Race and Representation Spring 2025

Prof. Jennifer Bajorek

**READING AND DICUSSION QUESTIONS**

Adrian Piper and Conceptual Art (p. 1) and Coco Fusco (p. 2)

1. Conceptual art is described (on the AWARE website) as “art that gives prominence to ideas” (rather than, say, to form, representation, beauty, etc.). Conceptual art has sometimes been considered to be “apolitical,” because it is not “punchy,” is rarely a call to action, and can take time to grasp. I (and others) would argue that Adrian Piper’s work is extremely political.

Choose ONE work by Piper (see links on course website) and use it to explore these questions:

(a) How is the work conceptual?

(b) How is it political?

2. In ***This is Not the Documentation of a Performance*** (1976), Piper takes a photograph from the mainstream media and changes it slightly: <https://hammer.ucla.edu/take-it-or-leave-it/art/this-is-not-the-documentation-of-a-performance>

How does the change that Piper makes to the photograph impact the way that we, as viewers, respond or react to it? How does (or might) this change read, specifically, in an art-world context, such as when the work is displayed in a museum?

3. In ***Imagine [Trayvon Martin]*** (2013), Piper invites viewers into a racially-charged situation (Martin, a Black high-school junior, was shot and killed by ‘neighborhood watch’ volunteer George Zimmerman [who is multiracial and Hispanic], who perceived him as threatening, while he was walking down the street in a suburban Florida neighborhood):

<http://www.adrianpiper.com/berlin/art/index.shtml>

At the bottom of the page where she presents this work, we can read: “Adrian Piper does not permit or approve the inclusion of her work in racially segregated exhibitions, edited collections or conferences.”

How can we reconcile the seeming contradiction between these two positions: a Black artist[[1]](#footnote-1) who makes work about a (horrifyingly) familiar part of Black American experience yet who will not permit her work to be included in exhibitions or books on “Black art” or “Black artists”?

4. Critic Ellen Yoshi Tani suggests that Black conceptualists respond to “prevailing expectations that their work reflect the black experience,” through a “critique of representation itself.” Often, she writes, they “trouble the role of the visual field as the guarantor of racial expression.”

Take either ***Self-Portrait Exaggerating my Negroid Features*** OR ***Self-Portrait as a Nice White Lady***, two of Piper’s best-known works, and examine in your own words how they challenge “prevailing expectations” and “trouble” common assumptions about visuality and race.

5. Choose ONE work by Piper (see links on course website) and use it to explore this further statement about Black conceptualism (by Yoshi Tani): that conceptual art by Black artists reflects an understanding of race, not as “embodied essence” but as a “social force.”

Coco Fusco, “Racial Time, Racial Marks, Racial Metaphors”

1. Coco Fusco opens her essay by essentially arguing that *photography* and *race* are the two most important tools or forces that have been used to create American identities.

What do you think of this idea? Have we read or looked at other material in this class that supports this idea? Do you feel this still holds true today? What contemporary practices or spaces do you feel are relevant to ongoing conversations about American identities?

2. Fusco argues that, for the first 150 years of the United States’ existence, “race was considered a theoretically coherent system of human classification” (15) and “racial hierarchies were widely accepted as having a basis in science” (16). During this period, she suggests, photography was used mostly as a tool to support (or, in rare cases, as we saw with Douglass, refute) these hierarchies. In later historical periods, she argues, it became clearer that instead of “*recording* the existence of race, photography *produced* race as a visualizable fact” (16).

She goes on to share a large number of images (the essay is an intro. essay to a photography exhibition she curated) that show us how photography *produces* race as a visualizable fact.

Choose 2-3 images (or sets of images) from her essay, and use it to explore one or more of these ideas:

--that photography visualizes “race as a metaphor” (13)

--that it renders visible (or presents as real) “imaginary racial distinctions” (18)

--that it creates “a spectacle and a commodity” out of racial difference (20)

--that it turns “racialized viewing into a form of entertainment” (20)

--that it fetishizes and aestheticizes “the racial other’s beauty” (21).

3. Fusco’s essay and exhibition also explore “whiteness” as a racial configuration that has its own complex relationship to photography. She writes, for example, that “whiteness…may even be expressed through nonfigurative means as the exercise of power over others” (25) and that whiteness often “operates as a force in the physical world separate from white bodies” (25).

Choose an image EITHER from Fusco’s essay OR from another source out there in the world (this can be any source) that, to you, shows how whiteness operates through the exercise of power and as a force in the world “separate from white bodies.”

(This does not mean that there cannot also be white bodies in your photograph, though the representation of those bodies will, perhaps, not be the principal work done by the photograph…)

Be as creative or bold as you wish to be…

Be prepared to share your image, or images, in class.

1. To be accurate, Piper stopped identifying as Black in 2012 and now identifies as an “American woman of acknowledged African ancestry.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)