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Adrian Piper's aesthetic agency: Photography as catalysis for resisting neo-liberal competitive paradigms

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Abstract

Contemporary neo-liberal society is ruled by the market. Davies, Chen and Lentin and Titley show that its objectification and categorization founds a competitive notion of agency that disables subjective construction of self and intersubjective understanding of the world. As the market's rules and norms are set by white patriarchy, its competitive paradigm structurally disadvantages others. Art too is objectified and categorized by neo-liberal institutions, equally embedded in white patriarchal market structures and severely limiting democratic public access to a diverse artistic field, argue hooks, Mercer and Piper. Yet, Piper's artwork shows, art holds emancipatory potential. Defined as transforming experience, its ambiguity provides a structure for constituting agentic subjectivity and intersubjective signification processes, defying objective/objectifying

market workings. Photography's specific qualities allow Piper to democratize access to the paradigm she proposes. Her artistic choices may thus found the potential to publicly construct a notion of aesthetic agency as resistance to the neo-liberal market.

1. Introduction

Dear Friend,

I am black.

I am sure 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 of 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 that there are no black people present, and to distribute these cards 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.

Adrian Piper's *My Calling Card #1* describes her experience of race-based discrimination. Between 1986 and 1990 Piper passed out her 'calling cards' during art-scene events where she often witnessed racist remarks by the mainly white art in-crowd to which she was unsure how to react (Piper 1986–1990: 219–21). On them, one can read about the ambiguous position she is in at these moments. She is a woman who identified as black, yet, being fair-skinned, might have had the possibility to pass for white on occasion. In 'Passing for white, passing for black' Piper writes about how, when she entered graduate college to study philosophy, for example, she found herself in a peculiar predicament. A white professor told her she was about as black as he was, alluding to her not looking black at all. Yet, she writes, remarks on that feature were usually made by other blacks. In the predominantly black neighbourhood she grew up in, she was often perceived to be other, to not be black – or at least not as black as the majority if its population was (Piper 1992a: 275–308). Her artistic and philosophical practices present an overarching thematic of not clearly or definitively belonging to either the white or the black category, both constructed upon supposed essential racial features.

Born in 1948, Piper began her artistic practice in New York after graduating from the School of Visual Arts in 1969. As a philosopher, she obtained her Harvard doctorate in 1981. Today she remains active in both disciplines and is based in Berlin, where she has established the Adrian Piper Research Archive (n.d.a.) and *The Berlin Journal of Philosophy* (n.d.b.). In 1996 many of Piper's writings were published under the title *Out of Order, Out of Sight*. They are a main source for this article. The texts show critical questioning of society, of the place that she can occupy in it and how. They put

forth an image of a society shaped by dualisms: man versus woman, white versus non-white and art versus non-art.

This article investigates the significance of Piper's photography in the context of contemporary neo-liberal society that is dominated by the market. That context will be outlined in the first section of the text. Davies' elaborate study of the neo-liberal market shows its detrimental effects on subjectivity and intersubjectivity (2017). It provides an important basis for understanding the significance of Piper's photographic work. Her writing clarifies that she experiences societal dualisms and the workings of art institutions as intertwined and both structured by that market (Piper 1970–73: 29–54, 1981: 51–62, 1983: 63–90). Mercer and hooks point out how that relation impacts on the possibilities for minority cultures to have access to the art world *and* to public discourse alike (Mercer 1994; hooks 1995).

Piper's works *Food for the Spirit*, *The Mythic Being* and *Thwarted Projects, Dashed Hopes, a Moment of Embarrassment*, 2012 will be presented in the second section of this article. The three cases testify to a search to exit dualisms and escape categorization of any kind. In Piper's photographic work particularly, strategies emerge to deal with divisive societal structures and market mechanisms simultaneously. Through her understanding of the notion of the indexical present she reinstates subjectivity and intersubjectivity as bases for experiencing art and life. In these works, ambiguous content functions as a conscious and constructive refusal to take any one position definitively. Structurally, her view on art as 'catalysis' – a catalytic agent provoking change in the viewer that impacts on his conception of society – motivates a quest to make that content democratically accessible (Piper 1970–73: 32). I will argue that these artistic choices found the constitution of an aesthetic notion of agency with particular importance in a neo-liberal societal context.

2. The neo-liberal market's objectifying mechanisms

This first section will outline the contemporary neo-liberal context within which Piper's artistic choices, discussed in detail in the second section, propose particularly important emancipatory strategies. Taking a closer look at the structure of neo-liberal society and what it means for art and its institutions will enable a better understanding of how exactly Piper defies its effects. A recent in depth sociological study by Davies shows the market's dominance in that society and the way that it affects cultural participation and interhuman relations alike. Though Piper's work addresses these themes since the late 1960s, Davies' study reveals their pertinence in a contemporary context, a pertinence that grows proportionally to the market's hold on life in general. From a specifically black and female perspective, authors such as hooks and Mercer contribute to understanding that importance, as well as the possible pitfalls, of elaborating representation possibilities for social minorities in the artistic and cultural scenes of society.

