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*Philosophical Examinations of Social Response through Artistic Analysis: Adrian Piper’s Catalysis (1970-1971)*
Gustav Caillebotte's *Paris Street; Rainy Day* is, one of the better-known examples of the flaneur; a concept initially thought of by French poet Charles Baudelaire and expanded upon by philosopher Walter Benjamin. The flaneur is the unseen observer, the one who blends in perfectly but through their eyes, the viewer sees truth. In *Paris Street*, the passersby do not glance over to the focal point that is our perspective, but merely continue on. The well-dressed male in the foreground looks to his right, detached from the scene but observing something beyond the viewer's eyes. Caillebotte frames the scene perfectly around a modern lamp directly behind the couple in the foreground. The inclusion of the lamp alludes to the changing of the city towards modern time while still maintaining a foothold in the past. By placing the lamp directly in the center, Caillebotte hints at a division within Paris, a city struggling to find its identity.

The forced perspective we see allows us as consumers of the scene to observe what is before us. Imagine this rainy day scene in midday Paris directly before us. We see the painting but it is more than a painting, it is a one-way mirror. The separation brought forth by our blending into the scene, the mask, disguise we've donned allows us to participate in the scene before us but also to make observations of the natural state of the bourgeois population before us. In modern day, the flaneur no longer merely observes the elite but rather focuses on sexism, xenophobia, and racism as explored by Adrian Piper in New York.

In 1970, Adrian Piper, an African American female artist, began a series of social experiments in which she disguised herself in various ways and went out into public. These disguises were not traditional but rather drew attention to Piper's physical self, which enabled her to observe reactions to her external self while her internal self remained distanced. Titled *Catalysis*, the 6 part series of performances took place between 1970 and 1971 in which Piper performed the catalytic events no more than twice per month (Araya).
Catalysis I began with public transportation in the middle of rush hour. Piper marinated clothing in vinegar, eggs, milk, and cod liver oil for a week before putting the clothing on and getting on a D Train during rush hour (Lippard). After riding the D Train for some time, Piper got off the train and walked to a Marlboro Bookstore that she frequented normally and browsed through the racks. Piper’s disguise as an filthy, potentially homeless person on the crowded train forced her audience to directly engage with her, if not through eye contact, at least through smell and repulsiveness. Interestingly, the D Train runs through what was considered both wealthy and poorer sections of New York. The audience Piper had was diverse and varied; some passengers may be kin to her persona while others strove to ignore her presence completely.

In Catalysis III, Piper begins her exploration of consumerist and capitalist methodology. In midtown Manhattan, the artist donned a long sleeved shirt covered in wet paint and a side reading “Wet Paint” while walking through Union Square as well as the fashion district near Macy’s shopping center (Araya). Piper’s performance ran for two hours in which she wandered the streets of New York with the crowds of people. In one performance, Piper enters Macy’s to shop for gloves and sunglasses. Afterwards, she noted the public reacted by “staring, backing away, circumnavigating, and avoiding eye contact” (Araya). Catalysis III begins the awareness of social exploration as Piper intentionally chooses Macy’s and Union Squares as her location. Macy’s is the oldest and one of the largest stores in New York City, a staple of capitalist regime. Furthermore, the Union Square at 14th street was the location of a 35,000-person march on City Hall in 1930s Depression (Araya). Piper intentionally returns to these sites to bring her focus to consumerist establishments.

While dressed conservatively, Piper filled her mouth with a large red towel allowing the excess fabric to hang down her front for Catalysis IV. She then rode a bus along First Avenue, a
subway during rush hour, and the Empire State Building’s elevator at various points during the day. Piper’s conservative apparel, not out of place in any of the public transportation methods she chose, hints at the flaneur. In blending in, Piper becomes a member of the crowd; she does not stand out or disrupt the norms. By adding in the red towel, Piper becomes a loud distraction from the day. Piper employs a similar method in *Self Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features* 1981. In this, Piper calls the viewer’s attention to her “negroid features” that she has intentionally made more than they are. Piper points out the physical features that seem to define her as a “black woman” while pushing away that title. Similarly, in *Catalysis IV*, Piper assumes the role of a modest, white, woman, and distorts the image by adding a bright red towel.

While exploring explicit themes of homelessness in *Catalysis V*, Piper went to Donnell Library in Midtown Manhattan, directly across from the Metropolitan Museum of Art and played pre-recorded belches on a tape recorder she carried on her person. Piper walked through the racks and conducted research while the tape recorder played at full volume. Located at 20 W 53rd Street, Donnell Library is known for one of the largest collections of non-English materials. The library frequently organizes free exhibits and cultural events and is open to the public. The library also attracts a large number of homeless that seek shelter inside. Piper notes that some cold days she could not find a seat as the library was so packed (Araya). Piper did not change her dress, smell, or mannerisms while in Donnell. Piper did however bring in uninvited and rude noise to a quiet institution.

