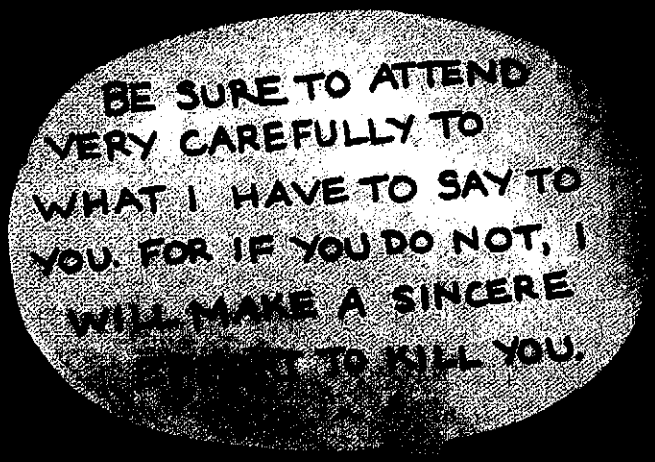
Adrian Piper

OUT OF ORDER, OUT OF SIGHT



Volume I

Selected Writings in Meta-Art

1968-1992

Out of Order, Out of Sight

Volume I: Selected Writings in Meta-Art 1968–1992

Adrian Piper

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24. Pontus Hulten's Slave to Art

Written in 1982 and previously unpublished.

In the summer of 1978, I read in the *New York Times* about the exhibition "Paris-Moscow," organized by Pontus Hulten at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris. The exhibit featured the USSR's collection, censored in the USSR, of French and Russian masters at work during the early decades of the twentieth century. My interest in political art, and particularly early Russian social realism, led me to decide to go to Paris to see the exhibition. I made the decision on the spur of the moment and at a time when I had very little money (I was in graduate school), so I had to borrow the entire sum to pay for my roundtrip plane fare and my food and lodgings while in Paris—well over $1,500.00. This provoked a lot of disapproval from my friends in academia, who considered it a frivolous expenditure. It took me almost three years to repay it all.

I have never for even one moment regretted that trip. I spent five full days, from opening to closing time, at the exhibition. The friends from Germany with whom I'd traveled would wait for me at a nearby café every evening, to which they had repaired much earlier. All day I wandered back and forth through the rooms, looking at the works in forward and reverse order, and all the variations in between. I looked long and hard, spent hours in front of particular paintings, posters, and sculptures, munching sweets to prevent me from keeling over in exhaustion. When I left that exhibition at the end of five days, I was a different person. My entire conception of what political art could be, and how it might respond to its environment, had changed. That show changed forever my relation to my own work.

Last month (October 1982) I met Pontus Hulten at an NEA conference, hosted by the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, of which he had just assumed the directorship. We were among the panel participants. I immediately looked forward to meeting the person who'd organized "Paris-Moscow," and at DeWayne Valentine's opening that first evening, I got drunk enough to walk up to him, introduce myself, and tell him what that exhibition had meant to me.

He seemed very modest and really pleased by my compliments. He was a heavy-set man, with a kind and massive face, clear blue eyes, a silver, closely cropped crew cut, and craggy eyebrows and moustache that made him look like a handsome and highly intelligent walrus, perplexed and overburdened by the complexity of his own visions. His carriage and manner of moving communicated his stature.

The moment he smiled, I wanted to sleep with him. During the second day of panel discussions I listened intently to his presentation—his voice was soft and pleasing, but I couldn't take my eyes off his hands, which were broad, with thick, stocky fingers. Vivid sexual fantasies sharpened as my morning hangover receded.

48.
$10.00/Hour Drawing of Pontus Hulten (1982). Collection of the artist.

We sat at the same table for lunch that day. He kept everyone in stitches by describing a Rauschenberg he'd recently purchased that splattered mud at you when you yelled at it. He made me laugh, and I liked watching him laugh.