2.1 Neo-liberal agency: A competitive paradigm

In neo-liberal society, Davies writes, the market is the key regulatory principle. Even politics have become 'disenchanted' by economics that now dominate society's institutions (2017: 5–17). This neo-liberal system of political, economic and social organization perpetuates various societally divisive dichotomies as a direct consequence of the paradigm the market imposes. To accommodate that market, quantification and categorization have been transferred from pricing goods to the realm of people's social interactions, and of art. This logic, Davies asserts, today provides the structures of collective experience and action, posing 'a single measure of value' to replace multiple values (2017: 11, 15). The measure employed is white, patriarchal normativity: the set of norms and values of the already powerful. They are set as conditions to be met in order to be successful on that market, and thus, due to its broad workings in society, in life in general. Clearly, this poses a problem for anyone who is not part of the white male normative group. Anyone who deviates from it finds him- or herself in an a priori disadvantaged position. Yet this structural inequality too is exploited and glossed over by the market. The model neo-liberal subject, Davies argues, is the competitor. Thus the market makes of inequality not an injustice but the condition itself for competitive action. This competitive notion of agency places a heavy responsibility on the individual. Individually, each competes to be the best, to gain a position as privileged as possible on the – so-called free – market. Yet the rules and goals of the competition have been preset by patriarchal power. Thus the market's paradigm simultaneously gravely limits possible actions to those that 'do not disrupt or distort' the system (Davies 2017: 41–42, 49).

Here, state Lentin and Titley, lies the limit of multiculturalism (2011). In a realm of competition that is said to be free, inequality becomes an issue of personal responsibility. Racism and sexism are presented to no longer apply on a structural level as market competition is open to anyone and, moreover, difference is its motor. Racism and sexism thus become weakened to questions of tolerance. Yet, 'relations of tolerance [...] assume the fact of control over the object of tolerance', they assume limits to be set, conditions to be met for the other to be 'recognized, contingently, as "desirable" or "not that desirable"' (Lentin and Titley 2011: 12–16, 30). Again, one can be different only to the extent that the governing norm is not disturbed. Agency, then, Chen argues, is to choose *within* the market framework that is in place (2013). In this environment private *and* public agency are narrowly equaled to competitive economic action that then becomes the criterium for evaluating rational choice (Davies 2017: 21–22, 27). Subjectivity and intersubjective relations thus become objectified and categorized, in fact disabling both. Yet, however destructive it appears to intersubjectivity, this public–private boundary transgression also grounds the possibility for changes in personal action to have public implications. And it is, I will show further on, to this personal level, the level of repositioning subjectivity, that Piper appeals in order to mobilize such a change.

2.2 The neo-liberal art world: Dominated by market normativity

Davies asserts a close connection between the market and art institutions. Neo-liberalism, he states, enables economic inequality to dictate 'political and cultural advantages' (Davies 2017: 40). Having access to experiencing art thus becomes in itself an important factor for political empowerment. Notably, hooks and Mercer have made the importance of that access in a black context – the context that Piper identified with – a focal point. In the 1960s she began working as a Conceptual artist (Piper 1968: 3–9, 1970–73: 29–32). By the 1970s conceptualism had become a dominant presence in exhibition spaces and art theory and criticism. Though she does not reject it, she does describe how social changes in the early 1970s made her aware of the limitations of this predominantly white male movement, and of the role of the art institutions in instating those limitations, with regard to enabling members of minority cultures to meaningfully experience art (Bowles 2011: 50–51; Piper 1970–73: 29–32). hooks and Mercer share these considerations and, brought together with Piper's, provide a clear view on the mechanisms that create and perpetuate this problem.

Remembering her high school art history lessons, hooks writes about feeling like 'art has no race or gender', like it was 'a realm where every imposed boundary could be transgressed' (1995: xi). But she also tells her reader how that vision became distorted as she realized that the canon of high art was set and perpetuated upon the norms of the already powerful white, male, middle-class culture. However, she states, 'in our lived experience we have not found it problematic to embrace such work wholeheartedly' (hooks 1995: xii). But art's institutional framework did pose a problem, as its visibility and signification was controlled by 'white artists and critics', forcing non-whites – and women – to 'continually confront an art-world rooted in white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal exclusion', subjecting any experience of art to its structure (hooks 1995: xii). As such, she states, 'politics in the realm of the visual' have 'colonized' minds and imaginations (hooks 1995: 13, 4). It has created a view that 'all black art must be protest art', hooks writes, placing black artists in a separate exhibition circuit, perpetuating cultural segregation and diminishing possibilities for experiencing art (1995: 6, 11).

