Book Reviews

PIPER, ADRIAN. *Out of Order, Out of Sight.* MIT Press, 1996. Vol. 1, *Selected Writings in Meta-Art, 1968–1992,* xxxx + 371 pp., 42 b&w + 2 color illus.; Vol. 2, *Selected Writings in Art Criticism, 1967–1992,* xxxvi + 323 pp., 42 b&w + 2 color illus.; $40 each volume, $80 set, cloth.

There has been an important artist in our midst. Her work is about gender, race, and the internal structures of the artworld, and it predated the current popularity of those topics in theoretical circles by three decades. She has produced conceptual and performance art (as well as drawing and photography) that document delicate nuances of the personal construction of identity and its inevitable—and controversial—attendant politics in the larger social arena. Her work has addressed issues of "passing" and "crossing," topics that have come to dominate the work of Susan Gubar (*Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture*) and Werner Sollors (*Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interrracial Literature*), for example.

Piper's volumes serve two functions. Volume 1, *Selected Writings in Meta-Art, 1968–1992,* provides an intimate history of the development of her own creative art making, while volume 2, *Selected Writings in Art Criticism, 1967–1992,* chronicles her more public responses to art-critical writings. Together they form an intense (and immense) document of a practicing, successful artist who is exceptionally articulate and hence interesting to read. (Students should find essays from these volumes particularly valuable in aesthetics classes.) It is no coincidence that her deep commitment to making political art—in which the artist is an agent of social change—functions in tandem with her scholarly pursuits in Kantian ethics. (She began studying philosophy in 1970.) As a professor at Wellesley College, she is situated in a unique position, even among artists. She intelligently crosses between the worlds of philosophy and art. It will be interesting to track how different critics respond.

A foreword by the art critic Robert Storr casts the book as a "narrative"—a "mid-life memoir"—the story of the education of an artist with an "undeterable will to explain": "It is the tale of the artist's passage from the hypothetical objectivity of disinterested aesthetics to the complex subjectivity of someone whose global view is consciously qualified by an ever increasing awareness of her fluid but finally inescapable 'specialness'" (vol. 1, p. xv). Her specialness is both innate and acquired. It resides in being able to *pass* as white due to light skin and to *cross* (over) into male masquerade when skillfully donning an Afro wig and macho walk. Her fluidity allows her to go back and forth—to traverse uncharted boundaries—and to make the experience of that peculiar fluidity the substance of her art and writing.

In more concrete terms, volume 1 charts "The Metaphysics of Conceptual Art" from the late 1960s, when she was a student of Sol LeWitt, through her 1970–1975 street performances ("Catalysis"), some of which included her appearing as a male "Mythic Being," through the incorporation of growing political concerns into actualized physical structures (1975–1982), into the exploratory phase of "Racism, Racial Stereotyping, and Xenophobia" (1983–1992). She is painfully candid throughout; she is exposed and vulnerable but still strong and confident, especially given the social spheres in which she counts as "minority," an aberration, an exception to the rule. (One essay in this section is entitled, "The Joy of Marginality;" another, in volume 2, is titled, "The Triple Negation of Colored Women Artists.")

Her stamina in withstanding artworld pressure is particularly evident in volume 2, most ardently expressed in her "Open Letter to Donald Kuspit" (1987). She rebukes him for stereotyping her as a "helplessly eloquent neurotic" (vol. 1, p. xviii), "a 'split personality'" (vol. 2, p. 122), and a narcissist (Kuspit wrote, "Philosophy is perhaps the ultimate narcissism"). Once again her specialness—this time as a philosopher—comes to the fore, enabling her to dissect his claims line by line, pointing out logical fallacies and verbal inadequacies. This is metacriti-

cism with a vengeance. It reveals an intense trust in the tools of analytic philosophy (usually anathema to artists): "logic as antidote to myth" and "reason as a way out of an impasse" (vol. 1, p. xxvi). According to Storr, Piper believes that "reason will prevail over prejudice" (vol. 1, p. xv). Other essays in volume 2—"Conceptualizing Conceptual Art" (1967–1970), "Art-World Politics" (1973–1983), and "Art-World Practice and Real-World Politics" (1984–1992)—elucidate the artist's maturing convictions in defense of political art as she *argues* for the use of reason over prejudice.

