2   Adrian Piper: In and out of conceptual art

Alexander Alberro

Beginning in April 1970, Adrian Piper executed a series of unannounced actions in New York City that she called *Catalysis* (see Figure 2.1). The artist moved through public and private spaces confronting unsuspecting passers-by while, for example, having stuffed her mouth with a towel, wearing odorous clothing or substances on her body, with balloons bulging from various parts of her frame under her attire, or carrying a 'WET PAINT' sign over a shirt soaked in sticky white enamel. These actions were meant to provoke Piper's unwitting audience, and have been understood as the crucial break with the abstractness of the artist's late 1960s work, which often used classification techniques such as grids, serial sequences and arrangements of words as media, in favour of works that can be interpreted as socially engaged interventions addressing race and gender objectification, passive and active transactions, otherness, identity, and xenophobia. Piper has, on several occasions, attributed this shift in her work to the social realities that promoted her growing political awareness and engagement in the early 1970s. As she recalled in 1973:

> In the spring of 1970, a number of events occurred that changed everything for me: 1) the invasion of Cambodia; 2) The Women's Movement; 3) Kent State and Jackson State; 4) and the closing of CCNY [City College of New York], where I was in my first term as a philosophy major, during the student rebellion.[1]

These events, she recalls, had a profound effect on her, leading her to reconsider her 'position as an artist, as a woman, and a black'.[2] Yet, the spatial relations that characterise *Catalysis* or the *Mythic Being* performances of a few years later are much more in accordance with the artist's conceptual art of the late 1960s than is usually acknowledged. The impact of the social and political realities of the late 1960s and early 1970s on Piper's work is unquestionable. But the artist's 1970s actions evolve, in many ways logically, from her late 1960s conceptual work.

Piper's early conceptual art practice, which she commenced in 1967, explored things, words, sounds and pieces of paper as concrete physical objects that

Adrian Piper, *Catalysis IV*, 1970. Performance documentation. Five silver gelatin print photographs, 40.6 cm × 40.6 cm each. Detail, photograph No. 1 of 5. 2.1

referred both to themselves and also outwards, to the world of abstract, symbolic meaning. By 1968 the artist had recognised the parallels between her work and that of Sol LeWitt. Beginning in the mid-to-late 1960s, LeWitt's art gave primacy to the concept; all decisions about execution were made in advance. The idea, LeWitt writes in 'Paragraphs on conceptual art' (1967), functions like 'a machine that makes the art': a logical operation of predetermined rules for decision-making that 'eliminates the arbitrary, capricious, and the subjective as much as possible'.[3] While largely rejecting the importance LeWitt placed on the perceptual presentation of the end product and its value in relation to the intellectual process that orders sensory impressions into cognitive categories, Piper found that her older peer's notion of conceptual art generally tended

to corroborate and strengthen her own. This was especially true of LeWitt's emphasis on the prominence of the conceptual aspect of the creative process. For the kinds of interests Piper was developing, it was essential that the generative concept be fully developed before the piece was made. Piper's primary concern became 'the construction of finite systems', defined as 'systems that serve to contain an idea within certain formal limits and to exhaust the possibilities of the idea set by those limits'.[4] This, the artist believed, was the best way to prevent the potentialities of a concept from extending to infinity, thereby presenting her with the conflicting choices of either attempting to satisfy her curiosity about the notion by pursuing it for an indefinite amount of time, or else ignoring the limitless aspect of the thought completely.

The difficulty of having to decide when a permutation was part of the original concept, and when it veered into generating another idea altogether – with its own separate set of possibilities – soon emerged. Piper tried to resolve the problem by putting aside new ideas for later investigations. She was also aware of the gulf between concepts and their manifestation in media. Accordingly, she would only settle on the final system of the artwork when she was fully confident that she had reduced the characteristics of the physical form to those most truthful to the evolved thought. In the crystallisation of the art idea, she sought to discern and mobilise the form that most effectively conveyed it.

