An American Art Job  Franklin Sirmans

What is often called the black soul is a white man’s [woman’s] artefact... For not only must the black man [woman] be black, he [she] must be black in relation to the white man [woman].

—Frantz Fanon, *The Fact of Blackness*¹

In 1970 Adrian Piper walked into the “art self-conscious consciousness” of the bar called Max’s Kansas City with her eyes blindfolded and her hands covered in long black gloves; she rode New York City’s buses and subways with a large white towel stuck in her mouth; she attached helium-filled Mickey Mouse balloons to her ears, nose, and hair; she saturated her clothing with a mixture of vinegar, eggs, milk, and cod liver oil for a week, then wore them on the D train during evening rush hour; and she perused the exhibition *Before Comes* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art while chewing large wads of gum and blowing up bubbles she allowed to stick to her face (see Fig. 1). What later became “a static emblem of confrontation” in her Mythic Being series was in 1970 the joy of “Loving the Alien.” At first glance Piper’s art is a means of abandoning the burden of the past, which, she has written, “haunts me, determines all my actions, increasingly habituates me to the limitations of my personality and physical appearance.”² It is also a means of causing a silent ruckus, keeping people on their toes and hopefully questioning their own actions through the work of art, which operates as a catalyst and as a self-affirming object. For Piper it has been an American art job. Studying, writing, teaching, and making art over the last forty years, she has left a mark on visual art that can be felt even further, outside of race, gender, and class, yet it’s her attention to those big universal issues that continues to resonate in *Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art Since 1970* and beyond.

Of course, in a perfect world, there would be no need for an artist, curator, or writer to respond to others’ essentializing gazes and preconceptions, to become caught up in a world of naysayers intent on defining the fabric of one’s own conscious-ness. Yet W.E.B. Du Bois’s words—his summary term “double-consciousness” used in the title of this show—still ring out when we read from his seminal collection *The Souls of Black Folk* that “the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” A century later, it is a wonder how those words still ring true.

Piper’s actions in 1970, aligned with subsequent social critique and political analysis, also point to the blurry lines between art history and art production present in the initial stages of what has become known in the history of art as Conceptual Art. By marking a point where the idea becomes the thing of art, Conceptual Art widened the parameters of what could potentially be understood as art. It also provided a way for art to address issues of paramount importance to many artists who felt disinclined to explore the formal parameters defined by modernism. In effect, looking to linguistic and other sources outside of the art historical canon, artists found a referent for their actions that was pointedly anti-Greenbergian.³ For many of these artists, discussing the issues that most affected them on a daily basis became crucial—the personal is political. A quick glance at international trends in the history of art reveals how very much political situations have affected the production of culture and art. From the Russian avant-garde, influenced by revolution, to the tumult in civil rights, women’s rights, and the antiwar movement that shaped Piper’s artistic background, artists have discovered that it’s not a perfect world, though the imperfections leave plenty of room for important artistic endeavors.

In a perfect world, there would be no warning souls judged by pigmentation. Thus, Jerry Saltz can dub Kynaston McShine, curator at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, an “antiformalist
in the House of Formalism" in his review of McShine's 1999 exhibition *The Museum as Muse*. True to "form," McShine also curated one of the first museum exhibitions of Conceptual Art, *Information* (1970). Saltz went on to describe *The Museum as Muse as Information* "with meat on its bones," and he accurately cited McShine's original fascination with Conceptual Art when he wrote that "he's best when he sticks to his cerebral, linguistic, information-oriented, conceptual roots."  

Included in the groundbreaking *Information* exhibition, Piper had by then come to a new perspective on her art practice vis-à-vis the emergence of Conceptual Art in the spring of 1970. Writing several years later about her Hypothesis series, she would place 1970 as the crucial year in her own oeuvre and the equally fertile starting point of this "Double Consciousness."  

"I started working on the Hypothesis series in 1968 and continued until 1970. In earlier pieces—my 'pure' conceptual work—I explored things, words, sounds, and pages of paper as concrete physical objects that referred both to themselves and also outward, to the world of abstract, symbolic meaning." Referring back to the Hypothesis series, in which she used her own body as the subject or "the physical object," Piper wrote, "This series was the crucial link between the earlier conceptual work and the later, more political work I did having to do with race and gender objectification, Otherness, identity, and xenophobia."  

While Piper was a part of the first wave of American Conceptualism, albeit as a very young adherent, she initially worked in the vein of the innovative Sol LeWitt—a generous early supporter of her work—whose declarative essay "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" she found to be particularly useful. LeWitt wrote, "In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. It is intuitive, it is involved with all kinds of mental processes, and it is purposeless." But Piper would soon come to her own terms with Conceptual Art when in 1968 she wrote, "I am presently interested in the construction of finite systems, that is, systems that serve to contain an idea within certain formal limits and to exhaust the possibilities of

the idea set by those limits. What appears to be a general pattern in my formulative process is, first, the emergence of a kind of intuition which somehow derives from whatever I have just completed."  

