Adrian Piper

City Gallery of Contemporary Art

October 1 - December 4, 1993

Adrian Piper

When my family moved to North Carolina in 1975 I was a rather sheltered twelve-year old, raised in sleepy Midwestern suburbs, who had never really had any contact with black people — in fact, it's not clear to me now if at that time I even recognized the existence of racial hierarchies. That all changed in the 6th grade. The school I attended was in downtown Winston-Salem and the majority of students and teachers there were black. As the months passed, it became obvious that the difference between white and black was important here, and that I would have to learn how to negotiate this unfamiliar terrain if I was going to make friends, take part in playground activities, stay out of fights.

The experiences of that first year in North Carolina had a profound effect on the way I viewed myself and the world around me. And years later, when I first saw Adrian Piper's art, an equally profound change occurred. I began to fully recognize what happened to me back in the 6th grade, what happened to all of us, both black and white. And with this recognition came the slower, much more difficult process of trying to come to grips with my own racism.

I also became interested in how other people, particularly my friends, were working-out these issues and I began asking them if they could define a moment when they became racist; if they could recall a specific event that lead them to attach negative feelings to a group of people based on their color. Some were insulted by the question and denied that they are, or ever were, racist. Some challenged the question's assumption that a person's racism could have a particular cause that one could pinpoint, and argued instead that racism results from a variety of influences accrued cumulatively over years. Others, more intrigued by the question's opportunity for self-analysis, honestly and somewhat to their own surprise provided vivid and detailed accounts. One man said his racism began during Pop Warner football practice, when a black player would squeeze his testicles hard after every tackle. I asked him if this would have bothered him had a white player done it and he said that wasn't the issue. "It was intimidating and made me feel queazy," he said, "and because the person doing it *was* black, I began associating those feelings with black people." Many of the stories were similar in that, at a relatively early age, either some violation of physical space or a perceived unfairness connected to a non-white individual — such as my own jealousy of a black kid who always had more candy than me but didn't have to pay for his school lunch — somehow later became justification for accepting and applying racist stereotypes.

This informal and rather unscientific survey (done, obviously, only with my white friends), nevertheless made two things clear to me: first, even among politically liberal whites, there is a well guarded and internalized tendency to blame minorities for their racism. "It's not our fault," we seem to be saying, as if the only way we can come to grips with such encounters is by casting ourselves in a victim role, an increasingly popular way of suspending responsibility promoted by pop psychology. Second, by becoming victims, we seek to gloss-over our racism by attempting to forge a rather suspect form of comradery based on mutual oppression—one that we hope our black, Hispanic or Asian friends will find sympathy with, but most likely, they end up forgiving us for.

Adrian Piper's art uncovers the subconscious fears and irrational denials that are the basis of racism: the very real and very dangerous cognitive flaws that, when go unexamined and unchallenged, can lead to an incumbent white United States Senator from my adopted home state narrowly winning a recent election over his black opponent with television commercials showing white hands holding a pink slip, due to affirmative action policies in the workplace.

Piper's art is in many ways a triumph over our lack of reason when it comes to race, which is not surprising given that she is also a professor of philosophy, currently teaching at Wellesley College. However, like with most artists of intense moral commitment, it has taken the art world a while to catch-up with Adrian Piper. She

Self Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features
1981, pencil on paper, 8 in. x 10 in.

has only recently received exhibitions in mainstream museums and strong critical support for her art, which stands as one of the most compelling and important bodies of work produced over the last twenty years.

The selections in this exhibition begin from the mid-1970s, shortly after Piper reconsidered the minimalist and conceptual orientation of her early work, and began to focus exclusively on the issues of racism and sexism that have occupied center stage in American life from the Civil Rights Movement to the Los Angeles Rebellion. The early influence of artists such as Sol Lewitt grounded Piper's art in an aesthetic rigor and internal logic that she would later apply to the volatile nature of her subject-matter. And it is this sense of moral rage tempered by elegant rationality that has defined her art ever since.

By infusing an essentially hermetic conceptual and minimalist language with the personal and political convulsions she faced as a black woman in a racist society, Piper developed something entirely different: a way of making art that embraced equally auto-biography, mass media images, text, performance and social critique. It was a largely unprecedented and hybrid approach, clearly on the vanguard, but it arrived on the steps of the art world with a resounding thud.

