

# **ADRIAN PIPER AND THE RHETORIC OF CONCEPTUAL ART**

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### The Work and the Viewer

Adrian Piper's installation *Four Intruders Plus Alarm Systems* (1980) (figs. 1, 2) is a wooden, conchlike construction, admitting only a few visitors at a time. In the darkened space within, the viewer faces backlit photographs of four black men; the light radiating from the men's eyes illuminates the small space. Equipped with headphones, the viewer hears four in-character monologues, spoken by Piper, each lasting several minutes. The monologues express reactions by potential spectators, and each reveals a problematic political attitude. One voice might be described as that of a politically apathetic aesthete: "It's an interesting attempt to disrupt my composure as an art viewer . . . [but] I don't think that it works as art, because I really couldn't care less about racial problems when I come to a gallery"; and another as that of a disappointed suburban moralist: "She's representing all blacks as completely hostile and alienated, and I just think that that's not true. . . . I know lots of black people. . . . Well, of course I wouldn't advise my daughter to marry one . . .



1. *Four Intruders Plus Alarm Systems*. 1980

it's just because society makes it so difficult for an interracial couple." The third voice is enthusiastic about the work, but indulges in a facile identification with the photographed men: "This is really right on. . . . I mean I've been really down and out myself. I can really understand black anger, because like, I'm real angry too." The fourth voice is that of unabashed, bitter resentment: "This certainly doesn't bring me any closer to the so-called black experience. . . . I've found that blacks are just angry, they're difficult to get along with."<sup>1</sup> These four narratives, it appears, are the "alarm systems" of the work's title: defensive orations triggered by the intrusion of the photographed men into the dark box.

*Four Intruders Plus Alarm Systems* suggests an art practice decidedly different from the one that introduced Piper's name to the New York art world some ten years earlier. She was one of the youngest participants in the Conceptual art movement; she turned twenty-two on the closing day of *Information* (1970), the seminal exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art that helped to solidify the identity of conceptualism. Piper's contribution to *Information, Context #7* (1970) (fig. 3), consisted of notebooks displayed on a pedestal and a typewritten sign instructing the viewer to "indicate any response suggested by this situation" by writing or drawing in the notebooks. As an efficient reversal of the roles of the artist and the viewer—the viewer produces the work, the artist peruses it later—the work seems typical of Conceptual art as a (clever, knowing, self-referential) idea *about art*. Piper's contribution to the exhibition catalogue reinforces

1. Adrian Piper, "Four Intruders plus Alarm Systems," 1980, in Peggy Zeglin Brand and Carolyn Korsmeyer, eds., *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), pp. 235–44; reprinted in Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, vol. 1, *Selected Writings in Meta-Art, 1968–1992* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 182–85. In notes on the work, Piper describes the four voices as the "aestheticizing response," the "liberal response," the "appropriating response," and the "redneck response." Ibid., p. 182.



2. *Four Intruders Plus Alarm Systems*. 1980

the impression of such an abstract investigation, explaining this role reversal with operations reminiscent of formal logic.<sup>2</sup> As far as its politics go, *Context #7* therefore seems utterly open ended, and, indeed, the responses ranged wildly, including a droll cartoon reminiscent of today's online trolling and an impassioned political message in support of the Black Panther political prisoners (figs. 4, 5). In *Four Intruders Plus Alarm Systems*, this deep interest in the status of the audience's thought processes remains, but, by contrast, the viewer's reaction seems preempted by the discourse on the headphones.

The shift from work that is open ended and conceptual to work with an overtly political subject matter is not, of course, specific to Piper's artistic career. The politicization of advanced art came to characterize the post-Conceptual practices of the 1970s onward, with artists such as Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula, Victor Burgin, Hans Haacke, Andrea Fraser, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and Lorna Simpson all making work that countered the political taciturnity of the post-object avant-gardes of the 1960s while toeing the same aesthetic line: an economy of means, informational display, and the free interweaving of image and text. Indeed, as various further artistic turns were announced during the 1990s and 2000s—"ethnographic," "social," "archival," "curatorial," "research"—one could speak not merely of a shift in emphasis but also of a continuation of a visually restrained, post-Conceptual art that has continued to aspire to the condition of (written and spoken) political discourse. The curator and art historian Miwon Kwon has aptly

2. Piper, "Three Models of Art Production Systems," in Kynaston McShine, ed., *Information* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1970), pp. 111; reprinted in Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, vol. 2, *Selected Writings in Art Criticism, 1967–1992* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), p. 13.



3. Installation view of *Information*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, July 2–September 20, 1970

Free all political prisoners!

The Panthers are prisoners of war, and their trial properly belongs before <sup>the</sup> U. N. Committee on Colonialism and Racism.

I was fined \$25 for failure to report a change of address on my driving license. My hair is long and my skin is not white. White ~~pe~~ people convicted that very same day for reckless driving were fined \$10.

Bobby Seale is being framed for ~~the~~ murder in New Haven. We will go to the full extent of recourse to the law (i.e. the Supreme Court). If we still do not get justice <sup>in the small matters</sup> we will level the earth on this <sup>and in the large,</sup> motherfucking country! Power!!!





designated such work “discursive,” the proper site of which is no longer just the gallery but public political discourse broadly conceived.<sup>3</sup> The work of these artists often involves considerable textual output in the form of essays, written-up archival research, extensive artists’ statements, or, as with *Four Intruders Plus Alarm Systems*, a narrative composition. Because these works already contain a textual element, they can easily migrate onto the printed page in a form that approaches that of a political essay.<sup>4</sup> While Conceptual work of the 1960s introduced the use of words, numbers, typefaces, and writing as new aesthetic possibilities, in discursive art the intertwining of text and imagery becomes more deliberate, coherent, and directed toward making specific political points. Art, we might say, becomes an argument.

This essay will not so much biographically chart Piper’s turn to political issues as consider two corpora of Piper’s work side by side: her performance-based Conceptual pieces of 1968–71 and her antiracist installation works of 1978–92. I address two sets of questions that have been central to the scholarly writing on Piper’s work in this period. The first set looks at the issue of how Piper’s later, overtly political, post-Conceptual work relates to her earlier, abstract, politically tacit Conceptual art practice. As we shall see, it has not been unusual in art-historical commentary to have read the artist’s Conceptual work as having *already* addressed the issue of racism, and I want to offer some resistance to this view. Indeed, the temptation to read early conceptualism as political in its subject matter is a product of its own political moment, and one that leads to some serious and underappreciated ethical problems.

The second set of questions pertains to Piper’s later, overtly political work. Once art purposefully enters political discourse, what role does it occupy vis-à-vis non-art political discourse? Do new, emancipatory kinds of rhetoric become available when political debate takes place within the distinct sphere of art making? Indeed, one of the voices in *Four Intruders Plus Alarm Systems* asks this very question: “Certainly it’s one thing to watch editorials on TV and have this material presented in a thoroughgoing way. And somehow I just think that that’s a lot more effective than trying to turn it into art, because after all, art is not social commentary.”<sup>5</sup> Establishing the rhetorical efficacy of Piper’s later work requires paying close attention to the way it foregrounds the viewer’s consciousness, a theme she pursued through her early, more abstract investigations, and which becomes salient in the four viewers’ internal monologues in *Four Intruders Plus Alarm Systems*. The link between the early and later work, then, is not its *subject matter* but rather its *methodology*. To flesh out the viewer whose internal processes are depicted in Piper’s works, I consider the American sociopolitical context of the 1970s and ’80s, the context described by social psychologists as the one of “modern” racism.<sup>6</sup>

3. Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 23–29.