Piper distinguished herself from that Black Arts Movement and from feminist art, both gaining importance in the 1970s. She was unconvinced by their oppositional strategy of establishing 'a milieu for themselves outside the patriarchal art world' (Godfrey 1998: 281). Mercer argues that such a strategy overdetermines culture as a site of ideological struggle. Artists from cultural minorities, she writes, are often confronted with a demand 'to "speak for" the marginalized communities from which they come', to be 'representative' for those communities (1994: 234–35, 237). In a context of racism and sexism, this often leads to a demand for oppositionality derived from the social struggle minorities are often involved in. But such opposition in fact reproduces and perpetuates the very binaries that found racism and sexism. The demand, Mercer writes, is present in art criticism's

evaluations of those artists. It seems to be unable to evaluate artists with a minority background on purely aesthetic grounds, but introduces criteria of representativeness. 'There is a structural underdevelopment of a viable framework for black arts criticism', she states (1994: 238–40). And that framework should be constructed dialogically, taking into account that 'different subjects construct different meanings out of the *same* system of signs', rather than based upon an unquestioned authoritative position of the critic (Mercer 1994: 252, 257, original emphasis).

The same position of problematic authority that the critic enjoys in the art world has been pointed out by Piper. She argues that it is dominated by *and* simultaneously reinforces the workings of the market and even separates art from society. Art criticism links aesthetic to economic value by 'fetishization': presenting the art-object as holding a specific meaning that can and should be known objectively to understand it (Piper 1981: 59, 1983: 71–75). The trained art critic is supposedly able to discover this meaning and he presents it to the public in an individual written account claiming truth. This process, Piper states, separates an artwork from its maker *and* its public, making them commodities on the high-priced art market. Art institutions thus work upon a shared consensus, a '*critical hegemony*' of '*Euroethnic art*' of which the reigning aesthetic presents the values of those that enjoy patriarchal socio-economic privileges: established dealers, critics and curators (Piper 1983: 65, original emphasis). The objectification of art's meaning by the critic, then, limits art's public to subjects with the intellectual and socio-economic background that enables them to support the values portrayed by the presented artworks. That group is now able to 'promulgate its [...] ethnocentric artifacts as High Culture on a universal scale' while confining others to categories like 'popular culture', 'craft' or 'folk art', thus severely limiting the field of art (Piper 1983: 65).

3. Piper's photography: *Food for the Spirit, The Mythic Being and Thwarted Projects, Dashed Hopes, a Moment of Embarrassment, 2012*

As an artist, Piper claims a position that is ambiguous in a productive sense. That ambiguity is clearly not a consequence of an inability to choose a definite position. It appears as itself a choice to not be definitively categorizable and objectively knowable, to elude market measurability and to defy competition. In her texts Piper focuses on the importance of broadly democratic and diverse public access to the experience of art. That particular emphasis has translated in her content, medium and presentation choices. As such, I will argue, in her photographic work particularly, she presents content putting forth an emancipatory thematic that hinges upon subjective ambiguity and intersubjective communication. Her choice of the photographic medium is motivated by her quest to communicate that content democratically to a public as diverse as possible (Piper 1974–76: 120). It has also enabled her to shed the absolute hold of the art world's discursive and presentation institutions on accessibility of artworks. Moreover, as will become clear throughout the following discussion of the cases, she

presents an *oeuvre* to which subjectivity and intersubjectivity are constitutive elements. Consequently, defying the market's objectification and individualization tendencies regarding art is inherently tied to defying their hold on art's public – subjective and intersubjective – experience.

3.1 Food for the Spirit: An indexical encounter

Piper's 1971 *Food for the Spirit* consists of a series of photographs and a performance. It 'was performed in my loft in NYC continually throughout the summer of 1971' when she 'had become very interested in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*', she writes (Piper 1971: 55–57). Piper studied Kant's critique and meditated on his transcendental, rationally knowing subject. Kant's a priori categories as the foundation for conscious knowledge are limited by experienced data not correlating to them. Thus the rational subject, Piper states, has an innate tendency for xenophobia, racism and sexism (1991). But she also describes how her meditations on Kant made her realize that it would be impossible for her to be that subject without 'losing [her] sense of self completely' (Piper 1971: 55). Kant's a priori categories that enable rational knowledge are, Piper argues, societally imposed. They are white patriarchal constructs, she argues, and their limits can be overcome (1991).