Yet, she yearned for more. To take the modernist trajectory out of formalism was a natural reaction to the impositions of art history and the expectations of critical readings. While this was an endgame for many of the movement's best proponents, it provided a more malleable medium for others, including Piper, for whom the personal became exceedingly political. "While romping in the theoretically fertile but disorganized universe of conceptual art in the late 1960s, and implicitly thinking of myself as the next *enfant terrible* of the art world, I was being systematically marginalized..." Piper wrote, then continued, "In those days, conceptual art was a white macho enclave, a funhouse refraction of the Eurocentric equation of intellect with masculinity."  

As was well discussed in the catalogue accompanying the
Important show Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s (1999) at the Queens Museum of Art, Queens, New York, Piper’s transition to a full-fledged Conceptual Art—between the fall of 1966, when she entered the School of Visual Arts in New York, and the spring of 1970, when four specific events occurred in her life connected to global politics—coincided with the emergence of social, political, and economic revolution throughout the world. Like her global counterparts, Piper and some of the artists in the current exhibition felt an even greater urge than most American Conceptualists to at least attempt to fulfill Conceptual Art’s promise to reimagine the possibilities of art through the sociopolitical realities within which it was created. Piper equated this resulting epiphany to a moment of becoming self-conscious. In the summer of 1971, drunk on the words of Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason, she created Food for the Spirit, a group of photographs ritualizing her physical appearance in the mirror, an anchor in the physical world—a world that she had abandoned that summer by doing nothing else but study Kant, write, practice yoga, and fast. The intense introspection of Food for the Spirit soon gave way to the increasingly politicized art that continues in Piper’s oeuvre to this day. While Food for the Spirit is one of Conceptual Art’s most poignant ventures into body art, it is also evidence of Piper’s realization of the personal as inevitably political. The very term “personal as political” points to art’s relationality to something else. Art and Culture, Arts and Leisure, Art and Life—all disclose the way in which art always clings to something else, to an idea out there in the real world. This relationality has had a profound effect on many of the artists in Double Consciousness. As Piper wrote:

In the society I want to live in, for example, there are no subliminal racist hatreds and fears I Embody (1975). Nor need I delineate a Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features (1981). It is unnecessary to give Folk Lessons (1983), because idioms of black working-class culture are not objects of ignominy and contempt. Questions about one’s degree of actual personal contact with blacks that are too Close to Home (1987) do not arise because a fully integrated society makes them obsolete.

Likewise, Howardena Pindell, a contemporary of Piper’s, would not have felt the need to create the video work Free, White, and 21 (1980), in which she recounts the personal effects of institutionalized racism in the art world. For Pindell like Charles Gaines, another early practitioner of Conceptual Art whose work is included here, the exhibition’s identification of links between artists over a more than thirty-year span provides crucial evidence of their artistic output—one that is far too often underrecognized—and their continued influence. Evidence of such connective tissue is invaluable in reading and making sense of contemporary art today. While David Hammons has received accolades for his contributions to the visual art discourse, he too encounters the peculiarly American dilemma of race in his tricksterish art and life (see fig. 2). Among the work of younger artists here is a plethora of links to this past.

While certainly not as encumbered as their predecessors, the artists in Double Consciousness work in different media with constantly changing ideas to create their art. Conceptual Art, with its use of systems and languages, and its insistence on ideas, has proved to be fertile terrain for many of these artists who seek to tackle the complex social realities of everyday life, all the while making beautiful, informative art.
Fred Wilson—represented here by his sculpture Atlas (1995, page 49)—like Piper in Information, was one of the few black artists included in The Museum as Muse. For that show he constructed a step-by-step photoessay called Art in Our Time (1999). Culled from pictures in MoMA’s archives, Wilson revealed how white the institution and the world of museums had been and continued to be. Saltz referred to Wilson’s revelations, particularly a group of images of white people shaking hands, as picturing “The Secret Handshake,” and concluded with the warning that “unless we put the secret handshake behind us, the museum will not be a place that can change the world.”

I don’t know about changing the world, but the artists and the work in Double Consciousness certainly question the world of art, museums, and beyond while dreaming of regime change. They believe that art does matter and that little by little they are doing their job—changing the world—or at the very least forcing us to question why not?

Notes

5. Saltz.
6. Piper, Selected Writings in Meta-Art, 19.
7. Piper, Selected Writings in Meta-Art, 4.
9. Piper, Selected Writings in Meta-Art, 5.
11. Piper, Selected Writings in Meta-Art, 245.
12. Saltz.