Then he—or someone—mentioned the recent work of an Australian body artist, Stellarc, who suspends himself nude in the air, hanging by fishhooks inserted under his skin. Everyone seemed to agree that it was an interesting, yes, a really terrific piece. I was shocked and revolted. I wondered how these lovely people I was eating with really felt about that work, and how they could swallow it with a straight face and without protest. Probably they felt it would be tacky to raise ethical questions about their own complicity in encouraging an artist to physically mutilate himself for their appreciation. I remembered that town in Florida, immortalized on film by Errol Morris, where the inhabitants deliberately mutilate themselves to collect the insurance. I wondered if these arbiters of contemporary art felt intoxicated by their own power to determine the life-threatening lengths in which artists would go in order to command their recognition. But it did make sense, in a way—the idea of artists mutilating and dismembering themselves for the sake of applause from a disembodied art audience.

Later on that evening there were dinner and a party at the Pasadena Art Center. Pontus Hulten ate at a table on the other side of the room, and I watched him. The music at the party afterward was not great, and too loud. Talking was difficult, but I got to speak with him a little. When I first came up to him, he touched my shoulder in greeting and let his hand slide down my back. He felt it undulate under his hand. I was very turned on, and he knew it. It was a good thing there was no conveniently located dark alleyway nearby. He would have had only to indicate it with a glance.

○

Instead we got into a discussion about power and its effects on human relationships. We disagreed. He claimed it was inimical to love and destroyed friendships. I argued that it was present in all relationships and could be used positively and playfully, if the relationship was one of mutual trust and responsibility between acknowledged equals. He suggested I read Prince Kropotkin. I suggested he review Kant's writings on moral autonomy. He became annoyed, complained about the music, and disappeared. I mentally berated myself for not keeping my mouth shut and meekly writing down the bibliographic reference he mentioned (this sort of tactic never occurs to me until it's too late). I went off to dance, trying to make the best of a disappointing punk-rock band. I didn't see him again but sent him a conciliatory note when I got back to the hotel.

At one point during our conversation, he had said jokingly, "Ah, but I have power over you . . ."

Without thinking, I had answered, "No, you don't, because I would never show you my work."

What I said was true and it felt honest to say it, but I thought about it a lot later on. He could have been referring to my obvious sexual attraction to him, but that would have been only power by mutual consent. Besides, he was too Jamesian, in my eyes, to have done anything so indelicate as actually to refer verbally to *that* facet of our interaction. I had automatically assumed he was referring to the real power imbalance between us, of our respective roles as august white male museum director and pipsqueak black woman artist. In my eyes it was irrelevant because I not only wanted nothing from him professionally but—because of my attraction to him—wanted to continue to want nothing from him professionally. In spite of our disagreement, I liked him and wouldn't have wanted to muddy things by entering into a business relationship with him. I would've been honored to know him as a friend. But the fact that I was sexually attracted to him complicated even that sentiment, because it transformed him into a possible candidate for collaborative partnership in a performance/installation I had long ago conceived but never dreamed of actually executing. The piece was entitled *A Slave to Art.*

I got the idea for this piece in 1972, after I had started to realize that I just couldn't bring myself to enter into art-world power relationships, with all the compromises, humiliation, and coercion they seemed to demand. *A Slave to Art* would have required the collaboration of a very powerful and intelligent dealer or collector. This person would have had to be a real mover; the kind of person whose professional choices have determined the course of contemporary art. He or she also would have had to be entirely self-aware of the benefits and burdens of his or her position, and recognize the awesome political and social implications that accompany the excesses of this kind of power. At the same time, this person would have had to understand how power operates, and be comfortable with the various ways in which it can be manipulated and played with. These requirements were important because of the nature and conception of the piece.

In it, I sell myself as an art object to the dealer in exchange for protection, security, maintenance, and public recognition for at least two and no longer than three weeks. During this period, the person can use my talents and resources in whatever way he or she sees fit, with the following provisos:

1. I am to be exhibited in his or her exhibition space for a minimum of three hours per working day, buck nekkid— uh, excuse me, *nude*—and with a collar around my neck chaining me to my pedestal (of course there's a pedestal), surrounded by four male guards roping off the area. In front of the roped-off area in which I'm ex-

hibited, there is a plaque showing our contract. While I am on exhibition, I don't get to do anything useful, like read, write, draw, knit, converse with people, or meditate.

