

FEATURE

# Adrian Piper's Show at MoMA is the Largest Ever for a Living Artist. Why Hasn't She Seen It?

The conceptual artist's life and work push against the boundaries of race and identity in America.

By Thomas Chatterton Williams

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**A**drian Piper, the conceptual artist and analytic philosopher, is almost as well known for what she has stopped doing as for what she has done. By 1985, she had given up alcohol, meat and sex. In 2005, she took a leave of absence from her job at Wellesley, sold her home on Cape Cod and shipped all of her belongings to Germany. On a lecture tour in the United States the next year, she discovered a mark on her plane ticket that suggested, to her, that she'd been placed on a watch list; she has not set foot in America since. Then, in 2012, on her 64th birthday, she “retired from being black.” She did this by uploading a digitally altered self-portrait to her website, in which she had darkened her skin — normally café *très-au-lait* — to the color of elephant hide. It was accompanied by a news bulletin announcing her retirement. The pithy text superimposed at the bottom of the photo elaborated: “Henceforth, my new racial designation will be neither black nor white but rather 6.25% grey, honoring my 1/16th African heritage,” she wrote. “Please join me in celebrating this exciting new adventure in pointless administrative precision and futile institutional control!” (Through extensive genealogical work, she later determined that her African heritage is closer to one-eighth.)

The piece was, like much of Piper's art and writing, absurdly comical in no small part because it was so brutally honest. It was inspired by Piper's dawning realization that she was unable to fulfill other people's expectations through the lens of race; since the early 2000s, she had stopped allowing any of her artwork to be exhibited in all-black shows, which she came to see as ghettoizing. In 2015, she announced that she would no longer talk to the press about her work.

Such inflexibility has done little to damage her standing in the art world. On a drizzly evening in March, a well-turned-out crowd of several hundred alighted upon the Museum of Modern Art to sip prosecco, schmooze and Instagram snippets of Piper's immense body of work. The occasion was the opening of the enormous, and enormously demanding for the casual viewer,

50-year career retrospective, “Adrian Piper: A Synthesis of Intuitions, 1965-2016,” on display through July 22. The exhibition draws its title from Kant’s “Critique of Pure Reason,” a lifelong touchstone for Piper, and marks the first time in MoMA’s history that the work of any living artist has earned the entirety of its sprawling sixth-floor special-exhibitions gallery. Alongside a Golden Lion award at the Venice Biennale, which Piper won in 2015, this is among the very highest honors the art world can proffer.



“Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features” (1981)

The Eileen Harris Norton Collection. Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin.



I'd flown from Paris to see the opening of "Synthesis" after having struck up a polite but formal email correspondence with Piper. In the last message she had sent me, about three weeks earlier, she refused to speak to me on the record unless she or her archivist could independently fact-check the article before publication. "I decided a long time ago that I would prefer no representation to misrepresentation," she wrote, and it seemed that, with this impossible condition, she would not grant an exemption from her indefinite moratorium. She suggested, as an alternative, that I consult her website and extensive body of published writing, an incalculable number of academic articles, essays and books. But I had already read many of those, and they had left me convinced that she has been quietly conducting, from that vexed and ever-expanding blot on the American fabric where white and black bleed into each other, one of the smartest, funniest and most profound interrogations of the racial madness that governs and stifles our national life that I had ever encountered.

Piper's body of work constitutes a maze of thought that ranges from graph-paper drawings and minimal sculpture and proceeds through Borgesian games of infinity, overtly political art and metapolitical art about the public's aversion to political art and even a room in which visitors are forced by security guards to hum upon entering. There are several hypnotizing videos that show nothing more than her dancing. As critics have noted since at least the 1980s, Piper's influence on subsequent generations of artists, black and nonblack alike, has been substantial even as the full measure of her output is only now being tallied.

I spoke with Cornelia Butler, the former chief curator of drawings at MoMA who conceived of and co-curated the show, and she explained that Piper has been a key figure in numerous distinct movements, from conceptual and minimalist to protofeminist art. In nearly every biennale or international exhibition, she said, Piper's "always there, and the work always looks current."

"But more than that," Butler continued, "since the '90s, there's a generation of artists whose work is really almost impossible without her." Anyone working with self-documentation or drag "is absolutely connected to Adrian," she said. This would extend her sphere of influence to Mark Bradford and Glenn Ligon, but the case can be made that everyone from Cindy Sherman to Carrie Mae Weems to Barbara Kruger should be included in it, too.

I visited one of the show's curators, Christophe Cherix, in his tidy office at MoMA. A kind-faced man from Switzerland, Cherix said that the museum's mission is always to look to the past and figure out which artists have been overlooked. "Adrian's work seemed to be a logical one to take on," he said. "We had seen exhibitions, but usually partial. And it felt like it was really a practice that needed to be somehow brought together. What's really her place in the 20th century? You have the feeling that her role was essential."

Yet Piper, whose voice and wildly charismatic likeness at various ages and in various guises permeated the building in numerous recordings, self-portraits and video installations, was palpably absent from her own historic achievement. The closest she came to witnessing the magnitude of the retrospective was by means of an all-white 3-D scale model of the MoMA's

6th floor that the museum had constructed for her in Berlin. They had an identical model in New York, Cherix explained. “And when we were changing something, we could change it in Berlin. Every work was reduced to a tiny little illustration.”

I envisioned Piper all alone with her meticulous facsimile, aware of every detail but so many thousands of miles away. The severity of her self-exile from the United States struck me as gratuitous. How, I later wrote to ask her, had she spent the day of her opening?

