

From White Cube to Public Sphere: Reconfiguring Agency in the Works of Dora García and Adrian Piper

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Abstract: European avant-garde practitioners have decisively shaped contemporary performance and conceptual art through critical interrogations of spectatorship, embodiment, and ideology. This article examines the transformative impact of these lineages, focusing specifically on how **Dora García** and **Adrian Piper** reconfigure the relationship between the art object, the institution, and the spectator. García's intermedial corpus utilizes durational performance and "situated knowledge" to deconstruct the neoliberal privatization of public space, employing relational dramaturgies to examine marginality and collective agency. Conversely, Piper synthesizes Kantian ethics with conceptual interventions to interrogate racialized and gendered subject formation. Through seminal works such as *Catalysis* and *The Mythic Being*, she utilizes somatic presence as a "social catalyst" to expose visceral biases and institutional gatekeeping. By situating these artists alongside figures such as **Marina Abramović**, **Wolf Vostell**, and **Hermann Nitsch**, the study illustrates a broader "durational turn" that dissolves disciplinary boundaries. Ultimately, the article contends that by refunctioning art as a site of ethical confrontation and "phronesis," these visionaries dismantle the neutrality of the "white cube," asserting the body as a vital archive of resistance and a conduit for structural transformation within the global art world.

Keywords: Contemporary Performance Art, Conceptual Praxis, Institutional Critique, Dora García and Adrian Piper, Durational Aesthetics, Somatic Embodiment

European avant-garde practitioners have decisively shaped contemporary performance and conceptual art through critical interrogations of spectatorship, embodiment, and ideology. Dora García destabilizes the boundary between fiction and actuality via participatory dramaturgies, while Adrian Piper confronts racialized and gendered subject formation through philosophically inflected conceptual interventions. Other performers such as Marina Abramović radicalizes durational aesthetics; John Armleder interrogates commodification through Neo-Geo strategies; Wolf Vostell mobilizes Fluxus to critique media violence; and Hermann Nitsch reactivates ritual sacrifice and catharsis. Collectively, their practices traverse disciplinary demarcations, refunctioning art as critical praxis.

García's intermedial corpus—spanning installation, film, writing, and performance—reconfigures exhibition space into dialogic encounter. Works such as *Rooms, Conversations* (2006), *The Deviant Majority* (2010), and *The Joycean Society* examine marginality, metafiction, and collective reading, while *Amor Rojo* (2018–2024) engages Marxist feminism and transnational agency. A recurrent emphasis on durational performance transforms spectators into co-producers of meaning, foregrounding labour, improvisation, and "situated knowledge." Rejecting the "white cube," García theorizes public space as a contested political arena (García, 2020), critiquing neoliberal privatization and institutional gatekeeping (2021).

Piper's oeuvre synthesizes Kantian ethics, conceptual art, and social critique. From *Catalysis* (1970–71) and *The Mythic Being* (1973–75) to *Food for the Spirit* (1971), *Funk Lessons* (1982–84), and *Cornered* (1988), she exposes ideological mechanisms and racialized perception (Piper, 1969; 1981; Bowles 162; 229–230). Her philosophical writings—*Ideology, Confrontation, and Political Self Awareness* (1981) and *Rationality and the Structure of the Self* (2008)—articulate moral alienation and reflexive self-governance, extending into participatory installations such as *The Probable Trust Registry* (2013–15). Through archive-building, institutional critique, and embodied provocation, Piper reconstitutes art as ethical confrontation and transformative experience (Cherix, 2003).

The lineage of European aesthetics has functioned as a primary catalyst for the evolution of contemporary performance and post-conceptual methodologies. Dora García navigates the liminal space between oneiric states and objective reality through aleatory participation, whereas Adrian Piper employs a rigorous philosophical framework to deconstruct the intersectionality of racialization, gendered paradigms, and ontic identity via confrontational maneuvers. The "durational" turn is epitomized by Marina Abramović, whose exhaustive temporal frameworks probe the limits of somatic and psychological endurance. In contrast, John Armleder's "Neo-Geo" compositions interrogate the reification of the art object within late-stage capitalism, a critique mirrored by Wolf Vostell's Fluxus-derived interventions that vituperate the hegemony of mass communication and systemic violence. Furthermore, the ritualistic enactments of Hermann Nitsch invoke primordial archetypes of immolation and emotional purgation. Synergistically, these practitioners dissolve

categorical demarcations, recalibrating the teleology of art toward a mode of radical socio-political interrogation.