The performance had taken place in Piper's private space. It is conveyed publicly only by a series of photographs. The black and white self-portraits in front of a mirror show the artist once naked, then clothed, against a background that reveals instances of her home: part of a glass doorway, a telephone hung on the wall. She appears as a subject in a universally recognizable context. The images appear vague as they are printed in very low contrast. These photographs do not function as mere documentation of the performance but constitute an integral part of the work. Piper describes them as a way to 'anchor myself in the physical world', to reconnect with 'the physically embodied Adrian Piper' (1971: 55). Her meditations did not create access to pure reason as the basis for knowledge. So instead she 'salvages her individuality [and] particularity' and makes a claim for subjectivity (Bowles 2011: 27). *Food for the Spirit*, then, Bowles confirms, proposes the impossibility for these societally determined categories to provide satisfying knowledge of empiric reality, especially of other subjects. Piper's doubts on pure rationality and objectivity as bases for understanding the world, self and agency amplify, the following cases will show, as her *oeuvre* develops. In this particular work they have motivated her decision to formally distance herself from prominent European and Anglo-Saxon conceptual minimalism in the late 1960s and 1970s. Until then her work had incorporated investigations of space and time through geometrical forms and linguistic analysis as was the case in, for example, *Sixteen Permutations on the Planar Analysis of a Square* (1968) or the *Hypothesis* series (1968–70). Although she continues to work as a conceptual artist insofar as she chooses a medium for its capacity to convey a concept, the self-portraits in *Food for the Spirit* are a far cry from the mathematical and geometrical

formal, spatial and temporal investigations of many of her well-known contemporaries. Piper chooses to present herself as singular, embodied, unanalysable and uncategorizable subject inherently tied to a present empirical and personal context.

Her choice to photograph rather than, say, paint a self-portrait, is not without consequences. Through photography, Piper references a concept central throughout her *oeuvre*: that of the indexical present. Well-known as they are, it is important here to return to Barthes writings on the index. They provide a basis for understanding Piper's use of the notion in this work, and those discussed further on. The photograph, Barthes writes, is a '*denoted*' image showing things untransformed, as '*message without a code*' referring to one certainty: 'that-has-been' ([1961] 1977: 15–18, 1980: 77, original emphasis). A photograph, as Iversen puts it, 'collapses time', it 'weaves together present and past' (2011: 58). But it also compresses meaning. It is inextricably linked to what it shows, inherently contingent (Barthes 1980: 4, 6). It creates a sense of immediacy that is important to Piper. She understands as the indexical present 'the concrete, immediate here-and-now', the place and time for a direct relationship, for a potentially transforming experience (Piper 1989: 247–48). Thus, she transforms any claim for objective realism – which Krauss has argued to be impossible as objectivity is itself a societal construct – to a possibility for subjective understanding (1990: 213). To Piper, photography provides an alternative to rationally objectified interpretations of one's surroundings. But the image truly appearing as denoted truth, Barthes writes, is rare. Any manipulation by the photographer or association by the viewer connotes it, imposes inherently cultural stereotypes on the image and rationally categorizes it. The viewer would need to linger in a pre-interpretative state to have a denoted experience. Yet he tends to *read* the photograph, rather than *perceiving* it, as if it were a rhetorical sign belonging to the familiar code of verbal language, knowable by interpretation (Barthes [1961] 1977: 18–20, 26). Photographs that resist linguistic reading do so by the presence of what Barthes calls an uncoded *punctum*, something in the image that catches the eye of the beholder while the author did not intend for it to be there (1980: 40–60, 73). 'The photograph endowed with this punctum has a "blind field"', Iversen writes (2011: 64). It holds a detail that 'does not prompt a reinterpretation that would subsume it dialectically and integrate it into the whole' but signifies an 'openness to alterity' (Iversen 2011: 64).

It is this kind of uncategorized subjectivity that can be connected to Piper's work. Through the indexical present, Piper's *Food for the Spirit* claims the establishment of direct subjective contact between her and another contextualized subject: the viewer. This move to establish an indexical relationship based not on rational knowledge, but on subjective experience is crucial to the themes that underlie her *oeuvre*. 'My work tends to target interpersonal manifestations of racism rather than institutional ones', she writes (Piper 1989: 246). This is not to say that she rejects the notion of institutionalized racism. On the contrary, as suggest her writings on art institutions, she attests to the

importance of being aware of institutionalized power hierarchies and discrimination, in the art world and in society, and of resisting them (Piper 1983: 63–90). Yet she believes that ‘institutions are composed of individuals, and that institutional manifestations of racism are composed of interpersonal ones’ (Piper 1989: 246). In light of that view, establishing direct intersubjective relations for changing institutionalized views and practices gains importance.

