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Grounds of Identity:
The Performance of Gender and Race in Adrian Piper's *Mythic Being* Posters

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Today was the first day of school. The only decent boys in my class are Robbie and Clyde. I

think I like Clyde.

It was 1973 and Adrian Piper walked the streets of Cambridge repeating this

mantra. She wore loose men's clothing, an afro wig, and dark sunglasses for the street

performance, which was one of the early pieces of the *Mythic Being* project (1973-1976).

Piper created the Mythic Being in an experiment with the boundaries of race, gender,

and sexuality, exploring the possibility that such identifications could be performative,

not innate, and thus fundamentally insecure. The project consisted of street

performances, staged photographic documentation, and a series of pictures the artist

took of herself in character that she drew over with oil crayon and circulated in multiple

formats: they were exhibited independently, altered for submission to the *Village Voice*

as advertisements, and modified and turned into posters. *Mythic Being* thus offered Piper

a variety of forms and procedures with which to explore the ways that identities—

particularly those tied to race and gender—are both experienced and constructed

visually.

Analysis of the project, however, tends to hew closely to Piper's personal

experiences as the Mythic Being, subordinating the work to the artist's biographical

relationship to the character and giving primacy to the street performances over the

photographs and prints. This is not wholly without reason: each aspect of *Mythic Being* is

linked to Piper's body, and can thus be understood as a performative act by the artist,

and her engagement with questions of identity insists that we consider the work from

her particular subject position. Piper's published notes on the project are also primarily

focused on her plans for the street performances and reactions to being out in public as

the Mythic Being.[1] And while *Mythic Being* was completed just after Piper had achieved

some recognition in the late 1960s as a conceptual artist, it faded from mainstream

critical attention along with the rest of her work until the '90s, when multiculturalism

brought new interest to the identity issues the project confronts. This interest remained

restricted to the work's content, often described as aggressive or confrontational, and its

relationship to the artist as a personality. For example, Lucy Lippard commented, "The

Mythic Being was often hostile or threatening. He offered his creator a way of being both

self and other, of escaping or exorcising her past and permitting her to re-form herself."[2]

This emphasis on subject matter and biography has persisted until quite

recently,[3] coming largely at the cost of attention to Piper's procedures and contributing

to the elision of the printed elements of the project into the street performances. But

while each aspect of *Mythic Being* depicts the same character and can be understood as

functioning in concert, there are dramatic differences in form that call for specific

interpretation. This essay performs a close reading of the poster series made by drawing

over photographs, demonstrating that Piper's destabilization of identity occurs on the

surface of the images, and that this formal engagement is what radicalizes the work's

message. In the posters, Piper uses oil crayon to manipulate the already uncertain

relationship of figure to ground in photography as a strategy for undermining the

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[1] Adrian Piper, "Notes on the Mythic Being I-III," in *Out of Order, Out of Sight* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996), 117–139. (Parts I and II were first published in 1976.) Piper's many published texts on her own work tend to loom as an authoritative voice, but are best treated as a resource that can be simultaneously useful and misleading.
[2] Lucy R. Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 44.
[3] Renewed interest in Piper's work from the 1960s and '70s has resulted in several more thoughtful studies, including John Bowles' *Adrian Piper: Race, Gender, and Embodiment* (2011), and Cherise Smith's chapter on Piper in *Enacting Others* (2011), both cited in this text. Also see Kobena Mercer's "Adrian Piper, 1970-1975: Exiled on Main Street" in *Exiles, Diasporas & Strangers* (2008), and Pamela Franks's "Conceptual Rigor and Political Efficacy, Or, The Making of Adrian Piper" in *Witness to Her Art* (2006).

security of subject positions; it is thus Piper's rigorous attention to both procedure and form, not her confrontational tone, that makes the work effective.

      The 1974 series *The Mythic Being: I/You (Her)* (Figure 1) unspools over ten images. Each print starts with the same photograph of a smiling, young Piper with another young woman peering over her shoulder, just barely emerging from the curls of Piper's hair. The pair are crammed into the bottom left corner of the photograph, and the expansive black space that surrounds them contrasts sharply with their over-exposed faces. In the dark space of each panel, Piper has drawn a white speech bubble that describes an intimate confrontation. "You hurt me, and betrayed my trust, and for that I will never forgive you" the narrator says in an early frame, and then later on, "I perceive that, now, you are no more capable of trusting me than I am of trusting you." It is tempting to read the text as Piper speaking to the person behind her, but as the title of the series underscores, Piper's persistent use of the floating signifiers "I" and "you" maintains ambiguity in the speaking subject. Similarly, the Mythic Being mantras refuse to be anchored to one speaker. Piper chose them by selecting lines from her lifelong diaries ("Robbie and Clyde" is cited as September 21, 1961), and they thus often have an intimate, girlish tone that conflicts with the swaggering masculinity that she performs. This tension not only highlights the Mythic Being's condition as both *of* (as in from or about) Piper and *not* Piper, but also sets up a vacillation between Piper, the Mythic Being, and the audience as potential speakers, particularly when she uses them in print. Reading the mantras, the viewer can imagine him or herself liking Clyde, just as the viewer can become the betrayed "I" or the betraying "you" when reading the texts in *I/You (Her)*.

However, the use of "her" in the title of the series (the pronoun never appears in the text itself) does force us to attend to the gender specificity of the images, which Piper also underscores elsewhere in the text. "Our femininity itself can never be a point of contact between us," the narrator declares. But her language turns to sexuality to destabilize expected gender positions: "I might indulge with pleasure in lovemaking fantasies about you. But you will never elicit an emotional commitment from me." The ostensibly female speaker's expression of erotic desire coupled with emotional unavailability disrupts heteronormative expectations for female relationships, claiming a stereotypically male sexual aggression and emphasizing the fluidity of the speaker, its ability to make feminine and masculine identifications. This shifting occurs visually as Piper draws in the Mythic Being's features over her own face, panel by panel. While this change normalizes the speaker's sexuality—if it is the masculine Mythic Being speaking, then expressing an aggressive desire for a woman is not transgressive—it also visually performs Piper's linguistic ambivalence toward gender, suggesting the third person "her" may now not only be the betrayer, but also the image of the artist, who has achieved this subjective distance through the doubling of gender identification.

Piper's process of drawing over photographs performs a similar destabilization of race. The extreme lights and shadows in the beginning of the series make both girls appear Caucasian, which is at first unremarkable, but becomes more salient as Piper draws in shadows to deepen her own skin tone and exaggerate racially-charged features like the breadth of her nose. And as she sketches in darker hues and stronger lines, the Mythic Being slowly emerges. By the seventh image his signature sunglasses have appeared as wire frames, flirting with bookishness, but in the next image they are shaded in, providing a cool veneer that protects their wearer from the strong emotions

expressed in the text. Then, in the final two images, a mustache appears, the afro is fully

shaded in, and Piper's transformation into the Mythic Being appears complete.

But this uncertain metamorphosis—the artist, whose disguise is not fully

convincing, wavers between herself and her character—isn't accomplished just by

drawing the Mythic Being's features over her own. Throughout the ten images, Piper

plays with photography's already uncertain relationship between figure and ground. The

photograph has a tendency to flatten an object or body into its environment, and the

"wrong" lighting—that which leaves a hazy blur or causes extreme lights or darks in the

figures to be swallowed into the background—can hopelessly confuse these boundaries.