Piper evidently recognised that she has little to no control over a number of elements that enter into the production process. The spectator (or reader as the case may be) has various options upon encountering her work. One is to refuse to consider the artwork's assembled system in its entirety, thereby rejecting perceptual (not to mention conceptual) information altogether. Another option is to acknowledge the logic that underpins and in turn generates the piece, while making no effort to infer from it. Still another option is to grasp the operation of the system, while deriving from it a highly idiosyncratic set of implications. In the first and second instances, there is little that Piper could do other than accept the validity of those responses. Although in her writings she indicates her frustration at the thought of her artwork being reduced, she came to accept this result in an objective way. After all, subjects see things differently, and clearly it is impossible for her to impose her own subjective perspective of her work on anybody (let alone everybody) else.

Piper seems to have found the third type of response to be the most valuable and desirable. For one thing, this option generates many new ideas, for which she has only to find a more concisely realisable form than the existing one. For another, it broadens her naturally subjective perception, and in the combination of two or more personal visions, she finds a greater critical objectivity, which she attempts to retain about her work and general development as a whole. Her early conceptual art mobilises descriptive or representational formats such as grids, maps, linguistic patterns or serial sequences

in order to integrate abstract concepts of space into a logical system of order. These techniques are used as what art historian Helmut Draxler describes as 'matrixes' to represent space.[5] As placements, or rather as spatial and temporal concretisations of the subjective, the momentary or the punctual in general, the matrixes function as 'a priori coordinate systems'.[6] Thus, for example, a collage such as *Utah–Manhattan Transfer* (1968) does not just expand the horizon by exchanging a one-inch-square field from a cropped map of a top-secret US military site in Utah with one of a comparable size of a subway map of Manhattan (see Figure 2.2). The artwork also calls into question the very operation of abstract classification tools such as cartographic diagrams, graphs, maps and grids, descriptions, or representations of space, including, in this case, the physical military site, the subway route, the empty Utah desert and the relatively dense New York City borough of Manhattan, which now all seem to converge.[7] Space, as conceived in artworks such as *Utah–Manhattan Transfer*, is encountered not ontologically, related to what exists, but conceptually and epistemologically, as a particular way of seeing and knowing the world. By early 1969 Piper had come to describe her conceptual art as 'involved with using the boundaries of specific elements of time and/or space as limitations on the infinite number of possible permutations of these elements, implied by the structure of the language used to identify them'.[8] The artist considered the potentialities of abstract symbolic formats such as language and other descriptive and representational techniques to be much greater than those of human perceptual faculties when it came to conveying 'the inherent character of an area in space'. Piper had evidently realised that these formats generate an enormous amount of information about space, and allowed 'the specificity – the particular limits – of the elements' she had chosen to work with to define the amount of information presented.[9]

That same year, 1969, Piper wrote what seems in retrospect to be a crucial, manifesto-like text: 'Idea, form, context'. The document proposes three central premises: (1) that 'good ideas are necessary and sufficient for good art'; (2) that artistic 'form is separate from, but necessary for, the realization of an idea' in art; and (3) that context, generally understood as referring to spatial and temporal factors, is 'separate from, but necessary for, presenting a realized idea'.[10] From these, Piper concludes that both form and context are fundamental, but not sufficient, for the production of art. The underlying idea is what is crucial in art.[11] Yet, she continues, 'the relative importance of form and context in an idea are factors by which the general nature of certain ideas may be determined. When form is important and context unimportant', as in the case of the recent work of Donald Judd or Eva Hesse, 'the idea is generally formal in nature'. When, by contrast, both form and context are important, the 'nature' of the idea 'is generally environmental'.[12] Piper cites Steve Reich's *Pendulum Music* (1969) and Robert Smithson's *Asphalt Rundown* (1969) as works that

2.2   Adrian Piper, *Utah–Manhattan Transfer*, 1968. Pencil and ballpoint pen on cut-and-paste maps, mounted on two pieces of foamcore. First panel: 33.7 cm × 36 cm; second panel: 30.5 cm × 30.5 cm.

