

Adrian Piper: Race, Gender, and Embodiment by John Bowles. (Book Review)

By: [Sarah Jane Cervenak](#)

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Abstract:

A review of *Adrian Piper: Race, Gender, and Embodiment* by John P. Bowles.

Keywords: Book Review | Adrian Piper | Art Theory | Race | Gender

Article:

Adrian Piper: Race, gender, and embodiment, by John P. Bowles, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011, 335 pp., US\$25.95 (paperback)

John P. Bowles' *Adrian Piper: Race, Gender and Embodiment* both is and isn't about the artist-philosopher Adrian Piper; Bowles opens his enormously important book by making it about you, the reader/viewer. A general contention of the text holds that Piper's career-long interest in the defamiliarization of spectatorship, how others see her, has been shaped by formal innovations as well as an engagement with the aesthetics and politics of race, gender, and sexuality. As Bowles argues, rather than heeding the artist's call to question one's racially and sexually motivated interpretations of art, some spectators have sadly refused by classifying Piper as "an angry black woman" or "distraught victim" (1–2), an analytical move that ignores the viewer's role in the production of racism and sexism. Against those reductive visions, Bowles attends to the complexities of Piper's art – including the profound production of herself as art – by foregrounding her interests in self-consciousness, spectatorship, and the "theatrical[ization] of the effects of racism" (8). Bowles situates Piper's art and the questions it raises within anti-racist, feminist, Kantian moral, and Black radical philosophical traditions, a strategy that crucially establishes Piper's intervention in conversations on, for example, Black masculinity and popular culture, race, gender, and 1970s sexual politics. By discussing Piper's work accordingly, Bowles raises an important question: What is at stake in understanding Piper's art as anti-racist, anti-classist, and feminist intervention?

In "Contingent and Universal: Adrian Piper and the Minimalist Ideal," Bowles queries Piper's formative, albeit complicated, relationship with minimalism and conceptualism, claiming that the

former's privileging of the art object over artist at once allowed her to put the viewer's response on display while removing her body from their potentially racist and sexist gaze. At the same time, Piper's racial and gender identity figured her as an impossible subject for minimalism and conceptualism's pretense to unmarked universality, for the constraints of a racist, sexist gaze caused her exclusion from exhibitions, critics' attention, and histories written on the traditions themselves.

In response, Bowles engages with a range of lesser-known pieces foregrounding her essential contributions to these traditions as well as their foundational role in the artists' critiques of xenophobia and racism in the years that follow. For example, the minimalist *Untitled Constructions* (1967) – two visually identical paintings with different textures – forces viewers to contemplate their own perceptual strategies while the conceptualist piece, *Parallel Grid Proposal* (1968) – a map of a test grid indicating the potential reach of nerve gas experimented with by the army in Nevada – suggests the extension of the artist's voice/concept beyond the discrete object. As Bowles persuasively argues, even though these works weren't politically motivated per se, Piper's formal engagement shapes the politically engaged works in the years that followed.

The interplay between conceptualism and minimalism, as theorized by Bowles, provided the conditions for Piper's subsequent interrogation of herself as artist, idealized minimalist viewer, and as art object. Bowles, in Chapter two, posits her *Hypothesis* series (1968–70) as the place where the political, particularly feminist, implications of these roles, are realized. In this series, Piper creates works that put on display her own perceptual processes; for example, in the subseries, *Situations*, the artist takes scenes from her daily life and represents them abstractly. In *Situation #16*, going to the grocery store is recorded in sparse, cold detail, and that document constitutes the work of art. Here, I found Bowles' discussion of Piper's philosophical meditations on supposedly domestic activities instructive; in this analysis Bowles productively aligned Piper's work with a feminist critique of the patriarchal split between home (as site of domestic anti-intellectualism) and the public sphere.

However, we encounter a confusing methodological moment after Bowles claims that even though this work was not overtly political, Piper was aware of and participated in political conversations of the time – among them Black Power and Feminist. Bowles expresses his art-historical conundrum of not wanting to fall into a “white liberal trap” of discussing a Black artist “only if a case can be made that it is political” (77). At the same time, in the interest of supporting Piper's recent claim that all of her early work was political even if not identified as such, Bowles still frames the *Hypothesis* series as decidedly “feminist.” While it is important to acknowledge the political implications of a work, Bowles subsequently identifies Piper as a black feminist: a slippage between implications/effects and political subjectivity. More specifically, there is a difference between the political impact of a work and whether its author framed their work in that same political spirit. Such a gesture assigns an identity when one is not

clearly claimed, a dicey move in relation to an artist who queries the determinisms enacted by others' visions.

