

Becoming Adrian Piper

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Cornelia Butler and David Platzker (eds), *Adrian Piper: A Reader* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018) 280 pp, \$45.00 Cloth, ISBN: 9781633450332

Kimberly Lamm, *Addressing the Other Woman: Textual Correspondences in Feminist Art and Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018) 320 pp, £80.00 Hardcover, ISBN: 9781526121264

Nizan Shaked, *The Synthetic Proposition: Conceptualism and the Political Referent in Contemporary Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017) 280 pp, £18.99 Cloth, ISBN: 9781784992767

The entry for the year 1957 in Adrian Piper's self-authored 'Personal Chronology', published in the catalogue for her 2018 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, enigmatically notes: 'reads Lewis Carroll, becomes *Alice in Wonderland* (through 1979)'.¹ Becoming Carroll's character is not an unreasonable thing for a nine-year old to imagine. But why place the shedding of this adopted identity so precisely in 1979? In his contribution to the accompanying volume, *Adrian Piper: A Reader*, Jörg Heiser explains that

¹ Adrian Piper, 'Personal Chronology', *Adrian Piper: A Synthesis of Intuitions* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018), p. 313. 'Adrian Piper: A Synthesis of Intuitions, 1965–2016,' The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 31 March–22 July 2018.

1979 marked the completion of her *Political Self-Portrait* series, in which the artist addresses her social position in terms of race, gender and class, as well as her appointment as an assistant professor in philosophy, which is to say her entry into a field rife with discrimination.² In Heiser's estimation, then, 1979 represents the culmination of 'successive confrontations with disillusion', which led to her 'being bereft of a dream, being thrown out of Wonderland, or at least out of the forest "where things have no names"'.³

In fact, Piper had already mobilised the trope of the broken dream in an essay published in the catalogue for her first retrospective at the Alternative Museum in New York in 1987. There she compellingly describes a recurring dream in which she learns how to fly by repeatedly jumping and flapping her arms. She eventually manages to soar above her surroundings but not without first raising the suspicion of those around her, who insist on trying to catch her and drag her back down. The analogy is with her attempt to ascend towards abstraction in the fields of art and philosophy: she identifies a first flight towards reductive abstraction in her embrace of minimalist and conceptual procedures prior to 1972 and a second flight towards abstract, philosophical thought from then onwards. In both cases, her wings are clipped by others' misjudgements about her social identity, yet her resolve is unflinching. In retrospect, the essay recasts the allegorical expulsion from Wonderland as a persistent struggle whose earliest

² See the entry for the year 1979 in Piper, 'Personal Chronology', p. 316. The artist has discussed her experience of discrimination in academia in several essays, including 'Flying', *Adrian Piper: Reflections 1967–1987* (New York: Alternative Museum, 1987), pp. 19–24.

³ Jörg Heiser, 'Adventures in Reasonland', in Cornelia Butler and David Platzker (eds), *Adrian Piper: A Reader* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018), pp. 20, 16.

iteration occurred around 1970, when identity-based rights movements coalesced in opposition to the escalation of the Vietnam War, ‘shocking [her] back into [her] skin’ as a result.⁴

In the critical literature, Piper’s recollection of these events is often cited as evidence of a direct link between the artist’s political awakening and the politicisation of her work. Such accounts, however, join two distinct moments that are set apart by a decade in Piper’s telling: the first, in 1970, marks her becoming aware of her social position; the second, around 1979, registers her narration of personal experiences of misrecognition and outright discrimination in the *Political Self-Portraits*. A string of recent publications casts new light on the gap between these two turning points in Piper’s career. Considered together, they help to uncover, if not the trail of disillusionment that led to her ceasing to be *Alice in Wonderland*, then at least how she became Adrian Piper, meaning the public figure that she has come to embody since her ‘rehabilitation’ in the late 1980s.⁵ Whereas previous efforts have focused on pulling apart the art press’s mythical construction of the artist and its racialising effects,⁶ these new contributions to the scholarship on Piper revisit overlooked aspects of her early practice that jar with the artist’s

⁴ Piper, ‘Flying’, p. 21.

⁵ Adrian Piper has referred to the spike of interest in her work in the late 1980s, notably around her 1987 retrospective, as a ‘rehabilitation’ in ‘Fifteen Minutes with Adrian Piper: an interview with franklin sirmans’, *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no.8, Spring/Summer 1998, p. 23.