4. For example, when the monologues from *Four Intruders Plus Alarm Systems* were first published, in *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics*, the text was placed among the essays rather than among the artworks. For other examples of how discursive art interacts with non-art publications, see *ibid.*, pp. 26–31.

5. Piper, “Four Intruders plus Alarm Systems,” p. 183.

6. For an early use of this term, see John B. McConahay, “Modern Racism and Modern Discrimination: The Effects of Race, Racial Attitudes, and Contexts on Simulated Hiring Decisions,” *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin* 9 (1983): 551–58. Other terms, such as “symbolic,” “subtle,” “aversive,” “covert,” and “ambivalent” racism have been used to describe this family of phenomena, but for simplicity’s sake I will use “modern” here as an umbrella term. For a useful overview of the terminology, see David O. Sears et al., “Race in American Politics,” in Sears, Jim Sidanius, and Lawrence Bobo, eds., *Racialized Politics: The Debate about Racism in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 16–31.

While Piper's work is my focus here, I hope that the discussion also contributes to a bigger art-historical picture. Writing in the 1990s, various historians of American art have asked just how the politically taciturn Conceptual and Minimalist practices of the 1960s—the art, for example, of Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, Eva Hesse, Robert Morris, or, indeed, the early work of Adrian Piper—gave rise to the politically committed post-Conceptual art of the following decades. Was this development a matter of historical accident—a contingent confluence of late modernism and the ground-shifting political developments of the late 1960s—or was there already something intrinsically emancipatory to the experimental forms of the 1960s: an aesthetic revolution, which facilitated the political one?<sup>7</sup> This bigger dilemma can be illuminated by considering Piper's work, since she is one of the few conceptualists to have turned so explicitly to political issues as well as to have responded to racism specifically. This emphasis calls for a renewed inquiry into the responses of the viewers of these works—the viewers whose mental processes are depicted by the works, i.e., the actual sociohistorical spectators, but crucially, also, the belated viewers of art-historical scholarship.

#### Monitoring Consciousness: Performance Pieces, 1968–71

Conceptual artists in the second half of the 1960s in New York formed a tight-knit group. One only needs to compare, for example, the entries in the visitors' book for Seth Siegelaub's New York show *January 5–31, 1969*, the list of addressees to whom Piper sent her first mail-art work (*Three Untitled Projects [for 0 to 9]: Some Areas in the New York Area [1969]*), and the guest list for the *Information* special-preview cocktail party to get a sense of the significant overlap of about two hundred artists, collectors, critics, and curators who shared an interest in this kind of artistic production.<sup>8</sup> Even with this cohesive group, however, it has become customary to distinguish different potentialities, and Piper approached Conceptual art through what may be called “visual” conceptualism, which owed much to the work and writings of LeWitt. Unlike Joseph Kosuth or the group Art & Language, who by the end of the 1960s understood Conceptual art to be largely linguistic and theoretical, LeWitt took Conceptual art to be in a sense continuous with the kind of work that a *visual* artist performed.<sup>9</sup> Piper acknowledges LeWitt's work as a crucial early influence; the two formed a friendship in 1967 or 1968, and Piper soon began renting a loft in the same building as LeWitt.<sup>10</sup>

While LeWitt's practice was still concerned with drawing lines in space, its important contribution was to see the line as “dematerialized”: primarily imagined and constructed not on a physical support but in one's head. LeWitt's wall drawings are typical of this approach, since their defining element is not any particular physical instantiation but their instruction to imagine a visual arrangement, for example, “All architectural points

7. See, for example, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art, 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” *October* 55 (1990): 131–37, 141–43; and Hal Foster, “The Crux of Minimalism,” in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 35–70. For a critical discussion, see Anna Chave, “Minimalism and Biography,” *Art Bulletin* 82, no. 1 (2000): 149–63; and Eve Meltzer, *Systems We Have Loved: Conceptual Art, Affect, and the Antihumanist Turn* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), pp. 64–69.

8. Seth Siegelaub Papers, I.A.40, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York; *Three Untitled Projects* (1969), archival material, Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin (APRA); The Museum of Modern Art Exhibition Records, 934.27, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

9. On the relationship between Sol LeWitt, drawing, and writing, see Anna Lovatt, “The Mechanics of Writing: Sol LeWitt, Stéphane Mallarmé and Roland Barthes,” *Word & Image* 28, no. 4 (2012): 374–83. On the alleged Kosuth-LeWitt split as it entered the historiography of Conceptual art, see Buchloh, “Conceptual Art,”



connected by straight lines,” the directive for *Wall Drawing #51* of 1970 (fig. 6). In this respect, LeWitt’s drawings are much like mathematical equations: we can physically draw the function  $y=x^2$  as a parabola, or we can just calculate the values and mentally represent the curve to ourselves. Likewise, we may physically draw LeWitt’s lines on a wall, or we can simply imagine them to be there. Indeed, LeWitt sometimes described the actual drawings as mere “documentation” or as an “aid” to the mind, and he was famously laissez-faire about how the drawings were executed.<sup>11</sup> The real interest, we might then say, inhered not in the artist’s authoritative stroke of the pencil but in the generative idea that existed in an abstract, imagined space.

Piper’s early Conceptual performance pieces are likewise concerned with the act of drawing a line in an imagined space and with the relationship between a generative idea and the executed work. Consider Piper’s Hypothesis series (1968–70) (pp. 140–43). For this work, Piper went about her daily business—walking around a room (*Hypothesis: Situation #1*), sitting at a table (#2), watching television (#3), spending time in a park (#8)—but she recorded the contents of what she was seeing by taking a snapshot with a camera held at her forehead, either at random or at scheduled intervals. The presentation of each work consists of three framed panels. One of them shows photographs and a graph plotting Piper’s movements along space and time coordinates, another presents a typewritten key explaining what

pp. 113–15, 124–29; and Peter Osborne, “Conceptual Art and/as Philosophy,” in Michael Newman and Jon Bird, eds., *Rewriting Conceptual Art* (London: Reaktion, 1999), pp. 52–61.

10. Adrian Piper, “Sol, 1928–2007,” APRA, [www.adrianpiper.com/art/sol.shtml](http://www.adrianpiper.com/art/sol.shtml); and John P. Bowles, *Adrian Piper: Race, Gender, and Embodiment*, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 42.

11. LeWitt, in Patricia Norvell, “Sol LeWitt, June 12, 1969,” in Norvell and Alexander Alberro, eds., *Recording Conceptual Art: Early Interviews with Barry, Huebler, Kaltenbach, LeWitt, Morris, Oppenheim, Siegel, Smithson, and Weiner* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 117. See also LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (Summer 1967): 79–84; reprinted in Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 12–16, in particular p. 15. On the execution of LeWitt’s works, see the accounts by his draftsmen in Susan Cross and Denise Markonish, eds., *Sol LeWitt: 100 Views* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press; North Adams, Mass.: MASS MoCA, 2009), pp. 108, 127.



