Adrian Piper, Then and Again

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While ambling through the special exhibition gallery space on the Museum of Modern Art's (MoMA) sixth floor—where nearly three hundred works by the visual artist, philosopher, and self-avowed yoga enthusiast Adrian Piper were on view in *Adrian Piper: A Synthesis of Intuitions, 1965–2016* (March 31–July 22, 2018)—I found myself surprisingly overcome by an intense bout of emotions. Minutes after they had first piqued my curiosity, I decided to make my way over to a trio of what, from a distance, looked like family photos—one in black-and-white, and two in color—to read the passage on display alongside them. The text, I discovered upon scanning it attentively, told the story of a married couple that had once shared a deep passion for socializing, dancing, loving one another, and cigarette smoking. Although the wife had given up the latter habit in her fifties, contracting emphysema some time thereafter, the husband found it impossible to desist from puffing. Cancer would ultimately take over his pharynx, throat, and mouth, leaving her to watch him waste away into death. She, the passage explained, would press on for as long as she could, but when the struggle to breathe became too overwhelming, she took to praying to rejoin her love, smiling at the thought of their eventual reunion.

I adjusted my stance after coming to the end of the passage to inspect the black-and-white photograph featuring a younger version of the couple, sharply dressed, holding each other intimately in front of a non-descript skyline. A large pipe dangled loosely from the man's lips. While his slight smirk suggested that the object had, at one time, been a source of great pleasure, I couldn't help but think about the pain that I knew it later caused both him and his family. I shifted my gaze once more to take in the color photograph of his visibly much older wife lying in a bed with her head full of gray hair perched on a pillow and a tube pumping life-sustaining oxygen into her nose. It was then that the feeling of loss struck me most forcefully. Piper, whose artistic practice has spanned more than five decades and an impressive array of mediums, is known for risking a lot of herself in her work. Still, I was unprepared for the particular affective charge the profoundly personal text and photographs would summon.

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It was only after I had exited MoMA's elegant, ever-expanding confines that I learned that, much like many of the other works exhibited in the retrospective *Adrian Piper: A Synthesis of Intuition, 1965–2016*, the piece, *Ashes to Ashes* (1995), had a fascinating and controversial history. A year after her mother's death in 1994, Piper was set to present an example of her early engagements with conceptualism along with more than fifty other artists as a part of the exhibition *1965–1975: Reconsidering the Object of Art* curated by Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles. She pulled the work that she had intended to put on view, however, after learning that Phillip Morris, one of the world's largest cigarette and tobacco manufacturing companies, was underwriting the endeavor. She offered to replace the piece with *Ashes to Ashes* instead, but the museum rejected her proposal. Perhaps most remarkable about belatedly coming across this information on the origins of a piece so emotionally compelling were the ways that it helped underscore for me a theme that reverberates throughout the artist's life and her formidable body of work. Piper has consistently demonstrated a commitment to confronting the existing state of things directly, often catalyzing supporters of her work to do the same by affording them unexpected brushes with insight, intuition, and feeling.

Curated by Christophe Cherix, Connie Butler, and David Platzker in collaboration with Piper (with Tessa Ferreyros), the exhibit brought into sharp focus the diverse range of aesthetic strategies that the pioneering artist has deployed over the years to, as she puts it, "induce a reaction or change" in viewers.[1] The result of four years of planning, it marked the first time that the work of a living artist filled the entirety of MoMA's top level. The square footage was certainly well-used, granting viewers an opportunity to experience the remarkable depth and breadth of Piper's artistic output including performances, videos, media installations, works on paper, paintings, photography, photo-texts, as well as sound, object-based, and publicly engaged pieces. As Butler and Platzker observe, Piper has contributed to and helped indelibly shape "contemporary art-historical discourses, including those initiated by Minimal, Conceptual, and feminist art, and more recent conversations about identity and public engagement."[2] Her voice, they go on to assert, has been "indefatigable in its critical rigor, in its anticipation of major cultural shifts, and in its extraordinary ability to transmit both urgency in response to contemporary issues and a remarkable sense of hope."[3] As someone who thinks, writes, and creates at the intersections of race, performance, aesthetics, identity, and temporality, Piper's ever-evolving art and philosophy have undoubtedly provided much to contemplate.

