

Stay Away, Don't Stay Away

An Essay on Adrian Piper

◆Adrian Piper is a conceptual artist whose work, in a variety of media, has focused on racism, racial stereotyping and xenophobia for more than three decades (◆*About Adrian*, www.adrianpiper.com). Adrian Piper is a Yoga practitioner and a Philosophy professor at Wellesley College, where she teaches courses in modern philosophy, contemporary ethical and political theory.

I have been an artist for five years, concentrating on distribution, social movements and political activism as both the form and content of my work. I volunteer part-time for Cinenova, a women◆s film and video distributor in London, and have worked as research fellow at the Copenhagen Free University since 2001.

When Mike Sperlinger suggested the idea of writing about Adrian Piper◆s work for a book, I was surprised because we had not discussed Adrian Piper◆s work before. Perhaps because to my knowledge it has not been widely exhibited or referenced in London in the past three years, and this is how long I have known Mike. I felt some discomfort at the thought of writing about the work of an individual artist who I did not know, when my thoughts are with social strategies and the disassembling of the individualised artist and art institutions, including the way artists◆ work is written about. I want to show in my writing how Adrian Piper◆s work has done much towards acting on such concerns, and how her work activates or encourages the practice of writing and articulating one◆s position where possible, by articulating some of my own position. In a text called ◆*Cheap Art Utopia*◆, first published in *Art-Rite* a magazine published, edited, designed, typeset and distributed by Edit Deak and Walter Robinson from 1973-1978, Piper poses the question,

If art were as accessible to everyone as comic books? As cheap and as available? What social and economic conditions would this state of things presuppose?

Suggestion can feel like a catalyst, when it is a good one, where the conditions need not presuppose the action. Mike◆s suggestion reminded me how much I had appreciated Adrian Piper◆s writing and artworks, for their conceptual rigour and disclosure of information about the conditions and context under which works were made, exhibited and interpreted by others. My overwhelming urge is that you should read Adrian Piper◆s writing and see her work, since it is not really possible to articulate what your experience might be.

I eventually took up the suggestion, starting with the act of reading Adrian Piper◆s work, and the way I looked on my situation affected by that experience: building an exchange of ideas, trying to trace activities, my preconceptions within a given time period, in relation to events that happened during the course of writing. I have tried to explain my version of events and include texts, but as examples they are not exhaustive/conclusive to the discussion, since Piper◆s work is so generous and far-reaching I in no way want to limit your possible understanding and experience by my capacity and ability to articulate it. I want to act, and acknowledge how reading and seeing Adrian Piper◆s work has been influential in my ability to act, where action is a broad term that includes refusal and doubt, amongst many disorganised thoughts and physical inhibitions.

Mike and I have been friends since meeting at the Lux Centre in London where we both worked. The Lux Centre exhibited, produced and distributed moving image works by artists, housed in a large privately-owned building in Hoxton Square in east London. The organisation was funded by the state, although embraced a combination of private and publicly funded projects. We were being paid by the state, but often it felt like we were part of a small commercially driven media company. Mike eventually took over the job I was doing temporarily, as an assistant to the cinema curator. I had gone back to working as a receptionist in the centre, believing it would allow me greater flexibility for my commitments as an artist, and would ultimately be less taxing on my nerves. The cinema curator◆s assistant job was regularly demanding extra hours trying to find prints that had gone astray, or dealing with technical problems in the cinema. After the Lux Centre closed in 2002, I committed to being a full-time artist, believing at the time that one had to try to make this commitment in order to clarify one◆s position to other people and oneself. My thoughts are somewhat different now. I actually think that the emphasis on a single income from an art practice which is littered with obstacles, in a culture where the artist◆s position as privileged subject is still prevalent and is used as the means to gain capital by generating inventive power or the image of inventive power, is not good for my nervous system either.

Following Mike◆s suggestion, I decided I would like to get in touch with Adrian Piper to ask permission to write about her work for the book, and have her read my work before it was published. In the enthusiasm for a project, and through interest in a persons work, one might be tempted to forget that the person is working and communicating in the present, and it may not be appropriate or desirable for them to have someone write a text about their work, even if one maintains that what one is writing about is the work not the person. Conventionally one has no obligation to gain permission, especially when work is available in the public realm, and putting work into the public realm is itself an act of exchange and dialogue, a social act. But this assumption is often one-sided, and only reinforces the already powerful position of critic and curator to do as they please, something that is considered the norm, especially by those who profit from it. Perhaps only artists can challenge these assumptions. And it seems they need to be continuously challenged, even when the conditions for reception and parameters for re-presentations of works are in

the works themselves, as I would say they are in Piper's case.

