

DIRECTIONS

MEL CHIN

FEBRUARY 1 - APRIL 23, 1989



The Opera of Silence, 1988. Wood, bog hide, steel, theatrical make-up, paper, bone, ink, plastic; 66 x 70 x 67 in. Collection of the artist, courtesy Franklin/Adams Gallery. Photo: seva-inken.

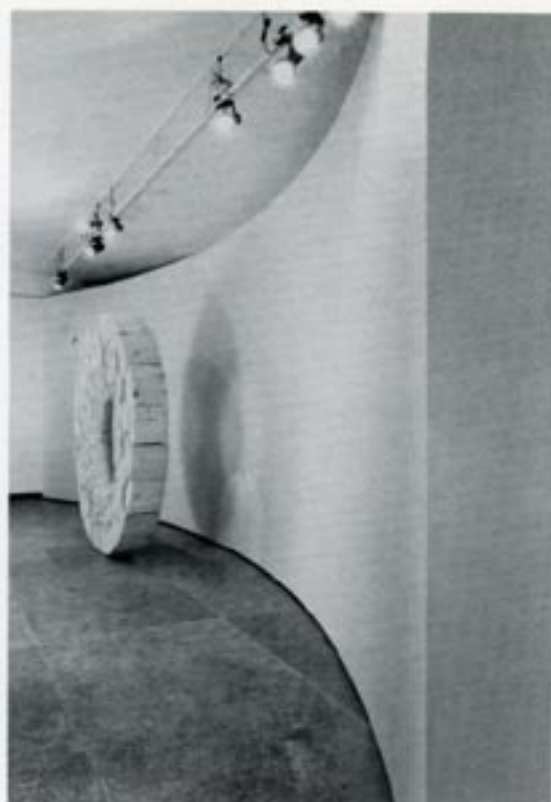


Fig. 1. *The Operation of the Sun through the Cult of the Hand*, 1987. Mixed-media installation at Loughbelen Gallery, New York.

MEL CHIN IS DRIVEN BY A FASCINATION with myths and their origins, a thorough knowledge of his materials, and an inquisitive mind that seeks to combine these elements in order to realize meaning through metaphor in his sculpture. Inspiration for his work springs from sources that range from the physical and natural sciences to oriental philosophy. In a decidedly studied yet subjective manner, he uses an array of detailed facts and accumulated insights gleaned from esoteric writings and applies them in a highly personal and interpretive way. As he has explained, "I did not want to have a style. I did not want to have a particular idea. I wanted to be free of all that." Chin's sculpture merges the clarity of reason with the mystery of intuition.

A first-generation Chinese-American, Chin left his native Houston four years ago to live and work in New York City. Since then he has tried to find common ground for his cultural heritage and the many challenges facing a young American sculptor. At first these contexts might appear mutually exclusive, but through a creative cross-referencing between East and West, Chin has found significant places of overlap.

As part of his exploration of how the two cultures relate, Chin began his investigation of the Eastern and Western sources of alchemy, the centuries-old quest to transform base metals into gold. Alchemy dates back to the Middle Ages and has intrigued modern artists, most notably Marcel Duchamp. Although alchemy's metaphorical possibilities engage Chin, he is also interested in the opportunities it presents to

*What I like to do . . . is to focus our attention on the defenses we use to rationalize away the uniqueness of the 'other.'*¹

ADRIAN PIPER HOLDS A SINGULAR position within the world of contemporary art. Not only a highly regarded artist, having received National Endowment for the Arts and John Simon Guggenheim fellowships and most recently an Award in the Visual Arts, she also has established an impressive academic career in philosophy, a subject she has taught—and continues to teach—at some of the most prestigious universities in this country. Piper grew up in an upper-middle-class black family in Manhattan. She attended a private school for affluent, predominantly white students and went on to study art at the School of Visual Arts and philosophy at the City College of New York. She subsequently earned a master's degree and a doctorate at Harvard University.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Piper came under the influence of conceptual and performance artists such as Sol LeWitt and Yvonne Rainer. In 1967 Piper began to "carve up objects spatiotemporally into infinite series, progressions, and variations," a statement that characterizes her earliest conceptual work.² In 1969 she worked as a receptionist and administrative assistant at the Seth Siegelaub Gallery, the epicenter of the Conceptual Art movement in New York. At a decidedly young age she was an active participant in the international art world, being included in such watershed exhibitions as *Information* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1970. That year, during which she began her study of philosophy, Piper says she "got kicked out of the art world for the first time" because of her gender.³ She began doing performances that "started going into issues of otherness and ostracism and got kicked out a second time because of [her] race."

