

ALIENATION, TOO, HAS ITS USES²

BEGUM YASAR AND ALIZA SHVARTS

I. 2017

The first protests started on Saturday, January 28, 2017 at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York City. Around 11 a.m. Eastern Standard Time, a group of about 30 people gathered in front of Terminal 4, where international flights arrive, to object to Executive Order 13769, commonly known as President Donald Trump’s travel ban. Signed just the day before, the executive order suspended entry into the country of people from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen for 90 days; suspended the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program for 120 days; capped the total number of refugees to be admitted into the United States in 2017 at 50,000; and suspended the entry of refugees from Syria indefinitely, declaring these groups of people to be “detrimental to the interests of the United States.”³

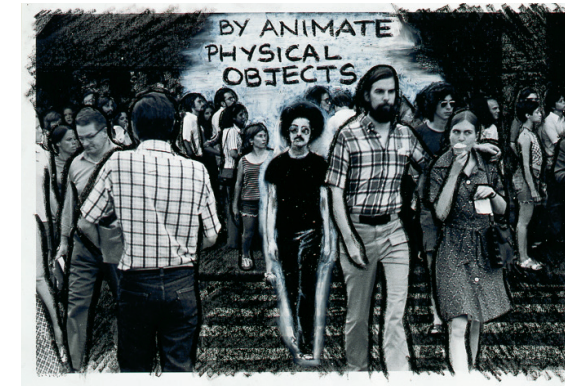
Section 1 of the order, which outlines its purpose, situates the need for increased restrictions in relation to the rise in terrorism-related crimes in the United States committed by foreign-born residents. It posits a trajectory that begins with the “terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when State Department policy prevented consular officers from properly scrutinizing the visa applications of several of the 19 foreign nationals who went on to murder nearly 3,000 Americans”⁴—though, as commentators pointed out, the 19 hijackers who carried out those attacks were all from countries not listed on the visa ban list (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates).⁵ The same section outlines an ideological position, framing the criteria for entry into the United States as a matter of not only external national affiliation but also internally held

beliefs. It makes the claim that: “In order to protect Americans, the United States must ensure that those admitted to this country do not bear hostile attitudes toward it and its founding principles. The United States cannot, and should not, admit those who do not support the Constitution, or those who place violent ideologies over American law.”⁶ Implicit in this phrasing is an opposition between “violent ideologies” and “American law” which erases the historical and present-day violence codified in U.S. legislation. Implicit too is the specter of the “alien”: the legal category of the non-citizen who becomes an embodiment of all that is counter to the national character as symbolized by the metonyms “founding principles” (an overly vague historical allusion) and “the Constitution” (an overly specific reference to a legal code)—or more simply, the alien as the embodiment of *everything we hate and fear*.⁷

The small crowd at JFK quickly grew throughout the day as activists and advocacy groups publicized the protest on social media, ultimately drawing more than 2,000 participants.⁸ What began in New York quickly spread nationwide to airports in Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Detroit, Orlando, Indianapolis, Seattle, Boston, Philadelphia, Portland, Houston, Washington, D.C., and many others. In the weeks that followed, the protests continued daily and extended globally to Berlin, London, Paris, Sydney, Manila, and Jakarta.⁹ In the months since this initial public outcry, the travel ban in both its original and revised iterations (Executive Order 13769 of January 27, 2017 and Executive Order 13780 of March 6, 2017) has been challenged in U.S. courts, with the Supreme Court slated to review the ban in the fall term of 2017.¹⁰



1-5. Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being: I Am the Locus*, #1-5, 1975



II. Xenophobia and the Politics of Meta-Art

Piper addresses the interpersonal dynamics of xenophobia in several texts included in Volume I of her collected writings, *Out of Order, Out of Sight*. In one of these texts, “Xenophobia and the Indexical Present II: Lecture (1992),” she writes:

My area of interest is xenophobia and racism. Xenophobia is defined as the fear of strangers, but it actually is not just the fear of strangers as such; for example, xenophobia does not apply to people in one’s family, relatives whom one happens not to have met, or to neighbors, or to other inhabitants of one’s small town. Xenophobia is about fear of the other considered as an alien—someone who does not look the way one is used to having people look, someone who does not behave in the way that one takes to be normal. It’s about the violation of boundaries, and I think that this perhaps has increasing resonance now in the European context, because of the demographic changes and waves of immigration that you are experiencing from Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa. My topic is racism because in the United States the analogue of your problem is the problem of racism and the integration of the slave population from Africa that has been in the United States for the last four hundred years.¹¹

Piper’s analogy between the U.S. and European contexts highlights the co-constitutive construction of racism as a category of xenophobia. Her training as an analytic philosopher, particularly her work on Immanuel Kant,¹² shapes this understanding of xenophobia, which is experienced first and foremost on the interpersonal scale. Alluding to Kant’s doctrine of transcendental idealism,¹³ Piper argues that the formation of the subject (and the identity thereof) is contingent on mutual perception and designation. She proceeds to succinctly frame the issue of xenophobia through this understanding of the dynamic formation of the subject and the intersubjective formation of the social. Accordingly, xenophobia, like the formation of identity, is a relational phenomenon. As she goes on to write:

I would suggest that xenophobia does not arise only in these contexts but also arises in the most basic relations between human beings, that is to say,

While the fate of immigration policy in the United States remains uncertain, the remarkable scale of public protests against Trump’s travel ban has raised deeper questions about how we understand the formation of nationhood—how borders function as physical and ideological sites that define not only the boundaries of the nation but also the conditions of social and juridical belonging. Specifically, these mass actions raise the question of *xenophobia*, which is a term that allows us to draw connections between contemporary policy and the more foundational constructs of difference that structure national ideologies, political discourse, and civic space. Is the xenophobia that characterizes the current U.S. presidential administration—manifest not only in the overt Islamophobia of the travel ban, but also in the anti-immigrant sentiment that thirsts for a “big, beautiful wall” on the border with Mexico, the white supremacy that rationalizes the killings of unarmed black citizens, and the historical and ideological divisions that animate violence in civic space—a break with the neoliberal globalization of the past decades or an outgrowth of its enduring crisis? What is the role of cultural production, and more specifically the visual arts, in times like these? *Times like these*—how are we to even understand our shared temporal frame?

Etymologically, xenophobia derives from ξένος (*xenos*) meaning “strange,” “guest,” or “foreigner,” and φόβος (*phobos*) meaning “fear.” It can refer to the perceptions among both groups and individuals, meaning that it manifests at the

scale of both the personal and political—a dual perspective the artist and philosopher Adrian Piper has excavated with unparalleled rigor throughout her career. For nearly six decades, Piper has engaged a set of political issues that continue to structure national and international discourses—primarily, racism and sexism, which she demonstrates to be categories of xenophobia. Piper’s work gives us a vocabulary with which to understand xenophobia as a constitutive force in the service of not only nationalism but also subjection at the individual and institutional levels—issues that, despite their longevity, appear with continued urgency in the current global political climate.

Thinking alongside the works selected for this exhibition—examples from Piper’s *The Mythic Being* series (1973–1976), *It’s Just Art* (1980), and the site-specific *Here* (conceived in 2008 and realized for the first time in this exhibition)—we examine how the artist uses her body, images, sounds, and language to directly address the viewer, drawing our attention to the perceptual relationships that mutually position a “self” and an “other” (pages 42–85, figs. 1–12, 17, 27). In doing so, Piper’s work opens a phenomenological space of confrontation wherein the social and political positions that settle the viewer might shift. At the same time, her practice provides a lens through which to recalibrate our attention to those political divisions that structure the nation form: the historical and present parsing of an “us” from a “them,” to which stakes of life and death attach.

intimate relations. Kant also says in the first *Critique* that it is impossible to be a subject at all without dependence on the object of perception. So there is a kind of mutual dependence between subjects insofar as they perceive one another and conditions for the identity of each are established.¹⁴

Piper emphasizes that institutions are made up of relationships between individuals and that each individual exists in mutual *perceptual* dependence with others, which catalyzes the formation of identities. No matter how frequently we interact with other people daily, our knowledge and judgments of them will always necessarily be based on our sensory experiences and our subjective interpretations of those experiences, which inevitably rely on existing categories that have been established over time. As Piper reminds us: “Human beings are inherently conceptualizing creatures; we never have unmediated access to ‘raw experience.’ But most of the categories by which we make sense of our experience are poorly drawn rules of thumb that rarely capture the essence of concrete particulars. We get into trouble when the concrete particulars we distort or misidentify are other people.”¹⁵ Once subject positions are established within the social, legal, and economic structures that bind us, perceived similarity and difference further stratify these positions, determining the parameters and boundaries for each self. In this context, Piper explains: “Xenophobia expresses fear of the other’s singularity through the imposition of inadequate, stereotyped categories of classification.”¹⁶

Even if we resort to imposing stereotyped categories of classification on the other in order to cope with their singularity that resists existing categories, we can still find ourselves in the throes of the xenophobic encounter. Piper describes the sensation of violation that expresses itself in the gaze of the subject experiencing xenophobic feelings towards another as “an eye widened in terror, unable to blink for fear of being blinded by the ineffable.”¹⁷ These feelings of intensity call to mind the Kantian sublime, which he theorizes in his third critique, the *Critique of Judgment*, as an overwhelming unmaking of the self.¹⁸ Xenophobia is in this sense an existential crisis palpably felt. It is not simply a matter of strangeness that characterizes the dynamics of the self and the other, but a matter of otherness that cannot be easily assimilated into existing categories within the perceiving mind, an otherness that produces a “violation of boundaries,” which, as Piper writes, “may occur in one case in the international context, in a geographical context, also can occur in terms of physical boundaries—the boundaries of the body, also the boundaries of the self.”¹⁹ The agent of violation—the alien—is identifiable by his or her visible appearance (“someone who does not look the way one is used to having people look”) and by his or her actions (“someone who does not behave in the way that one takes to be normal,” and someone who does not sound the way one is used to having people sound), which is to say that alienness is constituted through both visual and performative dimensions. These criteria, we might note, are first and foremost phenomenological—contingent on perception and sensation—as well as political. While it is not an unchangeable disposition, xenophobia is, as Piper

argues, firmly entrenched, especially in the form of racism in American society, to such an extent that only piecemeal progress can be made by means of specific forms of activism and art.