6. Sol LeWitt. *Wall Drawing #51*. 1970

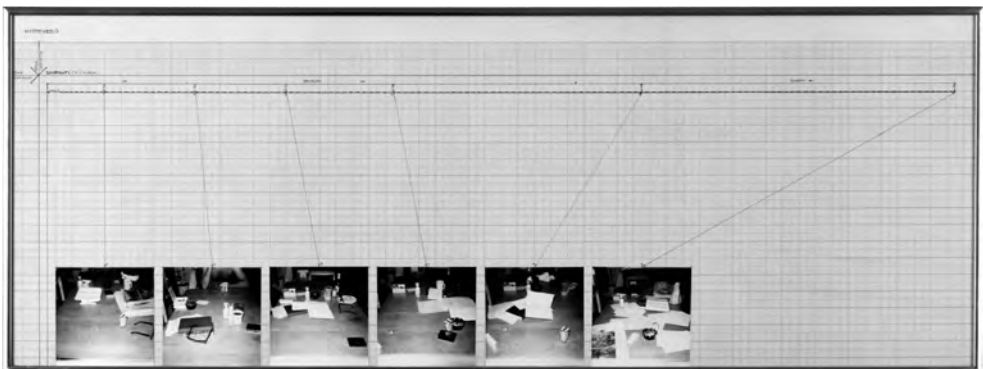
is shown, and another presents a typewritten essay. The graphs themselves of course include *lines*, drawn in india ink, but perhaps the most noteworthy line—the line that constitutes the Conceptual *work*—is the line charted by Piper's consciousness across a particular time period, as marked by the points on the line represented in the camera snapshot.

A line drawn by a consciousness is a rather overwhelming concept, to be sure, but designating one's own present conscious state as the site of the work was not an unfamiliar procedure in Conceptual art—take, for example, Robert Barry's idea pieces, such as *Something that is taking shape in my mind and will sometimes come to consciousness* (1969). Piper's method in the Hypothesis series likewise documents her state of consciousness and adds to it the LeWittian idea that the artwork involves the artist passing the contents of her consciousness into the viewer's. The Hypothesis series' continuity with LeWitt's work can also be gleaned from the beginning of a text on LeWitt written by Piper in 2009:

Think of any object, any event, any state of affairs, anything as it is at a particular moment in time and location in space. Think of that space-time intersection as a point in the space-time matrix. Then think of that thing as it is at a slightly later moment in time. . . . That second space-time intersection forms a second point in the matrix. Then draw a straight line between the first point and the second. . . . That line marks the path of the actual. It marks a section of the journey the thing actually took through time and space.<sup>12</sup>

Although Piper does not mention her own works in this text, it is notable that she describes LeWitt's practice in words that seem to recall the Hypothesis series: drawing lines between two points in *time*, something physically impossible but that constitutes precisely the kind of paradoxical projection of the mind's powers, precisely the kind of poking at the edge of rationality that Conceptual art so characteristically delighted in.

12. Piper, "The Unity of Sol LeWitt's Oeuvre," in *Sol LeWitt: 100 Views*, p. 89.



7. *Hypothesis Situation #2. 1968*

Of course, the Hypothesis series also involves the artist's body and the artist's private experience in a way that is mostly absent from LeWitt's practice, and, as a result, the work perhaps generates a temptation to read it through the (real or imagined) biography of the artist. For example, *Hypothesis: Situation #2* (1968) (fig. 7) tells the story of a single table as it enters Piper's consciousness at predetermined time intervals. Six times the unremarkable kitchen table appears in front of us, and yet the second photograph also contains a nude male torso (fig. 8). This unmentioned human presence surely captures our interest: is this athletic apparition, which momentarily disrupts the detached Conceptual investigation, relevant to the piece? Given that the artist is female, and that the photographed torso is male, and that the year is 1968, perhaps we should understand this presence as a sign of desire, or perhaps rebellion, or perhaps of the artist's subversion of the usual power dynamics. It is not difficult at this point to start reconstructing the piece as an episode in the artist's personal life, and I will return to this biographizing impulse later.<sup>13</sup> For now, however, I want to resist the temptation and retain the focus on what I take to be primary in the Hypothesis series: a conceptual investigation into the relationship between the artist's consciousness and the viewer's.

Piper's performances following the Hypothesis series took turns emphasizing one or the other side of this relation. The Catalysis series initially consisted of seven numbered actions performed between summer and autumn 1970.<sup>14</sup> These

13. In case the reader would like that biographical curiosity assuaged: it seems that the man in the photograph might be Piper's then-boyfriend, who has appeared in some of her work around 1968. See Piper, "Meat into Meat," in *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, vol. 1, pp. 9–10.

14. The earliest notes on the series are dated August 1970, and the seventh piece was performed, unannounced, at the *Before Cortés* show, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, which closed January 3, 1971.



8. *Hypothesis Situation #2*. 1968

were all unannounced interventions into public space, such as Piper going about town with a large bath towel stuffed in her mouth (fig. 9), working in the library while playing a concealed recording of loud belches, or politely shopping at Macy's while wearing clothes covered in wet paint.<sup>15</sup> Despite the outlandish nature of these actions, the artist's contemporaneous notes show her in her analytical, detached, Conceptual mode. The notes begin with a quotation from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and continue with two sets of "Notes and Qualifications," and, interestingly, nowhere in this initial set of remarks does Piper reflect on the unusual character of her actions or on the fact that they might appear to her audience as "either meaningless or insane," as she put it two years later.<sup>16</sup> Instead, the notes seem primarily concerned with the possibility of creating a work that is "defined as completely as possible by the viewer's reaction and interpretation."<sup>17</sup> Or, as Piper observes toward the beginning of the notes, "The work is a catalytic agent, in that it promotes a change in another entity (the viewer) without undergoing any permanent change itself."<sup>18</sup> If *Context #7* (exhibited during that same time, at *Information*) was an open-ended vehicle for the viewer's reaction, the *Catalysis* series was attempting to do the same, with one difference: here, the reactions took place outside of a preannounced art-world context; Piper meant for the reactions to be pure, uncorrupted by the "prestandardized set of responses" that an institution like a museum provokes.<sup>19</sup>

15. Lucy Lippard, "Catalysis: An Interview with Adrian Piper," *The Drama Review: TDR* 6, no. 1 (1972): 76.

16. Piper, "Talking to Myself: The Ongoing Autobiography of an Art Object," 1970–73, in *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, vol. 1, p. 49.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 41.



9. *Catalysis IV*. 1970. Photograph by Rosemary Mayer

If the *Catalysis* works privilege the audience's response, another performance from this time returns to the artist's own experience, excluding, for the time being, any audience other than herself. For *Food for the Spirit* (1971) (fig. 10; pp. 122–25), Piper spent a hot New York summer practicing yoga and studying Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* at home in her loft. She became, as she puts it, “obsessed with Kant’s thought,” and describes a kind of metaphysical buzz that will be familiar to anybody who studied philosophy as a young person: a dangerous exhilaration that comes with exploring a vast, intricate, just-about-graspable intellectual system, amplified in this case, no doubt, by Piper’s “two-month juice-and-water fast.”<sup>20</sup> To anchor herself in the material world—to remind herself that she had a body as well as a mind, Piper took clothed and nude self-portraits and kept a diary. The view of herself as a merely “physically embodied” person reassured her that “the *Critique* was a book with good ideas in it that I had chosen to study, and not (only? necessarily? really?) the entrance into a transcendent reality of disembodied self-consciousness.”<sup>21</sup>

20. Piper, “Food for the Spirit,” *High Performance* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1981); reprinted in *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, vol. 1, p. 55.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 55.



10. *Food for the Spirit* #6. 1971



The piece was only written up and published, with the photographs, in 1981.

Both the *Catalysis* works and *Food for the Spirit* can be described as semipublic performances: it remains ambiguous in what form they were to be received by a secondary, art-world audience. Two of the seven *Catalysis* performances of 1970 were photographed by Piper's friend Rosemary Mayer; the critic John Perreault mentioned the *Catalysis* actions in the *Village Voice* in 1971; the same year, Piper also performed two new *Catalysis* pieces in a gallery context; and Piper discussed the series in an interview with Lucy Lippard in 1972.<sup>22</sup> The photographs of *Food for the Spirit* were, as said, only published ten years after the performance. Several other unnamed and photographically undocumented performances from 1971–72 are semipublic in this sense. In one piece, Piper aurally memorized Aretha Franklin's *Respect* and danced to it, without any sound, both in front of passersby (prefiguring Gillian Wearing's 1994 *Dancing in Peckham* by twenty years) and privately in her loft.<sup>23</sup> For another, she recorded, memorized, and then recited her side of a telephone conversation with her best friend, Phillip Zohn, performing the piece "in front of a shop window on Essex Street shortly before sunrise" and "in front of a mirror in my loft in complete solitude," as well as elsewhere.<sup>24</sup> In each of these works, the primary audience was either unaware that what they were seeing was art, or the audience consisted only of Piper herself.