⁶ See, for example, Charles Gaines, ‘The Theatre of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism,’ in Catherine Lord (ed.), *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism* (Irvine, CA: Fine Arts Gallery, University of California, 1993), pp. 16–17.

popular reputation for confrontational performances and complicate the art historical record of this period.⁷

The snapshot of a young Piper walking down a busy shopping street wearing a deadpan look and a sandwichboard-type sign reading ‘wet paint’ is ubiquitous in the scholarship on American art after 1960. At the artist’s recent MoMA retrospective, however, the handful of small photographic prints documenting this and related actions in the *Catalysis* series were dwarfed by Piper’s prolific production around this time: the exhibition included over one hundred and fifty works made in the period 1965–75 alone. Immediately flanking the photographs were two series that Piper made in the privacy of her loft the summer before and after the best-known *Catalysis* actions. The fifty-six, framed sheets of graph paper in *Concrete Infinity Documentation Piece* (1970) contain a set of notational instructions and handwritten daily entries, each accompanied by a snapshot of the artist’s reflection in the mirror. *Food for the Spirit* (1971) also features a series of fourteen, increasingly underexposed portraits of the artist in front of the mirror, in which she appears mostly nude or semi-nude. Piper collated the dimly lit snapshots in a ring binder and interspersed them with annotated pages from Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*; at MoMA, a digital reproduction of the original work was displayed next to blown-up prints of the photographs dating from 1997. While these works’ comparably larger footprint makes them more amenable to the white cube, they have also claimed increased real estate in the recent literature on Piper. Barely referenced in the scholarship up until now, *Concrete Infinity*

⁷ An important precedent for the recent focus on Piper’s early work is John Bowles’s monograph *Adrian Piper: Race, Gender, and Embodiment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), which examines her practice from 1965 to 1975.

Documentation Piece occupies pride of place in two volumes in Manchester University Press's 'Rethinking Art's Histories' series, which take divergent routes to a reassessment of Piper's early work. Kimberly Lamm considers this and related works by Piper as part of a synchronic enquiry into the claim to language in Anglo-American feminism of the late 1960s and 1970s; Nizan Shaked's study is diachronic, examining how Piper's conceptual work laid the groundwork for the interrogation of identity politics in American art from the 1970s to the 1990s. Though *Food for the Spirit* has garnered more critical attention, it is also the object of significantly discrepant readings in MoMA's anthology *Adrian Piper: A Reader*, to which I will return in closing. The recuperation of these early works by Piper testifies to a renewed interest in the entanglements between conceptual art and performance, while also revealing major fault lines in current debates around the role that identity discourse plays in art history.

Kimberly Lamm's *Addressing the Other Woman: Textual Correspondences in Feminist Art and Writing* is structured around three pairings of artists and writers. Their work is discussed in monographic chapters brought together by a common theme: Adrian Piper's conceptual work is considered alongside Angela Davis's writings on the imbrication of sexism and racism, Nancy Spero and Valerie Solanas are paired on account of their use of the typewriter as a 'discursive machine gun',⁸ and Mary Kelly and Laura Mulvey because of their distinct but interrelated work on maternal fetishism. 'Correspondences', then, is meant to indicate overlapping concerns across feminist practices: art and writing, but also psychoanalytic theory, which Lamm deploys consistently throughout the book. The pairing that concerns me here – of Piper and Davis – is

⁸ Friedrich Kittler, cited in Kimberly Lamm, *Addressing the Other Woman: Textual Correspondences in Feminist Art and Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), p. 170.

interpolated by the work of literary critic Hortense Spillers. In an influential 1987 essay, Spillers argued that the violation of parental rights during slavery led to the ‘ungendering’ of African American bodies and social structures.⁹ While she frames the to gender conventions as a brutal byproduct of racialised subjection, in the description of the social conditions of black motherhood gleaned from autobiographical narratives, she also finds the outlines of a utopian, non-patriarchal structure. It is the double-edged power of ungendering, as both ‘violent theft’ and ‘radical black feminist possibility’, that Lamm argues Piper’s and Davis’s work helps to visualise.¹⁰