follow this premise.[13] In cases where both form and context are unimportant, she continues, 'the idea is generally conceptual'. The example Piper provides is LeWitt's *46 Three-Part Variations on 3 Different Kinds of Cubes* (1967), which she has repeatedly acknowledged as having had a very important effect on her understanding of art's possibilities.[14] However, Piper explains, 'when form is unimportant and context important, the idea is generally ideal in nature'. For Piper, this premise relates closely not only to the late 1960s art of Vito Acconci – she cites Acconci's *Points, Blanks* (1969) as an example – but also to her own recent work: she directs the reader to *Area Relocation #2* (1969).[15]

Acconci's *Points, Blanks* is one of a group of works the artist made in 1969 that involved a predetermined task executed at regular intervals across a context of time and space. In this case, Acconci (on 13 June 1969) called the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York City every ten minutes from public telephones as

he made his way from the Upper West Side of Manhattan to the gallery's store-front location, just south of Houston Street, where the opening of a group show that included his work was in process. At 7.31 p.m., the start of the programme, Acconci called from Broadway and 100th Street; at 7.42 p.m. he called from Broadway and 90th Street; at 7.51 p.m. he called from Broadway and 84th Street, and so on until he reached the gallery in SoHo at 9.51 p.m., just as the vernissage was ending. Over the 2 hours and 15 minutes of the piece, the artist goes from functioning as a peripheral figure relative to the art public at the opening to representing the central focal point of the work. While the programme unfolded, the phone could be heard ringing in the gallery, and every call Acconci made was followed by a public announcement of the locations of his phone calls, which were also marked on a map of Manhattan. As such, *Points, Blank* actuates a descriptive approach to space. Acconci was interested in neither the unique

attributes of the specific locations that he moved through nor the social relations that characterised the kinds of social forces involved in those spaces. Instead, his interest centred on the logistics of those sites as he passed through them.

Piper's *Area Relocation #2* catalyses a similar notion of space (see Figure 2.3). The artwork took the form of a public notice advertised in a local newspaper, the *Village Voice*. The public notice informed the reader that the area or space of the advert had been relocated from the headquarters of the *Village Voice* to the reader's address. The artwork was similar in kind to another work in the same series, an untitled piece in which Piper sent postcards to 170 readers of the summer 1969 issue of the magazine *o to 9*. The postcards directed those who received them to Piper's untitled grid project in the latest issue of the journal, with the other side of each card containing an enlargement of one rectangle on the grid, 'relocated to' the recipient's address.[16] Both pieces mobilised abstract representational space indexically to relate the two-dimensional space of the printed medium with no volume at all to the reader's address, which should be distinguished from the actual location of that reader's residence. As Piper subsequently explained about this intervention:

> in fact, it's not possible to *physically* relocate an area at all. When we refer to an area in commonplace parlance, e.g. the 'area' of a playing field or a chessboard, we are actually not referring to areas in the strict sense, but rather to three-dimensional physical objects. So in its ideationality, [works such as the *Area Relocation* pieces] address a *geometrical* reality that is essentially abstract and conceptual.[17]

In other words, the relocations that are central to these works can only be accomplished when they are consummated in the mind of the receiver.

Piper would soon materialise the concept of space in her artwork itself. Her *Hypothesis* project, for instance, which she began in late 1968 and developed over the next year-and-a-half, folded her 'pure' conceptual art investigations that abstracted space and time onto a study of her body as a concrete entity that could refer to itself as well as to other physical objects. The works in the series, especially the nineteen subtitled *Situations*, employ charts, diagrams, graphs, photographs and text to explore the particularities of the artist's perspective on the surrounding world. The perspective centred on the artist's body as an element that moves through the context of space and time just like any other.[18] In the words of art historian John Bowles, Piper is figured in the series 'as a hypothesis, whose presence is neither certain nor assured'. She alternates between positions of object and subject, seeking 'reassurance of her existence in the sequence of photographed moments'. Each set of photographs – and the *Hypothesis* series as a whole – sets out to anchor 'the artist's intellectual and bodily coherence'.[19]

In seeking consonance, however, *Hypothesis* also recognises that, unlike other specific three-dimensional objects, the human body (in this case the artist's) has an affective or phenomenological relationship with the space through which it moves. The works represent and communicate that

Adrian Piper, *Untitled* ('The area described by the periphery of this ad …')/*Area Relocation Series #2*, 1969. Deacidified newspaper page from the *Village Voice* with an original advertisement from 29 May 1969, 43.2 cm × 35.6 cm.