Thus her work extends beyond mere conceptualizing by crossing into self-conscious interrogation of the foundations of the artworld, its internal machinations, and its reliance on comfortable philosophical assumptions. For instance, she is well aware of the racism that has marginalized artists of color in spite of whites' blatant appropriation of African art (e.g., Picasso, earlier this century) and their late recognition of an African-American painter (Robert Colescott, age seventy) to represent the United States at the 1997 Venice Biennale. Her acknowledgment of the problem surfaces in sculptural pieces like "Four Intruders Plus Alarm Systems" (1980) which confronts viewers with their imagined responses to photographic images of hostile and aggressive-looking black men. Audio tapes play Piper's voice as she questions, confuses, and colludes with the viewers' internalized thoughts: "It seems as though this piece is meant to shock me out of my composure, and it just doesn't succeed in doing that, because what I'm looking for when I come into a gallery is an art experience. I'm looking for an aesthetic experience: something that I can judge in terms of aesthetic standards, and this is just not that aesthetically interesting" (vol. 1, p. 183). Juxtaposing political opinions and racist remarks with seemingly apolitical aesthetic judgments challenges basic philosophical notions like disinterestedness and pleasure, and pushes traditional dichotomies, e.g., the aesthetic-nonaesthetic distinction, into a defensive mode.

Volume 2 continues this theme when Piper confronts the "nightmare" of "cultural racism." In "Ways of Averting One's Gaze" (1988), she analyzes the language of designation—terms like Negro, black, persons of color—preferring the term "colored" "for its simplicity, accuracy, and conceptual and metaphorical possibilities" (vol. 2, p. 127). The many ways that persons are labeled, identified, stereotyped, and oppressed is an issue broader than the artworld. But it becomes an issue of the artworld when it is narrowed down to the microcosm of how critics berate "colored art" for lacking universal appeal and relevance. Piper's response is unconditional: "there is no universal conversation about Art to get on with. There are only particular conversations in particular idiolects, some of which pretend to universality, some of which do not" (vol. 2, p. 145). Furthermore (as she addresses fellow artists and students), artists who worry about being "ghettoized" through "association with their comrades in race or gender overlook the ghettoized nature of the circles to which they aspire" (vol. 2, p. 146). Everyone lives in a ghetto, including the critics. The bottom line is that the viewers' response that Piper anticipates in "Four Intruders"—for all its denial of racism—is as politically based as the critics' response about the insularity of colored art. Philosophers, we presume, form part of the circle of critics and every circle is closed. As Piper concludes, "Escape from the ghetto is impossible" (vol. 2, p. 146).

It is interesting to compare an artist like Piper with someone enjoying a considerable amount of success for his well-publicized turn toward philosophy. Mark Tansey began his signature style of painting in 1980, and he has been described as intellectual (by Arthur Danto), witty (by Robert Hughes), and "the master of mordant polemical paintings about modernist art theory and deconstruction" (by Phoebe Hoban; all quoted in "The Wheel Turns: Painting Paintings About Painting," *The New York Times,* April 27, 1997). He is an artist whose work, by 1984, had already been acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney, and the Museum of Modern Art. Is it coincidence that he is a white male? Are the judgments that have launched him to such heights purely aesthetic?

Adrian Piper provides readers with a first-hand account of someone who, like other African-American artists, worries about "being eradicated from the annals of mainstream art history" (vol. 1, p. xxvii). Her story is fascinating, but not an easy read. A suggested approach is to consult these volumes as records of someone who has amply documented what it means to *be* an artist *in* an artworld context and a philosopher in a time of important transitions in racial politics (hence her section entitled "Art-World Practice and Real-World Politics"). Xenophobia and Kantian rationalism have never been brought together in this way in the artworld before. *Out of Order, Out of Sight* will challenge your skepticism as to whether *she* is the CWA (colored woman artist) who can pull it off.

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