Since Angela Davis’s work has been foundational to black feminism, it is plain to see how her writings helped to build Spillers’s case. Lamm demonstrates that, in the early 1970s, Davis’s political analysis of what we have come to know as intersectionality necessarily converged with a practice of self-definition. Crucial here is the political philosopher’s point-by-point refutation, during her 1972 trial, of the monstrous mould in which the prosecutor attempted to cast her, exposing its reliance on the construction of black femininity as a distortion of, and threat to, conventional gender boundaries. Elaborating on this demythologising narrative, Davis’s 1974 autobiography positions her life story as representative of the racist and sexist system of power that produced her as an icon of white fear. Beginning with the *Political Self-Portraits*, Piper has strategically used elements from her personal life in several artworks to comparable effect. But Lamm focuses instead on how, in the period 1970–75, she deployed

⁹ Hortense Spillers, ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book’, *Diacritics*, Vol. 17, no.2, ‘Culture and Countermemory: The “American” Connection’, Summer 1987, p. 68.

¹⁰ Lamm, *Addressing the Other Woman*, p. 52.

language to expand social norms of recognition in ways that are markedly distinct from Davis. Drawing on Piper's 1990s writings on xenophobia as a visual pathology, she argues that her work after 1970 'created conditions for revising the pathologies that make visual signifiers of the black female body into emblems of the strange, disorderly and criminally out of place.'¹¹

Being the first work in which Piper integrated self-portrait photographs, *Concrete Infinity Documentation Piece* is pivotal in this discussion. If in her public performances of this period Piper fashioned herself as an art object, in this piece she aimed to record what she called 'object maintenance' according to strict rules: every day, she was to chronicle her physical actions in a handwritten, laundry-list entry, expunging 'subject', 'content' and 'incoming information', but including regular weight and temperature readings as well as a half-length portrait. The work's notational constraints are echoed in the fasting regime described in the text, the depleted body pictured in the photographs and the instruction to minimise social contact whenever possible. Lamm perceptively compares this work with Robert Morris's *I-Box* (1962) given their pairing of linguistic and photographic self-exposure. Despite its sarcastic revelation of the bodily constitution of the artist's subjectivity, Morris's I-shaped peephole is seen ultimately to reassert masculinity. By contrast, through reference to the psychoanalytic mirror stage, Piper's serial self-portrait is presented as 'revising the conditions through which the artist becomes recognisable to herself' and, more broadly, 'rewriting the conditions in which black women have been made to appear'.¹² Lamm casts doubt on readings of this piece as an assertion of black female identity, aptly pointing to the tension between self-inscription and self-erasure articulated in the interplay

¹¹ Lamm, *Addressing the Other Woman*, p. 34.

¹² Lamm, *Addressing the Other Woman*, pp. 47, 83.

of text and image. Still, she is more confident than other commentators in establishing a robust link between Piper's interrogation of selfhood and social identity: a correlation that the artist's efforts to suppress the 'I' by approximating the facticity of bodily existence appear to call into question.

Lamm's analysis of Piper's subsequent *Catalysis* series poses similar questions of interpretation. Building on art historical readings of minimal and conceptual art as only deliriously rational, she tracks the tension between order and disorder in Piper's early page works, arguing that the artist's embrace of performative strategies entailed a displacement of disorder from language to the body. This finds its most evident manifestation in the abject body displayed in the *Catalysis* actions, which she sees as foregrounding a 'corporeal messiness that locates disorder and chaos ... in ideas about the black female body and its historical proximity to ungendering.'¹³ The pairing of Piper and Davis succeeds in bringing into sharp relief the political backdrop against which these actions were staged: that the artist conceptualised *Catalysis* at the same time as *Life* magazine turned Davis's portrait into an emblem of corporeal excess demonstrates the extent to which the boundaries of the body that Piper was working to undo were a major site of political dispute in the USA at the time – one where race and gender played a crucial role. While Davis's self-identification as a black woman was key to her political advocacy, however, Piper did not explicitly locate the meaning of her artwork in her social identity, taking a divergent approach to many of her artist peers engaged in feminist and black activism. In foregrounding the correspondences between Angela Davis and Adrian Piper,

¹³ Lamm, *Addressing the Other Woman*, p. 53.