Piper's shading exacerbates this condition, pulling the dark ground over both figures. By

the last few images, as the Mythic Being overtakes the artist, his growing afro almost

totally obscures the other young woman's face: the visual effect is of the Being steadily

emerging out of the background and pulling the girls in, rather than simply being

layered over them. This distinction is important because it deploys the "radical mobility"

of figure and ground[4] in the image to suggest a similar mobility between masculine and

feminine, white and black, in Piper herself: the Mythic Being is more than a character

that Piper doffs and dons to conceal a more real self. Rather than suggest a masking of

some essential raced or gendered identity, the *Mythic Being* project points to the fluidity

of such identifications, and the shifting between figure and ground in works like *I/You*

(Her) functions as a visual metaphor for this fundamental instability. *I/You (Her)* thus

exhibits a close link between Piper's procedures and the work's messaging or speech.

And contrary to oft-repeated narratives that posit a significant break between Piper's

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[4] David Joselit, "Mark Morrisroe's Photographic Masquerade," in *Boston School*, by Lia Gangitano, Milena Kalinovska, and Institute of Contemporary Art Boston (Boston, Mass.: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1995), 73. In this essay, David Joselit points out that the photograph's inherent tendency to destabilize figure and ground lends itself to the performance of gender, which I will return to below.

early conceptual work and post-1970 political work, I believe that this intimate relationship between procedure, form, and subject is at the core of Piper's entire practice.

While attending the School of Visual Arts in 1966 and '67, Piper produced minimalist work that tended toward abstraction, including rectangular drawings, shaped canvases, and other pieces exploring the basic conventions of representation. Then in 1968, the artist encountered a Sol LeWitt installation and responded by immersing herself in conceptualism. According to John Bowles, this was when Piper began making work that aimed to provoke critical self-reflection, building on her conviction that "rational consciousness depends upon vision."[5] Her early conceptual works are extremely analytic, but later that year Piper began to integrate her growing interest in sociopolitical events with a series in which she collaged topographical maps of Utah's Dugway Proving Grounds over sections of the Manhattan subway (Figure 2). The *Utah-Manhattan Transfers* confront a question that lingered in the press following a military accident in the Proving Grounds: if this could happen in the desert, could it also happen in a densely populated city? Such political engagement was, at the time, as unusual for Piper as it was for her conceptualist peers, and she maintained an element of formal minimalism by abstracting the map sections so that only the most astute viewer could identify their locations. Although this stripped *Transfers* of the direct messaging that is characteristic of her later work, the project gave Piper room to explore how the self-reflexive analysis provoked by conceptual art might take on a social dimension.

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[5] John P. Bowles, *Adrian Piper: Race, Gender, and Embodiment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 44. For a more full discussion of Piper's minimalist and conceptual years, see section one of this text.

According to the dominant narrative of her practice, which is promoted by the artist herself, Piper experienced a political awakening in 1970 that led to a radical shift in her work. In part, the artist credits this to the climate of social activism in the U.S. forcing her out of "aesthetic isolation."[6] This was also the time when Piper's personal relationship with the art community changed. In the late 1960s, she had achieved a measure of success, exhibiting her work in important New York venues and major museum surveys of conceptual art.[7] Then, in the early 1970s, Piper describes experiencing a systematic exclusion from the art world. Previously, Piper's name had afforded her a certain degree of anonymity—"Adrian" is also a man's name, and "Piper" carries no specific racial connotations, thus easily lending her the "neutral" status of middle class whiteness—and she believes that it was the discovery of her blackness and femininity that led to her abrupt disappearance from exhibition and publishing. The artist recalls magazine articles both by and about her being disinvited, as well as critics and curators who simply stopped promoting her work.[8]

Forced to confront what Piper calls the "politics of my position," it was at this point that she embarked on the exploration of race and gender that would come to characterize her practice. Cherise Smith argues that the way that Piper engaged with these issues reflects the degree to which identity was essentialized in the 1970s.[9] Piper's own words seem to support this claim when she writes about doing "a lot of thinking about my position as an artist, a woman, and a black; and about the natural

[6] Adrian Piper, "Talking to Myself: The Ongoing Autobiography of an Art Object," in *Out of Order, Out of Sight* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996), 30.
[7] These include the Paula Cooper and Dwan Galleries, *557,087* at the Seattle Art Museum (1969), and *Information* at MOMA (1970).
[8] Adrian Piper, "Introduction: Some Very FORWARD Remarks," in *Out of Order, Out of Sight* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996), xxxv.
[9] Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere Smith* (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2011), 39–40.

disadvantages of those attributes."[10] The phrase "natural disadvantages" suggests that there are qualities that are "natural" to women and black people, an assumption that had not yet come under intense scrutiny and may well have been what Piper was thinking at the time. However, the formal work performed by *Mythic Being*, especially when Piper deployed photography and drawing, actually undermines any innateness in these positions by disrupting our ability to make secure identifications, either as observers or within ourselves.

Around the time of her growing interest in politics and social justice, Piper started inserting her own (raced and gendered) body into her work. One of her early efforts was the *Catalysis* series (1970-1971), in which Piper went out in public with a towel hanging out of her mouth (Figure 3), balloons stuffed under her clothes, smelling of rotting food, etc., and observed how her condition affected her interactions. Piper's early writing on the series simply described it as a critique of passive viewership, and in a 1972 interview with Lippard she claimed that the work was "completely apolitical." Looking back, however, we can see how the performances engaged the social norms that dictate public behavior: the reactions provoked by the absurdity of a towel hanging out of her mouth refer back to the subtler reactions that may be provoked by the assumptions that accompany perceptions of the artist's race and gender. And Piper did discuss the project in indirectly feminist terms, telling Lippard how the uncomfortable process affected her self-image as a woman: "the work is a product of me as an individual, and the fact that I am a woman surely has a lot to do with it. You know, here I

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[10] Piper, "Talking to Myself: The Ongoing Autobiography of an Art Object," 31.

am, or was, 'violating my body'; I was making it public. I was turning myself into an object."[11]

This movement from the analytic early works to performative and confrontational projects like *Catalysis* is usually ascribed to Piper's 1970 political awakening; thus the idea of a dramatic break in her practice. But *Catalysis* is not really the first time Piper took up social concerns. As we've seen, the *Utah-Manhattan Transfers* touched directly on current events, and Bowles has identified the 1968-1970 *Hypothesis* series as a feminist challenge to minimalism's universalist ideals.[12] However, more important than any continuity of subject matter is the degree to which the techniques that Piper developed as a conceptual artist continue to inform and shape her practice. Pamela Franks suggests that we view this transition period as movement along a continuum in which the procedures of the conceptual work help Piper maintain a rigorous relationship between form and content, which is what makes her later political messaging effective.[13] This is evident even in such seemingly disparate projects as the *Utah-Manhattan Transfer* maps and the *Catalysis* performances as Piper explores different ways to challenge her viewer to reflect critically, first on spaces and then on people: how and why am I reading this map becomes how and why am I having this interaction.

The effort to provoke people into a reflexive examination of their observations and reactions has become increasingly central to Piper's practice, and the *Mythic Being*

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[11] Lucy Lippard and Adrian Piper, "Catalysis: An Interview with Adrian Piper," *The Drama Review: TDR* 16, no. 1 (March 1, 1972): 78. Just as I want to approach the artist's writing with skepticism, it is, of course, also important not to take the artist's speech as a strict key to the meaning of her work.

[12] Bowles, *Adrian Piper*, 33. Also see chapter two of this text.