The visual strategies employed in *Food for the Spirit* amplify this direct intersubjective relationship. The combination of the low contrast of the prints with their limited scale – 36.9 × 37.5 cm – forces the viewer to approach them quite closely to perceive their content. Piper pulls her viewers closer, moving from a distant relationship in the noticeable context of the presenting art institution to one in which almost only two subjects appear to exist. By thus bringing in the viewer as an active constitutive part of the artwork, Piper’s conception of art as catalysis, as ‘nonexistent, except when it functions as a medium for change’ beyond the art world, motivates a shift of the notion of the index from tied to the viewer’s subjective experience of a photograph to a notion of denoted intersubjectivity (Piper 1970–73: 32–33).

Dewey’s definition of art as experience may contribute to understand what exactly is at stake at this point. Defining art as experience rather than object, Dewey argues, transforms the art-*public* from passive to active and democratizes access to the artwork. Freeland states in her account on Dewey that it stimulates ‘cognitive *activity*’ (1997: 12, original emphasis). Importantly, Dewey argues that the artwork only exists as an intersubjective, aesthetic experience. It is constituted dialogically, in a relationship that is contingent upon an interaction between the artist, the work and the viewer (1934). As such art, he writes, eludes automatic, stereotyped labelling and categorization but activates imaginative understanding (Dewey 1958: 70). Dewey’s definition relates closely to Piper’s conception of art. Vandenbossche’s argument, then, that by defining art as experience, Dewey constructs a conception of truth that is subjective, dialogical and imaginative may clarify *Food for the Spirit*’s emancipation from the market. Truth is a process, he states, never finished and fixed (2013: 22). As Dewey’s aesthetic experience, artworks put in motion an agentic *process* of signification, of ‘transformation of interaction into participation and communication’ (1934: 22, 40–41). In that regard, understanding of an artwork is never objective and definitive, but based on open-ended insight of which ambiguity is the mode of being (Dewey 1934: 258).

If an artwork is to be this transforming experience the objective, authoritative, individualized truth that the art-critic imposes on it, would in fact no longer allow it to be art. The notion of indexical present as it is put to work by Piper in *Food for the Spirit* turns art into an intersubjective relationship, defying the institutionalized neo-liberal market’s paradigm of competition. This view, at least that is the aim of art’s catalytic function, can pose a paradigm for encountering the world beyond art.

3.2 The Mythic Being: *De-objectifying strategies*

The Mythic Being shows a growing importance of direct intersubjectivity, weighing increasingly on Piper's artistic choices as her *oeuvre* progresses. Her preoccupation with racism and sexism, to which she sees direct, indexical, subjective communication as a powerful antidote, grows stronger. 'As a human being any identity that I may assume seems to depend largely on my interaction with other human beings', she writes (Piper 1970–73: 35). And experiencing others in the indexical present, she states, teaches us to not impose 'inadequate, stereotyped categories of classification' failing to capture 'concrete particulars' of anything, especially of people (Piper 1989: 248). Piper's view of art as catalysis drove her ever further away from pure conceptualism. It also appears to have driven her towards the photographic medium once again. It gave rise to a concern with art's physical and mental accessibility. If an artwork only exists insofar as it is a medium for change, it indeed needs an experiencing public to exist. Experiencing that I, with Barthes, Dewey and Piper, aim to explicitly oppose to interpreting, would be limited by cultural pre-conditions (Piper 1970–73: 33). The change she writes of, moreover, should go beyond the personal. *The Mythic Being* shows that her choice for the photographic medium furthers the possibility of establishing the catalyst experience she writes about.

The Mythic Being, constituted from 1973 to 1975, also started out a performance. It was a long-term project in which Piper went out in public, dressing and behaving as a stereotype of an African American male. She walked with a swagger, wore baggy pants and had a cigarette in her mouth. In this work too, there is an important photographic component. Piper created several manipulated self-portraits in which she appears as *The Mythic Being*, wearing an afro-wig and black sunglasses. The images are often drawn over in black and white crayon and accompanied by a speech bubble advertising *The Mythic Being's* thoughts in the *Village Voice* magazine, where the photographs were published. The bubbles contain excerpts of the journal Piper kept on her thoughts and feelings related to the performances, and that she describes as 'signs of someone else's experience to which I have only partial access' (1973–74: 112, 1992b: 263). Performing a male, though stereotypically black, enabled her to think, feel and act in ways that as a black woman she could not. Yet these thoughts, feelings and actions were a construct. Her awareness of that limited her access to them. To other images, Piper added speech bubbles with notes from her teenage journal. These thoughts and feelings were her own. Yet, the stereotypical black male she was performing, the white construction of what a black male is supposed to be, had impacted on her subjectivity, on her construction of self. While performing *The Mythic Being*, then, Piper's personal thoughts and feelings appeared equally inaccessible to her. *The Mythic Being* thus portrays how an objectified, stereotyped subject comes to self-govern identity construction in correspondence with mainly negative interactions, as if no alternative exists. Piper talks about the objectifying reactions to the being she was performing, and

how she in turn experienced alterations to her subjectivity, imposing on it characteristics that are in fact 'common property', traits of 'a mythic character, existing only in the perception of those who read his thoughts' (Piper 1973–74: 107, 112; Bowles 2011: 9). From here on, Bowles states in relation to *The Mythic Being*, Piper's artworks become ambiguous. They do not send a clear message and are no longer 'made' but 'exist simply to be experienced' (2011: 52). With regard to photographic images of *The Mythic Being*, this statement is poignant on several levels. As for the content of these images, the self that Piper presents from the standpoint of the stereotyped subject that attempts to relate to another, is indeed profoundly ambiguous. It cannot be definitively categorized and known. It can only be, so it would seem, experienced as it is, contingently.