Lamm's book raises important questions about what the historicity of race and gender categories brings to bear on the mobilisation of the artist's body around the year 1970, but it also understates the specificity of Piper's response to the cultural debates of the early 1970s and the extent to which it differed from her engagement with xenophobia in the 1990s.

In *The Synthetic Proposition: Conceptualism and the Political Referent in Contemporary Art*, Nizan Shaked frames the dialogue between the 1970s and the 1990s differently: here the emphasis is not on how the discourse of the 1990s offers a heuristic to uncover veiled political meaning in Piper's early work, but rather on how the artist's conceptual experiments shaped her engagement with embodiment from 1970 onwards. The book's title is borrowed from Joseph Kosuth's foundational 1969 essay on conceptual art, in which 'synthetic propositions' are framed as the negative counterpart to the 'analytic' or tautological approach to art embraced by the artist.¹⁴ Looking back at this period from the standpoint of the mid-1990s, Terry Smith and Mary Kelly have described the shift in their own practices during the early 1970s as an engagement with the 'synthetic proposition' repudiated by Kosuth – a framework that Alexander Alberro has suggested could be expanded to account for other artists' engagements with the interdependency of the art system and its social context.¹⁵ Shaked deftly follows this thread to weave a revisionist history of conceptual practices in Britain and the USA from the 1960s to the 1990s that stresses

¹⁴ See Joseph Kosuth, 'Art After Philosophy', in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds), *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), pp. 158–177.

¹⁵ See Mary Kelly and Terry Smith, 'A Conversation about Conceptual Art, Subjectivity and the *Post-Partum Document*', in Alberro, *Conceptual Art*, pp. 451–454; and Alberro, 'Reconsidering Conceptual Art, 1966–1977', *Conceptual Art*, p. xxviii.

the continuity between (self-referential) conceptual art and (politically oriented) conceptualism.¹⁶ The book aims to do this from a twofold perspective. On the one hand, by repositioning what Shaked calls synthetic practices as central to 1970s conceptualism, it intends to redress the deferred reception of feminist strategies in art historiography. On the other, by examining how conceptual methods were key to artists' interventions in the debate on multiculturalism of the late 1980s and early 1990s, it seeks to reframe the discussion of art and identity politics at the time. Adrian Piper plays a key role in the first section of the book (a monographic chapter is followed by a consideration of her work alongside that of Mary Kelly and Martha Rosler), whereas in the latter part the baton is passed to Andrea Fraser (whose work is discussed in two thematic chapters: her contribution to the controversial 1993 Whitney Biennial is considered alongside those of Daniel Joseph Martinez and Lorna Simpson; her 2003 *Untitled* as reprising Hans Haacke's examination of the intersection of gender, art and financial capitalism in his 1975 *Seurat's 'Les Poseuses' (Small Version) (1888–1975)*). Though the expansive scope of *The Synthetic Proposition* exceeds the parameters of my discussion, I want to consider how this framework leads to a markedly different assessment of Piper's early practice.

If Piper is key to Shaked's argument it is because her trajectory is paradigmatic of the shift from linguistic propositions towards discourse analysis that *The Synthetic Proposition* seeks to map. Writing in 1992, the artist lucidly describes the turn in conceptual practice around 1970

¹⁶ For a discussion of the slippages and overlaps between Conceptual Art and conceptualism, see Terry Smith, 'One and Three Ideas: Conceptualism Before, During, and After Conceptual Art', *e-flux journal*, no.29, November 2011, available at <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/29/68078/one-and-three-ideas-conceptualism-before-during-and-after-conceptual-art/> (accessed 28 January 2019).

as one from a ‘self-reflexive investigation of concepts and language ... to the self-conscious investigation of those very language users and producers themselves as embedded participants in the art context.’ In her own practice, the transition was, more specifically, from her body as a ‘conceptually and spatiotemporally immediate art object’ to her person as a ‘gendered and ethnically stereotyped art commodity’.¹⁷ Both Lamm and Shaked position this turn as central to their reading of Piper’s trajectory, but their interpretations differ significantly. Whereas Lamm sustains that Piper’s practice of the early 1970s foregrounds racialised and feminised modes of objectification, Shaked suggests instead that the return to the body after 1970 needs to be understood through the lens of the anti-expressive model of subjectivity set forth by conceptual art. Lamm situates Piper’s early work firmly within a black feminist trajectory; Shaked asks that we ‘read the work on its own terms’ in order to offset the interpretative distortions produced by the marginalisation of Piper’s practice through the 1970s and 1980s and its deferred reception in the 1990s.¹⁸

