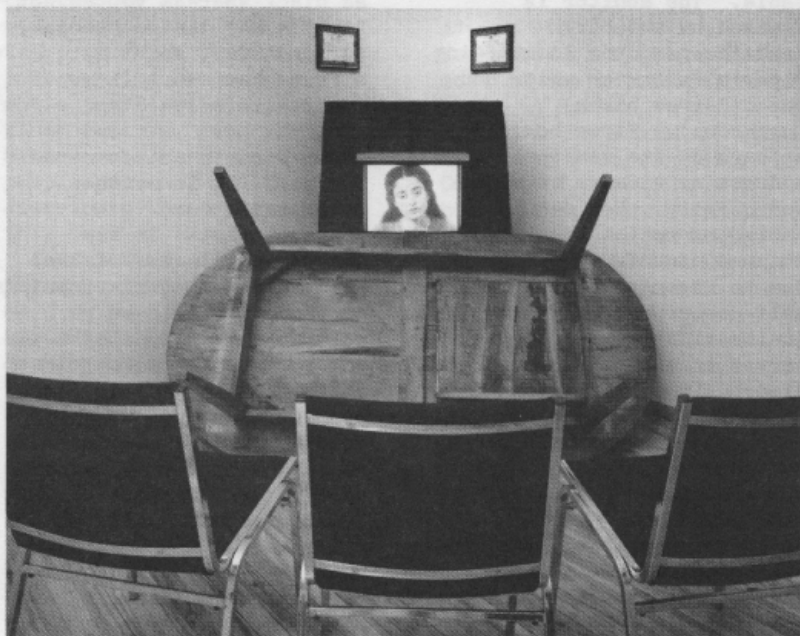


Adrian Piper  
MATRIX/BERKELEY 130

University Art Museum  
mid August - early November  
1989

Cornered, 1988



In her art as well as in her life, Adrian Piper has confronted the pervasive racism of our society. Piper, who is of mixed-race ancestry, is particularly concerned with the ways in which racism shapes our very sense of identity and self.

Cornered (1988) consists of a single video monitor which is wedged into a corner of the gallery behind an overturned table. The monitor is flanked by two birth certificates, one identifying Piper's father as white and the other as black (octoroon). Piper herself appears on the monitor, addressing viewers casually and quietly. Her own ambiguous racial identity, which confounds stereotypes due to Piper's light skin and self-described "bourgie, junior-miss" style of dress, serves as a basis for Piper's rigorously argued, deconstructive analysis that calls into question not only her own apparent racial identity, but the viewer's as well.

To Piper, racial identity in biological terms is less important than what we "do about it" in social and cultural terms. Thus, after informing "white" viewers of the likelihood that, according to genetic statistics and entrenched conventions of racial classification, they are actually black, Piper presents a number of behavioral options. For example:

"Are you going to research your family ancestry, to find out whether you are among the white 'elite'? Or whether perhaps a mistake has been made, and you and your family are, after all, among the black majority?"

"And what are you going to do if a mistake has been made? Are you going to tell your friends, your colleagues, your employer that you are in fact black, not white, as everyone had supposed? Or will you try to discredit the researchers who made this estimate in the first place."

In conclusion Piper says, "If I choose to identify myself as black whereas you do not," "that's not just a special, personal fact about me. It's a fact about us. It's our problem to solve."

While Piper's art concerns the self, it is neither solipsistic nor expressionistic in the conventional sense of the word. Rather, her art builds on the artist/viewer relationship to indicate the degree to which self-definition is a product of social interaction. While provoking the viewer's awareness of his or her own role in perpetuating ideologies of racial difference, Piper reminds us that the power of such ideologies to determine a person's identity cuts both ways. The white population's impulse to define--and therefore separate--blackness, for instance, can be seen as an attempt to define whiteness itself by exclusion. Clearly, such a strategy is limiting and oppressive to all concerned, black and white alike.

With My Calling (Card) #1 (1986), Piper provides a means for viewers to take the confrontation of racism into their own hands, extending Piper's art into other "real life" situations. This piece consists of a stack of small, wallet-size cards on which

Piper has printed the following statement:

"Dear Friend,

I am black.

I am sure that you did not realize this when you made/laughed at/agreed with that racist remark. In the past, I have attempted to alert white people to my racial identity in advance. Unfortunately, this invariably causes them to react to me as pushy, manipulative, or socially inappropriate. Therefore, my policy is to assume that white people do not make these remarks, even when they believe there are no black people present, and to distribute this card when they do.

I regret any discomfort my presence is causing you, just as I am sure you regret the discomfort your racism is causing me."

Whereas an earlier version of this work was signed with the artist's name, this version bears no signature and viewers are encouraged to take the card for their own use.

The course of Piper's art since the late 1960s can be understood as consisting of an ongoing interplay between conceptual and feminist practices. As a conceptual artist, Piper has stressed the power of rational argument and the clarity of logical proofs. Her rigorous analyses of self-identity suggest links to the exhaustive descriptive procedures of artists such as Sol LeWitt and Hans Haacke. Feminism enters into Piper's work not so much because it concerns women specifically, but because, like the work of artists such as Victor Burgin and Mary Kelly, it

consistently challenges the philosophical underpinnings of our phallogocentric language and society. Piper's analyses of subjectivity are invariably self-questioning, informed by an essential understanding of the mutability of her own identity. As in Cornered, Piper's art leaves us less certain of who we are, but more engaged in determining who we might be.

Adrian Piper was born in New York City in 1948 and spent most of her childhood and youth in Harlem. She attended the School of Visual Arts, New York, and City College of New York, and holds an M.A. and Ph.D. in Philosophy from Harvard University. She has received two National Endowment for the Arts Visual Artists Fellowships, in 1979 and 1982, and a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship in 1989. She is currently Associate Professor of Philosophy and Adjunct Professor of Art at the University of California at San Diego.

Lawrence Rinder  
MATRIX Curator

Works in MATRIX (Courtesy John Weber Gallery, New York):

My Calling (Card) #1, 1986, business cards in plexiglass holder, each 2 x 3-1/2".

Cornered, 1988, video (17 min.), table, birth certificates, size variable.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Three Untitled Projects (postal), 0 to 9 Press, NY '69; Matrix 56, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT, in conjunction with Real Artways, Hartford, CT '80; Adrian Piper: Reflections 1967-1987 (retrospective), The Alternative Museum, NY '87 (traveled '87-'90; catalogue); John Weber Gallery, NY '89.

Selected group exhibitions:

Language III, Dwan Gallery, NY '69; Concept Art, Städtisches Museum, Leverkusen, W. Germany '69; Information, The Museum of Modern Art, NY '70; Paris Biennale, Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris, France '77; The Art of Memory/The Loss of History, The New Museum, NY '85; Identity, Whitney Museum Downtown, NY '88.

Selected bibliography about the artist (see also catalogues under exhibitions):

Kosuth, Joseph. "Art After Philosophy II," Studio International, Nov. '69.

Lippard, Lucy. From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art (New York: E.P. Dutton '76).

Phillipot, Clive. "Talking to Myself," Art Journal, Spring '80.

Brenson, Michael. "Adrian Piper," The New York Times, May '87.

McEvelley, Thomas. "Adrian Piper," Artforum, Sept. '87.

Jones, Michael, ed. Adrian Piper. Essays by Lawrence Alloway, Lucy Lippard, Michael Jones. (Akron, Ohio: University of Akron Press '89).

Als, Hilton. "Adrian Piper," Flash Art, Summer '89.

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