She wrote back quickly. “I began the day by doing yoga,” she said. After that, she worked on a new site-specific sculptural installation piece called “*Das Ding-an-sich bin ich*” (“The thing-in-itself is me”; more Kant) and answered messages of congratulations from friends who attended the opening. “I did make myself dinner, but then went back to work on ‘*Das Ding-an-sich bin ich*,’” she continued. “This felt like the best way to ward off a really bad attack of regret, longing and self-pity for not being able to be present at the most important event that will ever happen to me. I kept reminding myself that this was the price of the choices I had made, and that I stood by those choices.”

**“Synthesis” is arranged** chronologically, perhaps the best organizing principle for a career as protean as Piper’s. Her earliest works — mostly highly detailed drawings from the 1960s — reveal the hand of a precociously skilled draftswoman. Her clean, geometric sculptures radiate the sophisticated restraint of Donald Judd. Early on, Piper was influenced primarily by the conceptual art of Sol LeWitt, a lifelong friend and one-time neighbor of hers when she lived on the Lower East Side. In marked contrast to what would come later, nothing in these early pieces suggests, or denies, that the author is “black” or “female” or really anything at all.

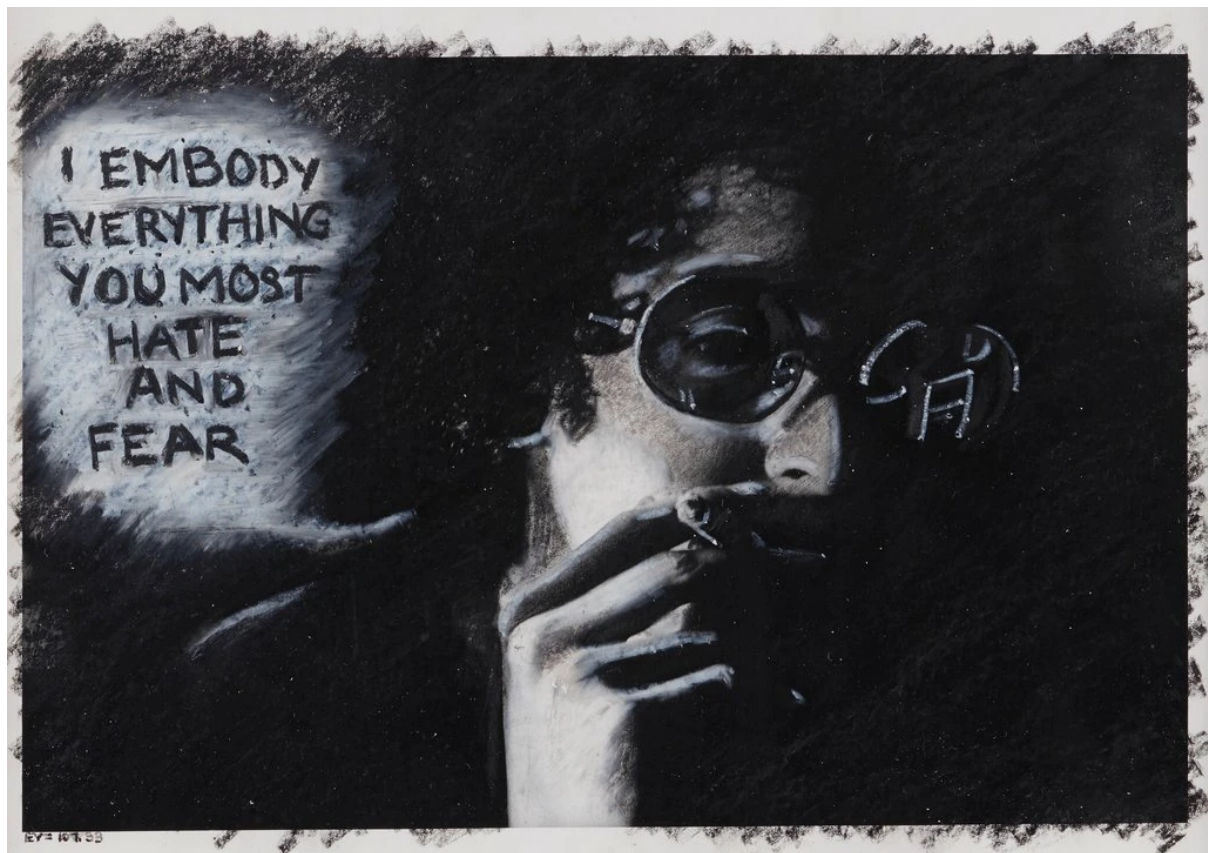


“The Mythic Being: Sol’s Drawing #2 of 5” (1974). Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.



Piper writes often of her natural inclination to engage the world around her with nothing less than “the deep-seated, optimistic sense of entitlement of an upper-middle-class het WASP male.” Because of her subject matter and the atypical spelling of her first name, in an age before the Internet, many other people also assumed that she fit that very description, inviting her to contribute to publications and group exhibits. Piper says that these people were sometimes openly disappointed when they met her.