In the winter months of 1970 and 1971, Adrian Piper’s *Catalysis VI* had her tie Mickey Mouse balloons to her teeth, nose, and ears and then walk through Central Park, the lobby of the Plaza hotel during the late afternoon and rode the B and D trains during morning rush hours. In Central Park, passersby pointed and laughed at Piper as if she were some amusement. The Plaza
Hotel, known for catering to wealthy guests exclusively, ignored Piper. She passed through the lobby seemingly unnoticed. In the rush hour subway lines, Piper recalls difficulty not being caught by the closing doors but not much attention being paid to her balloons.

The high volume and open spaces of Central Park should have provided Piper an opportunity to blend in as a homeless or insane person. On the contrary, in the Plaza Hotel, social norms expect the staff of the Plaza to protect their high-class guests from the low class by immediately removing threats. Instead, Piper was ignored and left to her own devices until she left the building (Araya). Piper performed each catalytic event for no more than an hour, eventually leaving and returning home. Afterwards, Piper noted the difficulty of carrying the balloons around tied to her teeth as they cut into her gums and made her bleed.

Piper’s final catalytic event, *Catalysis VII*, included chewing a large wad of bubble gum while walking through a Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition entitled “Before Cortes.” As Piper explored the exhibition, she continuously chewed and popped the gum, causing pieces of it to stick to her face and clothing. Seemingly oblivious to the gum, Piper stayed in the Metropolitan for half an hour before leaving. Guards reportedly watched her cautiously but museumgoers paid Piper little attention. The disregard Piper displays for the ancient artworks in the exhibition alludes to an attempt to call out museum culture on capitalizing on artwork stolen and the conservation of that art for further consumption. By putting the pieces of art at immediate risk, Piper taunts the show’s organizers and the Metropolitan.

*Catalysis* refers to an action of change between two forces initiated by a catalyst. In Piper’s experimentation, she becomes a catalyst in an attempt to enact change socially and racially. Each catalytic event utilizes a combination of differing locations and sensory stimulations to enact a social change. In the cases of *Catalysis III, V, VI, and VII*, Piper engages
with public spaces associated with consumerist and leisure focused values. Piper directly confronts those values by inserting herself into the spaces in a highly detracting manner. In the moment, the action intentionally calls the audience’s attention to something beyond their own thought process or space. In the Plaza Hotel, Piper’s balloons physically invade the guests of the hotel’s space while also making loud noises. In Macy’s while wearing both a sign reading “Wet Paint” and being covered in wet paint, Piper challenges the consumerist nature of the store and the people that inhabit it to look beyond their personal gains. As John Bowles argues for Piper’s early structuring, Piper’s practices allowed her to “develop and ultimately deploy her body as a site of self-reflexive critique in the viewer” (Driscoll). Rather than function consciously as an agent of change, Piper attempts to translate herself into the art object in order to catalyze those around her.

In order to function as a flaneur during the catalytic events, Piper must fulfill a crucial requirement; be a member of those she wishes to catalyze. Born into a middle class family, Piper grew up in Washington Heights section of Manhattan, New York, attending well-ranked schools early on. Furthermore, Piper frequently passed for a white woman, despite being African American. Her ability to blend in and make critical judgments of the consumerist classes she grew up in enables her to function as a social catalyst. Piper makes critical observations pertaining to New York life, the highly trafficked roads, subway lines, well-to-do neighborhoods, and institutions and blends in with the normal constituents of those institutions. Piper then can, and does, alter physical portions of her self in order to function as a catalyst.

Rather than explore specifics of gender identity or racial identity, Piper focuses on repulsiveness in the immediate senses to hide her. In Catalysis I, fellow passengers were repulsed and drawn to Piper. Her immediate pungency attracted their attention but also brought
up an interesting point, none of them wanted to interact with Piper. Her offensive odors made those in her surroundings very aware of her and all the more likely to ignore her. The conscious ignoring of Piper implies an awareness of her as an object within the space. Piper continues to explore sensory stimulus through color and surface in *Catalysis III*, form in *Catalysis IV* and *VI* and sound in *Catalysis V* (Araya). Piper ceases to be a person and becomes an amorphous object over the course of the *Catalysis* series.

As an art object, Piper attempts to totally remove her conscious self from the work. While riding a subway for *Catalysis I*, Piper recalls holding monologues with herself to maintain the insane persona. As people approached her, Piper tried to maintain consistency in the dialogue without shifting to acknowledge the person. Piper struggled against resuming consciousness and leaving her role as the object (Lippard). Only after returning home does Piper resume her identity as “Adrian Piper.” While wearing the soaked clothing, she is an object, a symbol inside of the crowded subway representing a homeless, potentially insane person. Piper ceases to exist in this moment, perfectly assimilating with her persona. As Piper takes on the homeless role, she creates a new version of the flaneur; one founded in the typical middle class and consumerist lifestyle that then highlights the byproducts of consumerism. The artist becomes an observer of consumerism, an active participant of the masses, and an art object.