Dora García: Relational Narratives and the Subversion of the Spectacle

A preeminent figure in Spanish contemporary thought, Dora García (b. 1965) is lauded for her "situated" performances that fundamentally alter the semiotics of the gallery space. Her multi-modal practice—spanning cinema, textuality, and installation—probes the tension between fabricated narratives and lived experience, often centering on the "anti-hero" or the disenfranchised, as seen in *Rooms, Conversations* (2006) and *The Deviant Majority* (2010). Recent trajectories in her work, such as *Amor Rojo* (2018–2024), synthesize Marxist-feminist theory with James Joyce's literary metafiction (cf. *The Joycean Society*, 2013). A three-time representative at the Venice Biennale and recipient of the 2021 National Award for Plastic Arts, García's praxis conflates high literature with grassroots activism to dismantle orthodox viewership. Drawing from the heterodoxies of Walser and Artaud, works like *She Has Many Names* (2023) utilize the subconscious as a site of resistance against transnational border regimes and patriarchal hegemony.

The cornerstone of García's methodology is durational performance, a tactic that disrupts the Newtonian temporality of the "white cube." By extending a performance through the entire duration of an exhibition's opening hours, she shifts the art object from "spectacle" to "existential encounter." This approach, often incorporating "open rehearsals" and digital simulcasts, challenges the bureaucratic ossification of art institutions. Aligning with Donna Haraway's concept of "situated knowledges," García prioritizes the cognitive process over the finished artifact, fostering a milieu of radical unpredictability and intellectual reciprocity between the "actor" and the "public."

García (2020) posits the public sphere as a contested political topography, essential for the recalibration of collective mnemonics and social contracts. Her work laments the encroachment of neoliberal privatization on communal spaces, asserting that surveillance and consumerism have neutered the potential for genuine dissent. By reclaiming semi-public zones for non-commercialized interaction, García critiques the "commodification of the aesthetic" and reaffirms the necessity of democratic agency. Her engagement with the legacy of Alexandra Kollontai frames "red love" as a subversive geopolitical tool, while her synthesis of Franco Basaglia's anti-psychiatry and Oscar Masotta's psychoanalytic theories (2021) positions the artist as a facilitator of liberation movements. Through her "publishing as performance" ethos, García democratizes information, bypassing institutional gatekeepers to expose the latent power dynamics of race, class, and labor that persist within the museum's walls.

Adrian Piper: Phronesis, Racial Ontologies, and Institutional Critique

Adrian Piper (b. 1948) occupies a singular position as both a preeminent conceptualist and an analytical philosopher. Utilizing Kantian ethics to dissect the mechanics of "racial passing" and xenophobia, Piper's career is marked by a rigorous synthesis of intellectual and aesthetic labor. After training at the School of Visual Arts, she secured a Ph.D. from Harvard under John Rawls in 1981. Her seminal *Food for the Spirit* (1971) functions as a somatic dialogue with Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Piper's career has been defined by a resistance to the marginalization she faced as a woman of color in the 1970s New York art scene. Her *Catalysis* (1970–71) and *The Mythic Being* (1973–75) series utilized "discomfort" as a pedagogical tool to force viewers into a state of critical self-reflection (Piper, 1987).

As the first African American woman to achieve tenure in philosophy at top-tier U.S. research universities, Piper's academic trajectory—and her subsequent departure to Berlin following institutional friction at Wellesley—informs her critique of systemic exclusion. In *Ideology, Confrontation, and Political Self-Awareness* (1981), she identifies the "Illusion of Omniscience" as a cognitive barrier to ethical social engagement. Furthermore, her integration of Vedic philosophy and Yogic discipline, documented in *Mokshamudra Progression* (2012), challenges the Western commercialization of Eastern spirituality. To preserve this intellectual corpus, she established the Adrian Piper Research Archive (APRA) in Berlin, a move followed by her 2015 Golden Lion win at Venice and a landmark retrospective at MoMA in 2018.