Ambiguity is equally strongly put forth by Piper's formal choices. They reinforce the content's meaning. A return to Barthes may be useful in this context. To Barthes, manipulating photographs has consequences. It connotes the denoted image. On the one hand, Piper's drawing over the images did not abstract or obscure *The Mythic Being's* bodily features. Instead, deliberate harsh lines and shadows reinforce them. The drawing's 'aestheticism' makes it so that 'the composition signifies [...] a certain ecstatic spirituality', foreign to the indexical mode of being of the photograph (Barthes [1961] 1977: 24). The combination, then, ascribes a status of something 'that-has-been' to an in fact spiritualized image. The young black male portrayed in Piper's images now effectively acquires a mythical status. He is a being that exists spiritually, a, Piper had stated in an interview, 'fictitious' personality used to 'sanctify social or legal institutions' but is assumed to exist (Smith 2011: 48). On the other hand, verbal language also heavily connotes the indexical image. It attempts to signify it within a familiar cultural structure, a known category. And 'the closer the text to the image, the less it *seems* to connote it; [...] the verbal message seems to share its objectivity' (Barthes [1961] 1977: 26, original emphasis). *The Mythic Being's* sexual and aggressive thoughts – the sort of thoughts often ascribed by white normativity to a young, black, working-class male – appear as part of the truth portrayed by his image. To Piper, however, as singular subject, they are foreign. Her own thoughts and feelings, on the other hand, belong to a distant past. They are foreign to whom she has grown into. Whereas *Food for the Spirit* expressed the need for encountering others subjectively, *The Mythic Being* confronts its viewers with the workings of objectification and categorization. Piper shows the subjective construction, the publicly constructed private sphere, of 'the black man', the stereotype, opening a possibility to subjectively communicate with white viewers on their relationships with non-whites, and with non-white viewers on a shared experience.

This ambiguity appears not to have been obtainable to Piper through the medium of performance. Performing *The Mythic Being* directly confronted Piper with people's reactions to the stereotype she portrayed. It also confronted her with the limitations of performance as a medium to establish an intersubjective relation. Her notes on the project reveal her doubts on the possibility for people in the street to realize that she was confronting them with her having turned into their

own projected image of the black man (Piper 1974–76: 138). At this point, she relates her personal experience with performance as a medium to the workings of art institutions and the market. Performance, Piper found, though seemingly an art form without investment value, appears problematic, its ‘unique object requirements [...] reminiscent of the gallery as esoteric shrine’ (1974–76: 120–137). It lends itself to fetishization far too easily and lacks democratic accessibility but is accessible ‘only to those adequately “prepared” for it’: visitors of art galleries or exhibition spaces – the institutionalized spaces in which the art-critic’s account and the largely white male canon remain unchallenged – that it may be performed in (Piper 1974–76: 138). Performance cannot, for Piper, reconcile art and society (1989: 249). Yet, when defining art as catalysis, diminishing its experiences results in diminishing its potential to be art. Piper’s choice for photography, then, indeed appears to be a choice for a medium allowing for direct communication with a public as diverse as possible. Through the notion of the indexical present, it establishes the potential for communication with a diverse audience on a subjective level more broadly than her performance. And it is reinforced by her presentation choices. Maximizing accessibility, she purposefully ‘exhibited’ *The Mythic Being’s* images on the *Village Voice’s* gallery page, a choice that now obtains political implications. Piper’s presentation choice shows how photography can produce artworks belonging to a democratic societal reality. She converts photography’s possibly objectifying truth-claims to a potential for subjective, communicative experience and its possibly vulgarizing reproducibility to an exit-strategy from elitist institutionalism.

3.3 Thwarted Projects, Dashed Hopes, A Moment of Embarrassment, 2012: *Productively defecting institutionalization*

Leaving many of Piper’s interesting works undiscussed here, I leap forward to the digitally manipulated photographic self-portrait *Thwarted Projects, Dashed Hopes, a Moment of Embarrassment, 2012*. In it, Piper appears of unspecified colour, the complexion of her face digitally altered. The text on the image reads:

Dear friends,

For my 64th birthday, I have decided to change my racial and nationality designations. Henceforth, my new racial designation will be neither black nor white but rather 6.25% grey, honoring my 1/16th African heritage. And my new nationality designation will be not African-American but rather Anglo-German American, reflecting my preponderantly English and German ancestry. Please join me in celebrating this exciting new adventure in pointless administrative precision and futile institutional control!