2. When I am not on exhibition as the dealer's latest acquisition, he or she can use me in any way he or she likes, from cook to maid to sex object to lover to companion to secretary. The sole constraints on use of me are: (a) no observer or audience can be notified, during the period of ownership, that this piece is in progress; (b) he or she can do nothing that will injure me; and (c) any use to which I am put must be consistent with protecting and maintaining me, physically, emotionally, and intellectually.

It's always seemed to me that the aesthetic and political implications of this piece would be really enormous. The problem was that I could never trust anyone enough to seriously consider collaborating on the execution of it, and I'd never met anyone in the appropriate sort of position in the art world who seemed to me to be intellectually self-aware or attractive enough to me to do this performance with. Obviously the person would have to be intellectually self-aware. She or he would have to have critical distance on their position, understand its implications, and also what it would mean to delineate those implications critically in that context. And she or he would have to be attractive to me, both physically and emotionally, because I couldn't license myself unconditionally to someone I wasn't prepared to sleep with. And I am not prepared to sleep with anyone who doesn't attract me in both of those ways. The piece is obviously very highly charged sexually, and it would work only if it were clear from the outset that we were equal partners who had entered into an exchange of power, voluntarily and by mutual consent. I have no intrinsic objection to being used and exploited by someone in a position of power and dominance over me for a limited duration, as long as I agree to the person's having that power and dominance, and as long as he or she uses and exploits me in ways I agree to; this is the essence of a functioning relationship between worker and supervisor who collaborate for mutual advantage (and follows Kant's formulation of the Categorical Imperative that enjoins us to treat humanity never only as a means but also always as an end in itself).

Well, *conceivably*, I could have imagined collaborating in that way with Pontus Hulten, because I liked him and was sexually attracted to him, and because he seemed to have some degree of self-consciousness about his position. Although perhaps not enough. After all, he did get irritated and rush away when we disagreed about power. Inability to tolerate disagreement always bodes ill for a friendship of equals. And he was a museum director with many conservative interests to protect. I'm sure it would have been asking the impossible to expect him—or any-

one, for that matter—both to maintain that position of power and also to have the kind of critical, politically informed sense of humor that would have enabled him to collaborate on a piece like this, even supposing he were to recognize its implications. Self-mutilation with fishhooks is one thing, art-world politics is another.

Oh, well. Pontus Hulten, we don't travel in the same circles, and it's not likely that we'll meet again. But thinking and fantasizing about the possibilities always brings me one step closer to embodying my ideas materially. For that opportunity, I thank you.

IV. Meta-Art 1983–1992

Racism, Racial Stereotyping, and Xenophobia

25. Notes on Funk I–IV

These pieces were performed in 1982–1984 and were written up in 1983–1985. The chapter is previously unpublished.

Notes on Funk I

1985

From 1982 to 1984, I staged collaborative performances with large or small groups of people, entitled *Funk Lessons*. The first word in the title refers to a certain branch of black popular music and dance known as "funk" (in contrast, for example, to "punk," "rap," or "rock"). Its recent ancestor is called "rhythm and blues" or "soul," and it has been developing as a distinctive cultural idiom within black culture since the early 1970s. Funk constitutes a language of interpersonal communication and collective self-expression that has its origins in African tribal music and dance and is the result of the increasing interest of contemporary black musicians and the populace in those sources elicited by the civil rights movement of the 1960s and early 1970s (African tribal drumming by slaves was banned in the United States during the nineteenth century, so it makes sense to describe this increasing interest as a "rediscovery").

This medium of expression has been largely inaccessible to white culture, in part because of the different roles of social dance in white as opposed to black culture. For example, whereas social dance in white culture is often viewed in terms of achievement, social grace or competence, or spectator-oriented entertainment, it is a collective and participatory means of self-transcendence and social union in black culture along many dimensions, and so is often much more fully integrated into daily life. Thus it is based on a system of symbols, cultural meanings, attitudes, and patterns of movement that one must directly experience in order to understand fully. This is particularly true in funk, where the concern is not how spectacular anyone looks but rather how completely everyone participates in a collectively shared, enjoyable experience.

My immediate aim in staging the large-scale performance (preferably with sixty people or more) was to enable everyone present to

GET DOWN AND PARTY. TOGETHER.