Piper's early interventions, such as her "mail art" distributed to 150 industry figures, bypassed the gallery-industrial complex (Piper, 1969). In *Catalysis*, she performed "social breaches"—such as wearing clothes soaked in vinegar on the subway—to expose the fragility of social norms. This evolved into *The Mythic Being*, where she donned a hyper-masculine "street" persona to investigate how racial and gendered "coding" dictates public perception. During her 1971 ascetic retreat, she produced *Food for the Spirit*, a series of 14 silver prints documenting her physical presence as a counterweight to Kantian abstraction. Later, her *Funk Lessons* (1982–84) utilized the "social dance" of Black culture to deconstruct racial stereotypes among predominantly white audiences, predating the "Relational Aesthetics" described by Nicolas Bourriaud.

In her more explicit philosophical-artistic hybrids, such as the *Calling Card* series (1986–90), Piper confronts the "casual" racism of the social elite. In *Cornered* (1988), she addresses the viewer through a televised medium, asserting her Black identity to disrupt the comfort of those who assume her "whiteness" based on phenotype. Her later work, *The Probable Trust Registry* (2013–15), shifts toward "ethical self-governance," asking participants to sign contracts of personal integrity. Even her 1960s *LSD Paintings* presaged her career-long obsession with the "dissolution of the ego." Through works like *What Will Become of Me* (1985), which features her preserved hair and skin, Piper confronts her own mortality and the eventual absorption of her physical self into the very institutions she critiqued. Her "retirement from being black" serves as a final, provocative act of linguistic and ontological defiance against the taxonomies of the state.

Comparative Analysis of Institutional Critique: García vs. Piper

While both artists dismantle the "neutrality" of the art world, their tactical maneuvers diverge between García's relational subversion and Piper's philosophical confrontation.

Feature	Dora García: The Relational Subverter	Adrian Piper: The Philosophical Provocateur
Primary Methodology	Narrative & Durational: Uses "open-ended" time to turn the gallery into a laboratory for social interaction.	Analytical & Confrontational: Uses Kantian logic and "social catalysts" to force ethical self-examination.
Target of Critique	The White Cube as a site of historical and social detachment; neoliberal privatization of space.	Systemic Taxonomy: How institutions categorize, commodify, and marginalize based on race and gender.
Viewer's Role	Co-author/Participant: The audience completes the work through conversation and immediate cognitive labor.	Subject of Experiment: The viewer is confronted with their own biases, often through discomfort or "calling cards."
View of the "Object"	Process over Artifact: Replaces finished works with "situated knowledge" and live broadcasts.	The Body as Evidence: Uses her own physical existence (hair, skin, or "passing" phenotype) as a conceptual tool.
Key Philosophical Influence	Haraway & Kollontai: Focuses on collective agency, feminist liberation, and situated truths.	Kant & Rawls: Focuses on rational agency, ethics, and the internal structures of the self.
Institutional Response	Integration: Uses the museum as a "public square" to facilitate democratic discourse.	Defiance: Challenges the museum's role as a gatekeeper; famously "retired" from racial categorization.

Dora García: The Performer as a Relational Proxy

In García's work, the body is rarely her own; instead, she enlists performers, narrators, and "professional amateurs" to inhabit the exhibition space. This creates a secondary layer of mediation that shifts the focus from the artist's persona to the mechanics of the social contract.

- **The Body as Inhabited Text:** In *The Joycean Society* (2013) or *The Beggar's Opera*, the performers function as living embodiments of García's research. Their bodies are "read" as part of a larger linguistic or political narrative.
- **Decentralized Agency:** By using proxies, García avoids the "cult of personality." The performers' bodies serve as situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988), interacting with the public to create an unpredictable, communal intellectual environment.
- **The Labor of Duration:** For García, the performer's physical presence is a form of affective labor. The fatigue or boredom of a performer during a months-long exhibition highlights the institutional demand for "presence," turning the body into a critique of the neoliberal work ethic.

Adrian Piper: The Body as a Philosophical Crucible

Contrastingly, Piper's work is characterized by the radical presence of her own body. For Piper, the somatic is inseparable from the ontological; her physical self is the primary site where racial, gendered, and philosophical theories are tested.

- **The Body as "Catalyst":** In *Catalysis* (1970–71), Piper's own physical form—soaked in vinegar or stuffed with a towel—becomes a chemical agent designed to trigger a reaction in the "social body" of the public. The discomfort is not just observed; it is physically endured by the artist.