"I was brought up as an art student to believe in the redemptive and progressive power of the avant-garde. I thought you were supposed to break new ground and push your media in new directions. I keep on needing to be reminded that only certain new directions are institutionally acceptable, and that you're not supposed to push in any direction that might question or change the way those "keepers of the flame" actually live their lives. All that nonsense about keeping art separate from politics is really nothing more than a demand to keep art from intruding into the personal realm, where of course politics reigns supreme in all relations. The demand to keep politics out of art is really a demand to keep art out of real life." [1]

Piper's art was not only pushing boundaries of content and form, it was also reinventing the relationship between viewers and art. Critic Maurice Berger has pointed out that "her radicalization of the artist's societal role has necessarily shifted the involvement of the spectator; neither artist or viewer is permitted the usual defensive rationalizations that exempt us from the political responsibility if examining our own racism." [2]

Piper employs a variety of strategies to involve the viewer, most either directly confrontational or involving communal activity. In her *Mythic Being* performances from 1972-76, she dressed as a black male complete with Afro, dark glasses and slim moustache, who would then enter public spaces associated with white upper-middle class activity, such as galleries, museums and theaters, and observe the discord resulting from his/her appearance, which was perceived immediately as threatening.

The *Mythic Being* performances point-out that racism is essentially a visual problem and that, as Piper explains, *"We need to understand how these deeply buried archetypes function in our character and personalities, how they engender a sense of security when people look and act as they are 'supposed to' and fear and anger when they don't. These perceptual issues are fundamental."* [3]

In her *Vanilla Nightmare* series, made from 1986 to 1987, Piper clipped advertisements from *The New York Times* that were designed to stimulate desires for beauty and status, such as the well-known American Express ad employing the slogan "Membership has its Privileges." She then turned the meaning of the ads inside-out by drawing stereotypical images of blacks into them, images which undermine and threaten the values the ads seek to promote. By doing this, Piper dramatically and powerfully shows how such stereotypes were invented precisely in response to white fears, such as sharing economic power (a la the "Vanilla Nightmare" presented more crudely, but no less effec-

Decide Who You Are # 24: A Moving Target
1992, mixed media, 72 in. x 138 in.

tively, in the Helms television commercials). Another ad, for POISON perfume, features a languid white woman that Piper has surrounded with powerful black men who caress her arm and kiss her shoulder and head. Here, white fears of miscegenation are connected with the stereotypical image of primal black males.

Piper's most direct and extended study of miscegenation is *Cornered*, a 1988 video installation in which a somewhat mischievous Piper, although dressed conservatively and as Maurice Berger has noted in a manner "familiar to us from television news programs and public service announcements," [4] proceeds to calmly and methodically explain that genetic studies have found that white Americans have between 5 percent and 20 percent black ancestry, due to this country's long history of racial intermixing. Because American convention uniquely identifies individuals as black if they have any African ancestry, Piper then asks *"What are you going to do about it? Are you going to tell your friends, your colleagues, your employer that you are in fact black, not white, as everyone had supposed?"*

The sheer brilliance of *Cornered* is that it asks whites to acknowledge, without shame, the likelihood that they indeed carry similar bloodlines, if not the same

features, as blacks. Responses to the piece range from unequivocal denial to tortured rationalizations about family heritage. But as Piper writes in her essay *Passing for White, Passing for Black:*

Among politically committed and enlightened whites, the inability to acknowledge their probable African ancestry is the last outpost of racism. It is the litmus test that separates those who have the courage of their convictions from those who merely subscribe to them and that measures the depth of our dependence on a presumed superiority (of any

Vanilla Nightmare # 4 A
1986, charcoal drawing on the <u>New York Times</u>, 22 in. x 13³/4 in.

kind, anything will do) to other human beings — anyone, anywhere — to bolster our fragile self-worth.,

Cornered is all the more devastating given that Piper herself is a light-skinned black woman who could easily pass for white. This visual ambiguity has played a major role in her work, either as a way of expressing her pride in her African ancestry, as in *Self Portrait Exaggerating my Negroid Features* (1981), or to probe deeper into entrenched attitudes toward race. She has experienced the embarrassment of hearing racist comments in situations where whites did not realize they were in the presence of a black person, or humiliation and shock when professors at the prestigious graduate schools she attended questioned her "motives" for identifying herself as black. She has also experienced alienation from other blacks who called her "pale-face" as a child or who, in adulthood, would intimate that her experiences of racism were not nearly as bad as theirs.

Piper's art has always approached racism through both the internal pain it has caused her, and its external manifestations in politics and culture. In her most recent work, the *Decide Who You Are* series, she brings together the internal and external in ways that show how each are connected. The works are generally arranged in a triptych format with the right panel of each containing a photograph of Anita Hill as a child and overlaid with text, presumably the "voice" of Clarence Thomas: YOU TAKE EVERYTHING PERSONALLY. YOU MUST HAVE PERCEIVED THAT INCORRECTLY. I'M SURE YOU'RE MISTAKEN… NOBODY WANTS TO HEAR THIS. ARE YOU TRYING TO RUIN EVERYTHING. STOP INSISTING ON THIS IF YOU KNOW WHAT'S GOOD FOR YOU.