I hoped that by contacting or meeting Adrian Piper I could propose an exchange on these subjects, but I did not assume that a brief meeting would give me a hitherto undisclosed insight into Adrian Piper's work, since I don't believe in such insights. A meeting, though, seemed totally unfeasible. At the least it might be possible to contact her via email - an assumption that I make about most people, but which I now realise is rather intrusive, although we have been led to believe by communication technology corporations that it is always desirable, and possible.

I visited the Adrian Piper Research Archive, a website that was set up and is run by Robert Del Principe with Adrian Piper. It contains many transcripts of lectures by the artist and other texts, information about what kind of equipment you need if you were to invite Adrian Piper to come and give a lecture or perform a particular piece of work, and autobiographical information, including a personal chronology describing events and incidents such as: wearing garlic around her neck for summer 1957 after reading *The Horror of Dracula* (born 1948) multiple viewings of Jean-Marie Straub's *The Notebooks of Anna Magdalena Bach* in 1968; starting a women's consciousness-raising group with Rosemary Mayer, Donna Dennis, Randa Haines, Grace Murphy, and others in 1971; and beginning a doctoral program in philosophy at Harvard University in 1974. In addition, the site provides information about the costs of hiring Adrian Piper's video works, and gives some texts on Yoga, a practice Adrian Piper has been engaged since 1965. The description of a lecture entitled 'What the Indexical present Really Is' on the website under the section 'Talks, Lectures, Readings, Seminars' introduces me to the relation of Yoga practice to Piper's making of visual art works and study of Philosophy:

Piper has often used the concept of the 'indexical present' to describe a decision-making strategy in her work by which the viewer is brought into direct and immediate relation to the art object. Through such devices as mimicry of rationalization; naming, depiction, or confrontation of troubling realities; the use of indexical language such as 'here, now, I, you, this;' representational, life-size human images posed frontally and making eye-contact with the viewer, Piper has sought to peel away the layers of self-deceptive conceptualization that mediate and obscure our relation to 'Others' and prevent recognition of our common humanity. In fact these strategies are rooted in Piper's decades-long practice of yoga and Advaita Vedanta, which she began in 1965. In this talk she contextualizes her art practice within its actual framework of Ashtanga Yoga, with particular reference to the concepts of satya (truth), svadyaya (self-scrutiny), dharana (entering into focussed relation to an object), dhyana (penetrating through to the essence of the object), and purusha (transpersonal consciousness of mental activity). Piper can't be accused of 'preaching to the converted' in this talk! (Duration approximately one to one and a half hours).

I made another search online to see if there was any chance Adrian Piper would be visiting London in the coming months. It turned out she would be participating in an ethics and aesthetics seminar with Noel Carroll, chaired by Diarmuid Costello (Oxford Brookes University) on 6 November at Tate Modern. I booked two tickets, and wrote to Robert Del Principe to ask if during Adrian Piper's visit we might be able to meet. Robert wrote back saying he would be speaking to Adrian Piper later that week and would ask her. Later that week Robert got back to me with a date that we could meet, and pointed out that there would also be a screening of Adrian Piper's new video work *Shiva Dances* (2004) as part of a series of events and exhibition of Adrian Piper's videos, called *Performance: Strategy and Process* at Toynbee Studios in London curated by Adelaide Bannerman.

Mike bought Adrian Piper's two volume paperback publication *Out of Order, Out of Sight: Selected Writings in Meta-Art and Art Criticism 1967-1993* and he immediately lent them to me. Four years ago, I was living with a woman who was working as a lecturer at a community college in London; she had access to the college library. Over one Christmas holiday she borrowed the two volumes in hardback for me to read whilst she went home for the holidays. I stayed in London reading, while it snowed outside. I experienced a feeling of discipline, reassurance and excitement in response to the way Adrian Piper's writing disclosed some of the facts about the contexts for her work and the conditions under which her work was made. I started reading them again, this time more conscious of the texts meaning something that I had experienced directly since the first time I read them. My 'decision' to become a full-time artist several years previously made Piper's articulations of the economics of the role of artist and 'socially embedded being' feel more critical. At the same time it occurred to me that I might have to read Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, but I felt I had such little time to do so.