The following chapter does not reference Piper's positionality per se but rather the political contexts – the Women's movement, Vietnam War, etc. – that “intruded upon her life” (126). Whereas, as Bowles argues, the art made prior to 1970 interrogated the ethical conditions of spectatorship and the conditions of possibility of art making that removed her body from view, the political climate of the 1970s provoked her to rethink the social implications of her racialized, gendered body. In “May 1970,” Bowles engages with Piper's *Untitled Performance for Max's Kansas City* and *Context Series* (among others), theorizing how she intervened in the decade's prominent political issues by theatricalizing the interaction between her body, self-consciousness, and external perception. In *Max's*, Piper donned a blindfold and gloves, nose, and earplugs in a public art space. By eliminating external sensorial perception, Piper explored the workings of her consciousness unaffected by others' perceptions while becoming an object of inquiry.

Engaging in questions of personal responsibility, in *Context #8*, Piper collected various fliers inviting her to rallies, protests, and gallery boycotts and formed a collage; according to Bowles, the collage allowed Piper to dramatize an encounter between herself and the world without committing her to a specific group or politic. Importantly, unlike the previous chapter, Bowles does not align Piper's project with a particular positionality but rather stays faithful to the artist's wish that her philosophical art-making not be “overdetermined” by external perception (113).

In Chapter three, Bowles neatly connects Piper's resistance to over-determination with her critique of minimalism's insularity. In the *Catalysis* (1971) series, Piper engaged in a set of acts designed to provoke a visceral response from the viewer, i.e, walking down a busy street covered in wet paint and attending an exhibit opening for “Women Artists” covered in feathers. For Bowles, Piper's presentation of herself as vulgar anomaly in gallery and extra-gallery contexts connects her to a set of political projects, particularly feminist. By inserting herself into museum spaces as a catalytic work of art, Piper critiques the minimalist distinction between artist and discrete art object. Overall, this chapter smartly elaborates upon the multiple ways that Piper enacts and critiques her own racialized and sexualized objectification, drawing upon the implications of that critique for feminism and minimalism. This chapter's conclusion, important for scholars on Piper, also queries the ways that Piper's choices in documentation (including the reluctance to be photographed) reflect her own desire to maintain a level of self-control over the perceptions of others.

The section that follows again contends with the limitations of spectatorship, particularly the artist's. In *Food for the Spirit* (1971), Piper reads Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* alone at home while doing juice fasts and yoga. By documenting the tension between a desire for transcendence and the dis/comforting reminders of embodiment, Piper reveals that the total rejection of the body was an impossibility for everyone, not just those who are racialized and gendered (as Kant

would have it). This is not to say that Piper did not achieve moments of transcendence; rather reminders of her embodiment – hunger, sweat – punctuated them. Bowles identifies the documentary process of *Food* as formative for future performances. Looking at photos of herself taken during the private performance, Piper became the work's first audience; in this process, Bowles argues, Piper witnesses the limitations of the image in conveying the entire experience. This disjunction between “who the artist appears to be and who she believes she is” forges the philosophical questions at the heart of the next chapter (221).

In *Mythic Being* (1973–4), Piper donned a wig, mustache, and sunglasses to become another persona, in this case a hypermasculinized, criminalized, black male. Foregrounding the scholarship of key Black feminists like Evelyn Hammonds, Patricia Hill Collins, and Audre Lorde, Bowles contends that Piper's embodiment of a racist and sexist fear elucidates the tension between who she is and the artifice of a disguise imposed on her by others. Drawing on Evelyn Hammond's foundational work on Black female sexuality and representation, for example, Bowles argues that Piper's MB also inquires into historical, racial, and gender fictions of the black body. The argument that Piper's project resonates with and intervenes within Black feminist philosophical projects is a productive line of inquiry that differs from earlier assertions that Piper herself was a Black feminist.

By locating Piper's art within various political, aesthetic, and philosophical contexts, this final chapter realizes some of the book's best qualities by providing the reader with an understanding of the artwork's political, historical, and aesthetic complexities without depriving the artist of her own. Moreover, Bowles' multidisciplinary approach advances an engagement with an artist who undoubtedly should be listened to more.