READING SIGNS: JASPER JOHNS & GLENN LIGON IN PRINT

Wesleyan University

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Curator's Forward

Reading Signs opens with Jasper Johns's etching, *Flashlight* (1967–1969). A tool of vision enhancement, the flashlight can be taken as an informal emblem for this constellation of works by Johns and Glenn Ligon: prints that are self-reflexively about visual information—how it is delivered and how it is read. Flashlights are used by specific, seeking lookers: the young reader staying up past bedtime, for example, or the spy—a figure of noted interest to Johns. In proximity to Ligon's *Runaways* of 1993, *Flashlight* takes on a darker valence, invoking the slave catcher's torch and the vicious peering of the pursuer. In their work, Johns and Ligon emphasize that ocular comprehension, whether causal or considered, often entails estrangement from the objects of our gaze.

So it is with reading, a mode of looking that promises to transmit ample, concentrated information, but can reveal itself to be alienating once its mechanics come under scrutiny. In his images of targets, Johns brings forth the oppositional stance between reader and sign. Whether we are focused on a target or a page, like one of Ligon's fictive frontispieces in his *Narratives* suite (1993), we never face in the same direction as our reading material.

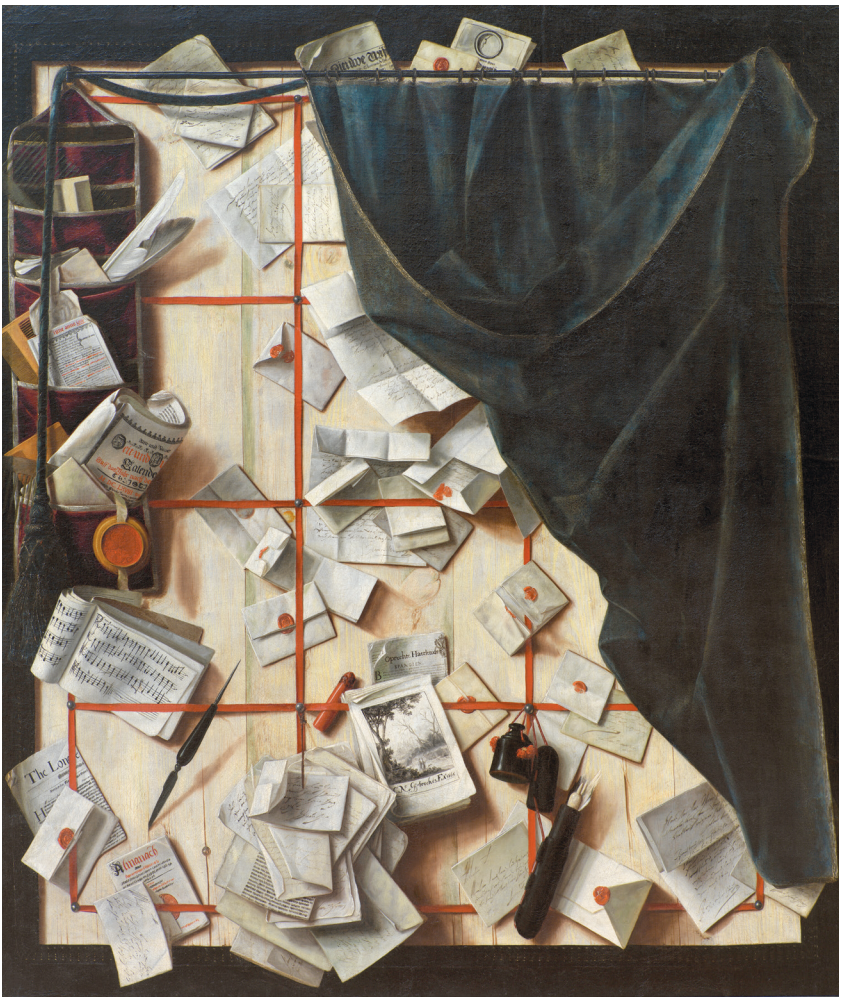
Both artists reveal how easily text can fall out of legibility. In Ligon's *Debris Field* etchings (2012–2015), letters, punctuation marks, and editorial notations become mysterious ciphers, scattered from the structures of words and typesetting. The titles, *Debris Field I* and *Debris Field II*, hint at a possible forensic reconstruction of compositions to which they may have once belonged. The content of the newspaper segments incorporated in Johns's work

is similarly out of reach. Rotated at varying degrees and layered with ink and other opaque pigments, the meaning of their text is beyond comprehension, even as words and letters poke through tantalizingly.

In 2024, text proliferates as never before. We tap out text on keyboards and touch screens and scroll through vast amounts of it on our phones—devices that once facilitated oral communication primarily. How much does it all mean? Who benefits from our frantic typing and reading?

Although Johns and Ligon's work harkens to printed media that predate our overstimulated digital age, their sensitive analysis of message and medium, and particularly "the elliptical ways our minds turn one into the other," as Susan Tallman puts it in the following essay, have much to offer us in the present.