Before, however, we turn to the efficacy of these strategies through an analysis of a selection of Piper’s works, let us consider how Piper’s understanding of xenophobia as a relational phenomenon having to do with a fear that limns the borders of both subjecthood and nationhood anticipates various analyses in contemporary political-theoretical discourses. Some of these theories posit the term “abjection” to describe both personal interactions and government-sanctioned policies of border control. Within these frameworks, we might understand the alien as both abjected and abject: it violates not only interpersonal comfort, but also the boundaries of the self and the borders of the nation state. This connection between the subject’s body and the conception of selfhood has been important, for example, to Julia Kristeva. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva describes the violation of the subject through abjection, an encounter that is “edged with the sublime.”²⁰ In her account, abjection is both the active *process* by which the subject violently repulses that which threatens the boundaries of the self in order to shore up its borders of subjecthood, as well as the resulting *state*—the condition of *being the repulsive thing*. Karen Shimakawa extends Kristeva’s terminology to examine the formation of the national body, arguing that this violent process of abjection is in fact vital to the maintenance of the nation for it produces the fictive internal cohesion of nationality. As she writes in her book *National Abjection*: “For U.S. Americanness to maintain its symbolic coherence, the national

abject continually must be both made present and jettisoned.”²¹ In Shimakawa’s analysis, the “national abject” are those racialized bodies (her analysis specifically focuses on Asian Americans) against which “Americanness” coheres. Indeed, the hyphenated term “Asian-American” (which, importantly, Shimakawa does not use) makes explicit the process through which such identity forms, for it is, as she asserts, “produced through and in reaction to abjection within and by a dominant U.S. culture—a discursive formation that both describes a demographic category and calls that category into being.”²²

This critical examination of the national subject—the citizen—further complicates how we might understand the nation and its operations in discourses of xenophobia. In “White Nationalism, Illegality and Imperialism: Border Controls as Ideology,” Nandita Sharma explores the nation as an ideological formation rather than a merely geographical one. Tracing a history of immigration policies from the Magna Carta, which guaranteed entry to “any human being (whether defined by the monarch as a subject or an alien),”²³ to the regulation of borders (initially drawn to keep people *in* so that they would be available for conscription into newly formed armed forces) that coincided with imperialist expansion and European colonization, she argues:

Border controls were implemented as human communities underwent a profound period of institutionalizing ethnicized and racialized identities within national state categories of membership and non-membership captured in the negative dualism of citizen/foreigner.

Indeed, border controls profoundly shaped this process of ethnicizing and racializing diverse people engaged in international migration.²⁴

This is to say, national borders themselves came to actively produce (rather than passively reflect) nationalist conceptions of uniform ethnicity or race. Contextualizing this border ideology in relationship to the post-9/11 “War on Terror,” Sharma makes explicit the connection between racism and xenophobia—that is, the maintenance of an external border that masks as it perpetuates the illusion of internal similarity, authorizing the criminalization of difference both inside and out. She emphasizes how the latter sanitizes and authorizes the former; or, as she succinctly phrases: “[R]acism is not questioned because nationalism is not.”²⁵ Her claim parallels that of Etienne Balibar, who in the introduction to his text “The Nation Form: History and Ideology” writes: “The theory of the nation will be discussed here not for its own sake, but to clarify another question, that of the causes and ‘deep’ structures of contemporary racism. Thinking about racism led us back to nationalism, and nationalism to uncertainty about the historical realities and categorization of the nation.”²⁶ For Balibar, race opens onto the question of how “a people” become a people. It therefore entails the maintenance of both “external” and “internal frontiers,” which, as he writes, outline a spatial imagination of “the same thing—external frontiers have to be imagined constantly as a projection and protection of an internal collective personality, which each person carries within him/herself and enables him/her to inhabit the

space of the state as a place where one has always been—and where one always will be—at ‘home.’”²⁷

What most distinguishes Piper’s conception of xenophobia from others is her “methodological individualism”: the observation that xenophobia, like most other social phenomena, begins between two individuals and takes shape first and foremost through visual and performative means.²⁸ She emphasizes that xenophobia is not only a social phenomenon individually felt but also an intimate and interpersonal one subjectively produced. She further elaborates that the formal innovations of art practice can productively operate on these parameters. On these grounds, Piper’s work in the visual arts, which she conceives under the rubric of “meta-art,” outlines the possibility of an art that is inherently political and practiced not *about* the self as an essential entity but *for* the self as a formative relation—an art that, through various formal strategies, intervenes in the very dynamics of subject formation that perpetually designate a self in contradistinction to an other. Piper describes “meta-art” as “the activity of making explicit the thought processes, procedures, and presuppositions of making whatever kind of art we make.”²⁹ Such art is constituted through a type of self-reflexivity wherein the artist and the work position themselves with respect to the various cultural and economic systems of which they are a part. For Piper, the meta-artist makes visible the conditions of both the individual and society, as the former offers a lens onto the latter. She writes:

Although the values will be social, ethical, philosophical, as well as aesthetic, the meta-artist need merely explicate his or her particular condition in order

to suggest the condition of the society. The contrast [between art and meta-art] I have tried to bring out supports a description of meta-art as artistic in its concerns, epistemological in its method, humanistic in its system of values.³⁰

The work of meta-art would accordingly communicate the ways in which the artist views their own practice as a process with practical implications: “social, ethical, philosophical” as well as psychological, physiological, political, and environmental. Importantly, practitioners of meta-art “articulate and present these implications to an audience (either the same as or broader than the art audience) for comment, evaluation, and feedback,”³¹ meaning that meta-art foregrounds not only a relationship to its conditions of production but also a relationship to its conditions of perception as embodied by the viewer.

The first of Piper’s essays on xenophobia in *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, “Xenophobia and the Indexical Present I: Essay (1989),” frankly articulates the stakes of her practice. Written just a few years before the 1992 lecture, it includes a clear description of her own particular condition as a racialized and gendered subject, which she in turn transforms into concrete effects through her meta-art practice:

My experiences as a third-world woman in mainstream society have been strongly influenced by attempts to marginalize or ostracize me, both socially and professionally, from the mainstream; or, at the very least, to put me in my (subordinate) place in it. In many ways I regard

my marginality as more of a blessing than a curse, as alienation, too, has its uses. In order to survive in a hostile environment, it is necessary to become familiar with its resources, understand the aggressor and anticipate his attacks, and develop adequate strategies for self-defense (yes, combat really does build character). My strategy of self-defense is to transform pain into meaning.³²

In this passage, we can read a connection between the personal and the political—that is, the role that Piper’s experience of her identity position plays in shaping her art practice. Importantly, the relationship she draws between the personal and political is not representational but operative. The intent becomes not simply to create an image of the marginalization she experiences in her daily life but to instrumentalize it. In this way, she demonstrates how art practice can be a way of not simply representing injustice but one tool among others used to reduce it. Several paragraphs down in the same essay, Piper describes her work as personal but not “autobiographical.”³³ This is to suggest that she does not report on or otherwise reify her experiences as images or narratives but rather uses the formal vocabulary of art practice—its visual, linguistic, and performative force—from the perspective of her own subject position. As a meta-artist, she uses the self as an interface through which to engage the shared historical conditions and real-time interpersonal dynamics that go into shaping personhood. Perhaps it is this intervention into the histories and processes of subject formation that Piper has in mind when she insists that “alienation, too, has its uses.”

III. Meta-Art and the Indexical Present

Piper's conception of xenophobia is intricately connected to her methodological individualism as a social-scientific method for understanding and conceiving possible ways of shaping social phenomena. This is coupled with her Kantian phenomenological understanding of human experience and comprehension: the fact that the human mind rarely, if ever, has direct access to raw experience or the essence of what it perceives. We always and necessarily comprehend what we experience through abstract categories, which, in turn, shape the experience itself. For this reason, Piper makes meta-art—an art which finds its source in the artist's own subject position. "My work tends to target interpersonal manifestations of racism," explains Piper, "rather than institutional ones. This reflects my methodological individualism." She continues:

I believe that institutions are composed of individuals, and that institutional manifestations of racism are composed of interpersonal ones: the off-color remark, the anxiety response at the mere presence of an ethnic and cultural other, the failure of empathy with an other that causes insensitivity, the failure of imagination and self-awareness that elicits the imposition of inappropriate stereotypes and xenophobic behavior in response to them. The atomic, interpersonal level of individual transactions is the most elemental, personal level at which blacks learn from whites that they are unwelcome in mainstream society, so this is the level on which I try to attack racism.³⁴

The method employed by Piper's meta-art in targeting racism on the level of the individual consists of various channels of active engagement with individuals in real time and space—in "the indexical present"—in an effort to heighten self-reflection and both bring to light and shape interpersonal dynamics. The indexical present is a term Piper uses to refer to "the concrete, immediate here-and-now" and thereby to draw a distinction between abstract temporality and the self-referential present.³⁵ Charles Peirce described the index as a unique category of sign whose ability to signify depends on a physical connection to its referent.³⁶ More generally, indexicality refers to a deictic relation, meaning that it demonstratively points to something that exists beyond itself yet to which it is concretely connected. The indexical present is thus a shared temporality that mutually situates those who are present in the phenomenological conditions of their presence. It is in the indexical present that relationships between perceiving subjects and the subjects/objects of perception are and can be shaped.