In Volume I of *Selected Writings in Meta-Art 1968-1992* you can read texts that Adrian Piper has written about particular works, beginning with *About Space, Time, Language, Form*, which explains the process of writing *Space, Time, Language, Form* created in 1968 and edited by Mary Peacock to accompany *Parallel Grid Proposal for Dugway Proving Grounds in Art-Language*. Piper describes it as the first time she had written about specific preoccupations in her work, a practice she named 'meta-art'; and her memory of this experience became the inspiration for 'In support of Meta-Art' (chapter 4 in Volume II), which was first published in *Artforum* 12, no.2 (October 1973) and begins:

I would like to make a case for a new occupation for artists. This occupation might exist as part of, alongside, or instead of the art itself. If it existed as part of or alongside art, it might have the effect of giving art a perspicuous and visible interpretation, support, or framework, although I don't see this as it's intention.¹

And it goes on to discuss some of meta-art's possible manifestations:

Generally what is required in meta-art is that we stand off and view our role of artist reflectively; that we see the fact of our art making as itself a discrete state or process with interesting implications worthy of pursuit; that we articulate and present these implications to an audience (either the same as or broader than the art audience) for comment, evaluation and feedback.²

Volume II is devoted to *Selected Writings in Art Criticism 1967-2002*, and focuses on the art world and, according to

the cover notes, her evolving awareness of herself as a creative, racial, and gendered subject situated in an often limiting and always absurd cultural and social context. In particular, An Open Letter to Donald Kuspit (1987) traces and critiques the publication in *Art Criticism* (3 no.3 [September 1987], pp.9-16) of an essay Adrian Piper: Self-Healing through Meta-Art, written by Donald Kuspit who was also the editor of the periodical, originally written for a retrospective exhibition catalogue at the Alternative Museum in New York, *Adrian Piper: Reflections 1967-1987*. Piper had asked for the essay not to be published in the exhibition catalogue, but Kuspit published it in *Art Criticism*, so Piper explains what is incorrect about the essay and why she did not want the essay published.

Two days after George.W.Bush had been re-elected president of the United States, I arrived late for the ethics and aesthetics seminar. I felt ill from running from the bus, and I was dehydrated and panicked. I met Mike and felt calmer, and was actually not too late, but was not sure if I would make it through the seminar from 2.30pm to 6pm. We sat near the front of the auditorium, the worst place actually if you are going to pass out.

Please read A Political Statement written by Adrian Piper in 1973, first published in *Art-rite 6* (Summer 1974):

Power is bad for the lining of the stomach. Financial success causes overweight and heart trouble. Art-world parties are bad for the liver. Galleries cause headaches and blood-sugar attacks. Dealers cause dislocation of the jaw. Critical reviews cause digestive upsets and emphysema. Competition between fellow artists for any of the above is a known carcinogen.³

And also Piper's proposal for an Asana class that she would like to lead entitled Yoga for eggheads published on the Adrian Piper research Archive:

Basic training in certain key postures and breathing exercises can as it does for the yogi/ni facilitate and prolong concentration, while reducing the physical pains and obstacles that limit our ability to engage in it.

Diarmuid Costello introduces Noel Carroll who was to give a paper on Art and Alienation, which would be followed by Adrian Piper making some comments and questions on the paper, then a break; and then Adrian Piper giving her paper Political Art and the Paradigm of Innovation, followed by Noel Carroll making comments and questions on the paper, and some questions at the end from us, the audience. Through Modernist practice and aesthetic philosophy, ambitious art has been alienated from social life, Carroll's paper attempted to diagnose these developments, criticise their philosophical foundations, and make limited suggestions about dealing with this impasse. Carroll pointed towards his idea of celebratory art as the way out of the impasse. In her comments Piper asked what if anything we should be celebrating, given, for example, the recent re-election of Bush. She asked what could we celebrate as a group of people here together in this moment. Neither Carroll, Piper nor anyone from the audience could think of anything, it felt hopeless; perhaps the least we could do was share our collective sense of hopelessness and try to find a way of energising our dissent. I forgot about my sweating palms, and felt relieved that Piper has asked this question.

In the break I bumped into an old college friend, he is married now, and studying philosophy at Essex University. Mike and I drank some tea together and stood on the outskirts of the social activity. In part two of the seminar we sat further back in the auditorium. Adrian Piper read her paper, which I had read an outline of on the Tate Modern website: marketing of new art and the canonization of senior artists by the media, galleries and museums refute postmodernist claims that originality and innovation are no longer values or goals in contemporary art. I cannot help feeling a little uncomfortable with the situation; I have often felt like the Tate Modern absorbs much of the potentially progressive acts of artists and cultural workers into its largely imperialistic framework, but I also know that I appreciate them inviting some people for certain projects. The text that describes Adrian Piper's paper on the website continues: the rhetoric of innovation in art plays the same central role in promoting such work as it plays in promoting the creation of desire and the consumption of commodities and services in free-market capitalist culture more generally. This also makes me think about the text All Power to the Copenhagen Free University by The Committee of 15th July, 2001/Henriette Heise and Jakob Jakobsen, which addresses how difficult it is for artists to avoid being incorporated into large art institutions in a free-market capitalist society:

When we turn our attention to the mode of aesthetic production we have to recognise that the artist is becoming the role model worker of the knowledge economy. The artist is traditionally investing soul in the work, which is exactly the qualification modern management is looking for when looking for a new employee. The entrepreneurship, self-employed independence and the sacred individuality of artists are the dream qualifications of the knowledge worker of tomorrow: An unorganised, highly skilled individual with no solidarity selling his/her living labour as a day-labourer. The heroic avant-garde artist of yesterday will become the scab of tomorrow. We see it around us and are doing it ourselves, with interest or without interest.⁴

Following Adrian Piper's paper, Noel Carroll is invited to make some reflections. Noel Carroll described a portrait that he and his wife had commissioned from an artist, not through a commercial gallery, but as a direct payment to the artist; he asked if this was outside of what Adrian Piper had described as unregulated free-market capitalism. Adrian Piper replied, Why should you be excluded? At the end of the seminar as we are standing up to leave, Diarmuid Costello points out that the Tate Modern loses money from these kinds of events. Perhaps it should be considered less of a loss, and more an investment, similar to the one we are all expected to make in a free market capitalist society.

Mike and I decided to wait for a little while in the lobby, to try and speak with Adrian Piper, or at least introduce ourselves. Many people from the audience wanted to speak with her. Eventually we met, we talked a little about the election, it still felt hard to believe Bush had made it again. Adrian Piper explained how she was not sure if she should mention it in the discussion, but how it would have been strange to pretend it hadn't happened, and she willed us in the European Union to join together in order to pose a serious obstacle to the U.S administration. We tried to explain that things were not any better here, could there not be a consolidation of power on a smaller

scale and more locally not as a nation state or states. I have a lot of doubt about the desire for large-scale consolidation, although I can see it is necessary for small periods of time in order to produce a visible obstacle and representation of refusal.

Next morning I woke early and ate a boiled egg, knowing I would need some protein to get me to the hotel to meet Adrian Piper. We go for brunch, I order scrambled eggs as does she, we both confess to having eaten something already due to our low blood sugar. It is good to meet and quite relaxed, but still sort of hung over from the whole Bush election issue. I don't know what I want to write at this point and am quite open about it. At Adrian's request, I try to talk a little about my background: how I grew up in the countryside, in a relatively working class family, went to art school in Sheffield in the north of England, am an artist, etc. I mention that I had been considering reading Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, as a way of beginning the process of writing. I was mildly relieved when she tries to persuade me not to, given the length of time she has spent studying it, and she reassures me that it may not be necessary for the task in hand. We talked about the speed at which things are required in art contexts, deadlines for publicity etc., and the different pace within academia. I feel determined not to try to speed up the process and to allow things to run their course, but of course this always runs the risk of failing to produce anything. I try to talk about political activism that I witness around me, amongst my peers, and the difficulty I have with many art institutions. Eventually we make some small commitment to the project, perhaps a process of email exchange via Robert Del Principe, or letters, but it is very tentative on both sides. She warns me that it will take a long time to respond to emails or letters given her prior commitments, but being a Kantian she explains that when she says she will do something, she will do it. I am not sure where this leaves us, since one of my ideas was to make an exchange, but there isn't time. We say goodbye, I say that I will try and speak with her later after the screening of her new video, and write down some thoughts in the meantime about possible ways of facing the practical problems. However after we part I can see that there is nothing I can do to change the situation, I go into denial and hope that I will find another way of approaching the task of beginning a relation to another person's work.

I made my way to Toynbee Hall later for the screening of Adrian Piper's video, *Shiva Dances*, presented as part of the *Performance: Strategy and Process*, which is described as:

A solo exhibition by Adrian Piper and complimentary programme of talks and events, profiling a unique gathering of artists and curators including: Adrian Piper, Paul D Miller aka DJ Spooky That Subliminal Kid, Virginia Nimarkoh, Robin Deacon, Sonia Boyce, Emmanuelle Waeckerle, Barby Asante, Lorrice Douglas, Grace Ndiritu and Sara Raza. Curated by Adelaide Bannerman.