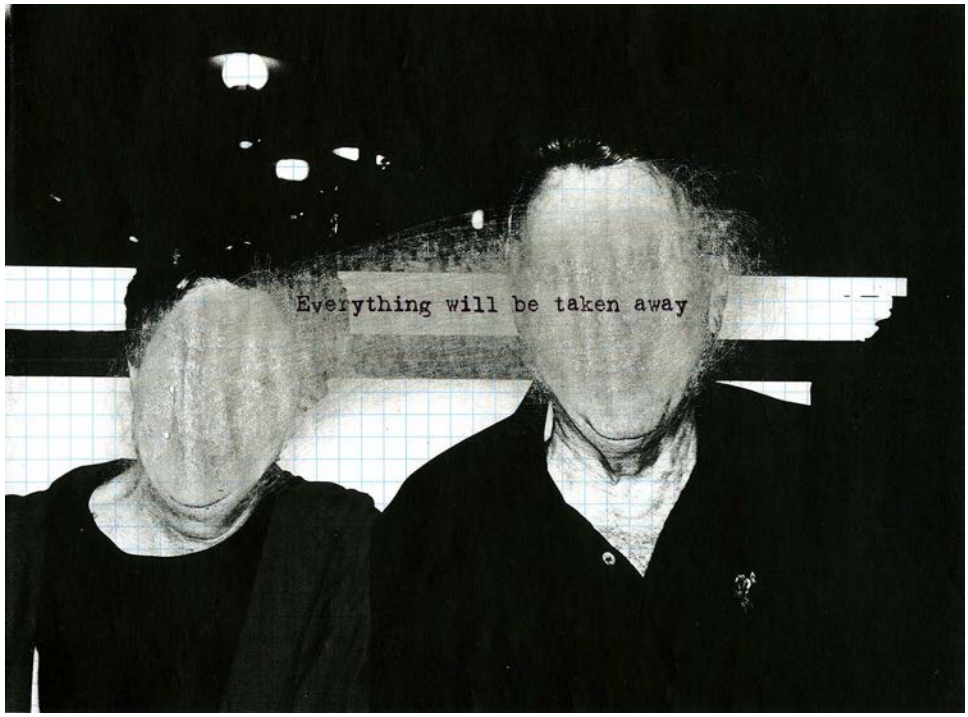
Following the lines and angles of the arresting *Recessed Square* (1967), a wall sculpture composed of wood and Masonite starkly painted in black and white, I wondered about what had inspired the artist to shift her practice away from

Adrian Piper. *Recessed Square*. 1967. Masonite on wood frame (refabricated 2017). 36 x 36 x 9 in. (91.4 x 91.4 x 22.9 cm). Collection Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin. © Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin. Photo: Timo Ohler.

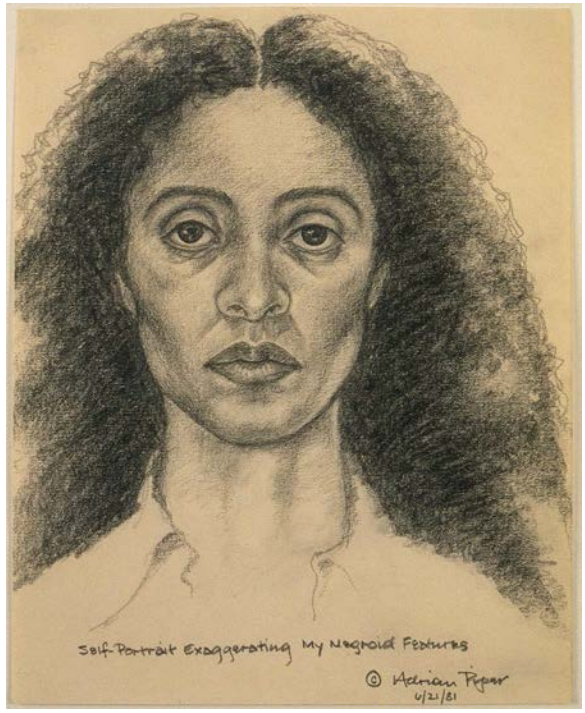
Installation view of *Adrian Piper: A Synthesis of Intuitions, 1965–2016,* The Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 31–July 22, 2018. © 2018 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Martin Seck.