The *Hypothesis* and *Catalysis* works, *Food for the Spirit*, and the unnamed pieces, notwithstanding their differences, share among them an inquiry into the Conceptual notion of art as a transfer of ideas from one consciousness to another, unencumbered, where possible, by the context of the art world. As with many other first-generation Conceptual works, there is, perhaps, also something meditative or pensive about these detached investigations.<sup>25</sup> The attempt in the *Hypothesis* series to freeze in eternity that fleeting *now*, which by its very definition is always slipping away, can be read as a melancholy enterprise; after all, Faust's "Verweile doch, du bist so schön" (Stay a while, you are so beautiful) expresses longing as well as metaphysical impossibility.<sup>26</sup> In an audio work from the same period, *Seriation #2: Now* (1968), Piper simply recorded herself saying "now" at increasing speed. *Catalysis*, *Food for the Spirit*, and the unnamed performances likewise thematize the artist's consciousness as isolated from that of others. While Piper's notes consider solipsism primarily as an abstract, philosophical proposition, her actions surely also reveal to us the existential weight of that view.<sup>27</sup> Solipsism acquires a more autumnal color when it implies that all that exists is our end of the telephone conversation.

22. Bowles, *Adrian Piper*, pp. 170, 172–75, 190–91; Lippard, "Catalysis."

23. These occurred at some point before September 1972. Piper, "Talking to Myself," p. 48.

24. The recording, dating from May 12, 1972, is available as a sound work. Piper, "Phillip Zohn Catalysis," 1989, in *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, vol. 1, pp. 57–58; see also "Talking to Myself," p. 49.

25. See Jörg Heiser, ed., *Romantic Conceptualism* (Bielefeld, Germany: Kerber, 2007).

26. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust* 1772–75, part 1, line 1,699.

27. For Piper's contemporaneous notes on solipsism, see "Talking to Myself," pp. 47–51.



### The Performance Pieces and Four Viewers

Considered from the standpoint of Piper's later antiracist work, in what light do these private performances appear? If examined alongside the four monologues from *Four Intruders Plus Alarm Systems*—performed a year before the documentation of *Food for the Spirit* was published—what overtones do these investigations into the artist's consciousness and into the viewer's acquire? The dominant art-historical account has indeed read Piper's early performances as prefiguring later work, that is, as pointed critiques of patriarchal and racist social relations. John Bowles—the author of the as-yet only monograph on Piper, which provides the most comprehensively researched account of her 1965–75 work—argues that in the Hypothesis series, Piper cast herself as a neutral observer of her own experience; thereby, Piper “repudiates Kant’s assumption that blacks and women are unable to comprehend their perceptions by presenting her subjectivity as a problem for Modernism.”<sup>28</sup> *Food for the Spirit* has been similarly analyzed as a repudiation of racism, for example by the art historian Amelia Jones: “For a black woman (who is also a philosopher by profession) to pose naked in the act of incorporating Kantian theory as well as in the act of taking a picture is a multivalently radical act.”<sup>29</sup> Bowles, partially concurring, considers *Food for the Spirit* an attempt to pitch Piper's particular experience as a black woman against Kant's totalizing, universalizing framework; Piper repudiated the “cultural norms” of 1971, which “silenced any black woman who made a claim to universality.”<sup>30</sup> The poet, critic, and cultural historian David Marriott points to the vanishing, ghostly quality of the images and argues that the problem Piper explored is not particularity versus universality but rather that “blackness has no material or phenomenal meaning outside of its relation to racist representation; it is only a stock of signs through which the subject cannot digest itself (as a presence or signifier) without slipping away from itself in a glissando of aberrant remainders.”<sup>31</sup> Finally, the Catalysis series is the most often discussed of the early performances, and is usually presented as an antiracist and feminist piece. The art historian Christine Ross's comment captures the consensus when she writes that Piper “dressed and behaved in ways that confused categories of gender and race, in order to confront people with cognitively dissonant situations and thus potentially ‘catalyze’ white viewers out of their limited perceptions.”<sup>32</sup>

Yet there is a certain friction between these political readings and Piper's contemporaneous notes, which, written soon after the performances took place, analyze them as conceptual investigations into the author's and the viewers' conscious experiences. Of course, matters are never as simple as assessing the author's “original” intention against the historian's belated interpretation. Piper would have been aware of the response that her semipublic performances occasioned in

28. Bowles, *Adrian Piper*, p. 120. Bowles connects Piper's interest in Kant with Clement Greenberg's.

29. Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 162. For a similar reading, see Joanna Frueh, “The Body through Women's Eyes,” in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), p. 194.

30. Bowles, *Adrian Piper*, p. 208; see also pp. 213–18.

31. David Marriott, “On Racial Etiquette: Adrian Piper's *My Calling (Cards)*,” *Postmodern Culture* 24, no. 1 (2013): 1–22.

32. Christine Ross, “The Paradoxical Bodies of Contemporary Art,” in Jones, ed., *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 393. In overviews of performance art, the Catalysis series is regularly analyzed in this way. See also Anne Rorimer, *New Art in the 60s and 70s* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), p. 162.

the contemporaneous art world audience, too. Between 1971 and 1972, Mayer, Perreault, and Lippard all considered the *Catalysis* series a feminist work, an interpretation that Piper occasionally resisted.<sup>33</sup> For example, when in a published conversation about the series Lippard suggested that Piper might have been getting out some of her “aggressions about how women are treated,” and that she had turned herself into an object that was “repellent, as if [she] were fighting back,” Piper replied, “In retrospect, all these things seem valid, even though they weren’t considerations when I did the pieces.” As to her intentions, she felt the work was “completely apolitical.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, in her 1970–71 notes on the *Catalysis* pieces, Piper drew a division between artistic and political activity: “An artist can’t effect political change by making political art intentionally, but by . . . striking exhibitions, picketing galleries and museums, and so on”; she also reflected on the need to take her works into the street precisely because the autonomous gallery context was disintegrating.<sup>35</sup> The original 1968 essay on the *Hypothesis* series and the 1981 notes on *Food for the Spirit* do not include any discussion of Piper’s racial or gender identity or any other political commentary.<sup>36</sup> Retrospectively, however, Piper has suggested that a political reading of these works can become available. In the preface to her notes on the *Catalysis* series, published in 1974, she describes it as a reflection of the political situation of the early 1970s; in a 1992 text, she describes the *Hypothesis* series as “the crucial link between the earlier conceptual work and the later, more political work.”<sup>37</sup> Importantly, though, Piper suggests the link consisted in what I call her *methodology*—her attention to the problem of consciousness—and *not* in her intention to raise the subject matter of race or gender.<sup>38</sup>

A four-way tension thus arises between different “viewers” whose reactions to Piper’s performances we might want to track: ordinary audience members who might have encountered Piper’s performances and of whose reactions no record exists; contemporaneous critics, such as Mayer, Lippard, and Perreault; the art-historical commentators; and Piper herself, represented both by her 1968–74 notes and her later reflections. Rather than tip the interpretative balance one way or another, my aim here is to inscribe this tension within a broader historical moment—the moment that arises around 1970 and during which a largely apolitical modernist artistic production in the United States clashed against an increasingly urgent need for a political reception of art.

