

## Adrian Piper

Thomas Erben Gallery,  
New York

Adrian Piper's early performance and photography work is often referred to but rarely seen. For the 'Mythic Being' series (1972-75), shown complete here for the first time (and archived usefully on the website, [www.thomaserben.com](http://www.thomaserben.com)), Piper disguised herself as an

androgynous, racially indeterminate young man, dressed in black T-shirt and flared jeans, big sunglasses, an Afro wig and a Zapata-ish moustache, often smoking a cigarette. She documented a series of public and private performances before drawing on many of the photographs and frequently adding speech or thought balloons.

The first public appearance of the 'Mythic Being' came in a series of monthly advertisements in the art pages of *The Village Voice*. Photo-

graphed as the 'Being' at home, Piper added balloons containing words from her own journals written between 1961 and 1972. From the outset, the age, race and sexuality of the 'Being' was unstable – its fiction confused by the autobiographical journal entries. One of the ads, for instance, reads 'Today was the first day of school. The only decent boys in my class are Robbie and Clyde. I think I like Clyde.' (This is dated 9-21-61, when Piper was a young teenager.)

The series of 10 images 'I/You (Her)' (1974), begins with Piper's own face, alongside a collage of a white woman's face. Speech balloons track Piper's estrangement from the other woman (a friend, or perhaps a lover) – 'You punish me for how I look, when that is irrelevant and out of my control'. The 'Being' is clearly a racially charged figure, a fact made explicit in *The Mythic Being Cruising White Women*, (1975), and *The Mythic Being Getting Back*, (1975). Race itself in this work is a mythic concept: charged but unstable, a representation (stereotypical or otherwise), a performance.

The status of race as performance is underscored in 'I/You/Us' (1975), a series of six photographs of a small, pale and undisguised Piper beneath large balloons in which she demands someone's

attention in a comical, cerebrally nasty manner: 'Be sure to attend very carefully to what I have to say to you. For if you do not, I will make a sincere effort to kill you.' Here, direct demand and aggression are undercut by a ludicrous, Monty Pythonesque tone. Subsequently, Piper has addressed relations between the indeterminacy of race and its concrete social effects. To reveal herself as the 'Mythic Being', or to drop the distinction between her fictional alter ego and herself, in 'I/You/Us', was to argue, both angrily and wittily, for the fictional nature of race as a fixed category of identity.

The reputation of Piper's early work rests on the fact that she was one of a number of artists who used performance to introduce social critique into a broadly Conceptual framework (earlier still, she had made classic Conceptual diagrams). Piper's use of elements of performance and autobiography undercut the veracity of the Conceptual-looking photographs. For Piper's photographs were not simply records after the fact; the existence of the 'Being' depended upon them. Piper's description of this complex relationship between performance and photography stands as an early demonstration that identity itself is bound up in performance and its representation.

Frazer Ward



[CAPTION] *The Mythic Being, Cycle I.* (Censored from *The Village Voice*, Thursday, June 27, 1974)

Adrian Piper  
Unpublished  
*Village Voice* ad,  
*Don't Feel  
Particularly Horny*  
1974  
Felt-tip pen on  
photograph  
16 x 17 cm