Miya Tokumitsu
Donald T. Fallati and Ruth E. Pachman Curator
of the Davison Art Collection



Cornelius Norbertus Gijsbrechts
Trompe l'oeil. Board Partition with Letter Rack and Music Book, 1668.
Painting. Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst, KMS3059.

The Art of Seeing Through Things

Susan Tallman '79

The word "quodlibet"—Latin for "whatever"—once described a musical medley or, in visual art, a trompe l'oeil gathering of written and printed matter. In their seventeenth-century heyday, painted quodlibets were enjoyed as duplicitous delights for the eye, displays of illusionistic skill, and vehicles for riddled messages. In a typical example by Cornelius Norbertus Gijsbrechts [fig. 1], a green curtain appears pulled aside to reveal a letter rack stuffed with handwritten correspondence, curled sheet music, a sketchpad coyly bearing the artist's signature, a German almanac, a Dutch newspaper, and a dog-eared *London Gazette*.

The randomness is a feint—every object has been put in place by the artist, and the whole has been arranged to tease. The promise of information is everywhere, but the letters are sealed with wax, the newspapers are folded, and the almanac (being just paint on canvas) cannot be opened. The viewer is left to puzzle out what these fragments might signify, though the message was often predictable—a memento mori, a commemoration, some flattery of the artist's patron. Those sentiments are now out of fashion, but quodlibitish games of looking, reading and disguising are still very much with us.

Jasper Johns and Glenn Ligon are artists of different generations, with different instincts about self-revelation. Ligon has treated his personal identity in relation to society as an overt subject, whereas Johns once explained: "I have attempted to develop my thinking in such a way that

the work I've done is not me."[1] Both, however, use art to manipulate disclosure and revelation. Both ask us to attend, not to just the medium or the message, but to the elliptical ways our minds turn one into the other.

The uncertain relations between image and object, between seeing and thinking, have preoccupied Johns since his first paintings of flags and targets in the 1950s. We cannot avoid reading concentric circles or stars-and-bars as symbols [see fig. 2], but Johns's tender, complicated surfaces redirect that attention and ask to be looked at slowly, to be seen as art. What exactly he meant was a question that vexed early critics, striving to locate emotional angst or political outrage. In place of a concise message to carry home, Johns gave the viewer a quandary to tarry with.

Printmaking deepened that quandary. Recasting the full-spectrum world in black-and-white has been standard procedure since the advent of ink-on-paper printing. The left-right flip between a printing template (etching plate, litho stone, rubber stamp) and the printed sheet of paper is, similarly, a basic print mechanism. And repeating the image—whether in one location or several—is printing's raison d'être. We are so accustomed to these maneuvers that we take them for granted and have learned to see right through them—mentally adding color back in, correcting the backwards scene, treating copies as interchangeable, streamlining legibility.

Johns, however, uses these effects to impede, rather than facilitate, the tidy replacement of a visual input with a word or an idea. In prints such as *Two Flags (Black)* (1970-72) and *Flags II* (1973), he bypassed red, white and blue, filling each stripe and star with busy scratches, scribbles, and

1 Johns in Vivien Raynor, "Jasper Johns: 'I Have Attempted to Develop My Thinking in Such a Way That the Work I've Done Is Not Me.'" *Art News* 72 (March 1973), pp. 20-22.

Jasper Johns
Target, 1974.
Screenprint
Davison Art Collection,
Wesleyan University.

Gift of the artist, in honor
of Dr. Richard S. Field (DAC
Curator 1972–1979), 2018.10.9
Photo: J. Giammatteo ©
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Society (ARS), NY.

strokes of white, black and gray. Drawing two flags side-by-side, he gives distinctly different renderings of the same plan. Repeating the composition of his 1955 construction *Target with Four Faces* in a 1968 screenprint, he pictures the same yellow and blue rings, red ground, hinged cabinet, a cast-plaster faces. But while the parts list is the same, the painting and the print differ in every material particular. Johns, long an admirer of John F. Peto's wistful nineteenth-century quodlibets, entices us into looking at things we are usually content simply to recognize.

In some ways, Glenn Ligon's two 1993 print series, *Narratives* and *Runaways*, seem to follow in Johns's footsteps. Each comes dressed in the clothes of an earlier artifact only to thwart expectation. Ligon, however, wants us to read. The *Narratives* sport the distinctive typography of nineteenth-century title pages—those elaborate display faces, wide kerning, and long runs of all-caps that slide seamlessly from title to plot synopsis—and summon tropes of the slave-narrative literature that flourished in the decades leading up to the Civil War, with their promises of suffering, their assertions of authenticity ("written by himself"), their epigraphs from famed poets.

We aren't fooled. These photoetchings (printed by Greg Burnet) are too big and too beautifully produced to pass as popular literature, and, as with Gijsbrechts's almanac, there are no books behind them. All, furthermore, are by and about the artist: "the narrative of the life and uncommon suffering of Glenn Ligon, a colored man, who at a tender age discovered his affection for the bodies of other men and has endured scorn and tribulations ever since," announces one. Another notes the author's "education amongst white people," his "commodification of the horrors of black life into art objects for the public's enjoyment," and his "journeys

among the other peoples of the world." Thus the life of a successful contemporary artist, Black and gay, is repackaged in another era's boxes.