PHOTO 3: Adrian Piper. *The Mythic Being: I Embody Everything You Most Hate and Fear.* 1975. Oil crayon on gelatin silver print. 8 x 10 in. (20.3 x 25.4 cm). Collection Thomas Erben, New York. Photo: © Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin.

Adrian Piper. *Funk Lessons*. 1983–84. Documentation of the group performance at University of California, Berkeley, November 6, 1983. Color photograph. Collection Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin. © Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin. Photo: Courtesy the University of California, Berkeley.



Adrian Piper. *Everything #2.8*. 2003. Photocopied photograph on graph paper, sanded with sandpaper, overprinted with inkjet text, 8.5 x 11 in. (21.6 x 27.9 cm). Private Collection. Photo: © Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin.



Adrian Piper. *Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features*. 1981. Pencil on paper. 10 x 8 in. (25.4 x 20.3 cm). The Eileen Harris Norton Collection. Photo: © Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin.

producing figurative art, as she had done early on while in art school, to creating work that foregrounded concepts. In the descriptive and, at times, playful personal chronology that she includes in the exhibition's substantial catalogue, she tells of reading texts by Samuel Beckett and Gertrude Stein, seeing a performance by Charles Ludlam's Ridiculous Theatrical Company, and viewing Sol LeWitt's *46 Three-Part Variations on 3 Different Kinds of Cubes* (1967–1971) the year she made the piece.[4] The work betrays a clear interest in exploring matters of form, color, space, perspective, and the possibilities and limitations of visual perception. Piper has returned to many of these matters time and again, including in the series *Drawings about Paper and Writing about Words* (1967), which features more than fifty experiments in pencil, ink, pastel, crayon, and various kinds of paper (graph, drawing, notebook, brown bag, etc.). The abstraction of these and other early ventures in strict conceptualism, even while reflecting some of the principles that have preoccupied Piper throughout her career, offered very little indication of just how heavily textual some of her work would subsequently become.

This textual mode is featured in *Nineteen Concrete Space-Time-Infinity Pieces* (1968–69) where the type-written words cover a series of fading pages. In one of the works, *Untitled ("If you are a slow reader . . .")* (1968), Piper postulates, "If you are a slow reader, it will take you approximately five seconds to read this sentence." In another, *Untitled ("The time needed to read a line . . .")* (1968), she underlines, "The time needed to read a line of print depends on the content & structure of the line." One of the more iconic pieces included in Piper's trailblazing project, *The Mythic Being* (1973–75), a series of performances documented through video and photography that featured the alter-ego brought to life by the artist donning an Afro wig, sunglasses, a mustache, and working class clothing, while also using words to assert bold claims, insisting: "I EMBODY EVERYTHING YOU MOST HATE AND FEAR" (*The Mythic Being: I Embody Everything You Most Hate and Fear* [1975]). This work, in some ways, anticipates later photo-based works such as *Free #2* (1989) and the *Pretend* (1990), *Safe* (1990), and *Decide Who You Are* (1992) series, which each see Piper screen print red words and phrases on appropriated historical, stock, and media images to command viewers to contend with their own biases and bigotries.

In addition to an interest in words, Piper has also demonstrated in her work a deep fascination with exploring the potentialities and deficiencies of the body. It was a stint as a go-go dancer at a New York City nightclub in the 1960s that, in part, awakened the artist to the idea that the body, as Peggy Phelan suggests, "does not experience the world in the same way that consciousness does."[5] Correspondingly, in performances such as *Aretha Franklin Catalysis* (1972), *It's Just Art* (1980), and *Funk Lessons* (1983–84), the artist took to dancing, often encouraging spectators to do the same. *Funk Lessons* is among Piper's most well-known works. Watching the artist instruct participants on the potency of funk music

and movement in the video documentation of the performance projected to fill one of MoMA's grand walls made it abundantly clear why this is so. I found myself completely charmed by Piper's pedagogy. A similar approach is visible in the equally celebrated video installation *Cornered* (1988), which was, by design, much more alienating. Piper focuses the work on imparting a lesson about the folly of determining another's racial identity based on readings of a body.

