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## **Adrian Piper: A Synthesis of Intuitions, 1965-2016**

**MoMA New York 27 March to 22 July**

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For many visitors, the first encounter with Adrian Piper's colossal MoMA career retrospective comes via a glimpse of a tattooed forehead of a fellow visitor on the escalator or in the museum lobby. The henna tattoos, written in reverse and only clearly legible to the wearer when viewed in the mirror, read 'Everything Will Be Taken Away' (*Everything #10*, 2007). They are, in fact, worn by performers, in what is one of many participatory performance works that extend Piper's exhibition beyond the designated galleries into the entire museum and its surroundings. Similarly, performers carrying sandwich boards with the same message (*Everything #3*, 2003) 'picket' in front of the museum once a week, using Piper's tested technique of combining protest tactics with performance art. The 'Everything' series, based on a quote by the Russian novelist Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in which he states that once everything is taken from a person they become free, continues throughout the exhibition, pointing to the transience and the fleeting nature of life. In a series of 15 partially erased photographs

(*Everything #2*, 2003), which can be seen in the exhibition, the same sentence is typed over the faces and objects which have been rubbed away with sandpaper.

‘Adrian Piper: A Synthesis of Intuitions, 1965-2016’ is the artist’s largest retrospective to date, featuring over 290 works. The show marks a departure for MoMA in being the first exhibition of a living artist to take over the whole of the museum’s expansive sixth floor. The strategy of working on such an ambitious retrospective with a living artist has proven fruitful, as Piper’s presence is acutely felt throughout the exhibition, which exudes artist-curator collaboration (the MoMA team worked closely with Piper for more than four years) in the way it combines a systematic retrospective with unexpected interventions. Despite Piper’s physical absence (the artist, now based in Germany, refuses to return to her home country for reasons explained in her recent travel memoir *Escape to Berlin*, 2018), her commitment to engendering participation and ‘activating’ the audience renders the exhibition more of a living, open conversation between the artist, curators and the audience than a traditional museum retrospective.

In many exhibited works, as is often the case in Piper’s oeuvre, the visitor is addressed directly, asked to act, to feed back, respond and rethink. Indeed, at the very entrance of the exhibition, in

*Vote/Emote*, 1990, viewer response is solicited. The four wooden cubicles with swinging doors, reminiscent of voting booths, provide the viewer with a private moment in which to respond to a series of questions. The booth I entered held an invitation to ‘list the fears of what we may know about you’, while in the one next door the visitor was encouraged to ‘list the fears of how we may treat you’. The visitor is instantly placed ‘on alert’ in a reminder that the institution – any and every institution – is, in a Foucauldian matrix of social control, always watching, monitoring and profiling.

Broadly chronological, the exhibition opens with a salon-style hang of around 20 of Piper’s ‘LSD Paintings’ created in 1965/66, for which the artist took the hallucinogen, later painting her impressions. The psychedelic paintings depict Piper’s everyday life, her friends and her cat with some self-portraits visibly merging the artist’s image with her background, exploring shifts in perception when on drugs. Early galleries also feature Piper’s doll assemblages in which drawn girls appear to ‘hold’ protruding real three-dimensional dolls, as is the case in *Barbara Epstein and Doll*, 1966. This is followed by ‘Barbie Doll Drawings’, 1967, a series of 35 ink and pencil drawings arranged in a grid, each a rendering of grotesquely reassembled Barbie body parts. This work marks the

beginning of Piper's journey towards working with systems, maps and grids only to eventually arrive at her 'home territory' of conceptual and later fiercely politicised work, predominantly centred on race-based discrimination in the US and beyond.

The central part of the exhibition contains dozens of works from the late 1960s, a phase during which Piper experiments with complex systems and grids, using text, numerical combinations, working with maps, daily recordings of her own actions, seeing her own body as an object to record, monitor and document. Works with titles like *Sixteen Permutations of a Nine-Part Floating Square*, 1968, represent a phase in which Piper meticulously develops her own broad vocabulary of conceptual practice, socialising at this stage with artists like Sol LeWitt, whose influence on her work is notable.

A key shift in Piper's work occurs in 1970, when a combination of local and global political events, including the invasion of Cambodia, the Kent State and Jackson State university shootings, lead the artist to deem her actions to date to be 'laughable' and politically ineffective, taking the time to pause and reconsider her own position as an artist, as a woman and as a black person. Realising that she must reach beyond gallery audiences, Piper turns to the public space of the city and begins to stage

performances on the street, on public transport and in everyday social situations. This when the work becomes acutely political in nature. Piper's heightened awareness of systemic racial discrimination, violence and the ways in which privilege renders us tone deaf to injustice is central to much of the work from this point on.

Here the exhibition shifts gear to include series of highly politicised works combining performance documentation, installation, and series of photographs and video. Here we encounter Piper's groundbreaking and enormously influential performance, video, collage and photographic series 'Mythic Being', 1973-75, in which the artist created an alter ego persona, a working-class black male who she regularly 'became' in her daily actions as a way of tracking difference in social interactions across two different identities. Another well-known installation on view here is *Cornered*, 1988, centred around a video featuring Piper, dressed in an elegant outfit with a pearl necklace and earrings, directly confronting the viewer about racial stereotyping and the assumptions that somehow passing for white is seen to be a positive way to move through life. Piper's sweet and polite voice delivers statistics about race which soon 'corner' the viewer, revealing that racial identity is more fluid than most people think,

and that perhaps, after all, one may want to reconsider one's own racial identification.

Two-thirds into the exhibition, as one moves towards more recent work, a written instruction above a doorway informs the audience that 'IN ORDER TO ENTER THE ROOM, YOU MUST HUM A TUNE. ANY TUNE WILL DO'. *The Humming Room*, 2012, is another intervention into audience behaviour, and a playful reminder of institutional authority, as the guard really does prevent passage into the next gallery until one begins humming a melody.

Spanning over 50 years of artistic practice, 'Adrian Piper: A Synthesis of Intuitions, 1965-2016' is best approached as a text from which to begin a detailed study of Piper's rich oeuvre. It is a site to which one must return again and again. This is an important retrospective in myriad ways, but it is especially pertinent to our political moment. It is at a time when social-media both facilitates rapid organising in response to social injustice (as with campaigns like Black Lives Matter, #MeToo #TimesUp, #NotSurprised, to name but a few) while also being the very engine of fake news and underhand political manipulations, that we most need to think clearly. It is crucial that we now cultivate discerning minds able to understand the obfuscated workings of political agendas, and to

expose systemic violence embedded in the patriarchal white male social order. As Piper points out when speaking of her work *Four intruders plus alarm systems*, 1980, her primary concern lies in breaking down the ‘ideological defences against the comprehension of political realities and one’s own involuntary (and sometimes unwilling) participation in them’.

Piper’s retrospective can act as a toolkit to help us sharpen our senses in a moment in which we are manipulated in ways we are not yet able to comprehend.

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