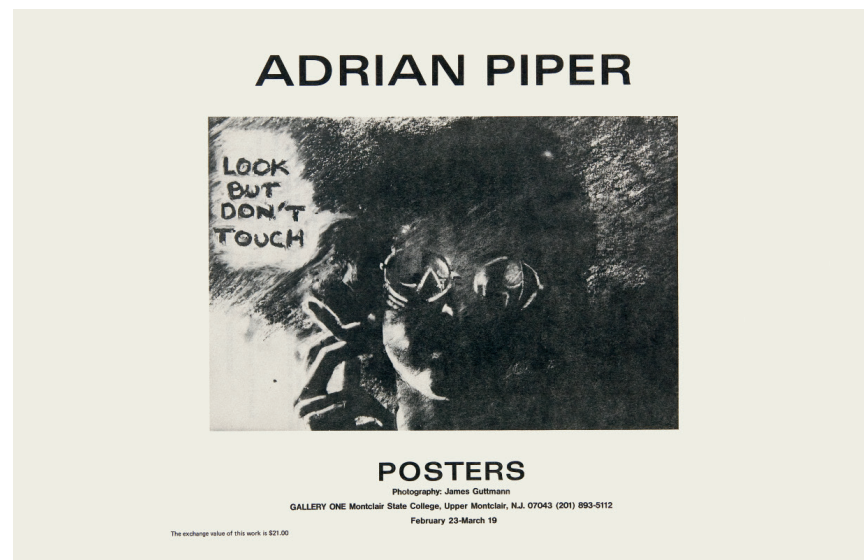
Piper invokes visibility as a sensory category that determines race as a political category. As she writes: "Racism (like sexism) is primarily a visual pathology: It feeds on differences in perceived appearance, not differences in genetic ancestry. Art is primarily a visual medium. So political art would seem to have the potential for furnishing a forceful antidote to racism."³⁷ Yet for Piper, the visual corollaries between art and anti-racist politics are not themselves enough, and she investigates why political art "has failed to exploit fully its own potential to heal this particular visual pathology."³⁸ For her, "part of the problem is the reliance on depiction and repre-

sentation of political content alone, rather than on its collaborative construction through object-viewer interactive confrontation."³⁹ Such confrontation occurs through encounters in the indexical present, wherein we experience identity as a plastic relation rather than a reified essence. Through this reasoning, the connection between xenophobia as an interpersonally produced phenomenon and meta-art as an operation in the indexical present becomes clear. If xenophobia arises, as Piper ingeniously delineates, from a mismatch between our theories of other people and the concrete particularities of their embodied existence, then a heightened awareness in the indexical present enables us "to check our theories about them against the particulars of their presence. No amount of abstract analysis, no matter how astute or politically correct, can escape this trap, because xenophobia is merely an extreme tendency of which ordinary failures of vision and sensitivity are the norm." Accordingly, "artwork that draws one into a relationship with the other in the indexical present trades easy classification—and hence xenophobia—for a direct and immediate experience of the complexity of the other, and of one's own responses to her. Experiencing the other in the indexical present teaches one how to see."⁴⁰ By making sensorial the conditions of its emergence and perception, meta-art allows the relevant perceptions, attitudes, and relationships to be reshaped, however slightly.

One of the landmark bodies of work through which Piper explored the political potential of the indexical present is *The Mythic Being* series (1973–1976) (pages 43–55, figs. 1–12). Within Piper's oeuvre, the meaning of the term "Mythic Being" is twofold, denoting both the character that Piper

assumed and the diverse group of works in which this character figured. In her "Preparatory Notes for *The Mythic Being* (1973–1974)," Piper refers to a "Mythic Being" as "a fictitious or abstract personality" that has historically been invoked in order to "explain or sanctify social or legal institutions or natural phenomena."⁴¹ Piper sought to create a personality that was distinct from, yet not wholly foreign to, herself: "The M.B. as an alternative of myself. One of the many possible products of my experiences and history."⁴² Donning an Afro, reflective sunglasses, a moustache, and smoking a Tiparillo, she assumed the guise of a cliché: an urban, macho persona familiar from the emergent genre of blaxploitation films, seething with masculine sexual energy and intimations of violence. "In this series," recounts Piper, "I dressed in drag as a young black male; as you can see, I am wearing an Afro and a moustache. I basically invaded various contexts within New York cultural life. I went to the movies, I rode on the subway, I walked around Park Avenue at night, I crashed art-world openings, I went to the opera; I did all the sort of things I normally did except with this masculine guise."⁴³ Dispersed and iterated in multiple forms from unannounced public performances outside of the gallery or museum context to newspaper ads, oil crayon drawings on photographs, and editioned posters, *The Mythic Being* shifted the site of art from material objects to the medium of cultural consciousness.

As the Mythic Being, Piper photographed herself and collaged a comic-style thought bubble next to her photographic image, filling it each time with a different, serially ordered excerpt from her personal journals penned between 1961 and 1972



6. Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being: Look But Don't Touch* (poster from Montclair State College), 1975

(pages 43–55, figs. 1–12). Thus superimposed, these thought bubbles problematized the distinction between the private, interior space of one's mind—and, by implication, one's inner self—and the exterior space of one's body, one's audiovisual public presence. The excerpts from her journals also functioned as mantras that she repeated out loud to focus her attention during the performances in public spaces; as she explained: "The mantras are pathways into the identity of the Mythic Being: I can, through careful concentration on them, transcend my own."⁴⁴ These displaced private thoughts (both personal hopes—"I really wish I had a firmer grip on reality"—and pointed invocations of a racialized other—"I embody everything you most hate and fear"—trouble the notion of fixed identity, opening a limber subjective field that enabled Piper to transcend what she described as the "spatiotemporal limits of my personhood" (page 45).⁴⁵ Extending the performative framework of these works, Piper reproduced small *The Mythic Being* collages as paid advertisements in the gallery section of the *Village Voice* from late 1973 to early 1975 (page 51). By placing her private musings and personal anxieties squarely in the public sphere and crediting them to her quasi-alter-ego, Piper recontextualized

them as mental content that is conceivably shared across society. This was Piper's method of testing in the indexical present the limits of the extent to which any thought is entirely unique to a particular embodied self. The journal entries empty themselves of subjective specificity not only through their appearance next to an anonymous, "mythic" being, whose private identity is publicly inaccessible, despite the stereotypical accoutrements with which he is adorned, but also through their repetition as mantras in public during the performances. Given the anonymity of the Mythic Being, "anyone" could possibly think these thoughts; the question is thus the extent to which the Manichean binaries through which we locate ourselves are intrinsic.

Piper's account of her dual experience as the Mythic Being and her everyday self (a female first-generation conceptual artist and academic-philosopher-in-training in her mid-twenties) performing *The Mythic Being* is instructive here:

I was thinking a lot about specific alterations in physical subjectivity, particularly as a way of bringing out aspects of my own identity that are not readily available—not only the fact that I am



7. Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being: Cruising White Women*, #1 of 3, 1975

black, because many people do not realize that, but also that I have a very strong masculine component to my character. I wanted to be able to explore that. It was just great to be able to take the subway late at night and not worry about being mugged or raped. To be able to sit on the subway, the way guys often do, with their legs wide apart, kind of making room for their genitals. [...] That part was really wonderful; the sense of freedom that I experienced in doing this work was a real revelation to me. The bad part was that I got to experience what it is like for visibly black Americans to simply move through the world in any social context that is primarily populated by white people, and because I was showing certain visual cues of a black person, I was responded to in that way and it was truly horrible: I felt objectified over and over again in subtle ways that I, to this day, believe people have no control over. I do not think that anyone intentionally rejects or dismisses or ignores or objectifies another person. I do believe that it is completely an innate

uncontrollable fear impulse, and if you are not used to seeing black people in your environment, that is the way you are going to react.⁴⁶

Anchored in an acute understanding of the enduring reality of stereotypes rooted in irrational xenophobia, Piper's aim, even with some of the more active works such as *The Mythic Being: Cruising White Women* (1975) and *The Mythic Being: Getting Back* (1975)—both performed in Cambridge, Massachusetts while Piper was working on her Ph.D. at Harvard—was "to not actually violate conventions of behavior but simply to set myself up as an altered object of perception and explore those differences" (figs. 7–12).⁴⁷ By inhabiting the persona of the Mythic Being, Piper embodied an archive of shared social content, including an archive of the racist and sexist tendencies and impulses that position both the Mythic Being's body and her own. The Mythic Being is not *not* Piper;⁴⁸ rather, the performances heightened Piper's awareness of her own conceptions of and presuppositions about her own and others' identities, as well as those of the spectators who were reacting in certain ways. She discovered in the body—as a live presence and a static image—



8–12. Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being: Getting Back*, #1–5, 1975



a historically constituted, racialized, and gendered schema, which she made tangle through her performative acts and visual propositions. *Cruising White Women* consisted of Piper in the guise of a young black man who manifested certain visual, affective, and performative cues while seated on steps in Harvard Square, watching women walk by (fig. 7). *Getting Back*, a collaboration with David Auerbach, consisted of Piper mugging Auerbach in retaliation for him taking a newspaper she had just finished reading. Jumping him from behind and throwing him to the ground, she then made off with the purloined newspaper because he had no money (figs. 8–12).⁴⁹ Through the dynamics of her audiovisual presence and actions, and the reactions of spectators to these, she came to understand herself “as an object of hate and fear in this environment, because I was responded to in that way.”⁵⁰

In Piper’s words, the Mythic Being’s combative stance represented “a static emblem of alien confrontation [...] an abstract, generalized, faintly unholy embodiment of expressed hostility, fear,

anxiety, estrangement.”⁵¹ Yet abstract as this emblem may be, his alienation expressed a shared condition—one that Piper cannily stages through the dynamics of visibility and invisibility. Like Ralph Ellison’s “invisible man,” the Mythic Being became a “ghostly spectator, eternally viewing, taking in everything, recording and reflecting on everything, but not being an object of refraction him-herself because invisible,” as Piper recounted.⁵² The Mythic Being is invisible as a *subject* insofar as we see nothing of his inner self: not even his eyes, those symbolic gateways to interiority, which are always shielded by his reflective sunglasses. Yet as an *object*, he is hypervisible, a stereotype that impacts and moves others around him. Eliciting fears of miscegenation, black criminal aggression, and hypersexuality, he stands as “the personification of our subliminal hatreds and dissatisfactions, which blind and enslave us by being subliminal.”⁵³ Through this objectified embodiment, Piper made him (and through him, herself) visible to those who saw his portrait in the newspaper, to those who saw him walk on

the street recounting his strange mantras, or sit on the subway with his legs spread to make room for his hard-to-contain genitals and gaze through his opaque lenses at others in the car, or cruise women on the sidewalk, or mug someone in broad daylight.