[13] Pamela Franks, "Conceptual Rigor and Political Efficacy, Or, The Making of Adrian Piper," in *Witness to Her Art: Art and Writings by Adrian Piper, Mona Hatoum, Cady Noland, Jenny Holzer, Kara Walker, Daniela Rossell and Eau de Cologne*, ed. Rhea Anastas and Michael Brenson (Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y.: Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, 2006), 82.

project was one of Piper's first efforts to use direct address to accomplish this. In the newspaper ads and posters, Piper challenges the viewer to consider his or her role in the formation of stereotypes through a semiotic link between the artist's pose—the Mythic Being staring directly out from the page, or standing and looming over the camera—and the repetition of the pronoun "you." For example, in the eighth panel of *I/You (Her)*, the text declares that "from the fact of my appearance you jumped to the wrong conclusion, as you always do," thus placing the responsibility for the artist's experience of discrimination, as well as her visual transformation, on the viewer. The most well-known of the *Mythic Being* posters is even more direct, emblazoned with the phrase "I embody everything you most hate and fear" (Figure 4).[14] In the performances, Piper confronts her audience in much the same way that she did with *Catalysis*: going out on the street and provoking interaction and, hopefully, reflection through the sheer fact of her presence. And in many photographs of the street performances, we actually see Piper acting out young "ethnic" male stereotypes, cruising white women (Figure 5) or staging a mugging of one of her friends.

Piper's notes on her experiences of walking in public as the Mythic Being also explore the private psychological effects of inhabiting another race/gender identity. Reflecting on a 1973 performance in which she traveled to the Lincoln Center chanting the mantra at the top of this essay, Piper observes, "…I found myself deliberately aping more 'masculine' body movements and behavior to be convincing. I deliberately contemplated a sexploitation film ad for a few minutes…Felt really horny. If I'd had a

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[14] Piper would occasionally pick up this format again after *Mythic Being*. For example, *Self-Portrait as a Nice White Lady* (1995), features a head shot of Piper in which she appears conservative and racially-ambiguous, wearing a flat expression and gazing coolly out at the camera. The artist colored the background red to heighten the black and white tones of the image, and the thought bubble above her head demands, "Whut choo looking at, mofo."

cock I would've surely had an erection."[15] And thus the Mythic Being begins to take on an

independent identity: no longer a masculine side of Adrian Piper, he is the man Mythic

Being, but in the process he has become essentialized down to the visual and

performative markers of masculinity and blackness. By not only donning the afro, the

cigar, and the sunglasses, but also adopting an aggressive posture and masculine

swagger, sitting on the subway with her shoulders lifted and her legs spread to

accommodate her "protruding genitalia,"[16] Piper identified a series of generalized signs

for "young black man" that she could appropriate on and with her body. Later, the artist

wrote, "Recently, I have become more preoccupied with the iconography, with the

Mythic Being as a marker, sign, or symbol of the Mythic Being himself: the abstract

entity, the semifictional hero who exists partly in me and partly independent of me."[17]

The way this both distances Piper from the character and abstracts the identifications

she claims in order to inhabit him is, of course, potentially very problematic. As Smith

points out, defining the Mythic Being as a collection of simple visual and behavioral

markers reduces the qualities of blackness and masculinity themselves to an over-

determined "set of signs" that are freely available to the artist. This ignores and even

occludes the historical and lived experiences of black men, potentially perpetuating the

same stereotyping and uncritical reactions that Piper devoted the project to exposing

and resisting.[18]

      But while treating race and gender characteristics as a costume essentializes

identities that are not her own, when Piper uses drawing and photography to

manipulate her performance of race-and-gender drag, she is able to trouble these easy

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[15] Adrian Piper, "Preparatory Notes for The Mythic Being," in *Out of Order, Out of Sight* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996), 104.
[16] Piper, "Notes on the Mythic Being I-III," 117.
[17] Ibid., 123.
[18] Smith, *Enacting Others*, 51.

identifications. In a 1975 five-part series, *The Mythic Being: I Am the Locus* (Figure 6), Piper follows the Mythic Being's movement across the street in a crowded crosswalk, subjecting the images to the same treatment as *I/You (Her)* by using oil crayon to literally draw the Mythic Being out of the crowd. In the first picture, the character is small, and would barely be discernable if she hadn't drawn a thought bubble above his head, inscribed with the phrase "I AM THE LOCUS OF CONSCIOUSNESS". In the second photograph, he stands at the midpoint, pausing to puff on his cigar. His cool stillness draws our attention in the moving crowd as much as the lines with which Piper has deepened his black clothing and hair, setting them off against the white bubble that now reads "SURROUNDED AND CONSTRAINED". In the third frame, the Mythic Being is walking with the crowd again, and has moved closer. Piper's drawing is now bleeding onto the other figures; their bodies are traced with thick, dark lines that crawl out of the background, which she has blacked out with crayon. The Being himself is almost fully drawn over with high-contrast shading that lends him a graphic appearance, and the white bubble now says "BY ANIMATE PHYSICAL OBJECTS". This phrase turns our attention to the "animate physical objects," which we can only assume to be the crowd. By labeling these people objects, Piper performs a linguistic reversal of the objectification of the black man into the Mythic Being: "surrounding and constraining" him en masse, they are de-individuated, reduced to a generalized group that he will describe in the next image as "fleshy" and "pulsating." And yet, this is the only frame in which the combined visual effects of the photograph and drawing actually prevent the crowd from bleeding together. The thick, black outlines cause a few figures in the front to stand out dramatically, and even the smaller figures at the back of the crowd, their faces barely visible, are given a new bodily specificity. This registers a wild formal oscillation between foreground and background throughout the series, as well as the

mobility and fundamental ambivalence with which Piper assigns subject-object identifications.

In the penultimate image, the crowd's back is suddenly turned to the Mythic Being (has he moved through the group on the other side of the crosswalk? Have Being and photographer relocated? It's unclear). Piper has heightened the blacks and whites in their clothing so that the white patches emerge and the black outlines give way, flattening the figures and causing the darker bodies and hair of those farthest from the lens to get sucked into the background. The white cloud has also grown and now emanates from behind the Being, giving him an ethereality that emphasizes his metaphorical distance from the people (objects) pressing around him. The text reads "WITH MOIST, FLESHY, PULSATING SURFACES…" And finally, in the last image, almost everything but the Mythic Being has faded to black, while the character himself is so thoroughly drawn over that he has become fully graphic as he moves so close to the camera that he is cropped at the waist. His body is turned away at such a slight angle that we could easily imagine him colliding with us as he pushes past, and the cloud, which has whited out the face of the figure directly behind him, now reads "GET OUT OF MY WAY, ASSHOLE".

As with *I/You (Her)*, Piper is capitalizing on the instability of the photograph's figure/ground relationship, but here this occurs on two levels: within the photograph itself, in which the Being moves toward the camera from the back of a crowd, thus staging the figure's uncertainty against the flattening ground of bodies; and in the drawn layer, with which Piper constructs a steadily darkening artificial ground that allows her to both manipulate the relationship of the "background" bodies to this space and create a false focal point that draws our attention to the Mythic Being's transition from photographic to graphic. This parallels the completion of the disguise as Piper uses

oil crayon to exaggerate the afro, sunglasses, mustache, and cigar that signify race and gender in the character. Piper thus creates a link between the shifting relationship of the Mythic Being to the bodies within the photograph and his shifting relationship to the surface of the image itself, all of which points to the instability of the either/or (black or white, male or female) identifications that she is performing, which is also flagged in the heightened contrast between black and white. And while *I/You (Her)* specifically highlights the artificiality of external perceptions of identity, by using both text and image to explore the individual's self-perception within a crowd, *I Am the Locus* suggests that these identifications are also uncertain within ourselves.