Signed Adrian M. S. Piper and dated 20 September 2012, the work was announced as a news-flash on the Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation's website, accompanied by the statement that she had retired from being black, and that 'in the future, for professional utility, you may wish to refer to [her] as The Artist Formerly Known as African-American' (Piper 2012).

Piper published her texts before this work was made. The most important monographs on her work too were published before 2012. Moreover, no further comments on this piece were to be found on the Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation's website, and at the time that this article was written Piper had announced that she was temporarily unavailable for interviews. However, *Thwarted Projects, Dashed Hopes, a Moment of Embarrassment, 2012* appears to show an important evolution in the presentation of themes that have been primordial throughout Piper's *oeuvre*. Consequently, in the absence of literature discussing the work, a reading informed by her writings and that *oeuvre* is proposed here.

In a greyish tone, the artist seems to belong to a middle ground between blackness and whiteness, no longer passing for white, or for black. Smith clarifies that passing in racial context does not just refer to being able to pass as white visually but has important political connotations, by stating:

Passing is when a person temporarily or permanently identifies as or switches to a different ethno-racial category. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, people chose to pass for advantage. For example, light skinned African-American people disappeared into the white world to seek economic and social mobility.

(2016)

Keeping in mind Piper's notes on the comments she often received due to her fair skin tone, on a purely visual basis, Piper could have passed for white. Yet she maintained a black perspective throughout her *oeuvre* and life. Similarly to what Davies and Lentini and Tiley have argued to be the illusion of the free market, Smith refers to a context in which economic, social and political privilege is portrayed to be readily available for anyone *choosing* to belong to the white male majority culture. Consequently, one deprived of those privileges has surely *chosen* otherwise. But whiteness or male normativity are not just choices one can make. Choosing, here, conceals a demand for assimilation, adapting to normativity as much as possible, through behavioural and artistic choices, through conforming language and clothing, etc., to be tolerated by the already privileged. Piper calls this '*cultural racism*', playing on a very personal level and showing itself in the high art versus popular culture hierarchy (Piper 1988: 127, original emphasis). Cultural racism, then, becomes a *conditio sine qua non* for anyone, or any group, falling outside the reigning norm to be spared of political, economic, legal and social sexism and racism. With regard to Piper's artistic *oeuvre*, this would have implied a choice in favour of Conceptualism's dominant minimalist aesthetic, of making unique

objects, of presenting them in renowned institutions. Yet, as she would then conform to the critical hegemony of the artistic elite and become dependent on patriarchal market-laws, these choices would have limited her freedom to choose. Working from a black perspective, Piper chose a position outside the art world's – and society's – hegemonic centre. So her retirement from blackness may at first glance seem out of character. Yet, keeping in mind the road she paves towards constructive ambiguity, it too is nothing less than a productive defection from categorization.

Thematically, it relates to the notion of miscegenation. In the earlier installation *Cornerded* (1988) Piper had thoroughly questioned what that notion could possibly mean. Against the background of two versions of her father's birth certificate – one stating that he was black, the other that he was white – a video portrayed Piper arguing the near impossibility for anyone in American society to unambiguously belong to a black, *as well as* to a white category. The validity of the term's meaning thus became much less straightforward, and its limits stretched beyond historically set ones. In *Thwarted Projects, Dashed Hopes, a Moment of Embarrassment*, 2012, then, miscegenation becomes an ambiguous notion and relates to race categorization serving nothing but pointless administration. At least, that is what Piper calls it. But on the neo-liberal market, such objective/objectifying classification is certainly not pointless for power purposes. Piper resists this categorization, proposing an identity beyond existing binaries that found institutionalized power relations. Specifying the precise division of her ethnic ancestry again plays into the subjectivity-thematic. As this heritage is only hers, she cannot be categorized but can only be encountered as singular subject. Here, the textual component connotes the image, yet adds to the realization of supposedly objective, measurable categories' failure to capture any sort of essential identity.

Yet again, no harsh and final statement is made. Asking her viewers to refer to her as The Artist formerly Known as Adrian Piper is clearly ironic. As is well-known, Prince had also changed his stage name to 'The Artist Formerly Known as Prince'. Yet it is equally clear that Prince remained known as Prince, just as Adrian Piper is still known as Adrian Piper, and just as appropriation of instances of popular culture into high art will not change their association to the former. There appears to be no straightforward exit from a once received label. In this work too, reinforced by visual- and media strategies – the use of photography, digitally manipulated but not digitally constructed – Piper instigates a singular, subjective communicative dialogue calling for personal assessment of one's own position. She does not ask viewers to choose between one or another existing option, but to carefully construct a subjective position.