It is through this visibility as an object—through being perceived as an object in the indexical present—that the Mythic Being stages resistance. As Fred Moten writes in the chapter “Resistance of the Object: Adrian Piper’s Theatricality” in his book *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*: “The essential theatricality of blackness, of the commodity who materially objects beyond any subjunctively posited speech, is evoked in the service of metaethics. The resistance of the object is the condition of possibility of a metaethics whose fullest enactment is in Piper’s art [...]”⁵⁴ What becomes “essential” (by which Moten, calling on a secondary definition of the word, means necessary and strategic rather than intrinsic) to the body is a capacity to act and animate itself. This “essential theatricality” constitutes blackness as a relational

position and arises from the necessity of disrupting or objecting to the ideological frame and material history that positioned the black body as an object in a more overt sense: a commodity bought and sold in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Performance becomes a technique through which the objectified body—or perhaps more accurately, a body only afforded social visibility as an object because of this history of commodification—can and does resist.

Piper made a series of posters and oil crayon on photograph versions of the *Village Voice* ads, a selection of which is on view in this exhibition. *The Mythic Being: I Embodiment Everything You Most Hate and Fear* (1975) declares in the thought bubble: “I embody everything you most hate and fear” (page 45). The other two examples in this exhibition, *The Mythic Being: Say It Like You Mean It* (1975) and *The Mythic Being: Look But Don’t Touch* (1975), coupled with the censored *Village Voice* collage (1974) that declares, “Don’t feel particularly horny, but feel I should masturbate anyway just because I feel so good about doing it. 6.6.70,” represent *The Mythic Being* project in all of its unsettling ambiguity, sexual subtext, and conceptual force (pages 46–47, 51). In these works, Piper’s presence is veiled not only through drag but also through the oil crayon’s waxy pigment which obscures the details of her environment, thus heightening the Mythic Being’s condition of existential, social, and political alienation. With his eyes concealed by his sunglasses, which in a way reflect the viewer’s assumptions about who or what he is, he aggressively confronts the viewer yet resists our ability to return his gaze. These photographic works thus stage a complex scopophilic drama, triangulating our gaze with



13. Adrian Piper, *Catalysis III*, #1 of 3, 1970



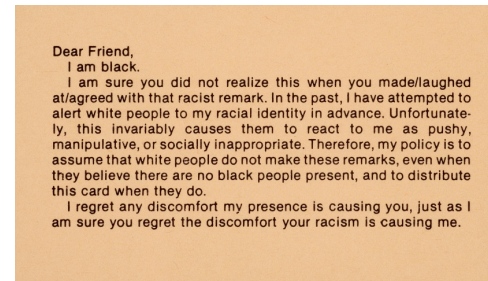
14. Adrian Piper, *Catalysis IV*, #3 of 5, 1970

that of both the camera and Piper's assumed persona. Interrogating the power dynamics of looking and being looked at, Piper denaturalizes cultural norms of visibility and communication, subjecting them to a trenchant and potentially transformative critique. This potential for transformation lies at the heart of the idea of meta-art operating in the indexical present. By confronting viewers with evidence of their own unconscious racism, subliminal fears, and presuppositions, Piper's work creates opportunities for them to check those presuppositions against the concrete particularities of the people who are indexically present and, in so doing, to take conscious steps towards assuming responsibility for, and ultimately altering, their attitudes. "The complete emergence of individuality and personal self-awareness," Piper observes, "is at the same time the emergence of political community and political commitment."⁵⁵

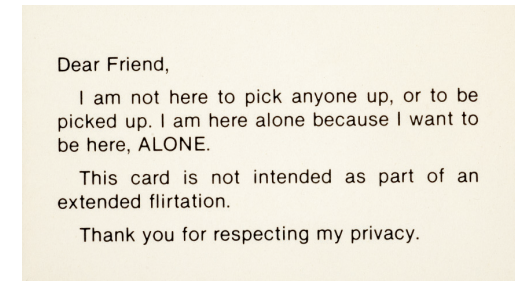
IV. Meta-Art and Interpellation

Since the beginning of her practice, Piper has used performance outside of the gallery or museum context to directly engage members of the public. In her early *Catalysis* performances (1970–1973),

Piper violated the norms of public interaction, shopping at Macy's with wet paint covering her shirt (*Catalysis III*, 1970) and riding public transit with a towel stuffed in her mouth (*Catalysis IV*, 1970) to catalyze a public response (figs. 13–14). In *Funk Lessons* (1982–1984), she invited groups of participants to "GET DOWN AND PARTY. TOGETHER." (fig. 20)⁵⁶ by teaching them funk's fundamental dance movements and discussing their significance in American culture (figs. 19–26). In *My Calling (Card) #1* and *#2* (1986–1990), she quietly passed one of two versions of a 2 by 3½ inch card to an interlocutor. The text on the cards silently "called out" racist speech or sexist behavior, beginning with either "Dear Friend, I am black." (*My Calling (Card) #1*) or "Dear Friend, I am not here to pick anyone up, or to be picked up." (*My Calling (Card) #2*) (figs. 15–16).⁵⁷ Across these works, we witness the operation of meta-art, which draws viewers into the indexical present and turns their attention to the immediate dynamics of the social encounter. The transformative potential of the indexical present is activated through not only the performative presence of the artist's body but also the distinct technique of "the indexical form of address."⁵⁸ Through speech (specifically the use of the first- and second-person pronouns "I/you," the latter of which is



15. Adrian Piper, *My Calling (Card) #1* (for Dinners and Cocktail Parties), 1986–present



16. Adrian Piper, *My Calling (Card) #2* (for Bars and Discos), 1986–present

often either explicitly stated or implied through the imperative grammatical mood) and/or action (often direct interactions with the public) "plus the frontal gaze, a frontal pose with the gaze of the image in the photograph locking eyes with the viewers,"⁵⁹ Piper positions the viewers *as* viewers, prompting them to acknowledge the nature of their imbrication in interpersonal dynamics in social contexts.

Consider the photo-text work *The Mythic Being: Look But Don't Touch* (1975) which employs direct address in its imperative phrasing to draw our attention to the performative operations of language (page 47). The phrase "Look but don't touch"—an excerpt from Piper's personal journals recontextualized—refers not only to the sexualized dynamics of looking but also to the aesthetic conditions of the artwork. The imperative "look" solicits the viewer's attention and positions him or her as a viewer (rather than simply as a reader) by explicitly referencing the act of looking. "Don't touch" delineates the limit of the encounter conforming to the etiquettes, protocols, and disciplines of art viewership and perhaps also to the explicit regulations of the gallery or museum contexts in which the work might be exhibited. "But," which connects these imperatives, signals their contradiction—the push and pull of the aesthetic encounter. The phrase as a whole alludes to a state of sexual fantasizing in public, prompted by the presence of another body while resisting the temptation of violating the physical boundaries of that body. Like *The Mythic Being: Cruising White Women*, *The Mythic*

Being: Look But Don't Touch sublimates desire and introjects it into a visual dynamic, which it then distills into a still image. The figure of the Mythic Being reflects, deflects, and is consumed as an image and yet remains impenetrable. To this end, the phrase comments on both the status of the art object and that of the body it depicts.

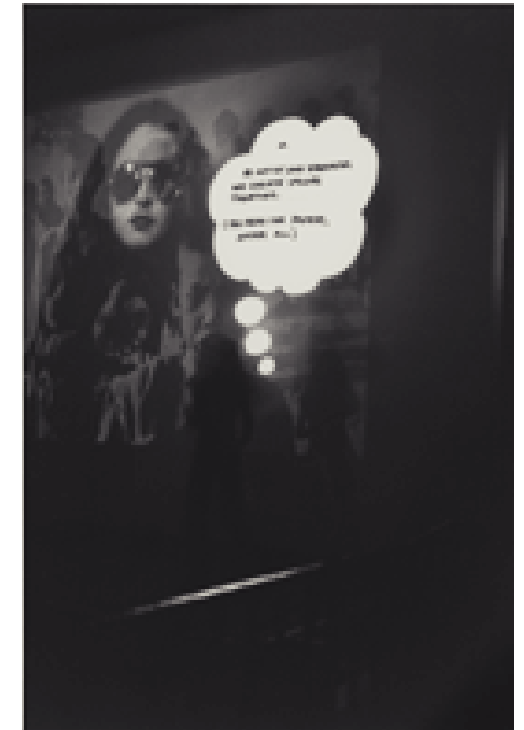
These techniques of indexical address are similarly observable in *It's Just Art*, a complex work conceived and realized five years after *The Mythic Being* series (pages 42, 56–77, figs. 17–18). This multimedia installation consists of a video reconstruction of Piper's eponymous twenty-five minute performance from 1980,⁶⁰ fifteen silver gelatin prints, and three thought-bubble collages on black paper, along with an offset poster announcing the performance at Oberlin College and a diagram mapping its temporal structure. The performance itself consisted of several layers of visual, textual, and performative components. Newspaper images of the Cambodian genocide carried out by the Khmer Rouge are projected onto the wall behind Piper over a film of Piper dressed in double drag as a femme personification of the Mythic Being in whiteface. Two sound elements meet in a similarly jarring relation: a voiceover of Piper reading in an "urgent reportorial tone"⁶¹ selections from William Shawcross' *New York Review of Books* article "The End of Cambodia" (which pored over details of the geopolitical response to the genocide) and Rufus and Chaka Khan's funk ballad "Do You Love What You Feel?" A series of fifteen thought bubbles appear to the side of the Mythic Being projection.