2.3

consciousness indexically by means of photographs, and symbolically through textual explanations, inventories of objects, charts, graphs and coordinate grids. Accordingly, *Hypothesis* documents the artist's experience and her consciousness of that experience in space and at specific time intervals as the feature that distinguishes her from other objects in the world.[20]

2.4   Adrian Piper, *Hypothesis: Situation #6*, 1968. Typescript on paper, silver gelatin
      prints and black ink on graph paper, vintage photo offset. 27.9 cm × 21.6 cm;
      27.9 cm × 45.4 cm; 27.9 cm × 43.2 cm.

Piper devised a spatial and temporal scheme and took photographs of whatever came into her camera's viewfinder to make the works that make up the *Hypothesis* 'situations'. Sometimes she used measured and predetermined time intervals; other times she arbitrarily snapped the shutter. One cycle of the series, *Hypothesis: Situation #10*, depicts shots of a television every ten seconds during an advertisement for a common pain killer; *Hypothesis: Situation #15* documents furnishings in her apartment; *Hypothesis: Situation #6* captures the artist's walk from her apartment on Hester Street to a nearby grocery store on the Lower East Side of Manhattan (see Figure 2.4). Piper plotted those spaces and moments of routine domesticity on grids that functioned as space-time coordinate systems. The vertical graphs correlate space, while the horizontal ones integrate time. The photographs thus connect each instant with a particular space-time intersection as they record the phenomenological experience of the artist. Piper 'fixed her spatial relationship to the objects around her' when she snapped the camera's shutter, and the overall impression is of her scan of the surrounding space at a given point in time, suggesting what Bowles describes as her subjective presence in the work through 'the reversal of her perspective'.[21] Each individual element of the scheme indexically or symbolically represents the contents of the artist's consciousness at a particular space-time location and juncture. This is what Piper concluded was the difference between humans and inanimate objects: the latter can be located in space relative to other things, existing in their relation to each other, but only humans can relate to space, and to things in space, in a conscious and self-conscious way. That is, only humans are also *subjects*.

But insofar as Piper subsequently altered the chronological order of some of the photographs in the *Hypothesis* project, randomly rearranging them and thereby shifting the artworks' representation of reality, she set this project in relation to others, such as the *Area Relocation* series or *Utah–Manhattan Transfer*, that, as we have just seen, jumbled the descriptive or representational spaces of cartographic maps to give priority to the artist's personal conceptions of them.[22] *Hypothesis*, in other words, at once pushed towards the development of a phenomenological and social concept of space, only to be pulled back to a conceptual or representational model of space when the artist abstracted the process by rearranging the temporal sequence of the unfolding experience.

The full-fledged move into a relational concept of space, which could theorise space not only phenomenologically but also performatively, as a medium of social relations, would be developed in the *Catalysis* series, which Piper began to work on soon after the completion of *Hypothesis* in 1970 and further extended in the *Mythic Being* performances of a few years later. In these preconceived street actions, the artist's body, first in the phenomenological perception of what she described as a 'spatio-temporally immediate object', and soon in the psychogeographic and relational logic of interaction in developing a sense of self, functioned as a catalyst to bring into focus – and, in her words, to 'promote a change in' – the social spaces through which it moved.[23] Humans,

Piper's work now seemed to suggest, by producing space according to their own social, psychic and interactive nature, materialise society into distinctive forms. Yet those forms, in turn, work to reproduce the subject.