This need to describe Conceptual art as politically effective began at least by the time of *Information*, in 1970. Kynaston McShine, the exhibition’s curator, included the seminal Art Workers’ Coalition antiwar poster *Q: And babies? A: And babies.* (1969) in the exhibition and, in a strongly worded essay, connected the art on display to the antiwar protests. Interestingly, the art on display did not obviously conform to this expectation;

33. Bowles, *Adrian Piper*, pp. 170–75.

34. Lippard and Piper, “*Catalysis*,” 77–78.

35. Piper, “Talking to Myself,” pp. 40, 41, 45.

36. Piper, “*Hypothesis*,” 1969, in *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, vol. 1, pp. 20–21; and “*Food for the Spirit*,” p. 55.

37. Piper, “Talking to Myself,” pp. 41, 45; and “About the *Hypothesis* Series,” 1992, in *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, vol. 1, p. 19.

38. For a candid autobiographical account of Piper’s transition from apolitical to political work, see especially “*Flying*,” in Jane Farver, ed. *Adrian Piper: Reflections* (New York: The Alternative Museum, 1987); reprinted in *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, vol. 1, pp. 223–32.

of the New York-based artists in the exhibition, only Hans Haacke submitted a work that made explicit reference to the politics of the day. Still, for several of the critical audiences, reading *Information* as a political event had by then become an ethical imperative (as can be seen in the submissions to *Context #7*, discussed above); indeed, the exhibition was put on at the height of the antiestablishment and antiwar protests that swept the New York art world by the end of the 1960s.<sup>39</sup> Arguably, this ethical imperative did not abate for the generations of art historians and critics that followed—that is, for those scholars who first received the task of “writing up” Conceptual art and Minimalism. The art historian Hal Foster has candidly remarked that for his generation, critical theory continued as a surrogate for modernism—both for the “difficulty and distinction” of its high art and for its cultural politics, insofar as theory’s “radical rhetoric compensated a little for [the era’s] lost activism.”<sup>40</sup> Even for art historians less invested than Foster in critical theory, reading political potentialities into the (abstract and, on the surface, apolitical) Conceptual and Minimalist works of the late 1960s became almost a matter of evidencing the author’s own political allegiances. To give the example of LeWitt: his serial, factory-fabricated modular sculptures have been interpreted as containing an “implicit theory” of the “Taylorization of labor”; his act of drawing directly on the wall as representing “a democratic gesture of accessibility and directness”; and with regards to his open and closed cubes, it has been maintained that the “radical contingency and oppositionality of LeWitt’s practice . . . points to an alternative model of democracy.”<sup>41</sup> As with Piper’s 1968–71 work, such interpretations go well beyond the artist’s own initial attestations and emphasize instead the politically charged backdrop of the late 1960s.

The art historians writing about the 1960s from later perspectives are surely deeply aware of the dilemmas here: arguably, no art-historical writing can isolate the work from its context of production, while the total rejection of an artist’s intentions carries its own ethical and theoretical problems.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, I would like to offer some further constructive resistance to the received view of Piper’s early performances as a critique of patriarchal and racist social relations.

Viewing the performances alongside a 1980s work like *Four Intruders Plus Alarm Systems* makes this resistance available. On the one hand, the juxtaposition can certainly encourage an antiracist reading of the earlier performance, via the late work. On the other, however, *Four Intruders Plus Alarm Systems* reminds its audience that looking at a racial other can be structured by ascriptions of emotion and intent. Three out of the four monologists describe the faces as angry or hostile, but is that the emotion they really express? What pattern of thought suggests to us, the viewers, that they are angry or hostile? Beholding, again, the picture of the naked woman photographing herself,

39. The institutional politics around *Information* have been comprehensively researched. See Francis Frascina, *Art, Politics, and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 170–85; and Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), pp. 13–22, 178–84.

40. Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p. xiv.

41. Jonathan Flatley, “Art Machine,” in Nicholas Baume, ed., *Sol LeWitt: Incomplete Open Cubes* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 84–85; Kirsten Swenson, *Irrational Judgments: Eva Hesse, Sol LeWitt, and the 1960s* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2015), p. 146; Lovatt, “For an Adversarial LeWitt,” in *Sol LeWitt: Incomplete Open Cubes*, p. 67.

42. For a recent discussion of the way that even those art-historical approaches that attempt to refuse biography and intention tend to appeal to a minimal sense of context of production, see Sam Rose, “Close Looking and Conviction,” *Art History* 40 (February 2017): 156–77.

shown alongside a text in which she describes her engagement with Kant's first *Critique*, raises another question: what pattern of thought suggests to us, in the first place, that the woman is making a statement about race?

Some of these tensions have been articulated by the art historian Darby English, who has explored how race can become a deeply problematic means of art-historical assessment that obscures separate and significant concerns of the artist in question. To paraphrase English, the issue is not quite as simple as reading the work on its own terms *versus* reading the work through the artist's identity; if we read the work of black artists through the lens of identity alone, however, we may end up with a new segregationism, whereby these artists are consigned to only ever addressing issues of race.<sup>43</sup> What would it take for us—what kind of work Piper would have to make—to see a documentary photograph of *Food for the Spirit* as an investigation into the problem of consciousness, rather than as a work about identity politics? The worry is that the photograph would have to show a white man.<sup>44</sup> Unsurprisingly, philosophically inflected work from this period by white male Conceptual artists, such as Kosuth, does not get analyzed in terms of the artist's perceived gender or ethnic identity but in terms of the links between their work and philosophy.<sup>45</sup> Equally, we should not let Piper's perceived identity preclude our understanding of her early performances as abstract philosophical investigations into the universal features of human consciousness, all the more so because of Piper's unique status as the only Conceptual artist whose work on philosophy has been validated outside of the field of art. While Piper's early works certainly prepare the ground for her later turn to political issues, their significance, I believe, also consists in providing us with some of the most moving and sophisticated examples of that wholly abstract, philosophical, conceptual idiom of American art making.<sup>46</sup>

I sound this cautionary note not to dispute the accomplishment of the other historians here discussed; their work has importantly located Piper within the history of feminist and antiracist art. Likewise, if an artist or theorist somewhat freely uses a photograph from *Food for the Spirit* within an emancipatory discussion of portrayals of black female subjectivity, it would be needlessly pedantic to complain of the interpretative inaccuracies of such a use.<sup>47</sup> However, as I briefly illustrated with various readings of LeWitt's work, the art historian's politicizing gaze, the gaze that (indiscriminately) wills a political subject matter into the late 1960s Conceptual work, must itself be understood as a symptom of its own historical moment, a moment that ought not to lie beyond critical scrutiny.

### Word, Image, and Types of Racism: Installations, 1978–92

“When thinking about black female spectators, I remember being punished as a child for staring, for those hard intense

43. See Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010), pp. 11, 15. See also all of the introduction and chapter 1.

44. Interestingly, Bowles briefly floats a similar objection to Jones's reading of *Food for the Spirit* as important “simply because it exists as a picture of a black woman ‘who doesn't look like one.’” Bowles, *Adrian Piper*, p. 211. Yet surely the same criticism applies to Bowles's own reading of Piper's performances; for example, his reading of *Catalysis VII*, of which he says that the “particularities of [Piper's] appearance articulate a black feminist's critique of the partnership between Modernism and norms of race, gender, and sexuality.” *Ibid.*, p. 163. For *Catalysis VII*, Piper walked through the exhibition *Before Cortés* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, chewing huge amounts of bubble gum and carrying a purse filled with ketchup.