17. Adrian Piper, *It's Just Art* (performance negatives), 1980

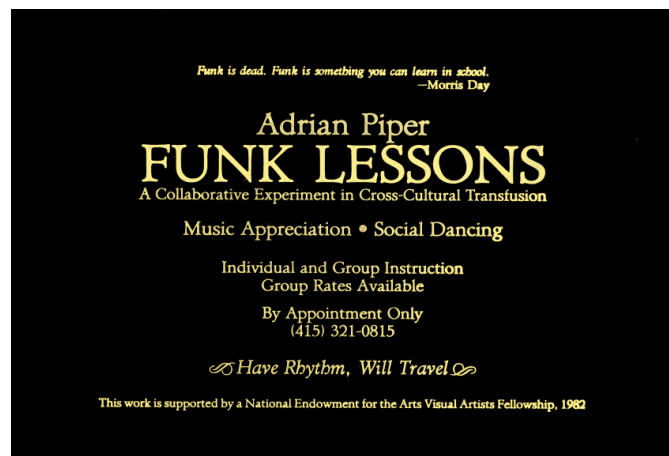
Partly obscuring the images of the Cambodian massacre, they seem to emanate from the head of the dancer—Piper as the double-drag Mythic Being—in front of the projection. The content of the thought bubbles directly addresses the viewer through the use of the second person “you,” as in Piper’s declaration: “our confrontation is gentle and respectful of the distance between us (you glance at the news photos of Cambodian refugees) [...] we defend each other (you certainly didn’t come to an art performance to hear a lecture on current events) against impending political realities.”⁶² In front of the projection, Piper reprises her moves from *Aretha Franklin Catalysis* (1972): “a mixture of the Bugaloo, the Jerk, the Lindy, the Charleston, and the Twist, with a high degree of improvisation,” documented in photographic prints in the installation.⁶³ Projected in film on top of images of political atrocity on the same wall, the Mythic Being in whiteface is positioned as a *spectator* (in addition to being an image in an artwork) who observes both the performer dancing in front of the wall with the projection and the audience’s reactions.

The performance was motivated by the “evasion of political responsibility” that Piper identified during this period in the art world. Her ambition was to confront the art audience with their habitual resistance to overt political engagement enabled by the “opaque screen of ‘aesthetic sensibility.’”⁶⁴ She has noted that her use of disco-funk music and dance was not intended as a “‘comment’ on the decadence and monotony of modern society,” as most white upper-middle-class audience members assumed, but rather as “an idiom of communication.”⁶⁵ Piper hoped that the disco-funk music and dance would



18. Adrian Piper, *It's Just Art* (detail), 1980

function as a liminal state “less explicit than speech and less intimate than physical displays of affection, sexuality, or aggression,” therein providing access to the deep-seated sexual and racial anxieties permeating American culture.⁶⁶ As Piper wrote in the program notes for the performance at And/Or Gallery in Seattle: “To succeed in dancing to disco music [...] is to express one’s sexuality, one’s separateness, one’s inner unity with one’s own body; and in a sexually repressive, WASP-dominated culture, this is to express defiance.”⁶⁷ In fact, Piper notes that as a reaction to the misunderstanding of her use of disco-funk in her work, two years after *It's Just Art*, she “found it necessary to do *Funk Lessons* in order to go on, and be able to use the idiom of working-class African American music in other performances and installations without being systematically misunderstood.”⁶⁸ Through its interactive pedagogy, *Funk Lessons* imparted not only the cultural relevance of funk music and movement but also “a kind of fundamental sensory ‘knowledge’ that everyone has and can use.”⁶⁹



19. Adrian Piper, *Funk Lessons* Direct Mail Advertisement, 1983



20. Adrian Piper, *Funk Lessons* Defaced Poster, 1983



21-22. Adrian Piper, *Funk Lessons*, 1982-84

In this way, Piper further developed her understanding of dance as a mode of personal expression, historical collectivity, and political resistance. Ultimately, her goal was to catalyze an environment in which power relations would be transcended, progressing from a situation in which she had the authority to teach the audience to a situation in which everyone was dancing—and she recounts several successful cases.⁷⁰

Both *It's Just Art* (pages 42, 56-77, figs. 17-18) and *Funk Lessons* (figs. 19-26), among other works, anticipated a synthesis of dance, philosophy, and politics that contemporary dance scholars such as André Lepecki have gone on to theorize. In his 2006 book *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement*, Lepecki observes that “choreography and philosophy share that same fundamental political, ontological, physiological, and ethical question that Deleuze recuperates from Spinoza and from Nietzsche: what can a body do?”⁷¹ Through the use of her body and the participants’ bodies in the indexical present, Piper draws our attention to not only the visual and sensory frameworks of art, gender, sexuality, and race but also the dynamics through which a viewer engages “political art.” As meta-art, *It's Just Art* shifts the viewer’s engagement from the politics *referenced* (through the image of the Cambodian crisis) to the politics *enacted* in the present time and space of the gallery, museum, or alternative

space. As she explains, it “addresses the self-conscious reaction of the actual viewing audience to the political information being disseminated, the performance as a whole, the dancer [...], and the art context in which this occurs.”⁷²

In this work and others, the indexical present holds open a space between the viewer, the artist, and the art object in which a force unfurls, animating a relation. To better understand *what* this force might be—how the constitutive capacity of language calls an audience into presence—we turn to the idea of “interpellation.” Theorized by Louis Althusser in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” “interpellation” accounts for the formation of subjecthood—which is to say, the way in which ideology is reproduced at the level of subjectivation. In its most basic sense, interpellation is a speech act that calls the subject into being. Althusser’s famous example of such an act is a policeman calling out “Hey, you there!” on a public street. Whether or not “you” are the one being called, you turn around when the policeman calls out.⁷³ By responding to the call of the law, you recognize yourself as subject to *the law*, which is to say as a subject of *ideology*. More than that:

this call—this *interpellation*—subjectivates you, actively constituting you *as* a subject. Althusser goes on to explain that this originary scene theatricalizes a process that is always already occurring. We are called into ideology long before we encounter the policeman on the street by the schools that educate us, the laws that bind us, the family structures that hold us, and so forth. In fact, we are interpellated as subjects with names, genders, countries of citizenship, etc., before we are even born. Subjecthood is the medium through which ideology is made tangible and operative; or, as Althusser writes: “there is no ideology except for concrete subjects, and this destination for ideology is only made possible by the subject: meaning, *by the category of the subject* and its functioning.”⁷⁴

Piper’s work reminds us, however, that we are not all called to subjecthood in the same way. We occupy subjecthood with historical difference, and it is these differences of subjectivation that play out in the indexical presence of her work. Her use of direct address brings to mind both Althusser’s account of interpellation and another that precedes it by twenty years: the infamous “hailing” that Frantz Fanon describes in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*. In it, Fanon narrates a more disturbing scene of interpellation

formative of his own sense of black subjecthood. Sitting one day on a Paris train, he is hailed not by the policeman’s call “Hey, you there!” but a child’s taunt “Look, a Negro!”⁷⁵ Like the hypothetical addressee of Althusser’s policeman, Fanon recognizes himself as being called by the interpellation; as he writes: “It was true.”⁷⁶ Yet this recognition is at once constitutive and negating. Fanon is not simply hailed as a subject but as a black subject, a colonized subject, a subject different from the unmarked subject position elucidated by Althusser. Pierre Macherey brings together Althusser’s and Fanon’s accounts of interpellation to highlight not only their political differences but also their aesthetic ones, which together invoke the dual registers of the visual and the performative. As he writes:

The Althusserian formula of subjection draws its efficacy from its purely verbal character: it is projected from behind, from a source systematically concealed from sight (when God speaks to Moses, while hiding himself in a cloud, his voice alone bears the sum of his presence). ‘Look, a nigger!’: this reaction is spoken to his face, and is sustained in the line of a gaze.⁷⁷



23–26. Adrian Piper, *Funk Lessons*, 1982–84

Both versions of interpellation solicit a performative response on the part of the hailed: a turning around (Althusser) or a shuddering (Fanon), physical manifestations of the recognition that it really is *you* being called. Yet the “purely verbal character” of Althusser’s interpellation resembles, as Macherey provocatively asserts, the voice of unmarked authority: the voice of God speaking



to Moses insofar as voice alone bears the sum of presence. It contrasts with Fanon’s account, which requires a visual encounter between the subjects involved. The former operates on the “order of the sayable,” as Macherey goes on to describe, and the latter on “the order of the visible.”⁷⁸

The interpellating thought-bubble texts in *It’s Just Art* comment not on the Cambodian crisis but on the conditions of viewing that hold the audience and artist in relation through the aesthetic screen. They juxtapose statements of the artist’s actions (phrased in the first-person-singular “I” or plural “we,” the latter a reference to the audience’s mobilization through the work) with parenthetical statements that describe the audience’s hypothetical responses to what they are looking at, all of which are phrased in the second-person “you.” These hypothetical statements function interpellatively: the viewer introjects them through the act of reading, taking them in and creating an interior state determined from the outside. When the parenthetical “you” is met with the “yes, it’s really me” of viewer recognition, it enacts a subjectivating process. It reconstitutes the viewer of the work

in a way that challenges the conventions of looking at images of atrocity — that is, the familiar positions of apathy and self-congratulatory compassion. In the text of the thought bubbles, interpellation makes tangible the durational nature of the indexical present as well as the operations of meta-art.