A number of the works in Piper's *oeuvre* reveal a concern with engaging and occasioning a kind of Heideggerian questioning of identity. Along with the cleverly conceived "reactive guerilla" calling card performance series, *My Calling (Card) #1, #2, #3* (1986–2012), the self-portraits that Piper has been producing since the 1960s stood out as some of the more compelling illustrations of this pursuit. Created fourteen years apart, in 1981 and 1995 respectively, *Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features*, a pencil drawing on paper, and *Self-Portrait as a Nice White Lady*, a black-and-white photograph embellished with oil crayon, invite rich reflection on the performativity of identity when considered together. Concomitantly, they also prompt considerations of the constitutive nature of loss in its making. Piper projects how she wants to be perceived in both pieces. There are indications, however, that she might, in fact, be passing; both in the former piece's over embellishments and the latter's thought balloon that reads "WHUT YOU LOOKIN AT, MOFO," the visible differences between the subjects feature heavily in each. At the same time that they capture her attempts to stake a claim for a particular identity, the two self-portraits also show her in the process of losing something or—perhaps more precisely—someone. Loss is made arrestingly visible in both works, functioning as a unifying thread and theme.

Piper's *Everything* series, which includes what I believe are some of her most impactful and challenging pieces, sees her provocatively return to and further grapple with this theme. After exiting the space where the participatory work *The Humming Room* (2012) was installed—having playfully followed the instructions to hum a tune while making my way through it—my attention was immediately captured by six, somewhat faint black-and-white wallpaper portraits of Abraham Lincoln, Medgar Evers, John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy. I spotted King first—perhaps because his visage is so iconic or perhaps because I visited the exhibition on April 4, 2018, when many around the country were commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of his murder. It took several beats for me to process that each of the leaders included in *Everything #6* (2004) had been the victim of an assassin's bullet, and several beats more to recognize that on the center of all their foreheads was a word printed in red that, when read together, stated: *Every thing will be taken away*. The overt entwining of past and future in the piece did not escape me. Loss, it reminded, repeats. Its recurrence would become even more pronounced while viewing the nearly

twenty other pieces in the series, many of which are comprised of photographs of people—some alone, others in groups—rendered anonymous through the erasure of their faces. The message about loss's inevitability was repeated across each: *Every thing will be taken away*. It even appeared on my own face when I stood before *Everything #4* (2004), a work composed of a wooden mirror with the phrase engraved on its surface in gold leaf.

An equally harrowing message about loss, about stolen life, would grip me as I studied a faded version of the "selfie" of Trayvon Martin that circulated widely in the aftermath of the teen's senseless murder. There was a bright red target overlaid on his face, and I could see it on my own as I stared into the youth's expressive eyes. It was the text that adorned the work, *Imagine (Trayvon Martin)* (2013), that finally shattered me: "Imagine what it was like to be." The piece, much like many of the works exhibited in *Adrian Piper: A Synthesis of Intuition, 1965–2016*, demanded retrospection and introspection while grappling with urgent existential concerns and questions of meaning. Those demands no doubt continue to resonate with me, a testament to the enduring power and brilliance of Piper's work and artistic imagination.

NOTES

1. Adrian Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight: Volume I: Selected Writing in Meta-Art, 1968–1992* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 32.

2. Cornelia Butler and David Platzker, "Adrian Piper: Reading the Work," in *Adrian Piper: A Reader*, edited by Cornelia Butler and David Platzker (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 7.

3. Ibid.

4. See Adrian Piper, "Personal Chronology" in *Adrian Piper: A Synthesis of Intuition, 1965–2016*, edited by Christophe Cherix, Cornelia Butler, and David Platzker (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 312–25.

5. Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 52.

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