To this end, Shaked examines *Concrete Infinity Documentation Piece* through the lens of Roland Barthes’s contemporaneous theory of the shift from Work to Text, which is to say as a means of testing the diffuse ontology of the work of art.¹⁹ If Barthes argues that, in the Text, the

¹⁷ Piper, ‘The Logic of Modernism’, *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Vol. II: Selected Writings in Art Criticism 1967–1992* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), pp. 213–14.

¹⁸ Nizan Shaked, *The Synthetic Proposition: Conceptualism and the Political Referent in Contemporary Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), p. 60.

¹⁹ Roland Barthes, ‘From Work to Text’, *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 155–164.

Author is demoted from Father to mere guest, Shaked shows how, by combining writing and performance, Piper aimed to achieve a strategic splitting of the self and thus erode the distinctions between artist, work and viewer. In this reading, the process of objectification that underlies this exercise is not one of dehumanisation, but one in which ‘the self becomes an object in an experiment’.²⁰ Later, in 1975, Piper would claim ‘voluntary self-objectification’ as ‘an act of political defiance’,²¹ but Shaked relies on a series of unpublished conversations that Piper conducted with psychologist Dr. Spingarn in 1972 to argue that, at this moment, the artist fashioned herself as an object to become an audience for herself. From this perspective, the significance of Piper’s method lies in how this strategic objectification ‘opened up ways to examine [the] distinctions between self, identity and subjectivity’,²² largely by combining the procedural logic of conceptual art with the insights of feminism regarding the political character of personal experience.

Drawing on Liz Kotz’s argument that, in the 1960s, the work of art is redefined as a specific realisation of a general proposition, Shaked concludes that Piper’s work from around 1970 frames the problem of the body as one of instantiation, gradually shifting ‘from the general use of the body to its specific classed, gendered and racialised identity.’²³ Given the book’s organisation around thematic clusters, what *The Synthetic Proposition* does not clarify is how

²⁰ Shaked, *The Synthetic Proposition*, p. 103.

²¹ Piper, ‘Some Reflective Surfaces I’, *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Vol. I: Selected Writings in Meta-Art, 1968–1992* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), p. 154.

²² Shaked, *The Synthetic Proposition*, p. 67.

²³ Shaked, *The Synthetic Proposition*, p. 105. See Liz Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), p. 194.

this shift – if it is indeed a shift – from the general to the specific is enacted in Piper’s work as it has evolved from 1973 onwards. How do the political referent (i.e. the use of sourced images and newspaper clippings) and the self-portrait (i.e. the tactical deployment of personal material) work differently as catalysts in this transformation? And, further, as Kobena Mercer has asked, to what extent was the marginalisation of Piper’s practice in the mid-to-late 1970s and early 1980s a reflection of postmodernism’s indifference to questions of race prior to the rise of multiculturalism?²⁴ The wealth of questions raised by Shaked’s analysis suggests that nested in her overview of the intersection of conceptual art and identity politics is the seed of an as yet unwritten but much needed monographic study of Piper’s practice and its reception across the last five decades.

For the outlines of what such discussion might look like, we can turn to the anthology *Adrian Piper: A Reader*, edited by Cornelia Butler and David Platzker in collaboration with the artist. Though the volume spans the breadth of Piper’s career, the focus on her early work is significant. Two essays are dedicated to this period: Nizan Shaked examines Piper’s page works as a hybrid of the conceptual models provided by Sol LeWitt and Joseph Kosuth; Kobena Mercer suggests that her early performances stage a ‘discrepant embodiment’ that reflects on the breakdown of recognition.²⁵ Addressing transversal themes in Piper’s work, the remaining four essays – by Jörg Heiser, Diarmuid Costello, Vid Simoniti and Elvan Zabunyan – all return to the

²⁴ See Kobena Mercer, ‘Decentering and Recentering: Adrian Piper’s Spheres of Influence’, *Adrian Piper: A Retrospective* (Baltimore: University of Maryland, 1999), p. 54.