The process of analyzing art’s presuppositions, which cannot necessarily be directly visually observed, requires an analytical methodology. We might read the fifteen thought bubbles as “regressive proof”⁷⁹ of the presuppositions which animate the work — particularly the social conditions of the art world that choreograph the engagement between art and politics. This allows us to understand the work as not necessarily about the specificity of the Cambodian genocide but the perpetuity of crisis and the ways in which we protect ourselves from seeing it. By cycling through the same sequence of genocide images multiple times, the video appropriates mass media’s relentless reproduction of images of violence, which desensitizes the viewer to the spectacle of others’ suffering. In contrast to this cyclical temporality, the thought bubbles advance in logical succession, reaching a crescendo in meaning: the revelation that the artist, art object, and viewer collaborate in defending each other “against impinging political realities,” as the fifteenth bubble asserts.⁸⁰ By putting the representation of politics into crisis (that is, by rendering ineffectual the documentary strategies that visually present atrocity in order to produce an effect in the viewer, assuming that effect will prompt action and not dissipate as mere cathartic feeling), Piper reorients our assumptions of what constitutes “political art.” Here, the political efficacy of art unfolds not by transporting the viewer to an elsewhere

place but by demanding a sustained engagement in the indexical present wherein the viewer encounters his or her own conditions of looking. “I am particularly interested in grappling with the ‘Who, me?’ syndrome that infects the highly select and sophisticated audience that typically views my work,” Piper writes. She continues:

[...] However, different individuals respond in different and unpredictable ways that cut across racial, ethnic, and gender boundaries: Some people align themselves with the standpoint from which I offer the critique. Others identify themselves as the target of the critique. Yet others feel completely alienated by the whole enterprise. There is no way of telling in advance whether any particular individual is going to feel attacked by my work, or affirmed, or alienated by it. So people sometimes learn something about who they are by viewing my work. For me this is proof of success.⁸¹

IV. *Here and Now*

Piper’s site-specific installation *Here* (2008/2017) similarly utilizes interpellation in the indexical present in order to stage a potentially transformative encounter (pages 78–85, fig. 27). Doing away entirely with photographic and figurative images, this architectural installation explores the concepts of presence and absence, and the related dynamics of subjectivation, through the spatialized use of language. The sequence of phrases “I was here/We

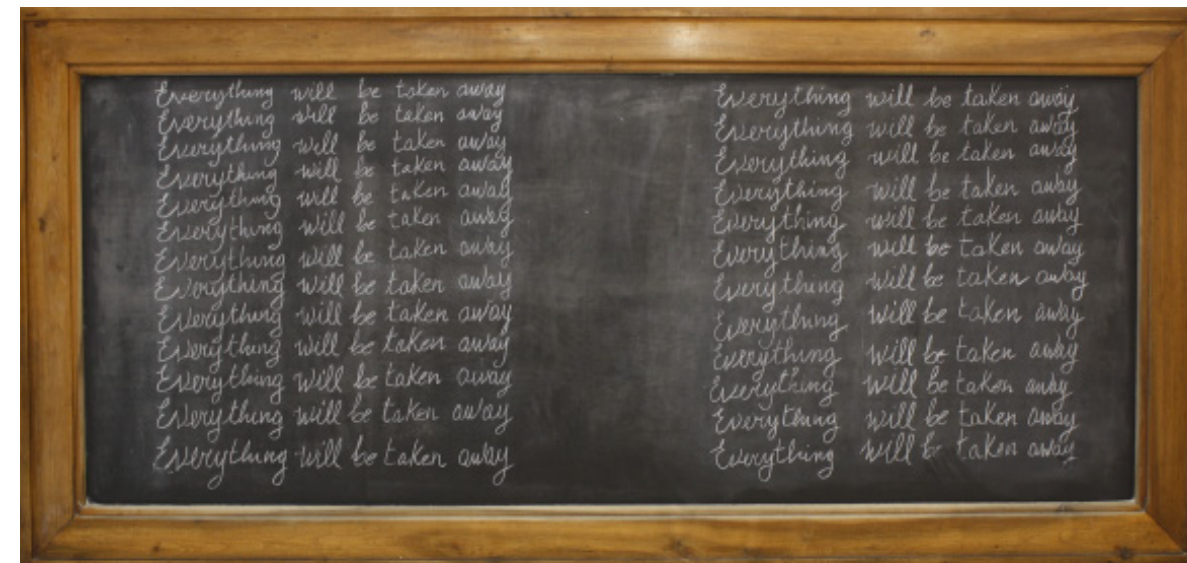


27. Adrian Piper, *Here*, 2008/2017

were here/We are here” written in the Hebrew, Latin, and Arabic alphabets—an order vaguely referential to the chronological order in which Judaism, Christianity, and Islam emerged—are engraved on three adjacent walls in a small room. Incised in white against white, their visual slightness belies their interpellative force and declarative lucidity. Similar to *It’s Just Art*, *Here* achieves a sense of linguistic progression in both the transformation of the first person from the singular into the plural as well as the transformation of the past tense “were” into the present tense “are.” The shift from first-person singular to first-person plural suggests a process of collectivization. Pointedly, it is now the declarative “we” (rather than the imperative “you” used in the prior *The Mythic Being* and *It’s Just Art* works) that summons the viewer. In the absence of a visual image—particularly an image of the artist herself or members of the public—this interpellation takes on an Althusserian rather than Fanonian quality, a “purely verbal character.” As Macherey noted, this purely verbal character has the unmarked attributes of absolute authority—specifically, to return to Macherey’s allusion, the authority of God as he appears to Moses hidden in a cloud. To extend the allusion further, we might think

of how God conveys not just his presence to Moses in the biblical scene cited but also his laws: the Ten Commandments carved into stone. The “timeless” quality of *Here* perhaps invokes for the viewer the absoluteness of divine law. Yet, at the same time, it troubles that absoluteness through the mutability of the three phrases and three translations that constitute this environment.

Three times repeated, Piper’s text moves between the arbitrariness of linguistic convention and the registration of physical presence, which grounds its assertions in a particular place and moment: the discrete *ere* of social exchange. Reduced to a personal pronoun, a variant of the verb “to be,” and the adverb “here,” the statements achieve the minimum level of description necessary to convey sense. They recall the strategic sparseness of much language-based Conceptual art from the 1960s and 1970s, which privileged the ostensible blankness of factual description and literal usage. Yet when pressed further, the simplicity of *Here*’s tripartite text troubles interpretation. The words “I,” “we,” and “here” are what Roman Jakobson termed “shifters”⁸²: a category of sign whose meaning hinges on the existential presence of a specific subject, thing, or place. Consider Piper’s phrases as successively

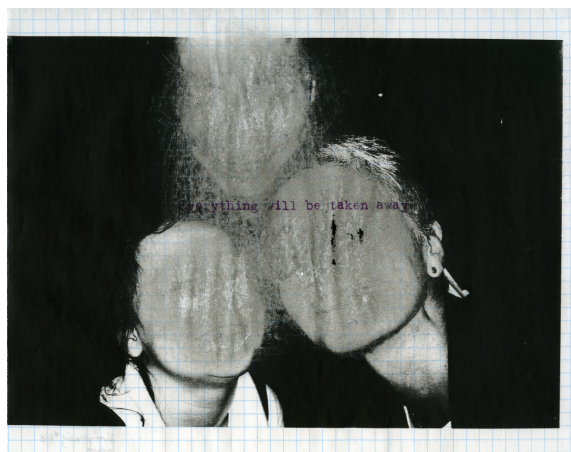


28. Adrian Piper, *Everything* #21, 2010-13

uttered by two people: when each uses “I” and “here,” the referents of these words change, contingent on the irreducible particularity of the speaker’s selfhood and his or her location in space. “We” would seem to be the only fixed term of their interaction, yet, it, too, opens onto an abiding ambiguity. In this scenario, does “we” include only the two speakers present, or does it denote a broader, unvisualized—and perhaps even universal—subject? Like “I” and “here,” “we” straddles both utmost singularity and sweeping generality. All three admit of reference to both a specific instance—this particular “here,” where “you” and “I,” constituted as the collective “we,” stand—and any instance whatsoever. It could refer to the very instance of a group of gallery visitors standing in this particular room (“we are here”), yet it also trades in associations in the geopolitical sense (“here” in this gallery, or “here” in New York City, or “here” in the U.S., or “here” in any place one could conceivably be referring to), as well as in the existential sense (our time-bound existence “here” in this world). *Here*’s singularity thus admits of infinite conceptual potential: a permutability underscored by Piper’s rehearsal (or perhaps what appears as such to an English-speaking audience) of the

phrases in Arabic and Hebrew. Similar to Peirce’s notion of the index discussed earlier, the ability of which to signify likewise depends on a physical connection to its referent, the shifter’s meaning can never be definitively stabilized.

Here reminds us again of the chasm between the abstract theories we harbor about people, places, and their practices, and the complex particularities of these when experienced on a one-on-one basis in the indexical present. This is how “work that draws the viewer into the indexical present provides a healthy antidote to xenophobia.”⁸³ Immersed in the colorless and seemingly boundless environment of *Here*—atemporal and without spatial coordinates, belonging not to any particular time or place but admitting of an infinite permutability in terms of its references to people, places, and times—it is impossible not to experience an intensified state of self-reflection as a subject amid a plurality of possible predicates and attributes that might identify that subject: viewer, artist, gallery worker, Western, Eastern, Jewish, Muslim, atheist, citizen, alien, *ad infinitum*. By virtue of its linguistic and spatial operations on the concepts of presence and absence, singularity and plurality, similarity and difference—vessels waiting to be filled for their meanings to



29. Adrian Piper, *Everything* #2.3, 2003



30. Adrian Piper, *Everything* #2.7, 2003



31. Adrian Piper, *Everything* #2.14, 2003



32. Adrian Piper, *Everything* #2.12a, 2003

emerge—*Here* heightens our sensitivity to how we experience the interpellative pull of “we” as well as how we frame the space of “here.” That is to say, it alludes to the mechanisms that constitute the differences with which we are subjectivated through ideology. This formal linguistic openness produces a space for the audience to critically reflect on the politicized productions of “us” and “them” that manifest not only in interpersonal violence but also on the larger scales of armed conflict and war that set the stakes of nationhood. The Arabic and Hebrew versions might invite the viewer to draw a parallel between the concept of presence that animates the work and the discourse of occupation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: the *co-presence* that would be peace as compared to the *conflicts over competing presences* (over borders, settlements, and sovereignty claims) that animate war. This comparison between existential presence and what could be described as either “nation building” or “colonial occupation” (depending on one’s political viewpoint) illuminates how ideological abstractions translate into real violence on both an interpersonal and a mass scale.