Piper's recent art launches a fierce attack on racist attitudes, which she believes are prevalent in American society. Her work has become more programmatic, employing newspaper and magazine photographs that have been removed from their original context, dislocated, and re-presented in order to examine aspects of racial violence as well as the underlying psychological dimensions of American society that contribute to racist behavior. In fact, her work does considerably more than merely outline these elements. She has stated, "It's laudable to depict and analyze

issues of racism. But my work really does not function in that way. I actually want to change people. I want my work to help people stop being racist (whether they ask for that help or not). Just as movies and encounter groups can change people, so, maybe, can my art."⁴

In *What It's Like, What It Is #2*, 1991,⁵ conceived and produced for the Hirshhorn Museum's Directions gallery, Piper has created an environmental installation that incorporates seven life-size free-standing photographic cutouts⁶ with small audio speakers that emit sounds of radio static [figs. 1 and 2], wallpaper designed by the artist [fig. 3], and the artist's drawing of a black person's head on an otherwise blank employment application [cover] repro-

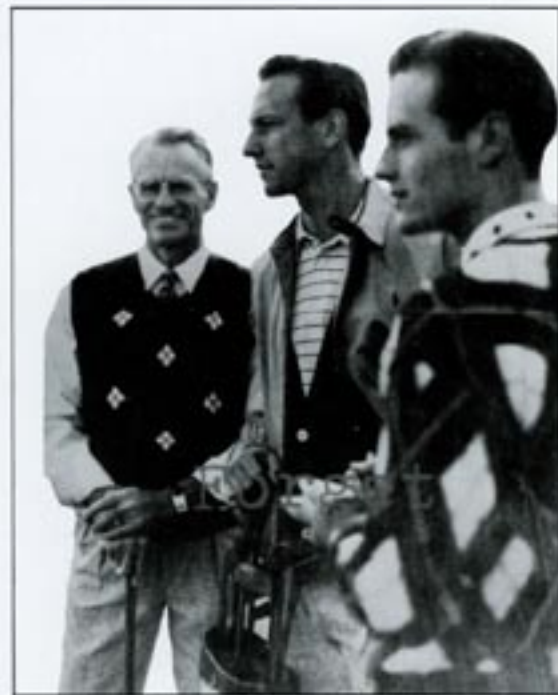


Fig. 1. *What It's Like, What It Is #2*, 1991 (detail, photographic cutout). Courtesy the artist and John Weber Gallery, New York.

duced and placed on the wall nearby to relate to each of the seven cutout elements.

Piper has used wallpaper previously in her art.⁷ The wallpaper in *What It's Like, What It Is #2* reproduces and repeats an enlargement of the artist's rendering of the traditional "Hear No Evil, See No Evil, Speak No Evil" group—three monkeys sitting side by side, one with hands over ears, the next obscuring its eyes, and the third covering its mouth.⁸ It was originally drawn on graph paper, and thin blue lines are discernible as a matrix. The repeated images encompass the entire Directions gallery space like a cyclorama.

The photographic cutouts, enlargements from advertisements or news photographs depicting Caucasian people, stand in the gallery as if to greet viewers as they enter the space. Two different social classes are presented. In one group, three separate scenes taken from advertisements for men's clothing in the *New York Times*, models portray upper-middle or upper-class men at leisure [fig. 1]. Piper has commented, "The stance, the bearing, the kind of aloofness, the sort of relaxation, the kind of easy command of one's physical environment, the sense that the world is there for one . . . what fashion images try to do is to replicate the style of the individuals who actually populate those environments." The other group of cutouts consists of images, primarily of working-class men, taken from news photographs [fig. 2]. One records the angry reaction of a white crowd rallying in the Bensonhurst area of Brooklyn to taunt and curse black protesters soon after a group of youths from Bensonhurst had killed a young black man who had come to the predominantly white area to look at a car he had seen advertised in the newspaper. Another depicts a group of men, jackets pulled over their heads, leaving a courthouse after being indicted for the racially motivated murder of a black youth in their Howard Beach neighborhood in Brooklyn. A third image, three men dressed in suits and ties gesturing triumphantly, shows the attorney for the only white man acquitted in the Howard Beach murder, flanked by two unidentified figures. A final image is taken from the trial of the Mississippi sheriff's deputy charged with killing three civil rights workers in 1964. These figurative groups stand in the gallery, oriented at angles to one another so that viewers can see that the cutouts are flat. The juxtaposition of the images on the seven cutouts is the nucleus of the installation. Piper avers,



Fig. 2. *What It's Like, What It Is #2*, 1991 (detail, photographic cutout). Courtesy the artist and John Weber Gallery, New York.

"The images from the fashion pages . . . are just cleaned-up versions of the images that are taken from these news stories. They embody power and arrogance more iconically because they are disassociated from particular crimes that might soil them."

In fact, the idea for the cutouts was partially inspired by Washington, D. C., sidewalk vendors who offer passersby the opportunity to be photographed with similarly flat, life-size photographic blowups of the likenesses of such American celebrities as President George Bush, pop stars Michael Jackson or Madonna, or wrestler Hulk Hogan, to name a few.⁹ In this installation, Piper has shifted the focus of the encounter from the luminaries of our day to her version of the anonymous "everyperson" whose racial and social politics play an important role in engendering feelings of deprivation and/or intimidation in those who would oppose or question them.