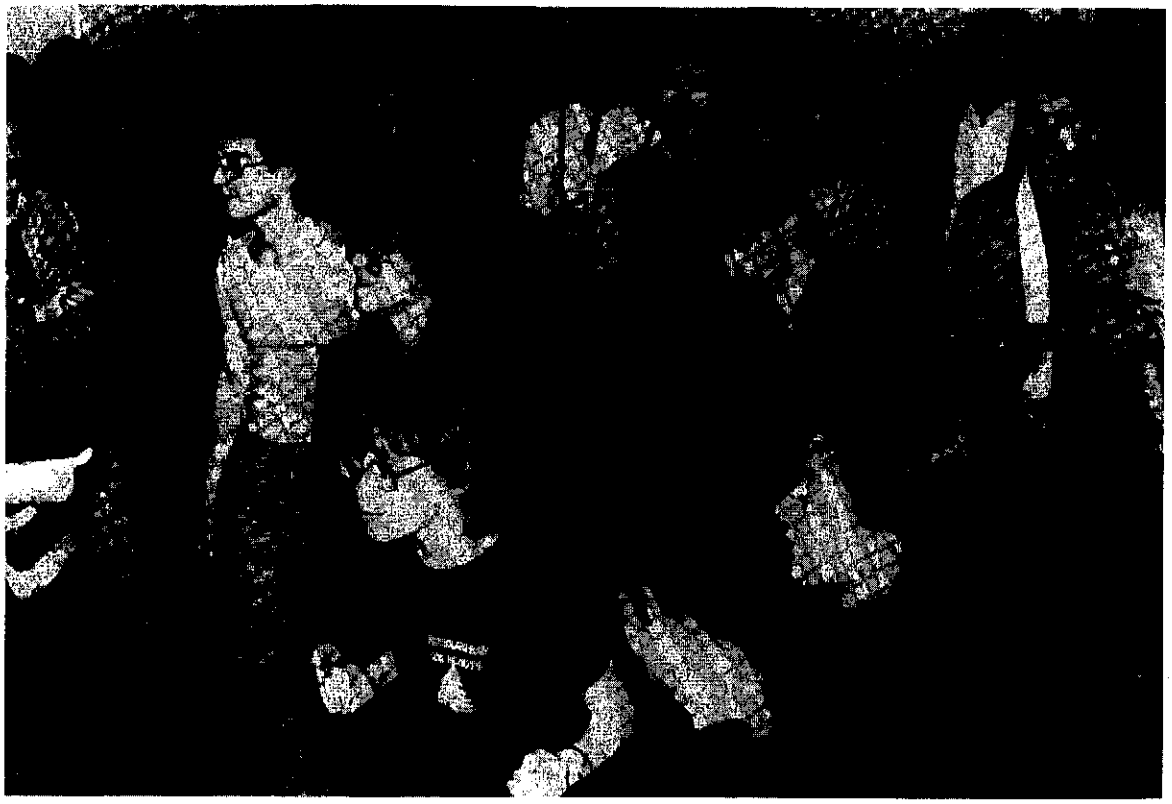
This helps explain the second word in the title, that is, "Lessons." I began by introducing some of the basic dance movements to the audience, and discussing their cultural and historical background, meanings, and the roles they play in black culture. This first part of the performance included demonstrating some basic moves and then, with the audience, rehearsing, internalizing, rerehearsing, and improvising on them. The aim was to transmit and share a physical language that everyone was then empowered to use. By breaking down the basic movements into their essentials, these apparently difficult or complex patterns became easily accessible to

everyone. Needless to say, no prior training in or acquaintance with dance was necessary. Because both repetition and individual self-expression are both important aspects of this kind of dance, it was only a matter of a relatively short time before these patterns became second nature. However, sometimes this worked more successfully than others, depending on the environment and the number and composition of the audience-participants (See my videotape, *Funk Lessons with Adrian Piper,* produced by Sam Samore and distributed by The Kitchen, for a record of one of the more successful performances.) Also, the large-scale performance compressed a series of lessons that might normally extend over a period of weeks or months.

