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### **Adrian Piper: A Catalyst for Social Change**

Adrian Piper is more than meets the eye – literally. Piper can best be described as a conceptual artist with an ever-changing identity that reflects the struggles of black Americans and women in society. As a first-generation conceptual artist, her vast educational record attending and teaching at Harvard University, along with several other high scholastic institutions, allowed her to address issues of race, gender, and inequality as she transformed her body and physical presence to share her ideas. By incorporating her own identity in her work, and through the extensive practice of education and philosophy, Adrian Piper has exercised several mediums to produce art that has acted as a catalyst for social change.

Similar to most artists, Adrian Piper has a compelling story for when she first recognized her inspiration to become an artist. In an interview with George Yancy, Piper describes her early childhood experiences growing up in a confusing and conflicting middle class neighborhood where her family was one of few black families in the area. It was here that Piper, a product of a German, Madagascan, and Nigerian lineage, first became aware of the situation that allowed her and several of her relatives to pass for white (Yancy 52). Piper claims that her parents and grandmother were responsible for her burning desire and passion to practice art and philosophy. The journey began first with her grandmother teaching her to draw and paint before age three; then following, the influence of her father's being a lawyer and strong advocate for education, in addition to her mother's analytical reasoning and logical

thinking, propelled Piper in her direction toward philosophy and an interest in artful expression (Yancy 55).

Piper's vast collection of work dates back to the early 1960s, which was a time where several styles and movements became firm foundations for succeeding in the art world. Expressions surrounding conceptual art, or more specifically contemporary art, were extremely popular; one movement with such impact is that which artists refer to as *Fluxus* (Rush 161). Fluxus can be described as a movement that flourished in the 1960s that led to postmodern innovations in performance, film, and eventually, video (Rush 25). Normally, the content of Piper's work would draw a myriad of provocative reactions; however, her work often gave its viewers a sensation that was not only aesthetically pleasing but also eye-opening and naturally inquisitive. She often sought to involve her audience in what she referred to as the 'indexical present,' the focus of our attention of here and now and the everyday context in which we speak, live, think, and act (Mercurylanes).

Between 1970 and 1973, Piper created a series of pieces called *Catalysis* involving her participation in everyday activities but with an altered appearance; without displaying any unusual behavior. Piper brought her work to the streets, arousing diverse reactions from her unsuspecting surrounding audiences. In *Catalysis III* for example, she shopped through Macy's (formally known as Bloomingdales) wearing a top that featured 'sticky wet paint' which literally read "WET PAINT" on the front. In *Catalysis IV*, Piper rode the New York City subway; still she dressed conservatively, but she rode the train with a large white bath towel stuffed in her mouth, leaving any excess of material to hang down (Piper 76). Piper states that the purpose of the project was to reveal the way social hierarchies were structured and to prove that people who "deviate from social norms" often become alienated and ignored. To quote, she says, "the strongest, most complex, and most aesthetically interesting catalysis is the one that occurs in uncategorized, undefined, non-pragmatic human confrontation" (Mercurylanes).

Piper applied this idea to each of the pieces in the *Catalysis* series beginning with *Catalysis I* in 1970, and ending with *Catalysis VII* in 1973 (Piper 78).

Piper's understanding of "self" also fueled the bulk of her projects. As mentioned earlier, she often applied her profound background in both philosophy and education to her illustrations. Piper often used these illustrations to test her audience in a number of ways. In 1973, Adrian Piper crafted a collection of photo-based performances with a series of pieces she called *The Mythic Being*. The piece featured Piper as her male alter-ego sporting sunglasses, a mustache, and an afro-wig; she purposefully wore the costume out to white social events and majority-white public areas. By doing so and taking on this suave masculine appearance, she became a symbol of the implied threat that black males pose to society; the project received negative reactions by spectators of the image who responded with suspicious attitudes of hate and fear.

It would not be surprising for one to question why an artist would want to knowingly elude such negative reactions from an audience. Ironically however, though these reactions were natural and useful in Piper's work, they were not the primary goal and focus of the piece. Instead, Piper was more interested by the fact that her appearance alone, when altered, could be a cause of confrontation in itself. She often battled a personal struggle with self-definition. Her light skin tone that reflected the uniqueness of her heritage often led people to believe that she too (alike to her family) was white, when in reality she was not. Piper used the ignorant assumptions by her audience to her advantage creating situations of controversy through which her prideful Afro-Caribbean and Afro-European heritage could be revealed (Yancy 51). Though this struggle remained with Piper throughout her artistic career, she figuratively addressed the issue via audience confrontations and self-expression.