- The Vanishing Self: In *Food for the Spirit* (1971), Piper used her body to anchor her sanity. As she delved into Kantian abstraction, she photographed her own fading physique to prove her material existence. Here, the body is a defense mechanism against intellectual erasure.
- The Evidentiary Artifact: In *What Will Become of Me* (1985), the body is literally commodified and archived. By exhibiting her hair, nails, and skin, Piper forces the institution to house her biological remains, effectively merging her mortal "self" with the museum's permanent history.

The Continental Vanguard and the Reconfiguration of Agency

Modern performance and conceptual frameworks are inextricably linked to a European lineage that prioritizes radical engagement over aesthetic passivity. Dora García interrogates the liminality between the oneiric and the empirical through relational participation, while Adrian Piper utilizes a rigorous philosophical lens to deconstruct the intersectionality of racialization and gender. This tradition is buttressed by Marina Abramović's durational inquiries into somatic resilience, John Armleder's Neo-Geo critique of the commodity-form, and Wolf Vostell's Fluxus-derived indictments of mass mediation. Furthermore, the ritualistic enactments of Hermann Nitsch invoke cathartic sacrifice, collectively transcending disciplinary silos to recalibrate the teleology of art (Abramović; Armleder; Nitsch; Vostell).

Dora García: Relational Narratives and Institutional Subversion

García's (b. 1965) practice is characterized by the transformation of the exhibitionary complex into a site of "situated knowledge" (Haraway). Her work—spanning *Rooms, Conversations* (2006) to *Amor Rojo* (2018–2024)—synthesizes Marxist feminism with literary metafiction (cf. *The Joycean Society*, 2013). García's durational performances eschew the spectacle in favor of immediate cognitive processes, utilizing open rehearsals and live broadcasts to dismantle institutional hierarchies.

Central to her inquiry is the reclamation of the public sphere. García (2020) posits that neoliberal privatization has neutered dissent; thus, her work functions as a cognitive framework for challenging collective memory. By drawing on figures such as Alexandra Kollontai and Franco Basaglia, she treats "publishing" as an extension of performance, rendering information public to bypass the "white cube" gatekeepers that sustain socio-economic inequalities (García, 2021).

Adrian Piper: Phronesis and the Deconstruction of Identity

Adrian Piper (b. 1948) bridges the gap between Kantian ethics and conceptual praxis to address racial passing and institutional ostracism. Her seminal *Food for the Spirit* (1971) serves as a somatic dialogue with Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, while the *Catalysis* (1970–71) and *The Mythic Being* (1973–75) series function as social irritants designed to expose visceral biases (Piper, 1987).

Philosophical Frameworks and Somatic Resistance

Piper's academic rigor, culminating in her two-volume *Rationality and the Structure of the Self* (2008), identifies ideological fallacies like the Illusion of Omniscience (1981). Her artistic interventions, such as the *Calling Card* series (1986–1990) and *Cornered* (1988), demand that the viewer confront their own complicity in racial classification. In *Funk Lessons* (1982–1984), she utilized the communal immersion of Black dance traditions to dismantle Eurocentric cultural hierarchies, predating the rise of Relational Aesthetics (Bourriaud).

The Body as Archive and Evidence

Piper's work often incorporates her own physical presence as an evidentiary artifact. In *Self Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features* (1981), she contests physiognomic tropes, while *What Will Become of Me* (1985) utilizes her biological remains—hair and skin—to conflate personal mortality with institutional permanence. Her relocation to Berlin in 2007 and her subsequent "retirement from being black" signify a final, defiant rejection of the state's taxonomic control ("Adrian Piper"; Bowles 162, 229-230).

The artistic trajectories of Dora García and Adrian Piper epitomize a radical shift in contemporary aesthetics, moving from the creation of static objects toward the facilitation of rigorous, socio-political inquiry. Through durational methodologies and the application of "situated knowledge," García successfully deconstructs the neoliberal enclosure of public space, repositioning the artist as a mediator of collective memory and democratic agency. Conversely, Piper's synthesis of Kantian ethics and confrontational performance serves as a vital diagnostic tool for exposing the persistent pathologies of racial and gendered ideologies within institutional frameworks. Collectively, their work demonstrates that the body—whether utilized as a relational proxy by García or a philosophical crucible by Piper—remains the primary site of resistance against systemic erasure. By dissolving the boundaries between artistic praxis and intellectual discourse, these visionaries ensure

that the avant-garde legacy remains a transformative force capable of challenging the structural foundations of the global art world.

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