Shiva Dances is described as follows:

Structured by a Fall 2003 lecture at the Art Institute of Chicago that transformed into a spontaneous and moving group performance, I situate Funk Lessons first in the evolving tradition of recent mainstream films that highlight the teaching of popular dance as a medium of self-transcendence and cross-cultural contact; and second within the broader philosophical context of The Color Wheel Series, which this video completes (*a description of which you can read at adrianpiper.com*)

The video was completed in 2004 and is one hour 42 minutes. In the beginning of the video as part of the lecture sequence, Adrian Piper gives some explanation about what is to come, and simple instructions or guides as to what we might do when a certain image appears. We can 1. Nod our head 2. Stand up with the legs very slightly bending and in a relaxed position 3. Clap fairly slowly with the beat of the music that is playing. When the image eventually appears it takes me a while to understand that this is the image, I feel as though I am in a very relaxed state. I wonder about responding or if it is the audience in the video that is responding, and this thought takes me to a more general sensation of deferral and I think that I would like to be engaging and not deferring. I nod my head a little, and one woman starts clapping somewhere in the audience. The camera slowly pulls back on the video to reveal the audience at the Art Institute of Chicago who are nearly all moving around, up on the stage and standing in the aisles of the auditorium, it is a fantastic sight. After reaching such a high, slowly things wind back down again, and people return to their seats and in the video of the lecture Adrian Piper begins to talk again. After the video, Piper answers some questions, followed by people wanting to talk after the discussion and I have to leave.

It is possible to rent this video and most of Adrian Piper's work through her website, and in the future a CD and DVD box set called *MEDI(t)ation's: ADRIAN PIPER'S video and soundworks 1968 - 2002* will be available to purchase. When these sets have been sold, it will no longer be possible to rent the videos or soundworks individually. The set will cost \$2,000 and you can already reserve a copy, it is very cheap considering the amount of material you would own, but I am curious about why the works will no longer be distributed separately. I am sure there would be just as much interest, although maybe it is too resource heavy to continue distribution and this would decrease the value of buying the limited edition set. I am not sure what the restrictions are on public screening of the work once you own the set.

In January 2005 I mailed Adrian Piper via Robert Del Principe as Adrian had requested. Robert wrote back asking if my email was a proposal or something Adrian already knew about. I replied saying we had spoken about the idea of making an email exchange in London, and this was some attempt at that. Robert replied asking me to shorten my request. Some time had passed and my deadline was looming. I need to let Mike know how things are going. I edited the email down to simple thanks for meeting and apologies for not writing sooner. A few days later Robert wrote back with understanding and greetings from Adrian Piper. I will send the text when it is ready.

* * *

Several weeks later I asked Mike Sperlinger, Irene Revell and Marina Vishmidt if they would read this text, which they did. They all commented on how I had not really explained Piper's work, and perhaps should give more examples of her texts and descriptions of artworks. Mike and Marina implied that I was holding back something, something they had read in other texts I had written? But I did not want to think about Adrian Piper's work, I wanted to act on it: a practical conceptualism, which incorporates having to make decisions about how one acts socially, and the

implications of those acts. I refuse to imply what I think something means generally or follow instructions absolutely, since I don't believe, either mechanisms will reveal anything. Where I have implied my opinion, I mean it as the cumulative effect of the discussions and actions I am engaged in, as a social and political act. I am sceptical of all other implied opinions. I find writing is a challenge to my lack of discipline, I feel almost constantly nervous about my productivity in language and the possibility to generate anything resembling agency, but I know it is necessary to continue to practice. Practice thinking about where your productivity takes place and where it ends up, practice refusing, by offering other possible ways of doing things, to the institutionalised effects and rituals in academia and art institutions. That is what I am doing. I sent the text to Adrian Piper who wrote back quickly saying that she liked the text as it was, and was happy for me to publish it; she made some comments that I will not mention here since I don't have permission from Adrian Piper to use those comments, but I have adjusted the text accordingly, should I send the text back with these further comments? I am undecided at which point I can act autonomously and if I ever want to.

Emma Hedditch, London 2005

Notes

¹ Adrian Piper, *Out of order, Out of site, Volume II Selected Writings in Art Criticism 1967-1992*. The MIT Press (Cambridge, Massachusetts) 1996, pp 17.

² Adrian Piper, *Out of order, Out of site, Volume II Selected Writings in Art Criticism 1967-1992*. The MIT Press (Cambridge, Massachusetts) 1996, pp 18 .

³ Adrian Piper, *Out of order, Out of site, Volume II Selected Writings in Art Criticism 1967-1992*. The MIT Press (Cambridge, Massachusetts) 1996, pp 29.

⁴ The text is available on the internet at <http://www.infopool.org.uk/cfu.htm>.