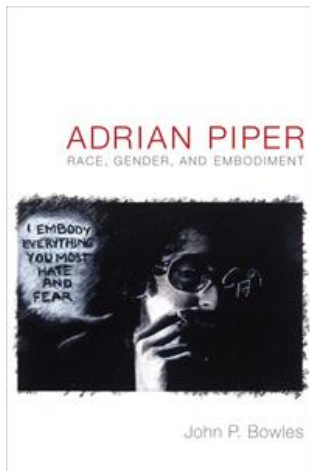


Adrian Piper: Race, Gender, and Embodiment, by John P. Bowles Duke University Press, March 2011. 352 p. ill. alk. ISBN 9780822349204 (pbk.), \$25.95: ISBN 9780822348962 (cl.), \$94.95.



John P. Bowles, Associate Professor of African American Art at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, begins his meticulously researched tome with the question, “how do we accept responsibility for the world in which we live?” Bowles suggests this moral inquiry is not only central to his scholarly investigation but also Adrian Piper’s artistic practice. The book itself then acts as an answer to this question inasmuch as it provides readers the opportunity to reevaluate their understanding of Piper’s work and how that informs the broader context of contemporary art history, race, and gender.

The book structure consists of two main sections arranged chronologically and representative of the major thematic shifts Bowles sees in Piper’s career. The first, “The Paradox of the Black Woman Conceptual Artist,” includes two chapters focusing on Piper’s works between 1965 and 1970.

During this early period, Piper was producing art that she refers to as “abstraction,” but Bowles firmly places it into two categories: Minimalism and Conceptual Art. These works lack any direct reference to the artist’s identity, but rather focuses on the object and/or information as a way of forcing the viewer to consider their own experience with the artwork.

The second section, “Personal Politics and Performance Art,” delves into the work for which Piper is best known—performance based projects between 1970 and 1975. The work included in these remaining four chapters reflects Piper’s realization that she was not able to make art void of any reference to her personal identity as an African American women in relation to the specific social realities she encountered daily. How others read her identity immediately impacted how her work was interpreted and received by audiences and critics alike. Also influenced by the political and social movements of the time, Piper began to engage directly with her audience as a way of challenging their involvement in perceptions of identity.

It is clear from his writing that Bowles has found meaningful insight through a decade long dialog between author and artist, yet he still finds his own way of thinking about Piper’s art. Bowles has produced a thought provoking and well-formulated explication of Piper’s artistic output. While there is much written about Piper, there are few volumes dedicated exclusively to such a complete investigation of her artistic career. It is a great addition to contemporary art scholarship, and is therefore recommended for any academic or research library that supports such pursuits. It contains an extensive bibliography, an index, and over sixty illustrations including sixteen color plates.

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