²⁵ Kobena Mercer, ‘Contrapositional Becomings: Adrian Piper Performs Questions of Identity’, *Adrian Piper: A Reader*, p. 105.

formative period in the artist's practice to track the foundations of her artistic methodology. While this is not in itself surprising, what is remarkable is the contributors' consistent calls to cast aside the 'biographical reductionism' that has burdened interpretations of Piper's early work and which, as Mercer points out, reflects a generalised tendency to consider the work of African American modernists as transparent documents of their makers' social circumstances.²⁶ The authors also concur in their desire to stress the experimental and exploratory nature of Piper's early work, as in Heiser's characterisation of the *Catalysis* series as a 'hands-on-laboratory' in which the artist probes abstract ideas *in vivo*, as if she were saying: "Let's see what happens to transpersonal rationality if I ride the bus with a towel stuffed in my mouth."²⁷ This is not to disregard the importance of the political context in Piper's work, but to frame it as a test, rather than a product, of the artist's social environment. This shift in scholarly emphasis coincides with the unprecedented level of attention given in this volume to the relationship between Piper's work in art and philosophy. Particularly noteworthy in this regard are the substantial contributions by Heiser, who criss-crosses the artist's expansive practice, and Costello, whose discussion of Piper's Kantianism elucidates the importance of self-scrutiny as method, notably in the artist's meta-performances.

For all the concordant calls to valorise the conceptual character of Piper's early explorations, the anthology also reveals discrepancies regarding the extent to which gender and race should factor into how it is read. Here *Food for the Spirit* emerges as a bone of contention. In line with Shaked's analysis, Vid Simoniti argues that the continuity across Piper's career is to

²⁶ Mercer, 'Contrapositional Becomings: Adrian Piper Performs Questions of Identity', p. 106.

²⁷ Heiser, 'Adventures in Reasonland', p. 13.

be found at the level of structure rather than subject matter: in the direct mode of address that extends from the examination of the viewer's consciousness in her early conceptual work to the interpellation of her audience's socio-historically defined racial attitudes in her installations of the 1980s and 1990s. Like Shaked too, Simoniti is critical of art historical readings that construe Piper's early work as being primarily concerned with sexism and racism. This is the case, he argues, both with Piper's early critics such as John Perreault and Lucy Lippard – who smoothed over the incongruity between the climate of political emergency and artists' evasive methods – and with most art historians since – who have seen Daniel Joseph Martínez ded to retroject the artist's later concerns with xenophobia. Noting that neither Piper's contemporaneous writings nor her later discussions of *Food for the Spirit* address gender or race, he provocatively asks:

Beholding, again, the picture of the naked woman photographing herself, shown alongside a text in which she describes her engagement with Kant's first *Critique*, raises another question: what pattern of thought suggests to us, in the first place, that the woman is making a statement about race? [...] What would it take for us – what kind of work Piper would have to make – to see a documentary photograph of *Food for the Spirit* as an investigation into the problem of consciousness, rather than a work about identity politics? The worry is that the photograph would have to show a white man.²⁸

Though schematic, Simoniti's polemic gets to the core of the ongoing problem of racialisation in art history, to which, as we have seen, Lamm and Shaked give remarkably different responses. In his contribution, Mercer outlines how a dual focus on the formal texture

²⁸ Simoniti, 'Adrian Piper and the Rhetoric of Conceptual Art', *Adrian Piper: A Reader*, pp. 260–61.

of *Food for the Spirit* and its historical context might yield a more nuanced analysis of the relation between visibility and race. This includes discussions around the dematerialisation of the art object, which extend here to the disappearance of the artist-as-art-object as she becomes progressively shrouded in a haze of darkness. It also means situating the artist's investigation of disembodiment in *Food for the Spirit* in relation to the confrontational body staged in her *Catalysis* actions. Tracing the dialectics between suppressed and defiant embodiment in this series of works, Mercer suggests that Piper's testing of the limits of an authorial 'I' need not mean either a conflation with a biographical 'me' nor its complete effacement. As the incremental underexposure of the photographs blurs the outlines of the body, he argues, it also pushes visual markers of race and gender 'to the very edges of legibility'. 'The heuristic insight that [Piper] snatched from the threshold of disembodiment', Mercer concludes, 'is that the Kantian rules for gaining access to universal truth lead, when followed to the letter, to an entropic eclipse of the human, who fades out into undifferentiated invisibility.'²⁹ While Mercer also dismisses Lippard's attempt to make the artist's ascribed identity the source of the work's meaning, he allows for a greater degree of feedback between Piper's practice and its political context than Simoniti does. Like Lamm, he shows how the particularity of the body that *Food for the Spirit* 'brings to the brink of disappearance' – and thus highlights – has a specific historical weight.³⁰ But Mercer's emphasis on the formal means by which *Food for the Spirit* articulates

