

# MAP – Journeys in Contemporary Art

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## ADRIAN PIPER

23 October – 11 December  
Elizabeth Dee, New York

With various careers as a conceptual artist, analytic philosopher and yoga practitioner, Adrian Piper is perhaps best known for her uncompromising commentary on culturally normalised ideas of race and gender. The delivery of this acerbic punch has proven to lose no force in a four-decade art practice; she still hits her suit-wearing target straight in the eye. But while the artist's unflinching gaze may have previously penetrated the marrow of heated issues, this partial retrospective highlights the current invisibility of the singularly authored and politically vocal treatment within artistic practice today.

*Past Time: Selected Works 1973–1995* comprises serial photo-text collage, installation, a film programme and supplementary archival materials. It appears aesthetically uneven – perhaps adopting her mentor Sol LeWitt's mantra that in artistic practice, the concept comes first, and the work is subsequently built around it. 'Ashes to Ashes', 1995, a photo-text work, combines photographs of Piper's family with a text recalling her parents' smoking-related

illnesses and their romantic relationship, inserting autobiographical content into Piper's political and conceptual rhetoric. Perhaps out of a contemporary disposition for morbid curiosity, the artist's photographs of her parents (as well as those shown in the series *I Am Somebody, The Body Of My Friends*) appear more compelling than the text it accompanies. The audience is invited to view the likenesses of both her mother and father side by side, a bi-racial couple who are the source of much of Piper's subject matter. Placed intermittently around the gallery, meanwhile, 'What It's Like, What It Is, #2.1–2.7', 1991, consists of large silk-screened cutouts of grainy, blown up journalistic images of protestors and presumably the white males whose policies they are protesting against. Formally similar to Cady Noland's silk-screened aluminum cutouts produced around the same time, Piper's are emblazoned with the word 'forget', coloured in crimson and rendered in typewriter-style lettering. The quaintness of the journalistic images, typography and the obvious usage of blood-red ink speak of Piper's obvious lack of nuance here. However, the intrigue in her work is embedded in the controlled (and permitted) glimpses of Piper's life. Her lessons are those we have already heard – though as a culture, may have failed to digest.

Similarly compelling are Piper's installations. Lodged in a single room littered with baseballs and knight's armour is 'The Big Four-Oh', 1988: video documentation of an endurance dance performance is presented on a monitor in one corner of the space, playing out for nearly 48 minutes. Positioned in close proximity are jars containing various

bodily fluids – blood, sweat, tears, piss – the usual gross-out gamut that now fails to shock. A handwritten journal awkwardly occupies the floor-space to the bottom right of the table, forcing viewers to crouch, and at the same time risk hitting their heads, in order to read the text. The journal points to the artist's confrontation of her first 40 years of life, and perhaps her relation to the art world: 'I had to get hit in the stomach by a hardball many times before I learned how to play the game'. The armour, hardballs and bodily fluids all point to the struggle of art-making – where participation in the art world becomes a test of endurance, a dance under scrutiny and pressure.

Nearby, the 1990 installation 'Vote / Emote' recreates polling cubicles inlaid with window-style lightboxes, on which grainy Civil Rights-era images of throngs of African Americans are displayed. Entering the booths the viewer finds paper with pre-printed headers demanding a written response: 'List your fears about what we might know about you. List your fears of what we might do with your accumulations'. In one response, the former question was answered 'That I lie. That my hair isn't really this blonde naturally. That I'm not real. That I'm not smart. I don't like people with missing limbs.' The latter prompted coolly, 'That you won't recognise the gems'. Sadly, yet somewhat instigated by the artist's re-presentation, responses such as these invoke more complexity and curiosity than many of the works in *Past Time*. The visitor's statements foreground the awkwardness of Piper's work within the current context of a post-identity politics championed by an 'It Gets Better' society.

In an attempt to pluralise and humanise the ineffable suffering that arises from racism and misogyny, Piper's direct form of address seems ultimately outmoded. While she seeks to subvert the authoritative voice she reacts against, she paradoxically appears to adopt it herself, either literally as in the case of 'Vote / Emote', or aesthetically with work such as 'What It's Like, What It is'. This is not to say that her work is devalued or bad. Rather, the directness and force with which artists such as Piper dealt with issues of race, class, and gender of the mid-to-late 20th-century has since atomised into a new generation of artists who use less radical and more aesthetically complex models through which to express inequality.

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Adrian Piper, 2010, installation view Elizabeth Dee, New York