I have returned repeatedly to the relationship between figure and ground as the site of Piper's move to destabilize identity following Judith Butler's theory of masquerade.[19] In *Gender Trouble*, Butler uses the metaphor of figure and ground to discuss the role of gender identification in sexuality. Describing lesbian femme desire for butch-identified women, Butler argues that the plural objects of this desire are neither the female body taken out of context, nor a masculine identity "superimposed" over that body, but rather "the destabilization of both terms as they come into erotic interplay." The movement between feminine body and masculine identity, or masculine body and feminine identity, is what Butler calls an "inversion of ground to figure."[20]

Butler's treatment of the performance of gender identities as a manipulation of figure and ground can also be extended to race. Specifically, in *Mythic Being*, the

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[19] Joselit, "Mark Morrisroe's Photographic Masquerade," 72–73. I am indebted to Joselit for highlighting this aspect of Butler's theory and insisting that, although she uses the terms "figure" and "ground" metaphorically, the visual nature of this metaphor makes it readily available for image analysis.

[20] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 123.

nebulousness of the boundary points to both the character's ambiguity[21] and Piper's

own complex racial identification. The artist is African American, but so light-skinned

that she frequently passes for white. In her reflections on race, passing, and identity,

Piper reminds us that the notion of racial purity is fundamentally false—while the "one

drop rule" may be applied to guard the lines between white and black, human sexuality,

and thus miscegenation, will always win out.[22]

      As we've seen in Piper's aggressive swagger and imagined erections, the

eroticism of gender performance is central to *Mythic Being*, but this desire is complicated

by race. Performances like *Cruising White Women* remind us of the hysteria that has

historically surrounded social fantasies about black masculine desire for white women

(as well as the possibility that white women may desire black men), born out of the racial

fears that linger just beneath the erotics of miscegenation. There is thus a double charge

through which the sensuality of gender play is made dangerous by race play, forcing us

to consider the dual forces of attraction and fear that lead to the sexual fetishization of

difference.

      Piper explores these complex desires in the 1975 three-part series *The Mythic

Being: It Doesn't Matter* (Figure 7), in which Butler's metaphorical figure and ground

inversion again occurs on the actual surface of the image. Piper has reversed the process

of light to dark: in the first image, the Mythic Being drawing is already fully layered over

her photographed body, but now he appears as white shading over a dark ground that

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[21] Adrian Piper, "The Mythic Being: Getting Back," in *Out of Order, Out of Sight* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996), 147. In early essays such as this 1975 reflection on the *Getting Back* performance, Piper simply identified the Mythic Being as "third world," only solidifying his race as African American years later. The term "third world," which was broadly understood in the 1970s to refer to any oppressed ethnic group, thus renders the Mythic Being's race ambiguous and suggests Piper's political affiliation with leftist postcolonial politics at the time. Smith also points out that this ambiguity is part of what keeps the Mythic Being "in the *mythic* realm, rather than being tied to a *specific* place, history, or context." (Smith, *Enacting Others*, 48.)

[22] Adrian Piper, "Passing for White, Passing for Black," in *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, ed. Elaine K. Ginsberg, New Americanists (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 234–269.

pulls him back and makes everything indistinct but the outline of his hands and side of his face. He is standing, looming above the viewer, right hand lifted with that characteristic cigar perched between his fingers, while his left hand reaches down, palm out, as if to say wait or stop. A slight smile peeks out from under his mustache, and the words "IT DOESN'T MATTER WHO YOU ARE" are etched in the white cloud behind him. In the second image, this white cloud has moved down his body, rendering him in rough, smoky outlines. The background has lightened just enough for us to see the edges of a bookshelf, causing the solid, graphic certainty of the ground to waver and the image to reveal itself as a photograph. The Mythic Being's posture has also changed. Still standing above us, he has drawn his left arm across his body and under his right in a gesture that seems part defensive, part defiant, cocking his head away from the viewer. The cloud now reads, "IF WHAT YOU WANT TO DO TO ME." Finally, in the third image, the Mythic Being is fully articulated in loose, white strokes, but now the frame is cropped in close to his body so that he stands just above the viewer, placing us at groin height. He is holding the same crossed-arm posture, gazing straight down from beneath his glasses, and the text above him declares, "IS WHAT I WANT YOU TO DO FOR ME."

While Piper explores her own (vengeful) lust in *I/You (Her)*, she presents the Mythic Being as the sexual recipient in this series, highlighting Butler's point that the destabilization of masculine and feminine identities produces the objects of desire. But this also carries specific racial connotations: the hypersexualization of the black male in which he is fetishized and placed in a passive object position, while simultaneously imagined to possess a threatening, voracious libido. Piper suggests this ambivalence in the figure's shifting posture, from the "stop" hand in the first image to the downward glance of the third, which places the viewer squarely in position to perform fellatio. She also makes it explicit in the text, which plays with stereotypes of indiscriminate

masculine desire and the double position of the black man as recipient and aggressor. And by returning to the floating signifiers of "me" and "you," Piper both implicates the viewer in these fantasies and offers us the opportunity to speak, or inhabit, the Mythic Being's position.

Of course, neither text nor iconography fully secures the work's meaning. As in the other *Mythic Being* series, Piper uses drawing to emphasize the theatricality of gender and race, steadily adding detail to the character's face and body so that the qualities that exaggerate his blackness and masculinity develop along with the narrative. But while it is easy to read each series as a progressive transformation, the Mythic Being becoming ever more mythic, Piper maintains a degree of instability by constantly changing the relationship of figure to ground, causing both the solidity of the ground and the site and degree of its contact with the figure to oscillate between images. This is where the images really do their most radical formal work: not in the easy metaphor between drawing and costume, the layers of oil crayon representing, in Butler's words, "a discrete yet superimposed masculine identity," but rather in the uncertainty introduced by the figure's tendency to pulse in and out of the shadows, to be swallowed by darkness in one place and to stand out starkly in another. The surface of the image is thus where identity is exposed as a performance, where the security of masculine or feminine, black or white, is thrown into doubt, and where Piper offers the greatest visual challenge to the positions that the *Mythic Being* project seeks to undermine.

The way *Mythic Being* treats gender and race made it an awkward fit for the early 1970s art world. Piper did ensure that the work circulated within art spaces as well as outside of them: she took out *Mythic Being* ads in the gallery section of the *Village Voice* (Figure 8), exhibited the printed elements, and wore her costume to receptions, but the

project received little attention. The few contemporaneous discussions of *Mythic Being* performed a feminist analysis to the surprising exclusion of race, a silence that reflects systemic challenges faced by Piper as a black woman challenging both identifications.[23] Feminist groups emphasized a kind of gender solidarity that tended to flatten difference and erase other positions, and many black activist groups perpetuated mainstream gender relations.[24] Piper's work was also problematic for the 1970s Black Arts Movement, which called for art that unambiguously declared a black identity, typically through either claiming the visual idioms of an idealized African past or working in a protest-oriented, social realist mode. Piper's use of minimalist and conceptual strategies, turn to performance, and participation in museums and galleries placed her firmly in the "white" art world. But even more problematic was the fact that, rather than affirm an essential blackness or innate femininity, the very structure of works like *Mythic Being* undermines the stability of our race and gender identifications.