A given spatial order is internalised by the individuals it comprises. It imposes its rhythms and geographies on the bodies and psyches of the people who are subjectivised by it. From this perspective, however, space, like social contexts as a whole, is performative, always unfinished and open, made and remade on a daily basis. There can therefore be no assumption of a given coherence of spaces, or of the subject positions they produce. Identities, like the spaces and orders that catalyse them, are inherently precarious and, rather than static, are always in process – always changing. Social encounters destabilise individual difference and particularity, and place emphasis instead on the relationship between people.[24] Moreover, different individuals or social groups are placed in very distinct ways in relation to space. The degree to which one can move through it, whether walking about the streets or venturing beyond one's social circle or purview, is restricted by prevailing relations and conventions. These conceptualisations remain implicit. Subjects intuitively know their place, and what they can do where. This point concerns not only the issue of who moves and who does not – although that is an important element. It also concerns what geographer Doreen Massey refers to as the 'power in relation *to* the flows of movement'.[25] Some people, largely on account of the visible aspects of their identity – whether racial or gender-, class- or sexuality-based – are more in charge of the movement through social space than others. Some are empowered to initiate flows and movement, others are not; some are more on the receiving end of those flows and movements than others, some are effectively imprisoned by them.

Piper's works of the early 1970s emphasise that, among other things, processes of highly complex social differentiations occur within the context of social space.[26] While humans experience the world through and in space – a crucial medium in the production and development of subjectivity and identity – spaces are socially constructed, and those constructions are founded on acts of exclusion, often in contexts of unequal power relations and relations of domination and exploitation. There are differences in the degree of movement and communication, but also in that of control and initiation. Yet, to recognise that space, like identity, is essentially social and constantly struggled over and reimagined in practical ways is to understand it not as a natural, secure, ontological thing rooted in notions of closure, boundedness and permanence, but 'as the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions', and therefore 'as always under construction … always in the process of being made' by the human beings that constitute it.[27] In short, to say that something is constructed by human forces is to say that it is within human power to change it. Which is, in the end, one of the most important insights generated by Piper's conceptualist-derived artistic practice.

Notes

1   Adrian Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, 2 vols, Vol. I, *Selected Writings in Meta-Art 1968–1992* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 30.

2   *Ibid.*, p. 31.

3   Sol LeWitt, 'Paragraphs on conceptual art', in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds), *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. 12.

4   Piper, *Out of Order*, Vol. I, p. 5.

5   Helmut Draxler, 'Structures of response: Adrian Piper's transformation of minimalism', in M. Sullivan (ed.), *Structures of Response* (Berlin: S*I*G*, 2018), p. 7.

6   *Ibid.*

7   *Ibid.*

8   Piper, *Out of Order*, Vol. I, p. 15.

9   *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 11. For Piper's acknowledgement of the importance of LeWitt's art to her artistic practice see *ibid.*, pp. 209–14.

15 Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, Vol. II, *Selected Writings in Art Criticism 1967–1992*, p. 12.

16 Adrian Piper, undated postcard, postmarked 9 July 1969, sent to Kynaston McShine, in *Information* Exhibition Papers, Museum of Modern Art, New York; quoted in J. P. Bowles, *Adrian Piper: Race, Gender, and Embodiment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 277n18. As Bowles observes, 'The text draws the reader's attention to the project's contextual conditions and their realization. Reading the postcard or the magazine project creates an event in time and space that depends as much upon its reception in the "here and now" as on the moment when the artist made it' (p. 130).

17 Adrian Piper, personal correspondence with Nizan Shaked, 14 November 2016; quoted in Nizan Shaked, 'Propositions to politics: Adrian Piper's conceptual paradigms', in C. Butler and D. Platzker (eds), *Adrian Piper: A Reader* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018), p. 78n20.

18 Piper, *Out of Order*, Vol. I, p. 19.

19 Bowles, *Adrian Piper*, p. 84.

20 Adrian Piper, *The Hypothesis Series*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, T. B. Walker Acquisition Fund © Adrian Piper Research Archive (APRA) Foundation Berlin, 1968–70.

21 Bowles, *Adrian Piper*, p. 86.

22 *Ibid.*

23 Piper, *Out of Order*, Vol. I, p. 32.

24 See Kobena Mercer, 'Contrapositional becomings: Adrian Piper performs questions of identity', in Butler and Platzker, *Adrian Piper*, p. 103.

25 Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1994), p. 149.

26 Adrian Piper, 'It's not all black and white', *Village Voice*, 9 June 1987, 6.

27 Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005), p. 9.