The Center panel of each piece contains media images, such as a photograph of a lynching or of a hunted deer. The left panels contain deeply and well-crafted poems written by Piper, as in this excerpt of *Decide Who You Are #34 Review of Lessons,* which

is addressed to white viewers "of a certain age, class, background, and attitude":

I know that you are tired, and anticipate death
that your children are aging, and uncertain
that their children are strangers, unreliable,
uninitiated
that your convictions and your rituals
loosen their grip.

There is hope here. Indeed, as generations change and the new guard replaces the old, maybe we can look forward to a country without racist election campaigns, or at least to one in which such campaigns would only assure a candidate's defeat. I see this in Adrian Piper's art, in its striving toward the future by reshaping expectations about the nature of art, and rethinking attitudes toward race.

—Dennis Szakacs

Dennis Szakacs is an independent curator and critic who lives in New York City. He is the Manager of Program Funding for the Jewish Museum.

1. Maurice Berger, "The Critique of Pure Racism: An Interview With Adrian Piper," *After Image*, vol. 18, #3, October 1990, pp. 5-9.

2. Maurice Berger, "Black Skin, White Masks: Adrian Piper and the Politics of Viewing," *How Art Becomes History: Essays on Art, Society, and Culture in Post-New Deal America* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), p. 95.

3. Maurice Berger, *After Image*, October 1990, pp. 5-9.

4. Maurice Berger, *How Art Becomes History: Essays on Art, Society, and Culture in Post-New Deal America,* P. 93.

5. Adrian Piper, "Passing For White, Passing For Black", (Oxford University Press, reprinted from the magazine *Transition*, issue 58, 1992).

All photos lent courtesy of John Weber Gallery, NY.

Checklist

Works lent courtesy of John Weber Gallery. Dimensions are in inches, height precedes width precedes depth.

1. *The Big Four-OH*, 1988, 7-26-88; video tape
2. *The Big Four-OH*, 1988, armor, monitor, video, 40 balls, table, jars, 2 written pages
3. *Political Self-Portrait #1(SEX)*, 1979, photostat, 36 x 24
4. *Vanilla Nightmare #4 A*, 1986, charcoal drawing on The New York Times, 22 x 13³/4
5. *Vanilla Nightmare #5*, 1987, charcoal drawing on The New York Times, 22 x 27¹/2
6. *Vanilla Nightmare #11*, 1986, charcoal drawing on The New York Times, 22 x 27¹/2
7. *Vanilla Nightmare #16*, 1987, charcoal drawing on The New York Times, 22 x 27¹/2
8. *Decide Who You Are #1: Skinned Alive*, 1992, mixed media, 72 x 123
9. *Decide Who You Are #2: Snakes On Stilts In Bags*, 1992, mixed media, 72 x 123
10. *Decide Who You Are #11: Remains*, 1992, mixed media, 72 x 150
11. *Decide Who You are #18: Hardball*, 1992, mixed media, 72 x 138
12. *Decide Who You are #19: Torch Song Alert*, 1992, mixed media, 72 x 138
13. *Decide Who You are #21: Phantom Limbs*, 1992, mixed media, 72 x 138
14. *Decide Who You are #24: A Moving Target*, 1992, mixed media, 72 x 138
15. *Decide Who You Are #34: Review of Lessons*, 1992, mixed media, 72 x 138
16. *Ur Mutter #4*, 1989, photo-text collage with silkscreen text, 23 x 40
17. *Ur Mutter #8*, 1989, photo-text collage with silkscreen text, 36 x 59¹/2
18. *Ur Mutter #11*, 1989, photo-text collage with silkscreen text, 36 x 88¹/2
19. *Think About It*, 1987, phototext, collage, poster, mock-up, 14 x 17
20. *Look But*, 1975, oil crayon on photo in plexibox, 8 x 10
21. *I Am The Locus*, 1975, oil crayon drawing on photos, 8 x 10
22. *Art For The Artworld Surface Pattern*, 1976, environmental installation with wallpaper, audio cassette, 60 x 60 x 84
23. *Political Self-Portrait #3 (Class)*, 1980, photostat
24. *I/You (Us)*, 1975, 6 photos with written text, 14 x 17
25. *Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features*, 1981, pencil on paper, 8 x 10
26. *Mythic Being: Cruising White Woman*, 1975, 3 photos documenting performance, 14 x 17
27. *Forget It*, 1991, offset lithograph, 10¹/2 x 21