On each of the cutout groups the artist has silk-screened the word "Forget" in large letters in red ink over the lower central area of the image, and this superimposition of text gives the figural groups a particularized message. The word "Forget" is used ironically because it is linked to photographic imagery, perhaps the one method most often used to remember events. In this sense, the artist is suggesting a paradox: the text voice insists that viewers forget the very images that are staring back at them with such force. Moreover, the reproduced drawings of the black person's head on the application form, a full-face head looking directly at the viewer, also have a word superimposed over them in large letters, in the same color red, in the same general area—the

word "it." "Forget" now appears as a command from the anonymous voice of authority and, coupled with the drawing and the "it," seems to have a double meaning. Today, "forget it" is an expression of exasperation or disbelief. In Piper's visual/linguistic mechanism, the forgetting is being done by those upon whom the word is visually fixed, that is, the white people.

Further, the "it" is doubly resonant because the word and the image associated with the word are grammatically the object of the verb and, by extension, objectified. When discussing this installation, and the black figures in particular, the artist has said, "They're silenced, or at least whatever they are saying can't be heard or understood. The text has an objective function." Thus, Piper has constructed an elaborate yet emphatic echo of the action recorded by the camera, which indicates not only a neglect but a willful objectification of people into the box-like forms of a bureaucratic system. The artist suggests, in encasing the black person visually behind the rectangles on the application form, that black people are captives of a system that employs or does not employ them. By extension, one can hardly avoid thinking of the circumstances under which the ancestors of today's African-Americans came to this country—as slaves, objectified human beings to be bought and sold. The artist seems to suggest that the plight of African-Americans is still largely restricted to the social and economic confines of a system that is driven by jobs and that employers hire people based on educational background and similar experiences.

This effect is compounded by the radio static and the wallpaper of the monkeys. "The static comes from the space between radio stations, where things go in and out and you can hear voices and hear snatches of melody but not really anything except noise . . . not tuned in! 'Static' also means 'still' and connotes tension, like 'static in the air.'" The three monkeys symbolize those who ignore, remain blind to, and evade responsibility for the scenes unfolding before them. The cutout figural groups—icons of affluent disregard and racial violence—are the dramatic personae in Piper's staging of the vicious cycle of man's inhumanity to man. Like the best of all art, her mapping of this system is designed to propel and challenge a viewer to reconsider and reassess a subject he or she may presently take for granted. For it is in rethinking that the only hope for release from this dreadful and deadly system of degradation lies. As

Piper explains, "I have a couple of agendas. One is to depict in a kind of visceral way to white people what it's like to be the object of this kind of thing. The other is to get white people to own these feelings, not only the racism, but also to own the fears and the pain that really fuel racism, so that there can be a little bit more mutual comprehension between the black and the white communities."

Ned Rifkin
Chief Curator

1. Adrian Piper, in Maurice Berger, "The Critique of Pure Racism: An Interview with Adrian Piper," *Afterimage* 18 (October 1990): 8.

2. Piper, "Chronology," in *Adrian Piper: Reflections 1967-1987*, exhibition catalog (New York: Alternative Museum, 1987), p. 15.

3. Unless otherwise noted, all unattributed quotations are taken from a conversation with the artist in December 1990.

4. Berger, "The Critique of Pure Racism": 6.

5. Three installations share the same title. Piper is presenting *What It's Like, What It Is #1* concurrently at the Washington Project for the Arts in conjunction with her survey exhibition, *Adrian Piper: Reflections 1967-1987*. The third in the series will be presented at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in *Dislocations*, an exhibition scheduled for fall 1991. The artist has remarked, "What all these have in common is . . . they're all about conveying something about what it feels like to the object of racial stereotyping and racism to a public that most generally can't be expected to have experienced that firsthand."

6. Credits for original photography: Angel Franco, *New York Times*; Ralph Lauren; Larry C. Morris, *New York Times*; Bill Reed, *Black Star*; John Sotomayor, *New York Times*; Bill Turnbull, *Daily News*. Special thanks to Campbell Photo and Printing, Inc., for the technical production of all visual components.

7. In *Art for the Artsworld Surface Pattern*, 1977, an installation for the Paris Biennale, Piper created wallpaper based on a collage of photographs taken from newspapers and installed it on the interior walls of a five by five foot cubicle with seven foot ceilings. A light bulb hung and an audiotape played in the space.

8. Piper's drawing of the three monkeys is taken from a Chinese sculpture and was first used by the artist in 1990 in a series of six works entitled "Pretend" that were first shown at her solo exhibition at the John Weber Gallery. See *Adrian Piper: Pretend*, exhibition catalog (New York: Exit Art and John Weber Gallery, 1990).

9. Piper said, "I got the idea of using the cutouts from seeing them all over downtown, so that makes it very much about Washington."



Fig. 3. *What It's Like, What It Is: #2*, 1991 (detail, drawing for wallpaper). Courtesy the artist and John Weber Gallery, New York.