45. See Jean-François Lyotard, foreword, in Joseph Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy and After* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991).

46. For further discussion of these points, see also W. J. T. Mitchell, *Seeing through Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012); and English, *1971: A Year in the Life of Color*

direct looks children would give grown-ups, looks that were seen as confrontational, as gestures of resistance, challenges to authority.”<sup>48</sup> So begins bell hooks’s influential essay “The Oppositional Gaze,” in which she diagnoses racist subordination as crucially disciplining the black gaze, exploring this process in the depictions of black people in the white-created television show *Amos ’n’ Andy* (1951–53) as well as in the 1955 murder of fourteen-year-old Emmet Till, who was accused of sexually violating a white woman merely by looking at her. In Piper’s *Four Intruders Plus Alarm Systems*, the viewers presented in the voiceovers discipline the “intruders” in ways described by hooks some ten years later: they ascribe a motive of hostility to the men’s direct looking. Piper’s installations of 1978–92 share among them, again, not their subject matter, but rather their methodology of scrutinizing the viewer’s consciousness in the act of looking. This methodology, derived from Conceptual art, explains the rhetorical efficacy of Piper’s post-Conceptual, anti-racist works, as I will now argue.

While the themes of race and gender first implicitly entered Piper’s work in the Mythic Being works in 1973—a set of actions and print media that involved her mustached drag persona—I am here primarily concerned with the corpus of her installation-based work, from *Aspects of the Liberal Dilemma* (1978) to the *Decide Who You Are* series (1992). These works are characterized by a certain shared aesthetic and presentation: the shift toward an explicitly political subject matter coincides with Piper’s inclusion of found images, often photographs of black people taken from newspapers and advertising. Typically, these are experienced while Piper’s voiceover, performing a kind of in-character museum audio-guide commentary, plays on headphones.

Piper’s *Close to Home* (1987) (figs. 11, 12), for example, shows fifteen found black-and-white photographs, reproduced from *Ebony* magazine, each on a large (22 by 17 inches [55.9 by 43.2 cm]) sheet of paper. There are important aesthetic continuities with early work, such as the Hypothesis series: the central tenet of the conceptualist aesthetic, whereby an image may only ever be present within the context of commentary, is upheld in *Close to Home* by Piper’s inclusion of questionnaires, which are sorted into four categories of progressive levels of intimacy. These are: “I. Do you have a black colleague at your place of employment?” “II. Have you ever had a black person visit your place of residence?” “III. Do you have at least one black friend?” and “IV. Have you ever had a sexual relationship with a black person?” Within each category, there are multiple-choice, follow-up questions, which vary with the image: “If yes, in what manner do you socialize in the workplace?” (I.D) or “If yes, what social events did you attend together?” (IV.C). A panel under each questionnaire asks whether we feel uncomfortable at the thought of displaying such questions on the living room

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016). Important precedents for and parallels with this discussion are drawn from feminist art history. One seminal text is Anne Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O’Keeffe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

47. See Lorraine O’Grady, “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity,” in Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer, and Arlene Raven, eds., *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action* (New York: Icon, 1994), p. 156.

48. bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), p. 115.





- I. Do you have at least one black colleague at your place of employment?
- D. If yes, in what manner do you socialize in the workplace?
1. one-on-one dinner \_\_\_\_
  2. business lunch \_\_\_\_
  3. coffee break \_\_\_\_
  4. office party or gathering \_\_\_\_
  5. none of the above \_\_\_\_

Do you feel uncomfortable at the thought of  
displaying such questions on your living room wall?





IV. Have you ever had a sexual relationship with a black person?

C. If yes, what social events did you attend together?

1. family reunions \_\_\_\_\_
2. dinners, etc. with close friends \_\_\_\_\_
3. job-related dinners, parties, or outings \_\_\_\_\_
4. dinners, etc. with acquaintances \_\_\_\_\_
5. outside entertainment (movies, sports, etc.) \_\_\_\_\_
6. none of the above \_\_\_\_\_

Do you feel uncomfortable at the thought of  
displaying such questions on your living room wall?

Instructions for secretary

1. Get keys
2. Answer phone "Seth Siegelaub"
3. Catalogs are available only at gallery - if any one wants extras we will mail them. (except for the press)
4. If someone is interested in purchasing work, call me.
5. My other phone is 288-5031.
6. Gallery hours: Tuesday - Saturday, 11 - 5:30.
7. Gallery will exist for this month only.
8. Every morning turn on both Robert Barry pieces.
9. Lawrence Weiner has one freehold piece (see catalog) - if anyone inquires about this - tell them they can own the piece by making arrangements with Mr. Weiner at GR7-4113.
10. Have people sign guest book.
11. The typewritten Information sheet is for Press only.
12. For the first 6 hours of the exhibition (sat.) Take a polaroid photo every 1/2 hour of the Huebler sawdust (looking into the hall) and then place it on the wall (with scotch tape) near the typewritten document. At the end of the 6 hours (5 PM Sat.) remove the sawdust and throw it away.

[ Heat - switch on rear - 1st floor  
- 3rd floor 2) Turn valve shutting  
3) the pump on ] Sat only

13. Seth Siegelaub's instructions to his secretary (Adrian Piper) for the exhibition January 5-31, 1969, Seth Siegelaub Contemporary Art, New York

wall. The typewritten text instantly recalls what the art historian Benjamin Buchloh has memorably called the “aesthetics of administration” of Conceptual art; it evokes the spirit of an onerous bureaucratic protocol, also found in the works of Art & Language or Dan Graham or in Haacke’s viewer questionnaires.<sup>49</sup> Even some of the paraphernalia of Conceptual art—such as Siegelau’s to-do list, which Piper would have been faced with as the secretary at his show *January 5–31, 1969*—somewhat resemble the imperious tone of these protocols (fig. 13). The commentary device will be also familiar from Piper’s earlier Conceptual work (for example, from the essays that accompanied the Hypothesis series), even though in the 1978–92 installations, the artist’s commentary is turned into a more characterful voiceover. In *Four Intruders Plus Alarm Systems*, Piper performs the roles of possible viewers; in the audio track that accompanies the *Close to Home* images and text, she affects a sarcastically pleading tone, apologizing to the viewer whose sensibilities might have been offended by the questionnaire: “Wait. Please. Please don’t turn away. I’m. I’m just asking. I, I’m not accusing you of anything, I. I just wanted to know. I know these are difficult issues, and . . . and nobody’s perfect. . . . I, I didn’t mean to antagonize you. . . . I, I just I just wanted to know.”<sup>50</sup> In a later work, *Safe* (1990), Piper personifies the viewer over Johann Sebastian Bach’s “*Erbarme dich*” (Take pity), from *St. Matthew Passion*.

Describing the nature of the viewer summoned by these voiceovers requires emphasizing the shifting context of the late 1970s and ’80s, when these works were made. The United States at this time were no longer “legally racist” (the Civil Rights Act of 1968 arguably stamped out the last remaining Jim Crow laws). While, of course, the struggle against discrimination continued, one key change was the self-perception of white citizens in relation to this struggle. As can be seen from the national polls of the period, white America now mostly considered itself on board with the integrationist demands made in the 1960s by civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr.; problematically, however, white respondents tended to consider the struggle against racism as thereby completed (see fig. 14). From the 1960s to the 1990s, polls showed a steady liberalization of attitudes among white respondents insofar as the “in principle” issues of racial integration were concerned. White respondents gradually but significantly moved toward near-universal (over 90 percent) espousal of equal rights for employment and embraced the desegregation of schools. However, white respondents also became less likely to perceive black citizens as victims of discrimination (from 41 percent in 1977 to 34 percent in 1996). When it came to *implementing* racial equality by government intervention, in schooling or in employment practices, the responses either remained unchanged or, in the case of school desegregation, even exhibited a trend toward greater resistance.

49. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art,” pp. 118–19, 128.

50. *Close to Home* (1987), transcription of original tape, APRA.

51. For a recent overview of ongoing inequality and discrimination, see Fredrick C. Harris and Robert C. Lieberman, eds., *Beyond Discrimination: Racial Inequality in a Post-racist Era* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2013). The difference between the idea of equality and action on behalf of it became known as the principle-implementation paradox. See Howard Schuman et al., *Racial Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretations*, rev. ed. (1985; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 121–22, 191–95. For a more recent synthesis that includes American attitudes through 2012, see Bobo et al. “The Real Record on Racial Attitudes,” in Peter V. Marsden, ed., *Social Trends in American Life Findings from the General Social Survey since 1972* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 38–83.

Issues of Principle	1950s–60s	1970s	1980s–90s
Should black and white students go to the same or separate schools? (%Same)	63 (1964)	86 (1972)	96 (1995)
Do you approve of marriage between blacks and whites? (%Approve)	4 (1958)	34 (1978)	67 (1997)
Should blacks have as good a chance as whites at any kind of job, or should white people have the first chance at any kind of job? (%As good a chance)	85 (1963)	97 (1972)	(No data)
Social Distance	1950s–60s	1970s	1980s–90s
How strongly would you object if a member of your family wanted to bring a black friend home to dinner? Would you object strongly, mildly, or not at all? (%Not at all)	55 (1966)	71 (1972)	77 (1985)
Existence of Discrimination	1950s–60s	1970s	1980s–90s
On average, black people have worse jobs, income, and housing than white people. Do you think these differences are mainly due to discrimination? (%Yes)	(No data)	41 (1977)	34 (1996)
Do you think these differences are because most blacks: have less in-born ability to learn/less motivation to pull themselves out of poverty/less chance for education that it takes to rise out of poverty? (%Yes Less Ability/Yes Less Motivation/Yes Less Chance of Education)	(No data)	27/66/50 (1977)	10/52/55 (1996)
Who do you think is more to blame for the present conditions in which blacks find themselves—white people or black people themselves? (%Whites/blacks/both)	23/58/na (1968)	17/58/17 (1989)	14/56/23 (1995)
Implementing Antidiscrimination Measures	1950s–60s	1970s	1980s–90s
Should the federal government see to it that white and black children go to the same schools, or it is not the government's business? (%See to it)	42 (1964)	31 (1974)	25 (1994)
Should the federal government see to it that black people get fair treatment in jobs, or is this not the government's business? (%See to it)	38 (1964)	36 (1974)	28 (1996)

14. Data adapted from Howard Schuman, *Racial Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretations*, rev. ed. (1985; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 104–8, 123–25, 142–44, 156–60. All the data is from national surveys and tracks the white respondents' answers. Years of surveys are given in parentheses. The percentages exclude missing data. The wording of questions is approximate, and minor changes (e.g., "Negro" instead of "black," in the 1960s) occur over time.

Acceptance of *social proximity* to the racially other also lagged: intermarriage moved from 27 percent approval in 1972 to (only) 67 percent in 1997. Therefore, while black Americans continued to experience inequality and discrimination, white Americans tended to espouse equality in principle but resisted its implementation.<sup>51</sup>

Against this background, the generation of antiracism activists working from the 1970s through the 1990s sought to disrupt the triumphalist complacency of liberal America and point to the persistence of subtler but still pervasive forms of racism. Feminist writers of color (e.g., Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa, and hooks), critical race theorists (e.g., Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, Alan Freeman, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Mari Matsuda), and social psychologists (e.g., David Sears, John Dovidio, Patricia Devine, and Lawrence Bobo) focused on these new, modern manifestations of racial prejudice. Piper's installations can be understood as exploring the same territory as the work of this latter group. The focus of social psychologists on "modern," "symbolic," "aversive," or

“subtle” forms of racism in the 1970s and ’80s reflects Piper’s contemporaneous artistic investigation into that same set of attitudes.<sup>52</sup> As described by social psychology, this new set of modern, subtly racist attitudes differs from blatantly racist ones because they do not consciously endorse the belief that the racially other is morally or aptitudinally inferior. Instead, these attitudes are exhibited as, for example, sublimated hostility toward integration,<sup>53</sup> implicit biases,<sup>54</sup> or a greater willingness to interpret an act as a punishable transgression when it is committed by an ethnically other.<sup>55</sup> Crucially, these attitudes are compatible with the subject believing she or he is not racist, despite the pernicious effect their attitudes may have; this is perhaps most dramatically shown by racial prejudice patterns in jury-based trials.<sup>56</sup>

In Piper’s installations, the initial trigger for the viewer’s emotional reaction to the work is usually something as simple as a found photographic image of a black person. Interestingly, for the viewer implied in the voiceover, such an image is enough to recognize the work as a piece of “political” art; the central emotion of each piece is therefore not the feeling of flagrant racist dislike of black people, but the comparatively mild affective dislike that one might feel toward the topic of racism being discussed. This is similar to what has become known as “aversive racism,” the mildly negative feelings that lead to the avoidance of the racially other rather than risk confrontation with them,<sup>57</sup> as well as to “stereotype threat,” the unwillingness among white survey respondents to discuss political issues with a black pollster due to an a priori worry that they will be perceived as racist.<sup>58</sup>

If in real life such mild tactics of avoidance can go unnoticed by the subject, they take center stage in these installations. As in the early works, one of the key tasks for the installations is to arrest the (viewer’s) consciousness in the instantaneous “here and now,” the moment Piper later came to discuss under the heading “the indexical present.”<sup>59</sup> However, if in a series like *Catalysis* Piper experimented with the audience’s consciousness outside of the art environment, in the 1978–92 installations the art setting was key for focusing on the present. This is most clearly evident in *Aspects of the Liberal Dilemma* (fig. 15; p. 144). Here a newspaper picture of black men and women is shown out of the original context and covered with reflective Plexiglas that casts back the visitor’s face. The monologue played on a concealed sound system addresses the viewer as “you”: “It doesn’t matter who these people are. They’re parts of a piece of art, which is part of an art exhibit, in an art gallery, right here, right now. . . . You want to have an aesthetic experience: to be fulfilled, elevated, edified, irritated.”<sup>60</sup> As the monologue progresses, it describes the viewer growing increasingly impatient and frustrated by the work and feeling preached to. Interestingly, several studies in unconscious stereotyping,

52. For these terms, see note 6. In examples of individual studies, I will, where possible, limit myself to those that coincide with the period of Piper’s works (1978–92). Where I could not locate studies for this period, I cite more recent ones.

53. See, for example, Sears, Carl P. Hensler, and Leslie K. Speer, “‘Whites’ Opposition to ‘Busing’: Self-Interest or Symbolic Politics?” *American Political Science Review* 73, no. 2 (1979): 369–84; Sears, “Symbolic Racism,” in P. A. Katz and D. A. Taylor, eds., *Eliminating Racism: Profiles in Controversy* (New York: Plenum, 1988), pp. 53–84.

54. Patricia G. Devine, “Stereotypes and Prejudice: Their Automatic and Controlled Components,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 56, no. 1 (1989): 5–18; and John F. Dovidio et al., “On the Nature of Prejudice: Automatic and Controlled Processes,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 33, no. 5 (1997): 510–40.

55. Philip Atiba Goff, “A Measure of Justice: What Policing Racial Bias Research Reveals,” in *Beyond Discrimination*, pp. 158–71.