Supporting new and innovative works by regional and national artists and designers, the City Gallery of Contemporary Art's mission is to present and interpret contemporary art and design through a schedule of diverse exhibitions and explore aesthetic, cultural and ideological issues. City Gallery is a non-profit organization funded in part by the City of Raleigh, its members and friends, and is a funded member of the United Arts Council of Raleigh and Wake County. City Gallery of Contemporary Art, 220 South Blount Street, Raleigh, NC 27601, 919-839-2077. Hours: Tuesday-Saturday, 10 am - 5 pm. Admission free.

Adrian Piper

Present Position

Professor of Philosophy, Wellesley College, Wellesley, Mass.

Educational Record

School of Visual Arts, New York, N.Y. - A.A. (Fine Arts)	1966 -1969
City College of New York, New York, N.Y. - B.A. (Philosophy)	1970 -1974
Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. - M.A. (Philosophy)	1974 -1977
University of Heidelberg, Heidelberg, West Germany - translated portions of Kant's Reflexionen zur Moralphilosophie: audited courses on Kant, Hegel, and Marx	1977-1978
Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. - Ph.D. (Philosophy)	1981
California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, Cal. D.L. (Honorary Degree)	1992

One Woman Exhibitions

Three Untitled Projects (mail art exhibition), 0 to 9 Press, New York, N.Y.	March 1969
One Man (sic) One Work, New York Cultural Center, New York, N.Y. `	February 1971
Adrian Piper, Gallery One, Montclair State College,. Montclair, N.J	February 1976
Adrian Piper at Matrix 56, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Conn.	March 1980

in conjunction with

Adrian Piper, Real Artways, Hartford, Conn.	March 1980
Adrian Piper, And/Or, Seattle, WA	February, 1981

Adrain Piper: Reflections 1967-1987 (retrospective)

The Alternative Museum, New York, N.Y.	April-May 1987
Nexus Contemporary Art Center, Atlanta, Ga.	November-December 1987
Goldie Paley Gallery, Philadelphia, Pa.	February-March 1989
University of Colorado Art Gallery, Boulder, Col.	March 1990
Power Plant Gallery, Toronto, Canada	May-June 1990
Wooster Art Museum, Wooster, Ohio	August-October 1990
Lowe Art Museum, Coral Gables, Florida	December 1990-January 1991
Santa Monica Museum of Contemporary Art	February-March 1991
Washington Project for the Arts, Washington, D.C.	June-August 1991
John Weber Gallery, New York, N.Y.	March 1989
Matrix Gallery, University Art Museum, Berkeley, Cal.	August-November 1989
Williams College art Museum, Williamstown, Mass.	January-March 1990

Why Guess, University of Rhode Island Art Gallery, Kingston, R.I.	February-March 1990
Pretend, John Weber Gallery, New York, N.Y.	September 1990
Why Guess, Exit Art, New York, N.Y.	October-November 1990
Out of the Corner, Whitney Museum of American Art Film and Video Gallery, New York, N.Y.	October-November 1990
University of Iowa	March-April 1990

What It's Like, What It Is #1

Washington Project for the Arts, Washington, D.C.	June-August 1991

What It's Like, What It Is #2

Hirshorn Museum, Directions Gallery, Washington, D.C.	June-September 1991

Adrian Piper: European Retrospective

Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, England	September-November 1991
Cornerhouse, Manchester, England	January-February 1992
Cartwright Hall, Bradford, England	March-May 1992
Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, England	July-September 1992
Kunstverein, Munich, Germany	October-November 1992

Space, Time and Reference 1967-1970, John Weber Gallery

New York, N.Y.	October 1991

Political Drawings and Installations, 1975-1991, (retrospective)

Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, Cleveland, Ohio	November 1991-February 1992
Carver Center, San Antonio, Texas	April 1992
Herron Gallery, Indianapolis Center for Contemporary Art, Indianapolis, Indiana	May-June 1992
Women & Their Work, Austin, Texas	October-December 1992

What It's Like, What It Is #2, Krannert Art Museum,

Champaign, Ill.	January-February 1992

Ur Madonna, Monasterio de Santa Clara,

Moguer (Huelva), Spain	August 1-September 1,1992

Decide Who You Are

Grey Art Gallery, New York, N.Y.	September-October 1992
John Weber Gallery, New York, N.Y.	September-October 1992
Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, N.Y.	October 1992
Adrian Piper, Art Awareness, Lexington, KY	June-July 1993