In 1981, Piper created a piece which captured the essence of her identity in a more realistic way than her "alter ego" in the *Mythic Being*. The illustration titled *Self Portrait Exaggerating my Negroid*

*Features* presents Piper as her usual self but with stronger, more natural facial features that are stereotypical of black woman's appearance. The depiction demonstrates her with a strong jaw, broad nose, full lips, and a rugged hairstyle. Oppositely in 1995, Piper created a piece called *Self Portrait as a Nice White Lady* which was a seemingly less threatening depiction of herself with straight hair and serious facial expression. The two works, much like her earlier ones, were inspired by Piper's willingness to challenge social norms and stereotypes.

Piper liked to play off of the idea of her misjudged identity. Having experimented with her image and appearance to others, she quickly became aware of whom and what people thought she was. With this in mind, she began to invest more time into pieces that would act as protests to her audiences' ignorance and assumptions. Between 1986 and 1990, Piper directly addressed the racist remarks and stereotypes in a piece *My Calling Card*, which was a card that read specific text in response to any racist remarks that people made around her. Piper would present the card to the racist commentator which kindly informed them that she was black and not the white woman she appeared to be. In 1988, she produced a second piece with a similar idea addressing racism; it was a video installation performance that Piper famously entitled *Cornered*. *Cornered* was interesting because it was a short-film that engaged the viewer in a potentially uncomfortable, but very intimate conversation about prejudice and racism. The camera is focused directly on Piper as she boldly announces the statement, "I am Black." The succeeding conversation continues not to offend, but to simply address Piper's feelings about a "pervasively racist, xenophobic and unjust system" that has led people to believe that Piper's being *black* is threatening and offensive (Mercurylanes).

Without a doubt, strong emotions drive Piper's work. Years earlier, a viewer would see works that simply arouse a reaction from people in the *Catalysis* series; then, he may see works that intimidate its audiences in *Mythic Being*; but interestingly enough, Piper's ideas allude to the fact that people are

inadvertently threatened by their own unjust, discriminatory ideas. One can only imagine how Piper must have felt when she received such reactions to these images, especially when she passed for white in performances as done in *Calling Card*. In 1991, Piper seemed to communicate her personal feelings through a piece called *What It's Like, What it Is#3*, where a man “spews forth retorts to common racial slurs: ‘I’m not lazy,’ ‘I’m not vulgar,’ ‘I’m not horny.’” The responses to the retorts exemplify the hurt emotions that result as a product of racism amongst dehumanized blacks—not feelings of anger—but more so misunderstanding and confusion.

All of the previously mentioned pieces seem to have negative annotations, despite their positive intentions. Considering this, one may agree when evaluating her works that her performances appear in some way biased. Though this may be true, Piper’s ideas are not biased in a sense that she only focuses on prejudices against blacks, but simply the fact that prejudgments and misjudgments of people in general prevents society from progressing in positive thought. Piper’s performance *Funk Lessons* in 1985 attacked an opinion that even still is *widely accepted*— the preconceived notion that whites do not have rhythm and *can’t dance*. Here, Piper makes use of a fun-filled production packed with people of several different backgrounds, all with rhythm and style.

Piper’s more recent works were compliments of her profound background in philosophy. In *The Color Wheel Series* created in 2000, Piper created a color wheel to act as a display for the Pantone Matching System® which is an international printing language used to match and reproduce color. Piper’s purpose for the system itself is was to create different shades of skin tones specifically for the images in the project. The piece hosts three ‘Acting Heads’ per individual work in the series, each with a different skin color, and the Hindu god of yoga and dance, Shiva, the Destroyer of Illusion. To the viewer, the piece exhibits ideas surrounding self-awareness, that all people should have tolerance for others, as well as the concept of “Nondualism,” meaning “all essential things are one.”

The most recent of Piper's work, which dates from 2003 until present, is a series of installations called *Everything*. The project became a movement open to anyone in the public willing to participate. Supporters of the project wore the quote, "*Everything Will be Taken Away,*" backwards across his or her forehead. Where the saying is present, its significance symbolized the possibility of new beginnings as old baggage is wiped away (Pollack).

It is difficult to offer any conclusion that may justify the cogent themes presented in Adrian Piper's projects and presentations. Her contribution to the art world considering her widely diverse and educated background has been so unique that an artist could only *hope* to create pieces surrounding culture, society, and philosophy in the specialized manner that she has been able to. By no exaggeration, Piper is truly one in a million.

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