Here relates to Piper’s ongoing *Everything* series, which she began in 2003 (figs. 28–32). Appearing in various media throughout the series, the sentence “Everything will be taken away” activates an interpellative vector towards anyone who hears or reads it: it appears as an

all-encompassing prophecy in the declarative future tense, a portentous pronouncement that hails the viewer. The phrase was repeatedly handwritten in a pedagogical cursive on blackboards in *Everything* #21 (2010–2013), which was part of Piper’s contribution to the 2015 Venice Biennale (fig. 28). It was later engraved into a Romanesque arch-shaped piece of Plexiglas embedded in a wall in the 2016 Berlin Biennale. The Venice installation also included *Everything* #2 (2003): black-and-white photographs inkjet printed on graph paper (figs. 29–32). After using sandpaper to redact certain areas of the images, Piper printed “Everything will be taken away” over them in a typewriter font. Many of these redacted images feature Piper herself, such as *Everything* #2.3 (fig. 29). The focus of *Everything* #2.7 is a hazy erasure floating over a cluttered desk in an office (fig. 30). In *Everything* #2.14, the erasure centers upon a dinner-party scene (fig. 31). The ethnic and sociopolitical range of the faceless subjects is presumably diverse but obscured; their class positions are indeterminate. The erasure of these faces, coupled with the repeated appearance of the sentence, suggests an imminent effacement of all socially constructed identities, whether determined along the lines of race, gender, nationality, or any other category of classification: in effect, the stipulation of a state that exists prior to interpellation into ideology and subjecthood.

If we can conceive of that hypothetical state that transcends interpellation, the “here” of “I was here/We are here/We were here,” by virtue of its infinitely diverse and numerous permutations of subject positions, becomes a productive site for thinking about social justice in the here and now.

Students of analytic philosophy might draw a connection between the *Everything* series and “the original position,” a thought experiment in liberal-egalitarian social-contract theory conceived by philosopher John Rawls first in *A Theory of Justice*.⁸⁴ “The original position” is a hypothetical situation in which a group of people is behind what is called “the veil of ignorance”: that is, they have no information about their potential place in society. They have gathered to set the principles of justice: that is, the criteria by which society is to be organized or, in other words, the criteria by which laws governing the distribution of rights and resources are to be formulated. Rawls calls this a hypothetical “original position” because it is pre-interpellation: a state prior to subject designation in which race, gender, nationality, and endowments such as intelligence, physical attributes and capabilities, socioeconomic status, and so on, are not known. The motivation for this thought experiment is to enhance the awareness of the fact that we *could* take measures towards justice here and now in the particular

society we happen to be in simply by imagining the way we would make decisions in a situation in which *everything is taken away*—wherein no parameters of personal identity and subject position are available. Such an inquiry into the process by which a group of people would make the decisions regarding the way society is to be structured, without any knowledge of where each one of them will end up once the veil of ignorance is lifted, is a problem not in ethics but in *metaethics*. It is not intended to prescribe conceptions of the good or the good life: that is, how one *should* live their life and, accordingly, moral considerations such as what is right and what is wrong to do in a given situation involving certain people in a given society. It is intended instead for the legislation of overarching criteria that will in turn be used to shape the legal and institutional structures of that society once the veil of ignorance is lifted. In this resulting society, everyone is free to live in accordance with their own conception of the good.⁸⁵ For these reasons, consequential decision-making in accordance with the fundamental principles of rational choice theory would dictate that a just system would be put in place simply because all parties involved would strive to make decisions in such a way that would guarantee certain minimum requirements for human flourishing, as they do not know who and where they will end up being.

Precisely by virtue of the fact that we are always already born into subjecthood, interpellated and designated as particular subjects in particular societies with their respective laws, institutions, traditions, and habits of thinking and behavior, the original position is only a guiding device for thinking about how to take corrective and redistributive measures in real-world circumstances. Its exceptional ingenuity and force lie in its epistemological resistance to essentialism in all its guises. Just like Piper’s art, it acknowledges that human beings are and will always be inherently conceptualizing and categorizing, and that systems in all societies do and always will classify their subjects; it is thus concerned with effecting incremental change in the here and now. Once you are uncertain if you will end up being someone classified by society as black or white, as male or female, as citizen or alien, as subscribing to one religion as opposed to another, as physically able or not and to what extent, out of fundamental rationality you would make decisions that would ensure that the situation of even the worst-off member of society meets certain minimum standards of well-being. Therefore, Rawls’ theory of justice is intended to motivate thinking about how existing legal and social institutions can be reformed so as to meet those standards. In this vein of anti-essentialist, *ex post facto* corrective thinking, Piper’s work highlights that *given that* racism exists, our best bet is to attack it on a micro scale, on the level of the individual. She reminds us that institutional changes like the abandonment of abstract categories such as “white” and “black” cannot realistically be the first steps but must necessarily come later in a process that starts with the individual. As a society,

we will not be able to abandon essentialist categories such as “white,” which interpellates us all in a white/non-white binary, an “us” versus “them,” until, Piper explains:

[W]e get clear about the subtleties of who in fact we are. We then may be better able to see just what our ancestral entitlements actually are, and whether or to what extent they may need to be supplemented with additional social and legal means for implementing a just distribution of rights and benefits for everyone. Not until that point, I think, when we have faced the full human and personal consequences of the self-serving, historically entrenched social and legal conventions that undermine the privileged interests they were designed to protect, will we be in a position to decide whether the very idea of racial classification is a viable one in the first place.⁸⁶

While works of meta-art such as *It’s Just Art* are critical of a type of artwork that reifies politics in its subject matter, Piper is forthright about the tangible political aims that animate her practice. As she writes:

I want my work to contribute to the creation of a society in which racism and racial stereotyping no longer exist. In such a society, the prevailing attitude to cultural and ethnic others would be one not of tolerance but of acceptance. [...] To accept ethnic and cultural others, rather than merely to tolerate them, is to be disposed to flexible adaptation,

that is, to see them as sources of the personal catalysis and growth that inevitably result from new experiences, and to seek these out rather than barricade oneself against them.⁸⁷

This acceptance can be achieved only through genuine acknowledgement of the fact that there is a multitude of qualities that make each person who they are. In the face of this awareness of each individual’s complex particularity (genetic constitution included),⁸⁸ the essentializing categories that enable xenophobic attitudes and behaviors cannot stand. While the individual body offers a terrain of the social, an interface for the mutual positioning of subjects through perceptual relations that catalyze the formation of identity, the individual “self” seems to surpass this interface, encompassing historical, political, and ideological conditions. The body is in this sense a fulcrum—a tool, alongside language, images, and narrative, to open, shift, or redirect these intangible forces. With this understanding, Piper’s work targets xenophobia as a tangible interpersonal dynamic that entails not only a relational site but also a temporal scope. It activates the lived space of interpersonal encounter, a space where the body can intervene, where subject positions and identity formations may shift. It makes palpable that lived space of the indexical present, “the present of the here and now—between the art object and the viewer as a kind of medium for social relations.”⁸⁹

In the here and now of 2017, where, at the time of writing, proposed federal policies such as Trump’s travel ban are punctuated by eruptions of violence—such as the “Unite the Right” white supremacist rally on August 12, 2017 in

Charlottesville, Virginia, during which two state troopers were killed in a helicopter crash, one counterprotester was murdered by a white nationalist who plowed his car into a crowd, and 34 others were wounded, prompting the state’s governor to declare a state of emergency⁹⁰—Adrian Piper’s strategies and tactics remain urgent and salient. In the rigorous methodological individualism that she has tirelessly practiced for nearly six decades, *artistic concerns* (the formal criteria of aesthetic practice), *epistemological methods* (the analytical frameworks of knowledge production), and *humanistic values* (that which we might call the politics) of meta-art converge. Her work provides an instructive intervention into how we might navigate the complex dynamics that produce us in relation to others. In this way it realizes one of the highest and most elusive ambitions of art: to produce effects far beyond the scope of the gallery or museum.

ENDNOTES

1. Adrian Piper, “Xenophobia and the Indexical Present I: Essay,” in *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume I: Selected Writings in Meta-Art, 1968–1992* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 247–248.
2. *Ibid.*, 245.
3. Office of the President, Executive Order 13769 of January 27, 2017, “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States,” *Federal Register* 82.20 (February 1, 2017): 8977–8982, accessed October 19, 2017, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2017-02-01/pdf/2017-02281.pdf>.
4. *Ibid.*, 8977.
5. Adam Liptak, “President Trump’s Immigration Order, Annotated,” *The New York Times*, January 28, 2017, accessed October 19, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/28/us/politics/annotating-trump-immigration-refugee-order.html>.
6. Executive Order 13769, 8977.
7. This is a reference to *The Mythic Being: I Embody Everything You Most Hate and Fear* (1975), an oil crayon on photograph work from Piper’s *The Mythic Being* series on view in this exhibition. The full text of the work, written in a speech bubble, reads: “I embody everything you most hate and fear.”
8. As reported by CBS News and USA Today. See “Protests erupt at

airports nationwide over immigration action,” CBS News, January 29, 2017, accessed October 19, 2017, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/protests-airports-immigration-action-president-trump/>, and “Protests against Trump’s immigration plan rolling in more than 30 cities,” USA Today, January 29, 2017, accessed October 19, 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2017/01/29/homeland-security-judges-stay-has-little-impact-travel-ban/97211720/>.

9. “Global protests against Trump’s travel ban,” CBS News, undated, accessed October 19, 2017, <https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/global-protests-against-trumps-travel-ban/>.

10. Donald J. Trump, et al., v. International Refugee Assistance Project, et al., 582 U.S. (2017), accessed October 19, 2017, https://www.supreme-court.gov/opinions/16pdf/16-1436_l6hc.pdf.