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[23] Lucy Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: Women's Body Art," *Art in America* 64, no. 3 (June 1976): 73–81.

[24] Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story*, 1st Anchor Books ed (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 191.

Figure 1. Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being: I/You (Her)*, 1974 (1-10):

The Mythic Being: I/You(Her), 5.

The Mythic Being: I/You (Her), 6.

The Mythic Being: I/You(Her), 7.

The Mythic Being: I/You (Her), 8.

The Mythic Being: I/You (Her), 9.


The Mythic Being: I/You (Her), 10.
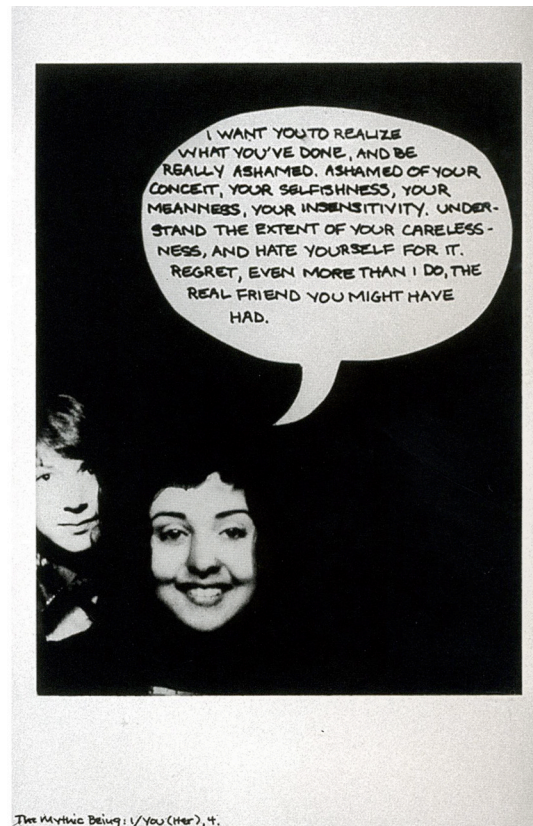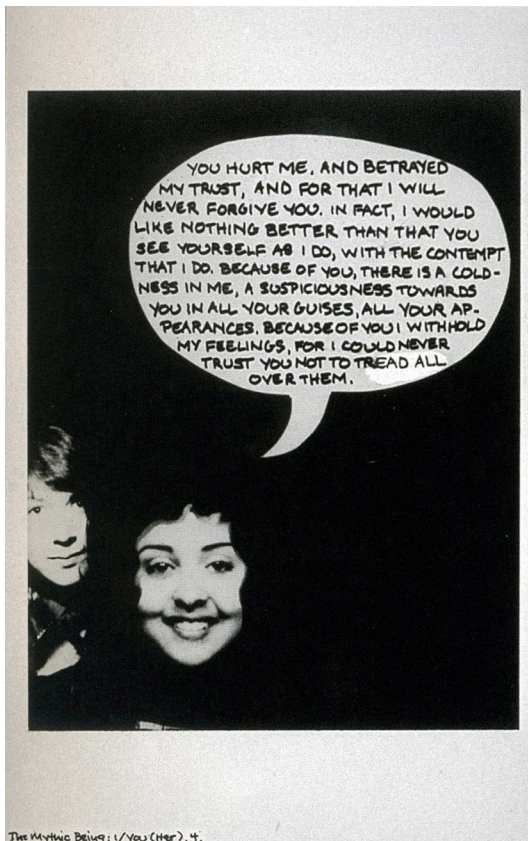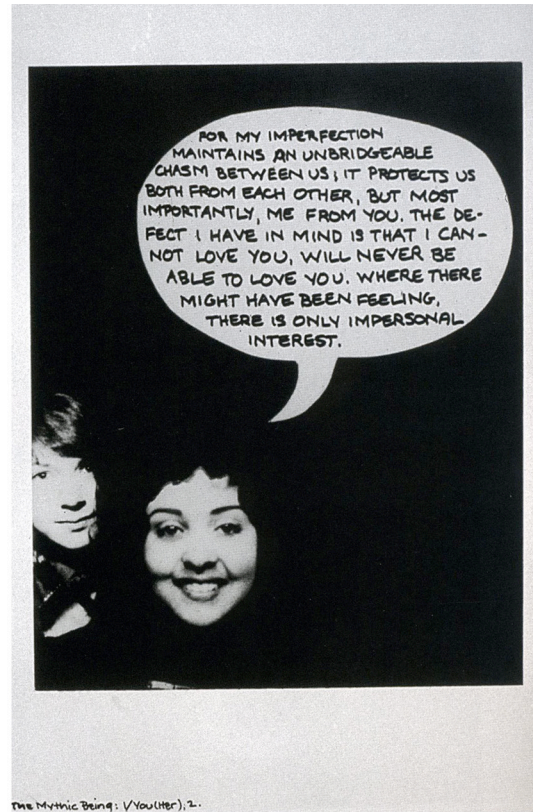