²⁹ Mercer, 'Contrapositional Becomings', p. 128–29. A concept originating in Ralph Ellison's writings, 'invisibility' denotes the specific form of social invisibility to which African Americans have been historically subjected.

³⁰ Mercer, 'Contrapositional Becomings', p. 128.

issues of legibility, rather than on gender or race as attributes of the performing body, allows him to underline how identity categories structure the visual field more broadly.

How Piper's investigation of socially specific forms of embodiment was not limited to an examination of her own identity is borne out by the fact that in the spring of 1971, immediately before embarking on *Food for the Spirit*, she drew up several proposals outlining bodily alterations, along the lines of her *Catalysis* actions, to be undertaken by a group of volunteer participants over several days or weeks. Three decades later, in 2007, Piper realised a similar participatory performance in New York, titled *Everything #10*, in which she instructed a group of volunteers to paint the phrase 'Everything will be taken away' backwards on their foreheads, using durable henna ink; they were asked to carry on with their lives, regularly checking their reflections in the mirror and writing down their thoughts. Commenting on the participants' journals, Costello notes both the particular connotations of these actions in a post-9/11 context – the cultural specificity of the henna, the apocalyptic overtones of the inscription – and the methodological parallelism with the *Catalysis* series, concluding: 'because the work provokes a series of minor disturbances in everyday relations, because it uses anomalous or unexpected ways of behaving or appearing to shine a light on unthinking patterns of behaving and knowing, and because it encourages both participants and those they encounter to reflect on how such encounters make them feel as *individuals*, it can be read as a distillation of Piper's artistic project more generally.'³¹ These lines also encapsulate this volume's notable effort to reimagine the relationship between Piper's engagement with issues of identity and her formative interest in

³¹ Costello, 'Xenophobia, Stereotypes, and Empirical Acculturation: Neo-Kantianism in Adrian Piper's Performance-Based Conceptual Art', *Adrian Piper: A Reader*, p. 211.

abstraction. Like Costello, several contributors draw on the notion of anomaly to identify the conceptual core of Piper's practice as emerging out of her LeWittian investigation of the interplay between the singular and the schematic in the late 1960s, and feeding into the self-reflexive examination of her embedded position in the social field in the 1970s, where it is reframed as the work of recalibrating abstract categories in light of aberrant empirical experience.³² This substantially reconfigures the primal scene of political awakening with which I opened this article. While the critical literature returns time and again to Piper's assertion that, following the events of 1970, she did a lot of 'thinking about [her] position as an artist, a woman and a black', it is less often remarked that she then adds, 'and about the many ways in which I had managed to avoid all the natural disadvantages of those attributes.'³³ I cite the full clause not to cast doubt on the artist's experience of marginalisation but to call into question the construal of Piper's work from around 1970 as a direct transposition of her life experience or ascribed identity. Despite significant differences in approach, the new scholarship on Piper attempts to parse the work's complex relationship to identity categories by emphasising her systematic interrogation of processes of naming and categorisation. Expelled from Wonderland and the enchanted forest where things have no name, the artist has nevertheless remained committed to an examination of how names become attached to people or things, including her own practice.

³² Such reading is broadly aligned with Jacob Stewart-Halevy's argument that, circa 1969, Piper and her 0–9 affiliated peers turned to inductive methods to engage with socially embedded rules. See Stewart-Halevy, 'The Inductive Turn in Conceptual Art: Pragmatics in the 0–9 Circle', *Grey Room*, Vol. 68, Summer 2017, pp. 60–93.

³³ Piper, *Talking to Myself: The Ongoing Autobiography of an Art Object* (Bari: Marilena Bonomo, 1975), p. 39.