11. Adrian Piper, “Xenophobia and the Indexical Present II: Lecture” (originally published in a slightly different version in *Place Position Presentation Public*, ed. Ine Gevers (Den Haag, Netherlands: Jan van Eyck Academie, 1992)), in *Out of Order*, Vol. I, 255.

12. Piper has written extensively on metaethics, the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, and the history of ethics throughout her academic career. Her two-volume study in Kantian metaethics, *Rationality and the Structure of the Self*, Volume I: *The Humean Conception and Rationality and the Structure of the Self*, Volume II: *A Kantian Conception*, was accepted for publication by Cambridge University Press in 2008. It has been available since then as an open access e-book. Her third book, *Kant’s Metaethics: First Critique Foundations of His Theory of Action*, is nearing completion. See “Biography,” Adrian Piper Research Archive (hereafter APRA) Foundation Berlin, accessed August 3, 2017, accessed October 19, 2017, www.adrianpiper.com/biography.shtml.

13. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant argues that sensory perception provides the matter out of which we construct our conceptual world. Accordingly, space and time are merely formal qualities of the way we perceive the world, not things in themselves that exist independently of us, or properties or relations among them. Objects in space and time are appearances (*phenomena*), and he argues that we know nothing about the things in themselves (*noumena*, or essences). See Kant, “On the ground of the distinction of all objects in general into *phenomena* and *noumena*,” in *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 338–353.

14. Piper, “Xenophobia and the Indexical Present II: Lecture,” 255–256.

15. Piper, “Xenophobia and the Indexical Present I: Essay,” 248.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 246.

18. As Kant writes:

In presenting the sublime in nature the mind feels *agitated*, while in an aesthetic judgment about the beautiful in nature it is in *restful* contemplation. This agitation (above all at its inception) can be compared with a vibration, i.e. with a rapid alternation of repulsion from, and attraction to, one and the same object. If a [thing] is excessive for the imagination (and the imagination is driven to [such excess] as it apprehends [the thing] in intuition), then [the thing] is, as it were, an abyss in which the imagination is afraid to lose itself.

Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 115.

19. Piper, “Xenophobia and the Indexical Present II: Lecture,” 256.

20. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 11.

21. Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 3.

22. Ibid., 2–3.

23. Nandita Sharma, “White Nationalism, Illegality and Imperialism: Border Controls as Ideology,” in (*En*)*Gendering the War on Terror: War Stories and Camouflaged Politics*, ed. Krista Hunt and Kim Rygiel (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 129.

24. Ibid., 130.

25. Ibid., 137.

26. Etienne Balibar, “The Nation Form: History and Ideology,” *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 13.3 (Summer 1990), 329.

27. Ibid., 346–348.

28. Piper, “Xenophobia and the Indexical Present I: Essay,” 246.

29. Piper, “In Support of Meta-Art,” in *Out of Order*, *Out of Sight*, Volume II: *Selected Writings in Art Criticism, 1967–1992* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 17.

30. Ibid., 24.

31. Ibid., 18.

32. Piper, “Xenophobia and the Indexical Present I: Essay,” 245.

33. Ibid., 246.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid., 247, and Piper, “On Conceptual Art,” in *Out of Order*, Vol. I, 241.

36. See Charles S. Peirce, “On a New List of Categories,” *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 7 (1867): 287–298.

37. Piper, “Goodbye to Easy Listening,” in *Out of Order*, Vol. II, 177.

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.

40. Piper “Xenophobia and the Indexical Present I: Essay,” 248.

41. Piper, “Preparatory Notes for *The Mythic Being*,” in *Out of Order*, Vol. I, 108.

42. Ibid., 109.

43. Piper, “Xenophobia and the Indexical Present II: Lecture,” 263.

44. Piper, “Preparatory Notes for *The Mythic Being*,” 112.

45. Ibid.

46. Piper, “Xenophobia and the Indexical Present II: Lecture,” 263.

47. Ibid., 264.

48. Here, we might allude to what Richard Schechner describes as the “double negativity” that characterizes performance. As he writes:

While performing, a performer experiences his own self not directly but through the medium of experiencing others. While performing, he no longer has a “me” but has a “not not me,” and this double negative relationship also shows how restored behavior is simultaneously private and social. A person performing recovers his own self only by going out of himself and meeting the others — by entering a social field. The way in which “me” and “not me,” the performer and the thing to be performed, are transformed into “not me...not not me” is through the workshop-rehearsal/ritual process. This process takes place in a liminal time/space and in the subjunctive mood. The subjunctive character of the liminal time/space

is reflected in the negative, antistructural frame around the whole process. This antistructure could be expressed algebraically: “not (me...not me).”

See Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 111–112.

49. Piper, “The Mythic Being: Getting Back,” in *Out of Order*, Vol. I, 147.

50. Piper, “Xenophobia and the Indexical Present II: Lecture,” 264.

51. Piper, “Notes on the Mythic Being I–III,” in *Out of Order*, Vol. I, 138.

52. Piper, “Preparatory Notes for *The Mythic Being*,” 100–101.

53. Piper, “Notes on the Mythic Being I–III,” 138.

54. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 234.

55. Piper, “Some Political Self-Reflections,” in *Out of Order*, Vol. I, 174.

56. Piper, *Defaced Funk Lessons Poster* (1983), reproduced in “Notes on Funk I–IV,” in *Out of Order*, Vol. I, 207.

57. In addition, Piper created *My Calling (Card)* meta-performances in which she held several rounds of focus-group-type sessions for audience feedback on the project. Embodying the meta-art techniques of “comment, evaluation, and feedback,” this work further demonstrated how the indexical present creates opportunities for heightening consciousness and re-evaluating one’s convictions. Piper, “In Support of Meta-Art,” 18.

58. Piper, “Xenophobia and the Indexical Present II: Lecture,” 266.

59. Ibid.

60. *It’s Just Art* was first performed in the auditorium of the Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College on April 23, 1980. It was followed by performances at The Western Front, Vancouver; And/Or Gallery, Seattle; and Artists Space, New York, in 1981. See “It’s Just Art,” in *Out of Order*, Vol. I, 176–180, for a detailed firsthand description of the performance.

61. Piper, “*It’s Just Art* (1980; 00:18:00)” APRA Foundation Berlin, accessed September 1, 2017, www.adrianpiper.com/vs/sound_just_art.shtml.

62. Piper, “It’s Just Art,” 178, 180.

63. Piper, “Talking to Myself: The Ongoing Autobiography of an Art Object,” in *Out of Order*, Vol. I, 48.

64. Piper, “It’s Just Art,” 177.

65. Ibid., 180.

66. Ibid., 177.

67. Piper, “IT’S JUST ART,” program notes, February 26, 1981, And/Or Gallery Records, Special Collections, University of Washington Libraries, Seattle. Cited in John P. Bowles, *Adrian Piper: Race, Gender, and Embodiment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 261.

68. Piper, “Xenophobia and the Indexical Present II: Lecture,” 270.

69. Piper, “Notes on Funk I–IV,” 196.

70. Piper, “Xenophobia and the Indexical Present II: Lecture,” 269.

71. André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 6.

72. Piper, “It’s Just Art,” 178.

73. Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 174.

74. Ibid., 170.

75. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 84.

76. Ibid.

77. Pierre Macherey, “Figures of interpellation in Althusser and Fanon,” *Radical Philosophy* 173 (May/June 2012), 14–15.

78. Ibid., 15.

79. Regressive proof refers to one of the analytical techniques outlined by Piper in her theorization of meta-art. As she writes: “One might be what Kant called the method of ‘regressive proof,’ which he used in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Such an analysis would consist in beginning with the fact of the work itself, and from its properties inferring backward to the conditions necessary to bring it into existence. Luckily there is no need to insist that such conditions be transcendental. They might just as easily be social, psychological, political, metaphysical, aesthetic, or any combination thereof.” Piper, “In Support of Meta-Art,” 17–18.

80. Piper, “It’s Just Art,” 180.

81. Piper, “Xenophobia and the Indexical Present I: Essay,” 249.

82. See Roman Jakobson, “Shifters, verbal categories, and the Russian verb” (Cambridge: Harvard University, Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, Russian Language Project, 1957).

83. Piper, “Xenophobia and the Indexical Present I: Essay,” 248.

84. Rawls published *A Theory of Justice* in 1971 and continued to reformulate and refine his theory throughout his life in publications such as *Political Liberalism* (1993), *The Law of Peoples*, with “*The Idea of Public Reason Revisited*” (1999), and *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (2001). Piper received her Ph.D. in Philosophy from Harvard University in 1981 under the supervision of Rawls. Her two-volume treatise on metaethics titled *Rationality and the Structure of the Self*, which she dedicated to Rawls, was completed in 2008. Piper writes about Rawls’ theory in the chapter titled “Rawls’ Instrumentalism” in *Rationality and the Structure of the Self*, Volume I: *The Humean Conception*, second edition (Berlin: APRA Foundation, 2013), 410–463.

85. Conflicts between different conceptions of the good are of course inevitable in any given real society. This is however a problem in ethics. The salient point here in this metaethical inquiry is the proposition of the guarantee of basic rights and resources for *all* members of society *and* the redistribution of resources by the welfare state as a retroactive corrective device in real societies (all of which are characterized by unequal starting positions for their members) in order to better enable *all* members of those societies to live fuller lives.

86. Piper, “Whiteless,” *Art Journal* 60.4 (Winter 2001), 65. Italicized in original. Here, Piper references her 1992 essay, “Passing for White, Passing for Black.”

87. Piper “Xenophobia and the Indexical Present I: Essay,” 245.

88. See Piper, “Passing for White, Passing for Black,” in *Out of Order*, Vol. I, 288; and Piper, “As a Matter of Fact,” *Artforum* 55.10 (Summer 2017), 68.

89. Piper “Xenophobia and the Indexical Present II: Lecture,” 257.

90. Maggie Astor, Christina Caron, and Daniel Victor, “A Guide to the Charlottesville Aftermath,” *The New York Times*, August 13, 2017, accessed October 19, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/13/us/charlottesville-virginia-overview.html?mcubz=1>.