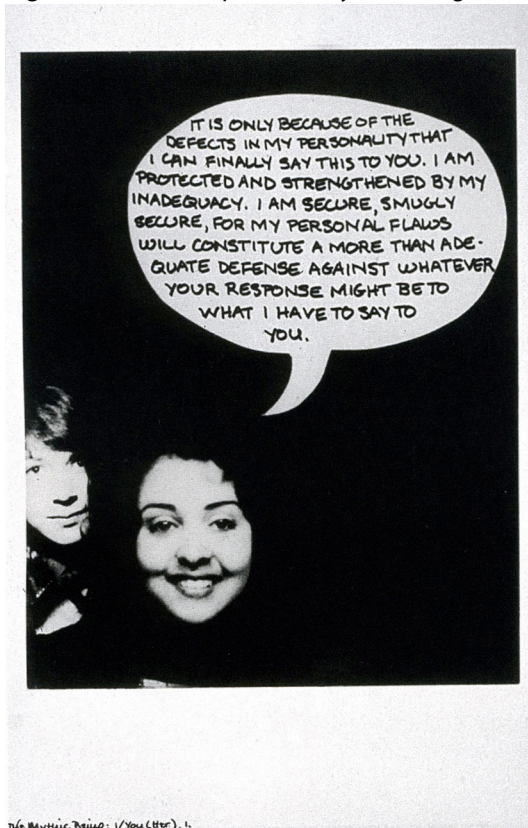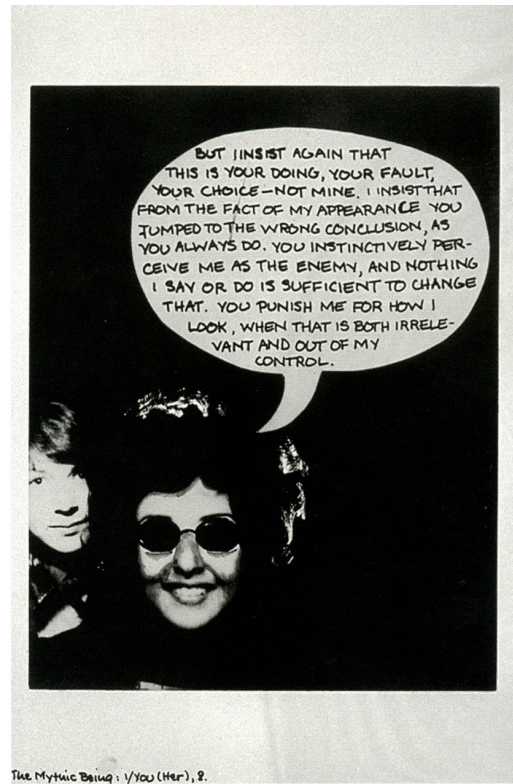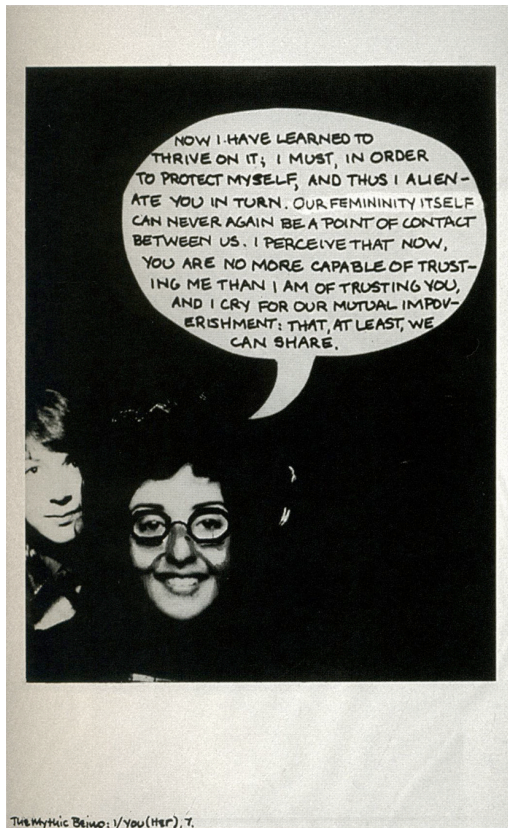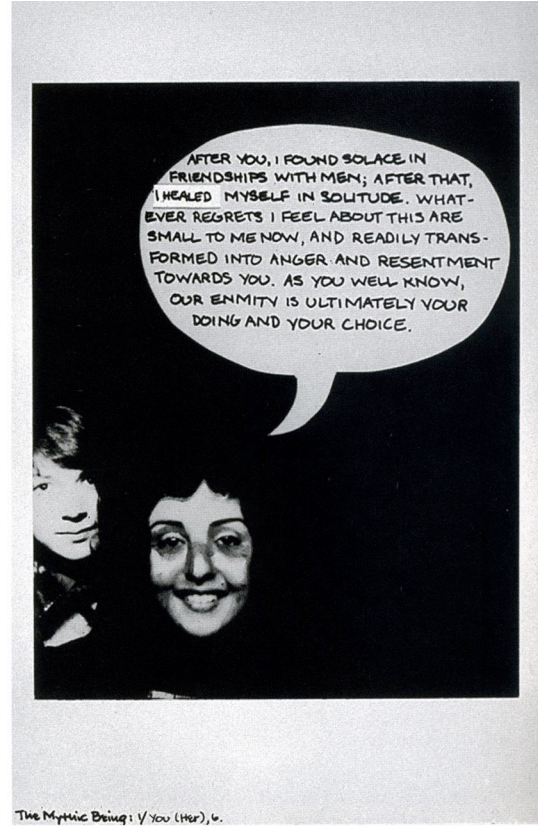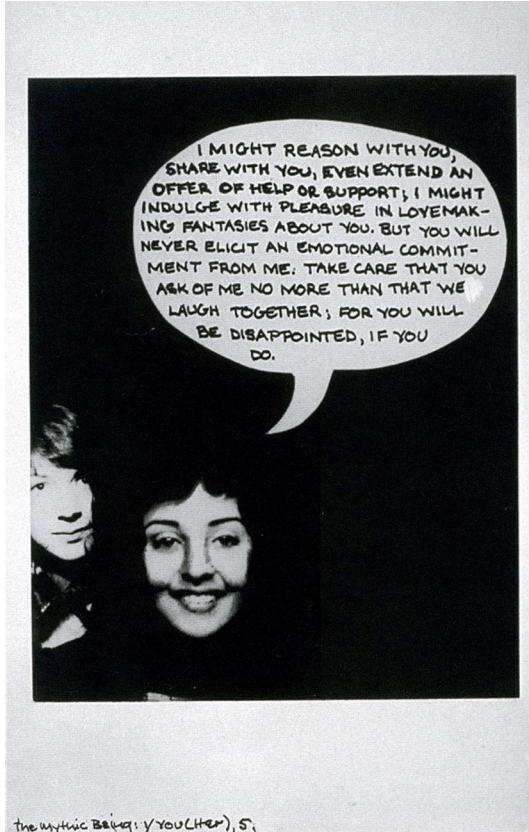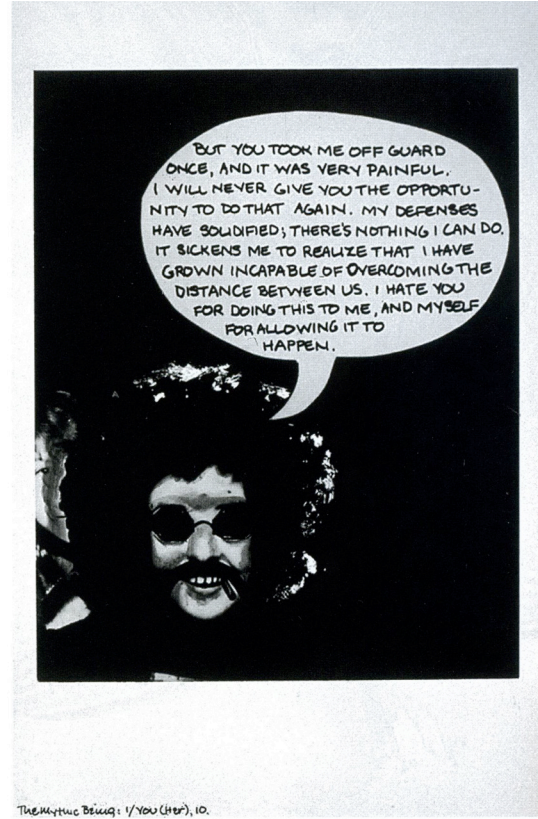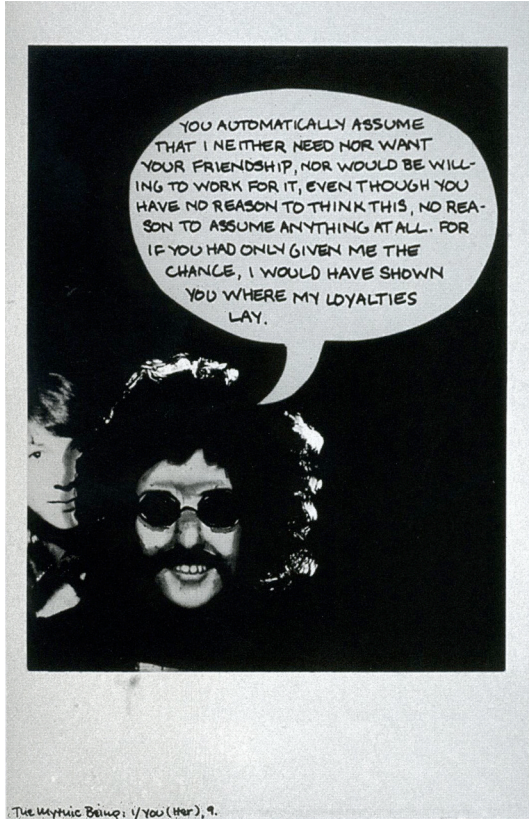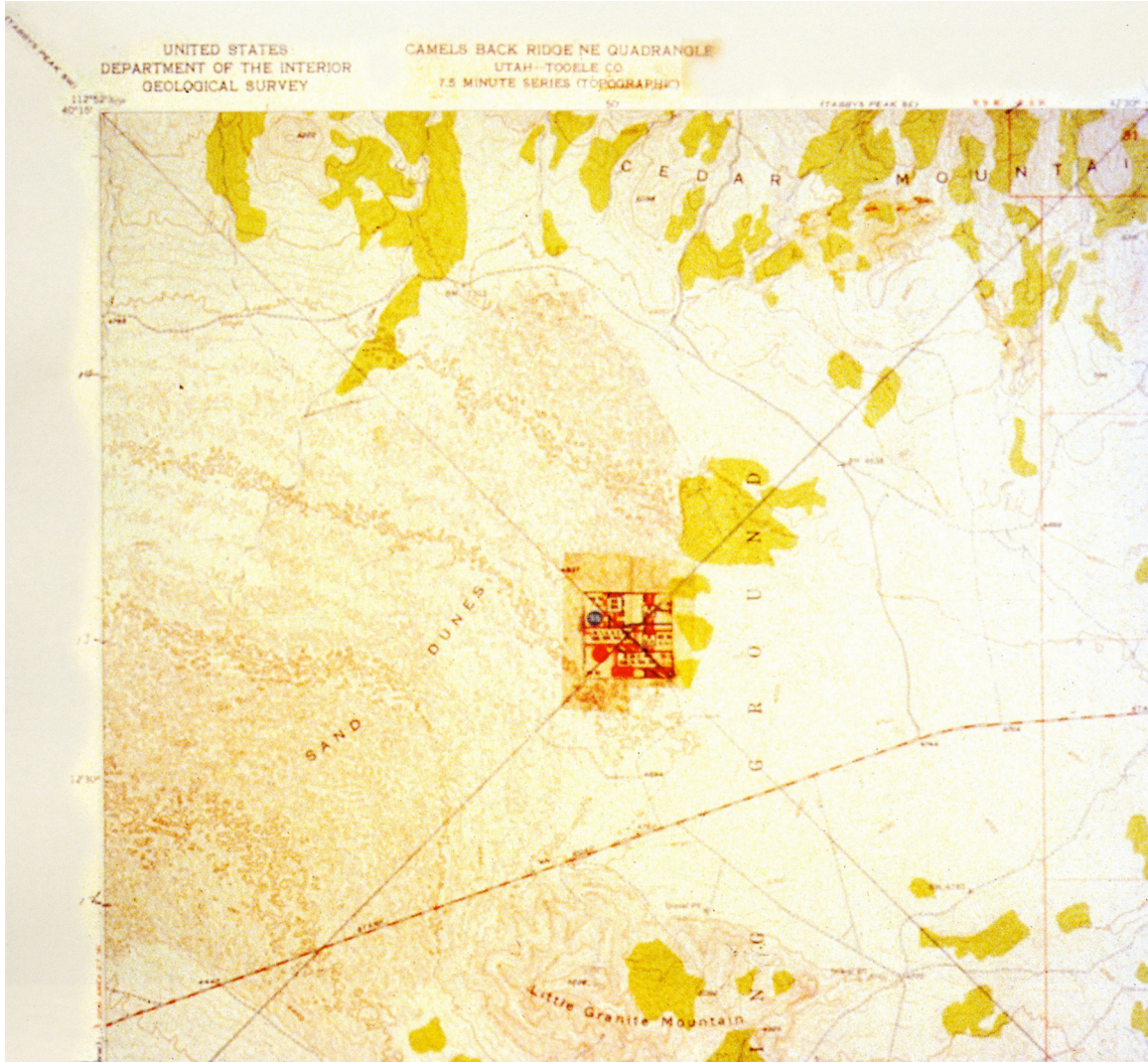
Figure 2. Adrian Piper, *Utah-Manhattan Transfer #1*, 1968