Five rooms into the show, viewers are confronted with a drastic change in Piper’s output, in the early 1970s, when she begins to make art explicitly dealing with identity. The shift comes by way of her canonical series of “Mythic Being” performances and photo-based works, in which she hits the streets of Manhattan and Cambridge, Mass., in drag, as a swaggering, mustachioed brown-skinned male with an Afro: an alter-ego who said and did the outrageous. What she considers her first racially conscious artwork, “The Mythic Being: I Embodiment Everything You Most Hate and Fear” (1975), emerged from this cycle in the form of an oil crayon drawing on a black-and-white photo, the subtitle scrawled over one side, as a lament or provocation. Piper has said that she wished she could make art like Frank Stella’s, with no obligation to anything beyond itself, but she eventually realized that she couldn’t. “It doesn’t occur to her that she’s a black artist until it has to,” Butler, now chief curator at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, told me, “until she’s made to realize that her race is an issue, and she is made to realize that through her life as a social being in the world.”



“The Mythic Being: I Embodiment Everything You Most Hate and Fear” (1975).  
Collection Thomas Erben, New York. Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin.

Not everyone in the art world believes she could have ever been so innocent, which has made her a controversial figure. “Her race is fully an art move,” Darby English, an art historian at the University of Chicago and adjunct curator in MoMA’s department of painting and sculpture, told me, “cynical in the way that Duchamp’s toilet is cynical.” What he meant is that whatever importance her work may contain was not inherent to it but a result of some loophole in the system; that, in essence, she appropriated a viewpoint and exploited a technicality for profit. Yet English, who is black, also recognized the value in demonstrating the arbitrariness of boundaries and transcending them, comparing Piper’s use of “blackness” to “the inconvenience that trans people are causing at the level of the pronoun.” By complicating and problematizing assumptions that are coded into our language, “there is a degree of work required of us to accurately describe them.”

However Piper came to plumb the paradoxes of her own racial designation (and everyone else’s), the desire to alter other people’s behavior by challenging their reflexive biases is one of her defining fixations. Her pieces are conversational and confrontational, proceeding from the premise that racism is always something interpersonal before it can be institutional or structural. In her 1992 essay, “Passing for White, Passing for Black,” a bracingly lucid personal testimony of fitting in everywhere and nowhere at once, Piper identifies the tragic miscommunication at the heart of so much American racial interaction. Growing up near Harlem, she was frequently mistaken for “white” by working-class blacks who either teased her or required her to submit to a “Suffering Test,” demanding that she “prove” her blackness by recounting “recent experiences of racism.” She notes that these exchanges were humiliating but useful in providing “insight into the way whites feel when they are made the circumstantial target of blacks’ justified and deep-seated anger. Because the anger is justified, one instinctively feels guilty. But because the target is circumstantial and sometimes arbitrary, one’s sense of fairness is violated. One feels both unjustly accused or harassed, and also remorseful and ashamed at having been the sort of person who could have provoked the accusation.”

While in no way excusing anti-black racism, Piper nevertheless hit upon, a quarter of a century ago, a means of understanding, at least in part, the tortuous psychology of white reaction. It is a means rooted in an unusual dual perspective that feels particularly useful in an era defined by a fracturing of collective understanding: the embrace of identitarian essentialism and rising reactionary populism. In such situations as described above, Piper elaborates, “one can react defensively and angrily, and distill the encounter into slow-burning fuel for one’s racist stereotypes. Or one can detach oneself emotionally and distance oneself physically from the aggressors, from the perspective of which their personal flaws and failures of vision, insight and sensitivity loom larger, making it easier to forgive them for their human imperfections but harder to relate to them as equals.”





"Self-Portrait as a Nice White Lady" (1995).

The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York. Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin.

The only genuine way out of the dilemma, Piper believes, is a radical one: As many of us as possible must come not merely to "tolerate" one another's differences but to go much further and even accept the possibility that we may actually contain some of these very differences inside ourselves. "No reflective and well-intentioned white person who is consciously concerned to end racism wants to admit instinctively recoiling at the thought of being identified as black herself," Piper continues, archly. "But if you want to see such a white person do this, just peer at the person's facial features and tell her, in a complimentary tone of voice, that she looks as though she might have some black ancestry, and watch her reaction."

Such an ingenious exercise in bluff-calling is what animates one of my favorite pieces from “Synthesis,” a 1988 video installation titled “Cornered,” which I found myself lingering in front of with my friend, a teak-toned woman from Virginia with the greenest pair of eyes you can imagine; her face, like mine, another living ledger of the country’s unspeakable racial tangle. “I’m black,” a middle-aged Piper seated behind a desk and wearing a pearl necklace calmly informs us in the manner of an evening news anchor, momentarily pausing to let her audience absorb the information:

*Now, let’s deal with this social fact, and the fact of my stating it, together.*

*Maybe you don’t see why we have to deal with it together. Maybe you think it’s just my problem and that I should deal with it by myself.*

*But it’s not just my problem. It’s our problem.*

...

*If I tell you who I am, you become nervous and uncomfortable, or antagonized. But if I don’t tell you who I am, I have to pass for white. And why should I have to do that?*

...

*Furthermore, it’s our problem if you think that the social fact of my racial identity is in any event just a personal, special fact about me. It’s not. It’s a fact about us.*

*Because if someone can look and sound like me and still be black, then no one is safely, unquestionably white. No one.*

The work is simple, nothing more elaborate than a phalanx of chairs arranged in front of a defensively upturned desk with a TV mounted behind it. But it’s visually arresting nonetheless. At some point I stepped back to photograph the installation. As I pressed my thumb to unlock my phone, I contemplated, as I often do, the wallpaper, a favorite snapshot of my 4-year-old daughter: ivory skin, clear blue eyes, an ever-so-incongruent puff of golden curls levitating above her neckline. In the not-so-distant past, she — like my father and me, though not like my wife or my mother — would have been enslaved by people who looked just like her.

