

27.oct.00—21.jan.01



Adrian Piper

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The simultaneous presentation of two separately organized exhibitions, *Adrian Piper: A Retrospective, 1965-2000* and *MEDI(t)Ations: Adrian Piper's Videos, Installations, Performances and Soundworks 1968-1992*, provides an in-depth consideration of Piper's artistic production during the past thirty-five years and confirms her central position in the trajectory of American art. Bringing together more than forty artworks, these exhibitions offer the opportunity to experience Piper's adept use of several media and to consider the complex yet resonant concerns that have preoccupied the artist for many years, namely bigotry, stereotyping, and xenophobia. Most important, this retrospective illuminates Piper's unflinching integrity and gives each of us pause to reflect on our personal beliefs and behaviors. Piper's work demands a high level of engagement as she unapologetically positions viewers in a relationship to the work that encourages them to evaluate their responses to the imagery and text she presents.

The exhibition considers Piper's career from its inception, including paintings she did in high school, which are harbingers of her career-long interest in issues related to identity. In *Multichrome Mom and Dad* (1966), Piper creates subtle variations in hues to portray her parents with a variety of skin tones and is the earliest example of her use of portraiture and masquerade to explore her identity and that of her family. Several later works attempt to reconcile her experiences as a light-skinned black woman in a racist society, a social position Piper might refer to as "in between." It is this inbetweenness that interests her: the inevitable tension experienced by people who are not easily defined by rigid categories of race, gender, and class.

In the late 1960s, Piper was influenced by artists such as Sol LeWitt, Vito Acconci, and Yvonne Rainer, and much of her work was based on Conceptual art. In *Sixteen Permutations on the Planar Analysis of a Square* (1968), for example, Piper plays out both on paper and through the use of a model the possible geometric variations found within a finite system. These early pieces indicated her tendency to foreground ideas in a straightforward manner. This propensity for candor and directness remained after Piper began to introduce socio-political content into her work, a result of her experiences during the student anti-war protests, the U.S. bombing of Cambodia, and the increasing momentum of the women's rights movement of the early 1970s. It is important to note that Piper's conscious decision to insert social content into her work did not preclude her from continuing to use the strategies of Conceptualism and Minimalism. On the contrary, these approaches to art making lend themselves perfectly to Piper's goals of promoting a more active and intimate relationship between object and viewer and encouraging her audience to transcend unexamined behavior and ultimately modify their attitudes.

Marking her first explorations in spontaneous and unannounced performance, in 1970, Piper embarked on her seminal *Catalysis* series in which she physically transformed herself into an odd or repulsive person and went out in public to experience the frequently disdainful responses of others. These explorations into xenophobia involved such activities as covering her clothing with sticky, wet paint while shopping at Macy's. Though photographs are all that remain of the *Catalysis* series, the work itself focused on the interaction between the artist and the public, and more specifically, on the reaction of the individual to Piper's presence.

In addition to working as an artist, Piper is a highly respected philosopher and writer. She was trained in analytic philosophy, and has a particular interest in the work of Immanuel Kant, specifically his notions of the self and his explorations into what enables people to act morally and make aesthetic judgements. Piper's philosophical explorations have had a considerable impact on her artistic production, both in its relationship to rational thought processes and as a means to gain access to larger, metaphysical concerns.

In the mid-1970s, Piper began what has perhaps become her best-known series, *The Mythic Being*. As in the *Catalysis* series, Piper's primary intention was to evoke a spontaneous response from an unknowing audience. For *The Mythic Being*, Piper took on the persona of a young, black male and went to public sites to experience attitudes and responses toward this socially contested figure, described best in the title of one of the series, *I Embody Everything You Most Hate and Fear* (1975). This work is one of the first examples of "the indexical present," a highly effective (yet commonly criticized as confrontational) technique that Piper uses to situate the work in the immediate present and create a direct relationship to the viewer by the use of words like "I," "You," "Here," and "This," instead of "We," "There," etc. By placing the viewer in the same time frame as the object being observed, the role of the artist as a mediator between the viewer and the subject of the work is diminished, as is the ability of the viewer to place barriers in the way of an honest consideration of the subject presented.

In addition to object-based works in a range of media, Piper's works of the 1980s and 1990s include several large-scale installations using technology to create multilayered experiences of visual and auditory information, including *Art for Art World Surface Pattern* (1976), *Four Intruders Plus Alarm System* (1980), *Vote/Emote* (1991), and *Black Box/White Box* (1992). Her installation work addresses such issues as the alienation of people based on stereotypical categories and the history of black experience in America, as well as self-referential examinations of the relationship between politics and art. She continued to embrace variations of self-portraiture, including the captivating and unnerving alterations to her own image found in *Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features* (1981) and *Self-Portrait as a Nice White Lady* (1995).

Such series as *Why Guess* (1989) and *Decide Who You Are* (1992) juxtaposed cultural representations of blacks with texts deconstructing the imagery and inviting viewers to assess their responses. Numerous artists, such as Glenn Ligon, Lorna Simpson, and Renee Green, have acknowledged Piper as an influence, particularly in relationship to the powerful examinations of identity produced by this younger generation. The fact that her work has elicited such ardent opinions, both supportive and critical, is a testament to her success in creating work that can function as a catalyst to heightened awareness and eventual change.

Anne Ellegood, Assistant Curator

Adrian Piper: A Retrospective, 1965-2000 is curated by Maurice Berger for the Fine Arts Gallery, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and *MEDI(t)Ations: Adrian Piper's Videos, Installations, Performances, and Soundworks 1968-1992* is curated by Dara Meyers-Kinglsey. *Adrian Piper: A Retrospective* is made possible by the Peter Norton Family Foundation, Lannan Foundation, Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and the Maryland State Arts Council. *MEDI(t)Ations* is distributed by Video Data Bank, Chicago. The New Museum presentations are made possible by the Producers Council of the New Museum.

The New Museum of Contemporary Art receives general operating support from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, New York State Council on the Arts, and from the Producers Council and members of the New Museum.

Front: *Self Portrait as a Nice White Lady*
1995
photograph altered with oil crayons
10 x 8 inches
Collection of the artist