Adopting the less imposing form of lithographs (printed by Perry Tymeson), the *Runaways* impersonate antebellum notices seeking the return of escaped slaves. The format is conventional: a block of text describing the fugitive, along with a pictorial vignette, most commonly a running man with a bindle over his shoulder. Ligon's versions are more graceful than the cramped originals, and he sometimes replaces the man-on-the-lam with the abolitionist icon of a shackled Black figure in a posture of prayer, or, in one case, with the portrait of Henry Box Brown, who escaped slavery by posting himself in a wooden crate to Philadelphia. (Brown's saga was the subject of Ligon's Hirschhorn Museum exhibition, "To Disembark," in which the two print series were first shown.)

Once again, the artist is the subject of every print. "Glenn a black male," reads one print, which goes on to detail his weight, complexion and fashion choices: "short-sleeve button-down '50s style shirt, nice glasses (small oval shaped), no socks." Written by Ligon's friends, each picks out different attributes, resulting in a kind of letter-rack portrait—identity, not as experienced, but as pieced together from the evidence of interested observers.

In his 1992 quartet of etchings, Ligon transformed the act of reading itself into a metaphor for social visibility. The sentences "I do not always feel colored" and "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background"—both from Zora Neale Hurston's 1928 essay "How it Feels to Be Colored Me"—repeat across two of the etchings, while the other two are filled with the opening lines of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, including the famous

statement, “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.” The stencil-shaped capital letters appear almost crusty with dark ink and the reading is not easy: Ellison’s are printed on black paper, while the sharp white background of the Hurston prints is disrupted with stains and splatters that obfuscate more with every line.

Johns and Ligon have both, at times, abandoned letters and symbols (in Johns’s well-known phrase, “things the mind already knows”), applying themselves instead to arranging illegible elements in ways that nonetheless feel syntactic. Johns’s “crosshatch” works rely on groupings of five short parallel lines, in arrangements that again exploit the repetitions and reflections endemic in printmaking. The mirroring in *Corpse and Mirror* echoes the lateral symmetry of a printing surface and its product, while the “corpse” is the “exquisite” one of the Surrealist collaborative drawing game—an allusion made manifest through horizontal “folds” in the pattern where the hatches all change direction in unison.

It takes slow looking to identify these structures, but describing the logic of their organization does little to capture their mesmerizing dance of reiteration and deviation. Speaking about a crosshatch composition titled *Scent*, Johns said he thought it “would be like an odor... something that couldn’t be identified but would be sensed in a certain way.”

An analogous effect occurs in Ligon’s *Debris Field* prints, where shattered letter fragments roam the field as independent actors—meeting up in one place, meandering off in another [see fig. 3]. There is no legible text and yet the ghost of a story seems to hover just out of view.

Glenn Ligon
Debris Field I, 2012-15
Etching with aquatint, sugarlift, and drypoint

Sheet size 21.5 × 17 inches (54.6 × 43.2 cm); Image size 16 × 12 inches (40.6 × 30.5 cm); Edition of 35 and 10 APs.
Davison Art Collection, Wesleyan University. John E. Andrus III (BA Wesleyan 1933) Fund, 2023.2.1
Photo: J. Giammatteo

When Gijsbrechts was painting, Western culture was just beginning to conceive of the visible world as a data mine—a universe of raw material waiting to be refined into formulae, principles, abstractions, knowledge. Everything could be seen both as an object and as a clue. This is the playful promise of the quodlibet, but even in the seventeenth century it had its limits.

The most contemporary-feeling of Gijsbrecht's efforts is also the simplest—a painting of the back of a painting: dirty wooden bars, angled tacks, gray linen [fig. 4]. A trompe l'oeil paper tag labeled "36," affixed with faux red wax, suggests an absent inventory that might tell us what's on the front of the canvas, but of course, we are already looking at the front. Like Johns's targets and crosshatches, like Ligon's texts that both reveal and misdirect, it pictures the lacuna between what can be seen and what can be known. It feels contemporary because its message is about messaging itself.

Susan Tallman is a critic and art historian living in Massachusetts and Berlin. She has written extensively on contemporary art, authenticity, the history of prints, and other aspects of art and culture. A regular contributor to *New York Review of Books* and *The Atlantic* among other publications, she has authored many books, most recently *Kerry James Marshall: The Complete Prints* (2023).

Cornelius Norbertus Gijsbrechts
***Trompe l'oeil. The Reverse of a Framed Painting*, 1668–1672.**
Painting. Copenhagen,
Statens Museum for Kunst,
KMS1989.

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Goldrach Gallery, located in the Pruzan Art Center
Wesleyan University

September 18–December 11, 2024

Tuesday–Saturday, 12:30–4:30 p.m.
Closed: October 19–22; November 25–December 2