The day after the opening, I wrote to Piper again. After two more days of back and forth, I awoke to an unexpected response: “Let’s try it.”





"Everything #2.8" (2007). Private collection. Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin.

**For anyone who** is doubtful of the sheer absurdity of racial categorization and the porousness of our supposed boundaries, the Piper family history can be instructive. Adrian Margaret Smith Piper was born in 1948 in Washington Heights, and raised there and on Riverside Drive. On her paternal side, she is the product of a long line of whites and extremely light-skinned, straight-haired black property owners and, on her mother Olive's side, mixed-race, planter-class Jamaican immigrants. Her father, Daniel, received two separate and contradictory birth certificates. The first one labeled him as "white," while the second, which his mother demanded as a corrective, put him down as "octoroon." (At MoMA, they are hung on the wall, as part of the installation of "Cornered.") Piper's paternal grandfather, also Daniel, went the opposite route after the birth of his second, slightly darker son, Billy, abandoning his wife and children and moving out West to start a new "white" family in Washington State. Daniel Sr.'s brother, Piper's great-uncle, William, lived his life as a Caucasian man of distinction, founding the Piper Aircraft Corporation and making his name as "the Henry Ford of Aviation." He ended up with his face on a postage stamp and a fortune big enough to endow an auditorium at his alma mater, Harvard.

Piper's father grew up more privileged than most Americans of any complexion, attending a private school in the city, where he was a handsome and popular athlete. But in his senior year, when he made the mistake of asking out a white classmate, he was publicly shamed and removed from the basketball team. In her memoir, "Escape to Berlin," which was published to coincide with "Synthesis," Piper writes that the incident caused her father to suffer a

psychological trauma of such severity that “he stopped speaking to all of his classmates and teachers for the rest of the year.” While serving in the military during World War II, he strategically enlisted as Caucasian, concerned that he would not otherwise see combat. But the racism he became privy to as a “white” man appalled him, and he never again wavered from his black identity upon returning to civilian life.

All the adults the young Adrian came in close contact with adhered to, in her words, the “governing convention of self-presentation in that stratum of upper middle-class African-American society”: a combination of hard work, impeccable dress, honesty and fair play. “Integrity,” Piper’s father stressed, “is the one thing racist America cannot take from you, unless you let it.” But she could have easily been quoting my father or any number of black men reared in eras in which respectability politics dominated. Such self-presentation was a defensive reaction to the dehumanizing stereotypes prevalent throughout the culture. “My parents’ class and generation did not fight the stereotype by marching, staging conferences or publishing articles, or in any other way designed to integrate them into the American mainstream,” Piper writes. “That would be my job. Theirs was simply to falsify the stereotype.”

In fact, the job that Piper invented for herself was completely *sui generis*. After attending the School of Visual Arts and enrolling at City College to study philosophy and musicology, she began her yearslong “Mythic Being” project. In this “self-conscious performance of stereotypes,” as the scholar John P. Bowles writes in his 2011 book “Adrian Piper: Race, Gender and Embodiment,” Piper cruised white women and staged a mugging, among other things, in order to force viewers to “question how popularly held stereotypes affect perception.” Piper was a very small and thin woman, but with the accouterments of a black man, she was, incredibly, both menacing and dripping with swagger. In his introduction to the “Synthesis” catalog, Cherix places Piper alongside Hanne Darboven, Dan Graham and Vito Acconci, “a generation of artists who emerged in New York right after the advent of what is called (much too reductively) Minimalism, in which works of art exist through their spatial surroundings, often completed by the viewer’s physical engagement with them.” But Piper alone found a way to tether her work to many of our society’s most urgent moral questions.

There are very few people who have experienced this kind of early success in one field who would willingly submit to the demands and diminutions of advancement in a second. Yet Piper could not escape her polymathy, and in 1974 she arrived at Harvard to pursue a Ph.D. in analytic philosophy. On her first day, Willard Van Orman Quine, one of the most famous and influential philosophers of the 20th century, approached her. “Without introduction or preamble he said to me with a triumphant smirk,” she recounts in “Passing for White, Passing for Black,” “‘Miss Piper, you’re about as black as I am.’” That comment shattered her, with what seems in retrospect to have been lifelong ramifications. In one remark, Quine simultaneously insulted Piper — implying, condescendingly, that her inclusion in such a rarefied space was predicated, at least in part, on the fact that she was legitimately black — while also invalidating her supposed racial credentials. In so doing, he had demeaned what she believed was the sacred life of the mind and stripped her of the confidence to trust that she would be perceived on his turf as an individual and not a social curiosity.



Piper ended up graduating at the top of her program, and the mark of her training is evident even in informal interactions. She is an extraordinarily formidable e-mailer, picking apart casual correspondence with the cool ferocity of a world-class logician; it sometimes felt as if Ludwig Wittgenstein was at the other end of the computer. Before she would speak with me on the record, Piper wanted to make sure that we were all in agreement about what a “fact” was. “I would ask that you share my short essay with your editor,” she wrote, providing a link to “Art Criticism Essay Suggested Guidelines,” a quasi-legal piece of writing that guides “authors who take themselves to be writing art criticism” through a series of points and subpoints, as if they were her students. “If she is in agreement with (1.1) through (3.3), and is aware of the ways in which the NYT has violated these standards in its treatment of my work in the past, then a brief exchange with her as to how to ensure factual accuracy in the final draft of your essay might well be useful and constructive. I would be interested in learning her views on these matters.”