Prior to *Catalysis*, Piper theorized that life activities could be and were art. The acts of walking, taking public transit, shopping, eating etc. were all an art form. These theories developed with the rise of conceptualism and performance art meaning Piper developed as an artist as performance art became an accepted medium of change. Piper’s utilization of commonplace activities as unique art objects enabled her to focus on the gray area in between tangible and abstraction.
By engaging in walks throughout New York, Piper turns her work into a practice in mindfulness\(^4\). Piper remains absent in her catalytic practices intentionally so as to not engage with her audience as Adrian Piper but rather as an art object. In removing herself, Piper reaches a heightened state of enlightenment, a crucial point in meditative practices. Piper’s removal is not without distractions as she notes on multiple points audience members approaching her and her efforts to not engage (Lippard). In some instances, Piper makes eye contact or attempts to direct her inner meditative dialogue towards the audience but does not break form. By donning the guise of the art object, Piper is able to simultaneously exist as the art object and as the flaneur observing her surroundings.

The separation of Piper’s mental and physical selves into two forms creates a barrier between Piper’s true, or mental, self and her physical body. This allows Piper to focus less on her outward appearance and more on what defines her as a conscious form. The focus Piper places upon her mental self strongly resonates of the rise of Western mindful practices in the 1970’s\(^5\) as well as the emphasis placed upon mental health awareness. Arguably, Piper roles in *Catalysis* call the audience’s attention to a lack of care for homeless suffering from mental health problems. However, Piper elected not to document much of *Catalysis* and her intentions in the moment are still unknown\(^6\). Piper chose to focus on the art not as an object designed for consumption but rather for the sake of art. Interestingly, this practice predates the rise of conceptual art and first comes to mind with the writings of philosopher Immanuel Kant.

In 1981, Adrian Piper graduated from Harvard University with a Ph.D. in Philosophy, with a focus on Immanuel Kant’s theories in Ethics and Metaethics. While Piper’s dissertation on Kantian philosophy is over morality, her performance work in *Catalysis* implies a familiarity with Kant’s writings on aesthetic beauty. In Kant’s major work *Critique of Judgment*, he outlines
a structure by which beauty and artistic value are determined. The premise of Kant’s argument revolves around art as an object created for the sake of being art, not for consumption. Kant argues for art as aesthetically beautiful when it serves just as art, not as a consumerist product. Adrian Piper’s walks in New York carried her through major consumer centers but did not participate in the traditional sense. Piper’s disguises called attention to her exterior appearance but were not designed for the consumption of her audience. In several instances, Piper noted that her work was not meant for an audience but rather as a function of merely existing. *Catalysis*, in short, was for Piper’s sake. Her attempt to become an art object was not for her audience to appreciate or not appreciate her work but rather for Piper’s catalytic event to exist.

As Piper explored philosophical themes in *Catalysis*, she made sure to keep the focus not on the audience’s reception of her work but rather on the work itself. Piper intentionally restricted documentation of *Catalysis* to focus on the events in the present. As each catalytic event came and went, Piper continued on with her day. The events, whether they enacted change or did not, still happened despite lack of documentation. *Catalysis* was not for the consumption of an audience after the fact and documentation would only enable some form of consumption by Piper’s audience. Interestingly, by restricting her audience from consuming her work, Piper furthers her role as the flaneur in New York. Were Piper to call attention to the *Catalysis* series, she would in effect remove her guise as the flaneur that observes and is at once a part of the society that she makes a commentary on. By not documenting *Catalysis*, Piper almost becomes an activist for change rather than an artist. Her work blurs lines between art, catalyzing change, and merely studies in meditative practices.
Bibliography


Smith, Cherise. “Re-Member the Audience: Adrian Piper's Mythic Being Advertisements.” Art

1 The final *Catalysis* event numbered VII implies 7 total events but Piper does not recall *Catalysis II* and no print publications contain any information (Araya).

2 The *Hypothesis Series* was the beginnings of Piper’s foray into philosophical studies. In these writings and pieces, Piper explores simple actions, such as walking, as sublime. This is also the beginning of Piper’s insertion of her yogi practices into art as she shifts focus less towards abstract concepts to hone in on being present in the moment, in the walk.

3 Piper first became politically active at a time when performance art was an acceptable means of engaging the public in diverse subjects.

4 “Mindfulness is the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we’re doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what’s going on around us” (Guyaux).

5 The founding of the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in 1975 amongst other organizations marked the rise of mindful practices in the West (Selva).

6 In an interview, Piper recalls *Catalysis* being a study and practice in her events but not something that needed documentation. Her intentional lack of documentation allowed her to focus on the catalytic events and less on the acknowledgement of each art work as a piece of art. She performed art for art’s sake (Araya).