The piece also relates to the thematic of institutionalization in the art world. After an absence from mainstream exhibition circuits during the 1970s and 1980s, Piper was rehabilitated and has since gained canonical acceptance. Quite possibly, considering her views on art institutions, she is weary of that evolution's consequences. The consideration seems particularly pertinent seeing that 'once pickled in the white cube [...] blackness often ends up standing only for its use-value' (Black 2016: 350). Institutionalized art practices, Piper had written, disseminate the neo-liberal market's

values and the artist's 'integration in [...] the capitalist structure' of society follows (1970–73: 39). This work, then, also speaks of the price to be paid for incorporation, fetishization, of blackness into the mainstream circuit of institutions that have not necessarily stopped categorizing and discriminating altogether. That results, as Mercer has argued, in a demand to black artists – and the same may be argued for female artists – to be representative for their community. Not only is this a demand that answers to white expectations of black art. It also factually contributes to perpetuating the invisibility of an internally diverse community and hijacks its access to public discourse by claiming that one voice is sufficiently representative (1994: 240). While Piper's view on art as catalysis requires it to promote change in the viewer, institutionalization fixes her work in a category. In that sense, her grey image and retirement from – now institutionalized – blackness motivates the viewer to perpetuate critical assessment of one's perceptions and experiences, of newly constructed as well as already existing categories.

Again, this is a photograph, easily reproducible, not unique in any quantitative sense that may enhance its monetary value. Its accessibility is maximized by its publication on the artist's website, rather than it being, for example, a large-format print framed for presentation in a gallery or Kunsthalle and ready for commodification by the art market that turned the 'ineluctability of blackness' into a mythic position, taking control of its presentation and meaning (Black 2016: 350). With this image Piper visualizes an ongoing quest to regain independence from racial categories and neo-liberal institutions, and a move towards preserving art as means to direct communication with a diverse public, yet again. Choosing to go beyond racial and artistic binaries by a strategy of ambiguity is, then, a choice of resistance, yet not of opposition. But *Thwarted Projects, Dashed Hopes, a Moment of Embarrassment, 2012* also confronts the viewer with the impossibility of doing so definitively. Emancipation in neo-liberal society, one might say, cannot be acquired once and for all. Like signification of an artwork, its constitution needs to be reiterated in an intersubjective dialogue. And productive ambiguity, as Piper's continuous choice of productive defection from institutionalization in art and in society shows, appears to be the catalyst strategy par excellence for insuring that reiteration publicly.

4. Conclusion: Piper's choices: An aesthetic notion of agency

Piper's institutional critique appears as particular as it is encompassing. The artistic choices she makes, push the boundaries of Conceptual art, much like the subjects she portrays in her work to push the limits of societal categorization. The works discussed above have repeatedly shown Piper's choice to defect from art institutions' patriarchal organizational framework. Yet, she does not seek refuge in another category, a separate art scene. Not choosing any oppositional but equally generalizing, rationalizing and objectifying category to compete with another, she posits a resistant ambiguous voice within the system and aims for structural change. She continuously creates new, not (yet) categorized options that by their very ambiguity activate imaginative, subjective understanding of self, of others

and of acting in the world. Piper's view of art as catalysis implies that just *her* making these choices is not enough. It implies them to be available for subjects in society at large.

The choices she made regarding the content of *Food for the Spirit*, *The Mythic Being* and *Thwarted Projects, Dashed Hopes, a Moment of Embarrassment*, 2012, propose ambiguity, subjectivity and intersubjectivity as constitutive elements for understanding the works. Piper's choice to not make fixed and ready for interpretation statements but, rather, propose images that inhibit us from falling back on stereotypes, reinforces active, agentic signification processes. As viewer, one cannot rationally interpret those works in one look. Instead, one needs to take time to experience the perceptual data that she presents as is, as indexes of that-has-been but that we cannot know based on a priori categories. The media she chooses, the combination of photography's indexical qualities with purposeful graphic manipulation, and her visual strategies including image and language converge to function as catalysis for conveying content that her writings, whether preparatory and reflection notes or structured essays, support. Motivated by her view on art as catalysis, Piper's presentation choices democratize the possibility to access this content, disseminating ambiguous and subjective construction of self, and of the conception of others and the world. And it is this ambiguity that bears the potential to defy neo-liberal competitive agency. As such, Piper's choices, the agency she displays as an artist, function as paradigm for a notion of agency based on the viewer's subjective experience and intersubjective signification processes – aesthetic Dewey's sense – , particularly pertinent in contemporary neo-liberal society.

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