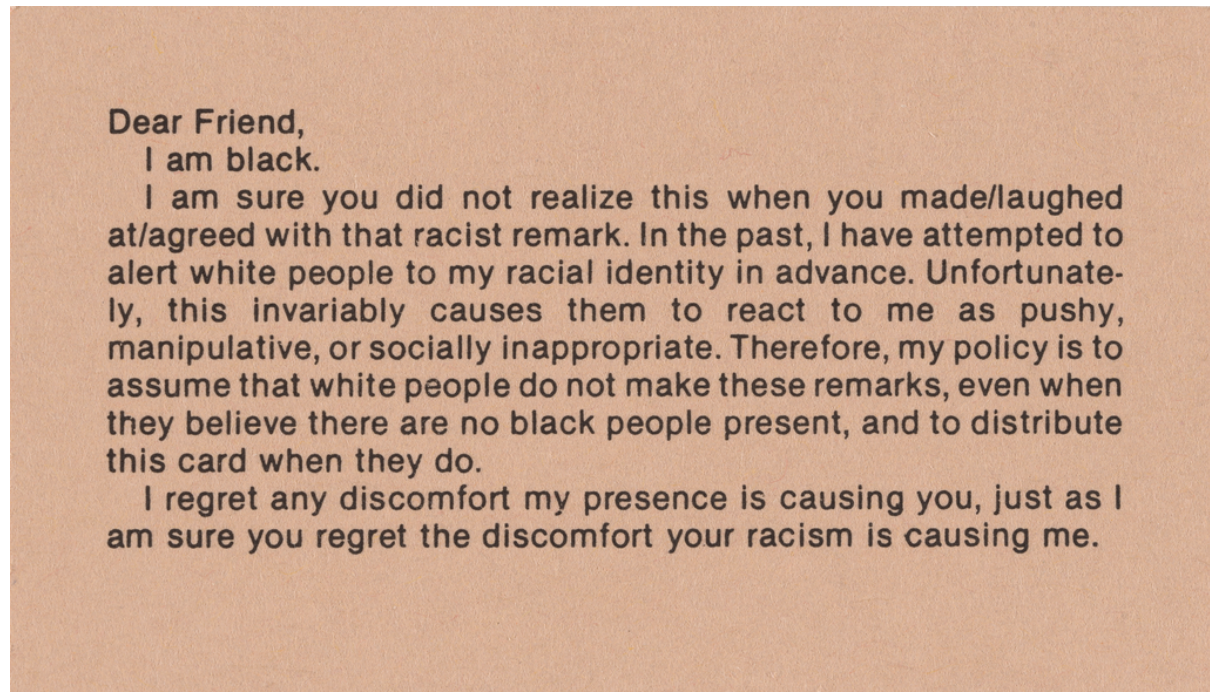
Piper is notorious in the art press for submitting and sometimes self-publishing excoriating letters to the editor when she feels a writer has misrepresented her work or her thinking. In 1987, she famously eviscerated the art critic Donald Kuspit in an open letter that became a kind of performance in its own right. (It included drawings, which are featured in “Synthesis.”) In a 2017 letter to the editor, following a *favorable* review in Artforum by the mixed-race British artist and writer Hannah Black (who caused a stir that year with her own open letter demanding the Whitney remove and destroy a painting of Emmett Till by a white artist), Piper objected that Black “situates [my work] within the confused but earnest Anglo-American devotion to obsolete racial categories that no thinking person has taken seriously for more than half a century.”

A few days before I left New York, Piper and I had finally hashed out a plan: We would see each other the following week in Berlin. I did not know what to expect.

**The Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation** Berlin occupies an airy high-ceilinged flat in the gentrifying immigrant neighborhood of Wedding. It was mostly vacant when I visited, because the work had all been shipped to New York, but in one of the rooms off the entrance there was that meticulous scale-model of the MoMA retrospective. It sat on a large table like the great map of Westeros that Daenerys Targaryen mulls over in “Game of Thrones.”

In “Synthesis,” Piper looms larger than life. In person she appeared deceptively Lilliputian. Dressed professorially in slacks and a blazer, with smooth beige skin, neatly trimmed hair and rimless glasses, her very Americanness was accentuated by her Continental surroundings. From the volume of emailing we had behind us, the thread of conversation resumed easily. In contrast to the image I had of her in my mind, Piper spoke softly, laughed wholeheartedly and smiled often, even as she mentioned several times that she was exhausted. We sat down at a long conference table, where I produced several of her “calling cards” from the late 1980s and early 1990s, brilliant performance props she created for use in real social situations. The cards are on display at MoMA and available in stacks for visitors to take home with them and share. “My Calling (Card) #1 (Reactive Guerrilla Performance for Dinners and Cocktail Parties)”

starts out, “Dear Friend, I am black. I am sure you did not realize that when you made/laughed at/agreed with that racist remark.” She kindly signed a few for my daughter, who may very well need a constant supply of them in the future.



“My Calling (Card) #1 (Reactive Guerrilla Performance for Dinners and Cocktail Parties)”  
(1986-1990).

Collection of the Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College. Adrian Piper Research Archive  
Foundation Berlin.

Piper’s life and work together chart a course beyond the paradoxical confinements of race and its unstable categories — ultimately rejecting racism as well as identity politics — and I wondered aloud if she thought more people would one day follow her lead. Could the rejection of race become more than merely a gesture? She expressed skepticism that very many people could handle or even desire such radical self-reinvention. “In order to really step out of the game, there are stages to go through,” she cautioned. “First, you have to really do your research,” meaning a person needs to scour her family’s genealogy, where she is practically guaranteed to find all manner of surprises. After that, “you might try saying, cautiously, that you’re actually racially mixed.” Her eyes widened. “You need to see how much punishment you’re willing to take and how much you can take.”