Figure 3. Adrian Piper, *Catalysis IV*, 1970-71, photo by Rosemary Mayer

Figure 4. Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being: I Embody Everything You Most Hate and Fear*, 1975

Figure 5. Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being: Cruising White Women #1 of 3*, 1975

Figure 6. Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being: I Am the Locus #1-5*, 1975:
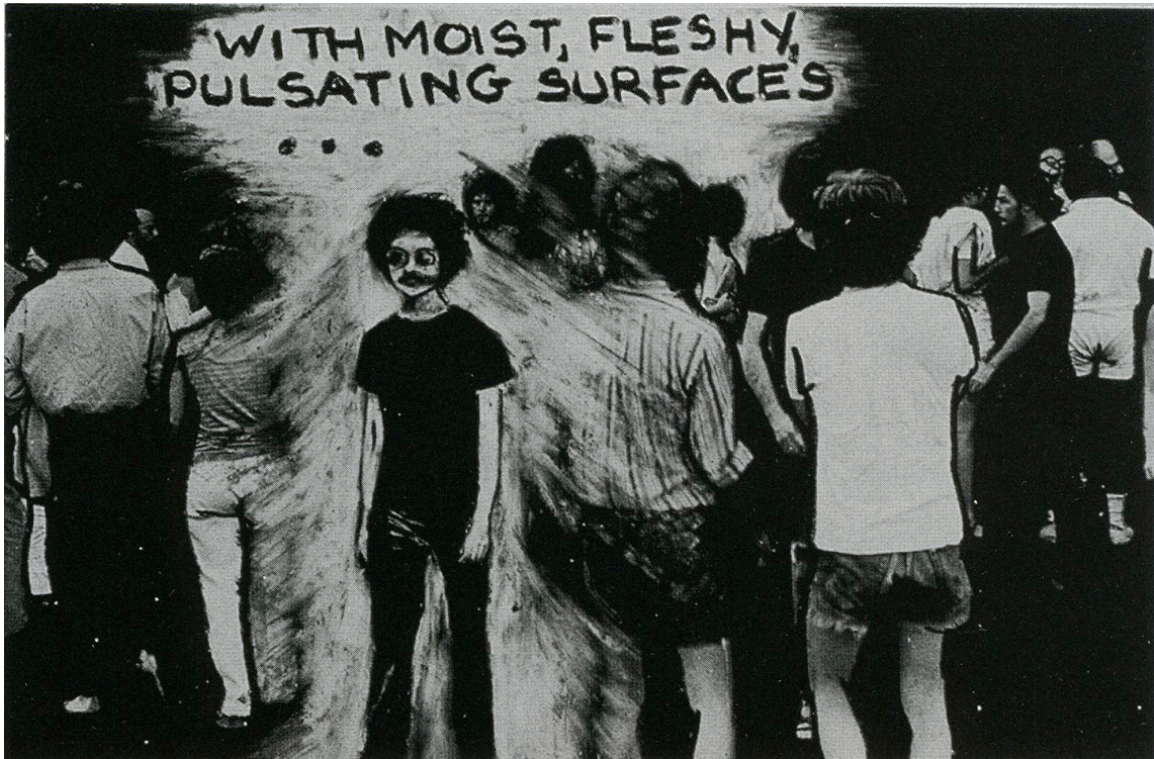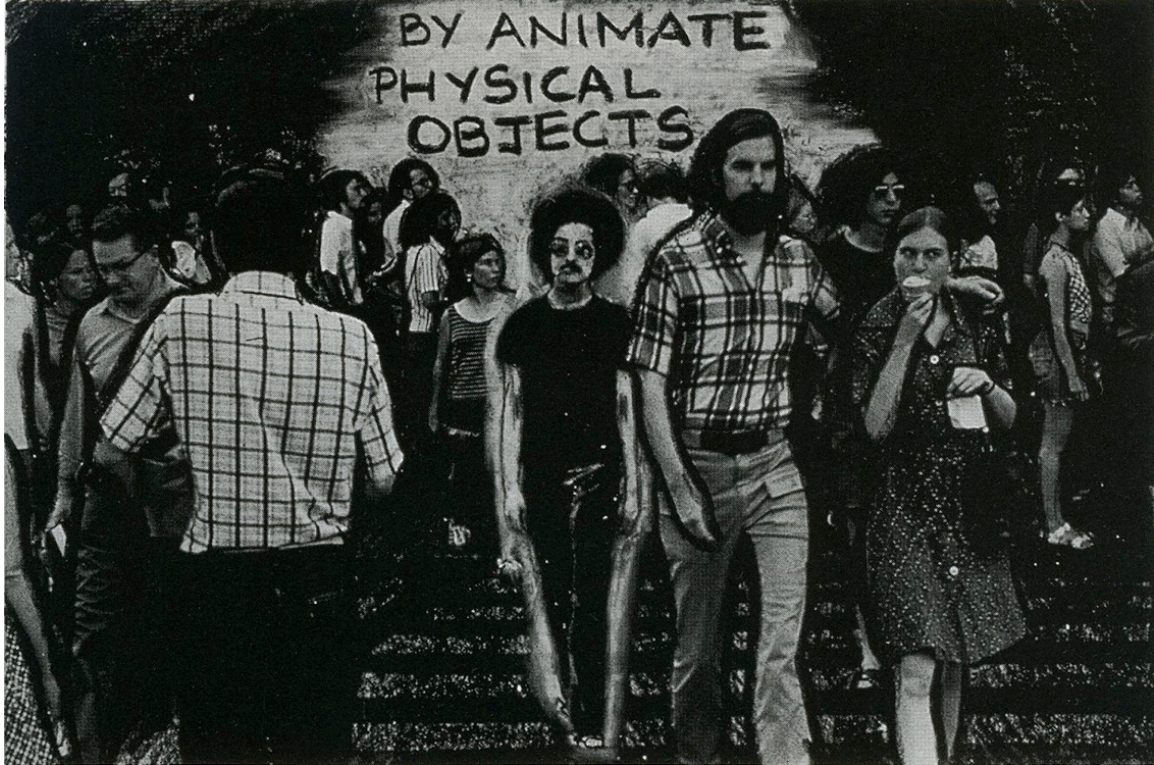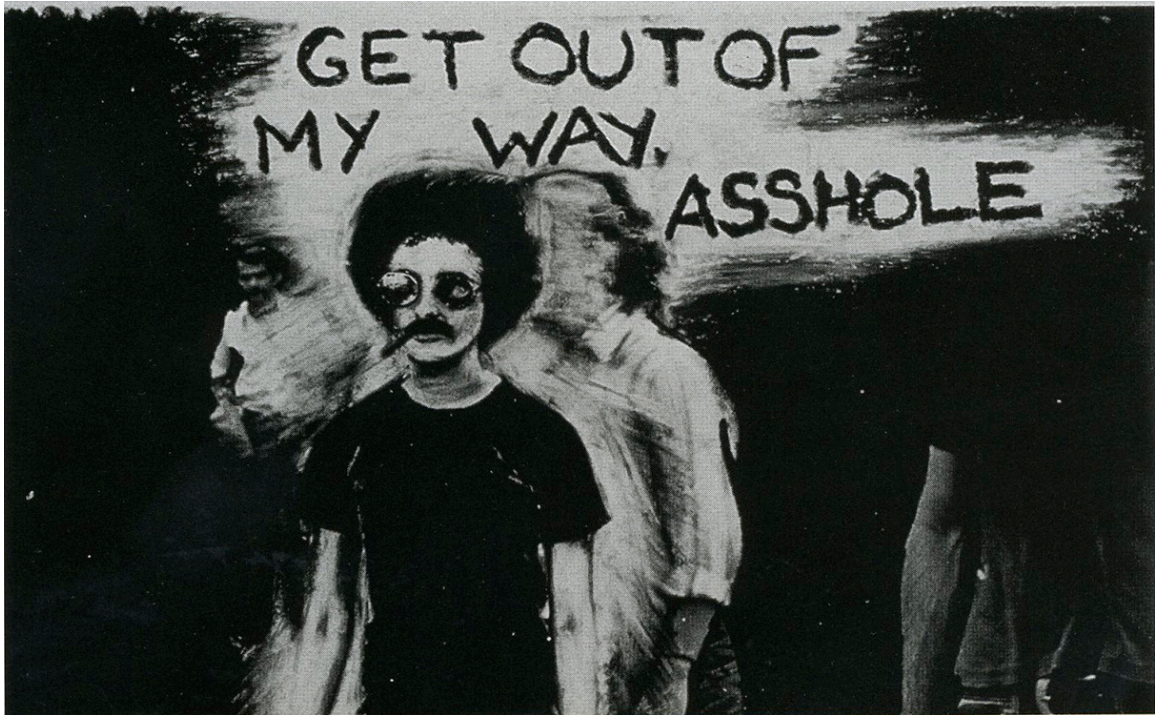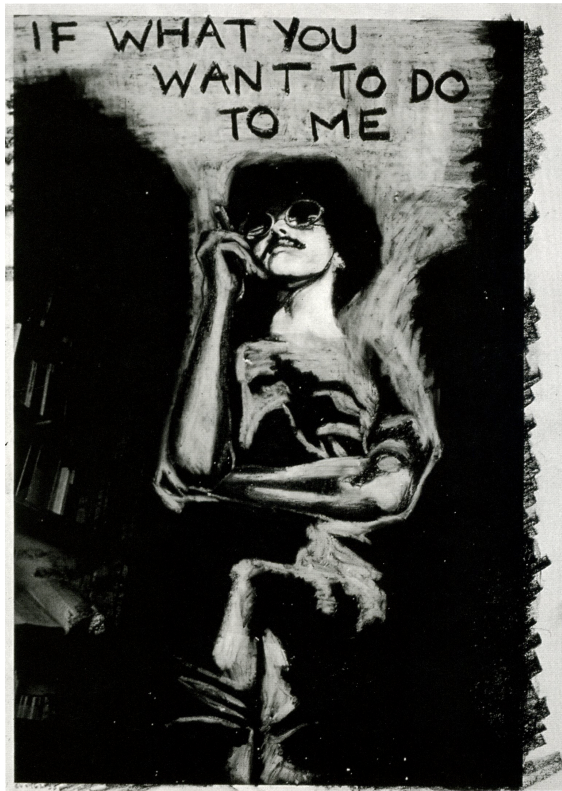
Figure 7. Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being: It Doesn't Matter*, 1975 (1-3)

Figure 8. Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being, Cycle I: 2/28/74*, 1974

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