56. Jennifer L. Eberhardt et al., “Looking Deathworthy: Perceived Stereotypicality of Black Defendants Predicts



which have revealed the tendency of white Americans to more readily associate negative emotions with black faces than with white faces, are likewise based on trying to capture a “here and now.” These studies measure the speed with which the viewer can associate positive or negative attributes with images of white or black people.<sup>61</sup> *Aspects of the Liberal Dilemma*, however, fixates on that putative initial moment of aversion.

A few of Piper’s later works, like the Catalysis series, utilize Piper’s own presence as the catalytic effect on the viewer. But whereas in *Catalysis IV* the artist is a bizarre unannounced apparition on the public transport, in the video installation *Cornered* (1988) (pp. 43, 148) she appears in a neutral blue cardigan and pearls; she is perhaps even conservatively dressed for an art-world presence. She smiles at us, holds our gaze, and then announces plainly, “I am black.” Perhaps we feel, Piper tells us, that she is making “an unnecessary fuss” by declaring her identity in this way, but if she does not announce her identity, she has to put up with racist remarks that white people make in her presence, believing that she is white.<sup>62</sup> In this way, *Cornered* is one of a number of works that thematize Piper’s personal predicament, as well as her family’s, as black persons who can “pass” for white.<sup>63</sup> Evoking what has been described by social psychologists as covert racism, these works address the tendency of white subjects to endorse illiberal or racist beliefs in nonpublic and all-white environments.<sup>64</sup> The work is not only

Capital-Sentencing Outcomes,” *Psychological Science* 17, no. 5 (2006): 583–86.

57. Samuel L. Gaertner and Dovidio, “The Subtlety of White Racism, Arousal, and Helping Behavior,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 35, no. 10 (1977): 691; and Gaertner and Dovidio, “The Aversive Form of Racism,” in Gaertner and Dovidio, eds., *Prejudice, Discrimination, and Racism* (Orlando, Fla.: Academic Press, 1986).

58. Goff, “A Measure of Justice,” pp. 174–75.

59. See Piper, “On Conceptual Art,” *Flash Art* 143 (November–December 1988); reprinted in *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, vol. 1, pp. 241–42. See also Piper, “Xenophobia and the Indexical Present I: Essay,” 1989, in Mark O’Brien, ed., *Reimagining America: The Arts of Social Change* (Philadelphia: New Society Press, 1990); reprinted in *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, vol. 1, pp. 247–48.

60. Piper, “Aspects of the Liberal Dilemma,” 1980, in *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, vol. 1, pp. 69–70.

61. See note 55. For a recent, ongoing study of implicit bias see Project Implicit, Harvard University, [www.implicit.harvard.edu/implicit](http://www.implicit.harvard.edu/implicit).

62. The transcript for *Cornered* has been



15. *Aspects of the Liberal Dilemma*. 1978



notable as a piece of testimony, however, but for the brilliance of its rhetoric, beginning with the discomfort that such a simple initial remark—"I am black"—has the power to occasion. The viewer may feel uncomfortable (preached to?) simply because he or she does not want to run the risk of seeming racist and would prefer to avoid any discussion of the subject altogether. The viewer may shrink away from the issue rather than see it, as Piper suggests in the video, as *our* problem—both her own as well as the viewer's. The uneasy viewer thus is cornered by his or her attitudes as much as the woman in the video is cornered by the objectionable choice between passing for white and court-ing hostility.

There is, then, an important structural similarity between the 1968–71 and the 1978–92 works, even if we do not take the early works to broach the issue of racism. In the 1978–92 corpus, Piper's work continues to build on the key issues of Conceptual art, some of which were already broached by LeWitt: the relationship between the work's instruction and the audience's reaction (what Piper termed "catalysis"), and the ability of a consciousness to focus on, and self-analyze, the experience of the present moment (the "indexical present"). Recalling the strictures of Conceptual drawing that traced the artist's consciousness in the *Hypothesis* works, each of the 1978–92 installations proceeds like a polygon for the viewer's thought. One is confronted with an image as well as a questionnaire or a voiceover, each forcing a new level of scrutiny upon one's own initial reaction. In *Aspects of the Liberal Dilemma*, the viewer is even forced to observe his or her own face in the Plexiglas that covers the photograph. Here, then, it is the viewer who draws the line that his or her consciousness has traveled. The bequest of early Conceptual art to later politically engaged practices was not, then, we might suggest, in its subject matter but in its rhetoric.

We might also ask again: who exactly is this viewer? To the four viewers discussed in the previous section, we must add a fifth: an artificial character that I have been referring to, constructed from the person addressed or impersonated by Piper's voiceovers and from the sociohistorical context of these works. This fifth, sociohistorical viewer is a hypothesis, but a hypothesis to which the studies cited here add plausibility. In other words, if reading Piper's works side by side with social psychology seems at all convincing, then the viewer that Piper's installations so masterfully evokes is precisely the modern, subtly racist subject of liberal, post-civil rights America. (While I could not find any studies on racism pertaining to a gallery-going public, it is interesting that higher education has been shown to correlate with a higher commitment to liberal principles, but not with a higher commitment to their implementation.)<sup>65</sup>

This is not to suggest, of course, that any *individual* viewer must have reacted in this way (though it suggests many probably

published in Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, eds., *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005), chapter 14.

63. The video in *Cornered* is displayed as part of an installation that includes the two birth certificates of Piper's father, one identifying him as "white," the other as "octoroon." Other works that make use of Piper's biography include her Political Self-Portrait series (1978–80).

64. See, for example, studies that show white respondents to be more likely to report negative views toward black Americans when interviewed by white interviewers. Shirley Hatchett and Schuman, "White Respondents and Race-of-Interviewer Effects," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (1975): 523–28.

65. Indeed, higher levels of education resulted in *less* liberal attitudes on some issues of implementation, such as preferential treatment; see *Racial Attitudes in America*, pp. 231–34. Similar results continue to be reported today; see Geoffrey T. Wodtke, "Are Smart People Less Racist? Verbal Ability, Anti-Black Prejudice, and the Principle-Policy Paradox," *Social Problems* 63, no. 1 (2016): 21–45.

did). It is to argue, rather, that the rhetorical effectiveness of Piper's work consists of making us temporarily inhabit a deeply familiar character, a deeply plausible and recognizable picture of the kind of racism that the society now faces. What any of us does with that picture—whether we recognize in it a part of ourselves, or of our world, or of our persecutors—will depend as much on our circumstances as on our sensibilities. At any rate, to return to the question I posed at the beginning of the paper—what do discursive forms of art offer vis-à-vis broader, non-art political discourse?—Piper's art surely offers a convincing answer: here is an art that induces an exacting, uncompromising degree of self-scrutiny in the here and now, which we simply do not encounter in other registers of political debate. The same scrutiny of the audience's internal processes that was developed through abstract investigations of Conceptual art is now presented as a rhetoric designed to display and dismantle a modern, subtly racist viewership.

Finally, it is the same scrutiny we can apply to ourselves as art historians. I have suggested that the art-historical gaze of the 1990s and 2000s, one that reliably reads a political message into Conceptual art of the 1960s, may have grown out of a legitimate concern for a politically more engaged academia, but also that it has, by now, perhaps, become a maneuver that is too predictable and too totalizing to be always useful. As I tried to suggest with Piper, this gaze can also unhelpfully fix an individual artistic subjectivity into some allotted place. Instead, it may be more productive to return to the abstract investigations of Conceptual art on their own terms, to think about what rhetorical modes were thereby enabled, and then to think, perhaps, about which of these rhetorical modes we may use in the continued struggle for a more just society.