Piper believes that anyone who peers deep enough would find no such thing as a stable racial identity. When I asked her about it, she rejected the notion that there is even something so straightforward as a “black sensibility.” “The concept of being black was not one that was in use in my home,” she said with a laugh. “It’s not as though we said, ‘Here I am, a black person cooking an egg!’” But the civil rights movement made the question pressing. “Which side of the line are you on? That’s where identity politics begins,” she said, suggesting a subtle irony that black thinkers from Richard Wright to Fred Hampton would recognize as true: The fight for liberation from oppression can reify the very same racial categories that are bogus to begin



with. This is one of the more perverse traps members of historically oppressed groups can find themselves hemmed up in. I mentioned to Piper that English, the art historian, had told me that he found the very wording of “retiring” from being black deeply fascinating, evocative not of identity so much as labor; in this sense, “whiteness,” or the absence of “blackness,” can be seen as the state of liberation from the punishing travail of race. She smiled when I repeated to her his suggestion that she is now collecting her pension.

You could of course extend the metaphor to say that the racial ambiguity available to Piper is as privileged a position as not having to work. Yet I don’t think there is anything nefarious about her retirement. For some people — those of us who can’t help brushing against the margins — the logic, or stunning illogic, of our lives makes the decision to de-emphasize the arbitrary distinctions that sustain the American color-caste system that much simpler. I understood exactly why she gave up on race, I told her, but what I couldn’t follow was why she let go of so much else along with it.

“Meat and alcohol, O.K.,” I said. “But why give up on sex?”

“Sex is really wonderful and great fun,” she said with a shrug. “I’m a ’60s hippie person. I’ve had plenty of sex. My priorities changed.” The third vocation of Piper’s life — as important or even more so, she insists, than art or philosophy — is yoga. The concept of yogic celibacy took hold of her around 1985, when she suffered a series of personal setbacks: First, she was denied tenure in the philosophy department at the University of Michigan, and then her marriage fell apart. (Around this same time, she also began collecting her hair and toe- and fingernail clippings in racks of eerie glass bottles now on display at MoMA.) She likened her thinking to a comment she had heard about Michael Jackson’s dancing, that he was all energy, with no physical weight to fight against. “My decision to become celibate helps to transcend the drag of the body,” she told me.

We had been talking for three hours. I ordered a car to take us to dinner at Pauly Saal, a Michelin-starred restaurant that is one of Berlin’s best and Piper’s favorite. It surprised me that this was her spot. “I always jump at the chance to eat at Pauly Saal,” she’d told me, “so as to avoid my own bad cooking, which comprises rabbit food and vitamins.” After combing over the fine print of the tasting menu with the waiter to ensure her portions were strictly vegetarian, she ordered a bottle of still water for herself. As her slight frame folded into the capacious velvet booth, her large brown eyes attentive but tired, she looked again like the ascetic I’d expected.

When the exquisite little dishes arrived, Piper met them with no apparent gusto, almost absent-mindedly. It reminded me of a line from “Escape to Berlin” in which she posits the decidedly anti-bon-vivant notion that “human beings should need to eat only once, so that the resulting fuel intake will see them through a normal human lifespan.” This attitude seems to stem from a larger distrust of the corporeal. Earlier in the car we fell into a discussion about reincarnation, a possibility in which Piper more or less believes. She qualified herself, noting that she did not think our memories would last — we would not be ourselves in any recognizable sense — but that energy can never dissipate. At the end of the short ride to the east, the driver, who had not previously spoken, burst into a spirited conversation with Piper in

German. She responded to him at length, as though he were a distinguished colleague at Harvard, making no move to get out of the car before he had finished. “What was that about?” I asked her as we walked inside.

“Oh, well, he brought up a good point,” she said. “Which was that you wouldn’t need memories for the self to persist if you allow for continuity of the soul.”

**In 1987**, the same year as her first retrospective at the Alternative Museum in New York, Piper became the first black woman ever to receive tenure in an American philosophy department while she was on the faculty of Georgetown. Three years later, she received an offer from Wellesley, where she would continue her philosophical work, which turns to questions of category, perception and xenophobia.

Though Piper remembers her students fondly, her decade and a half at Wellesley presents one of the most unusual focal points in any autobiographical writing I have ever read. In 2000, she brought suit against both Wellesley and its president at the time, Diana Chapman Walsh, for breach of contract and other claims, arguing, according to court documents, that the college had been “unjustly enriched by reaping the benefit of free publicity from her anti-racist artwork while failing to provide her with promised institutional support.” The lawsuit and a subsequent complaint were dismissed, but Piper’s relationship with the school, where she remained employed until 2008, never recovered.

In “Escape to Berlin,” Piper’s need to flee Wellesley takes on the urgency and melodrama of a psychological thriller. In several instances she accuses members of the philosophy department, the administration and the board of campaigns of harassment, vandalism and, ultimately, trying to kill her. (She never explicitly mentions Wellesley, referring only to “The College.”) “I still think The College wants me dead,” she writes, “that it will want this even more once this memoir is published; and that, with its powerful international political and corporate connections, it will find a way to make this happen.” She made an artwork that consists of the words “Make it look like an accident” over a smiling, desaturated self-portrait, specifically over the area of forehead where a hired assassin would aim a laser beam.

If you talk to faculty members who knew Piper at Wellesley or to members of the current administration, you will receive a range of reactions to this claim. “I think people were inclined always to be helpful to her and maybe even a bit protective of her at first,” Alison McIntyre, a chairwoman of the philosophy department at that time, told me in an email. “Nothing about her persecution narrative seemed to us to be grounded in reality, but still, I think the attitude toward her was more like uncomprehending forbearance, not hostility.” When I asked Wellesley to comment, a spokeswoman provided a statement that called Piper an “exceptional conceptual artist” who eventually came to have “her differences with the College, but all of her claims against Wellesley were dismissed in court.” Wellesley explained her termination as a direct consequence of her absence: After moving to Germany, she didn’t show up to work for more than two years.

Yet when I spoke to Selwyn R. Cudjoe, a professor of Africana Studies who was instrumental in recruiting Piper to the school, he offered another layer of complexity. “Adrian is a brilliant woman,” he said. “A brilliant, black woman. Folks in philosophy may have been very, not resentful, but they do not accept excellence among black people that easily.” Cudjoe is the longest-serving black faculty member at Wellesley. He assured me that, in his 32 years there, he found Wellesley to be “a very nurturing place.” But something about our conversation about whatever happened to Piper must have touched him. Several days after we spoke on the phone, he emailed me again: “Since talking with you, I have been thinking. I believe that part of Wellesley’s problem — and Adrian may have been a victim of this — is that it does not quite know how to treat its older black intellectuals, particularly if they are as smart as Adrian is. It might be that we have been here for such a short time they don’t quite know whether to appreciate our talent and our gifts or that we do not demonstrate enough thanks or gratefulness for their having hired us to this prestigious institution.”

Whatever one is prepared to accept as plausible, it seems undeniable that Piper derives from the particularities of her own experiences at elite institutions like Harvard and Wellesley certain larger questions about the very real challenges of being a black woman or of simply being black or being a woman, that are worth taking very seriously indeed. Still, the allegations about Wellesley nagged at me. While I don’t doubt for an instant that Piper came to seem extravagantly inconvenient to a number of people there or that she believes in the core of her being that her life really was at stake, I could not square the extremity of her feelings of persecution with my own sense of reality, no matter how hard I tried.

When I happened to be back in Berlin a couple of weeks after we first met, I saw Piper again for lunch, and we continued to email each other after I had left. At some point, I mentioned that “Passing for White, Passing for Black” was a better piece of writing than almost all of the first-person essays on race that I am familiar with, and that I would be grappling with it for years. What was so special and convincing in it, I felt, was the extent to which it exposed the fatal flaws and limitations inherent in both black and white points of view — how she could occupy a position not of pure seeing, but of fuller seeing, much fuller than most of us will ever access. What I could not understand, then, I wrote her, was why the essay hadn’t reached a significantly larger audience. She wrote back that it was supposed to have run in a major national magazine, but that she and the commissioning editor had a falling out over the content. I asked to see the exchanges, and she forwarded them to me with his name deleted.

Throughout a series of long missives, the editor was both solicitous and flattering toward Piper but also bizarrely patronizing, trying to coach her through her own conclusions in a way that I had never seen before in my professional life. In frustration, after months, she pulled the piece. As I wondered whether she, and now I, might be reading something racial into an exchange where there had simply been a misunderstanding — perhaps it was because she was an academic and not a journalist — I asked her the editor’s name. As soon as she told me, a flood of memories suddenly rushed back.



I also knew this man, who is white and who no longer works at that magazine. I met him when I was in graduate school, where he played an important gatekeeping role; he was seen to dictate a student's best shot at getting published. I am not someone who is overly sensitive to discrimination, and this man was not at all unpleasant, quite the contrary. But something was always off in our interactions, and it seemed to prevent him from ever being able to take me seriously as a writer, even though we both were concerned with some of the same intellectual themes. After he'd declined several of my project proposals, I'll never forget his cavalier shrug as he explained why. "It's O.K.," I recall him saying, "some people just don't really have ideas." Had I allowed that man's interpretation of my potential to define me, I would not be writing this article now, I am certain. And yet, I couldn't help wondering: Would even I have fully believed Piper about her own experience with him had I not, by sheer happenstance, also had this memory?

The thought deeply troubled me, and I wrote to this man to try to understand how he remembered his interactions with Piper. He made a convincing and well-documented, if more troubling, case that the response Piper received from him was actually a result of the magazine's top editors, a handful of more powerful white men, failing to value Piper's perspective. "This is not to say that she is wrong that there was/is white resistance to many of the ideas that inform her work," he wrote me. "But I tried my best to bring her ideas to light, not to repress them. ... My sin wasn't failing to recognize Adrian's brilliance, it was failing to convince my colleagues of it." His answer left me feeling uncertain, even about the substance of my own claims against him. Can we ever really avoid this tragic miscommunication that Piper herself has so powerfully analyzed in her writing and art?

**To many people**, Piper can seem strikingly unreasonable. Her refusal to return to America or her insistence that senior staff members at a national weekly magazine walk her through their understanding of what a "fact" is initially astonished me. But this unreasonableness, or rather this overreasonableness, this hyperliteralism, cuts both ways. It is inseparable from what makes her such a powerfully effective conceptual artist. This tendency of hers is best represented in "The Probable Trust Registry: The Rules of the Game #1-3," perhaps her most famous late work, which won a Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale and is restaged at MoMA. It comprises circular counters that would make sense in a Chase Bank lobby, staffed by receptionists and adorned with the phrases "I will always be too expensive to buy," "I will always mean what I say," "I will always do what I say I am going to do." Viewers are given the opportunity to sign official-looking contracts that would then make the declarations binding, joining them to a larger community of trustworthy people. The work is peak Piper — a personal experience, trivial and subjective in the scheme of things, transformed through the magic prism of art into something uncanny.



“The Probable Trust Registry: The Rules of the Game #1-3” (2013) as installed at The Museum of Modern Art. Martin Seck/The Museum of Modern Art

Piper has said of the “Registry” that it probably arises “from my jaded attitude toward institutional authority.” It is a response, she elaborated, “to the despair induced by recognizing, at a deep level, that the human institutions that are supposed to civilize and prepare us for a stable community anchored in shared interests and values are not working, and never have worked, because institutional professions of commitment to those values almost always mask a bottomless pit of need to accumulate, preserve and extend personal power.” Yet what feels so moving about the work to the hordes of participants is precisely the opposite of whatever jadedness that spawned it. On the contrary, it is the **sheer naïveté of the piece** that makes it function — **the chance it presents for a respite**, however silly and brief, from all the incessant, sophisticated little obfuscations and half-truths most of us must rely on to make adult life bearable.

“The Probable Trust Registry” made Piper the first woman of (*openly*, she would caution) African descent ever to win a Golden Lion. And yet neither the mainstream press nor the black community seemed to make a very big deal of this achievement at the time or since, certainly nothing like the tremendous outpouring of racial pride that was paid, for example, to Kehinde Wiley for painting Barack Obama’s presidential portrait. Perhaps this has to do with Piper’s decision not to exhibit her work in all-black shows, which has been perceived by some as self-loathing. In 2013, when Piper pulled her work from a group show, Valerie Cassel Oliver, the curator, responded by saying it was clear to her “that stigmas about blackness remain not only in the public’s consciousness, but also in the consciousness of artists themselves.”

In researching this article, I reached out to a half dozen of the most prominent black women artists and curators in America for their thoughts on Piper's significance and was amazed by the resounding silence. Each declined an interview or reneged after initially agreeing, even those who clearly have been influenced by Piper's oeuvre or were in attendance at the opening of "Synthesis," Instagramming videos of Piper dancing. I thought about this while rereading an incredible section of "Escape to Berlin," in which Piper writes with an unusually cleareyed self-awareness:

*I am identified as "black" by others, both "black" and "white," only when this serves to enhance their own social status, and not otherwise. Identifying myself as "black" had also very often served this function for me. I had regarded it as an honor and a privilege to be counted among the members of a community that had proved its mettle, its intelligence, and its genius by surviving and sometimes flourishing amid the most resourceful and sustained effort to destroy its humanity the world has ever seen. Outside the circle of my immediate family, however, the general presumption among both "black" and "white" Americans has been that I know nothing about the African-American experience. I now agree with that presumption. I would only add that my family and my parents' African-American friends probably did not know anything about it either, although, like me, they may have thought they did.*

Here Piper puts her finger on a most punishing aspect of black or any marginalized group identity that is seldom addressed with the honesty it requires. The idea that some black people do not even possess knowledge of their own experience when that experience strays from the predetermined plotline is itself oppressive. This is, at least in part, why Piper confessed to me in Berlin that she never would have found the freedom back home to exist outside of the black-white binary.

**The final vision** of "Synthesis" is the one I found myself drawn to more than anything, both at the opening and again on a subsequent viewing. As you exit to descend the escalator, there is a simple projection atop a plain white wall, hovering above the five-story abyss. It depicts a vaguely South Asian-looking gray-haired woman in a light red scarf and sensible bluejeans rocking out to house music in the middle of a sun-drenched East Berlin plaza. The woman is Piper, but here she could pass for your grandmother if only your grandmother possessed inordinate amounts of rhythm and stamina.

Though she is by definition a didactic artist — her most celebrated work, "Funk Lessons," a performance she began in 1983, involves her literally teaching, as though it were a social science, an auditorium full of mostly white people how to dance to funk music — Piper is far from a nag or a nerd. As a young woman, she cut a dreamy figure, with long flowing black hair and a smoldering physical confidence; in high school she made side money as a fashion model. Some of the most exquisite moments of "Synthesis" derive not from the labor or trauma of racial and gender identity but from the ineffable joy of simply being embodied (even if at the next turn she describes it as a nuisance).



The Piper we encounter in this last video has shed the glamour of her youth. But the motion, that extraordinary charisma communicated not through image or syllogism but through rhythm alone, remains as permanent as a fingerprint. The dancing, which continues for an hour unabated, is serious and playful, immersed in and oblivious to its surroundings, conveying numerous messages simultaneously. One message it conveys is that Piper is basking in her freedom — a joyful stranger among the throngs of Berliners who don't even bat an eye as they pass her. /

**Correction:** June 29, 2018

*An earlier version of this article referred imprecisely to Adrian Piper's performance in her doctoral program. Piper graduated at the top of her class, not near the top. The article also misstated how she exhibited her work; it is not the case that she regularly exhibited exclusively with other artists of color. In addition, the article misstated which shows she decided not to participate in. She decided not to exhibit her work in all-black shows, not shows with other artists of color.*

**Correction:** July 24, 2018

*An earlier version of this article referred incorrectly to the Harvard space endowed by Adrian Piper's ancestor. Piper Auditorium is inside Gund Hall, not a building in itself.*

Thomas Chatterton Williams is a contributing writer for the magazine. His last feature was a profile of Spike Lee.

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