As we explored the experience of the dance more fully, I would gradually introduce and discuss the music (which had, up to this point, functioned primarily as a rhythmic background) and the relation between the dance and the music: Because of the participatory and collective aspects of this medium, it is often much easier to discern the rhythmic and melodic complexities of the music if one is physically equipped to respond to it by dancing. Thus the first part of the performance prepared the audience for the second. Here I concentrated on the structural features that define funk music, and on some of its major themes and subject matter, using representative examples. I would discuss the relation of funk to disco, rap, rock, punk, and new wave, and illustrate my points with different selections of each. During this segment, except for brief pauses for questions, dialogue, and my (short) commentaries, everyone was refining their individual techniques, that is, they were LISTENING by DANCING. We were all engaged in the pleasurable process of self-transcendence and creative expression within a highly structured and controlled cultural idiom, in a way that attempted to overcome cultural and racial barriers. I hoped that it also overcame some of our culturally and racially influenced biases about what "High Culture" is or ought to be. Again, this didn't always work out (see "Notes on Funk III").

The "Lessons" format during this process became ever more clearly a kind of didactic foil for collaboration: Dialogue quickly replaced pseudoacademic lecture/demonstration, and social union replaced the audience-performer separation. What I purported to "teach" my audience was revealed to be a kind of fundamental sensory "knowledge" that everyone has and can use.

The small-scale, usually unannounced and unidentified spontaneous performances consisted in one intensive dialogue or a series of intensive dialogues with anywhere from one to seven other people (more than eight people tend to constitute a party, the interpersonal dynamics of which are very different). I would have people over to dinner, or for a drink, and, as is standard middle-class behavior, ini-



49.
Funk Lessons: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design Performance (1982). Photo by Daniel Lander. Courtesy John Weber Gallery.

tially select my background music from the Usual Gang of Idiots (Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, etc.). I would then interpose some funk and watch people become puzzled, agitated, or annoyed, and then I would attempt to initiate systematic discussion of the source of their dismay (in fact these reactions to my unreflective introduction of the music into this social context were what initially alerted me to the need to confront the issues systematically and collaboratively in the performance context). This usually included listening to samples of funk music and analyzing their structures, content, and personal connotations for each listener, in a sympathetic and supportive atmosphere. Occasionally, it also included dance lessons of the kind described previously, though this usually worked better with party-size or larger groups.

The intimate scale of the dialogue permitted a more extensive exploration of individual reactions to funk music and dance, which are usually fairly intense and complex. For example, it sometimes elicited anxiety, anger, or contempt from middle-class, college-educated whites: anxiety, because its association with black, working-class culture engenders unresolved racist feelings that are then repressed or denied rather than examined; anger, because it is both sexually threatening and culturally intrusive to individuals schooled exclusively in the idiom of the European-descended tradition of classical, folk, and/or popular music; contempt, because it

sounds "mindless" or "monotonous" to individuals who, through lack of exposure or musicological training, are unable to discern its rhythmic, melodic, and topical complexity.

Alternately, funk sometimes elicited condescension or embarrassment from middle-class, college-educated blacks: condescension, because it is perceived as black *popular* culture, that is, relatively unsophisticated or undeveloped by comparison with jazz as black high culture; embarrassment, because funk's explicit and aggressive sexuality and use of Gospel-derived vocal techniques sometimes seem excessive by comparison with the more restrained, subdued, white- or European-influenced middle-class lifestyle. Often this music is also associated with adolescent popularity traumas concerning dancing, dating, or sexual competence. These negative associations linger into adulthood and inhibit one's ability even to listen to this genre of music without painful personal feelings.

These and other intense responses were sympathetically confronted, articulated, and sometimes exorcised in the course of discussing and listening to the music. The result was often cathartic, therapeutic, and intellectually stimulating: To engage consciously with these and related issues can liberate one to listen to and understand this art form of black, working-class culture without fear or shame, and so to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural and political dimensions of one's social identity.

What follows are notes I took after having staged the performance at different times. They are the fruit of my dialogues with participants and of my observations of their responses to the performance.

Notes on Funk II

October 1983

The long-term goal both of the small- and the large-scale performances is to restructure people's social identities, by making accessible to them a common medium of communication—funk music and dance—that has been largely inaccessible to white culture and has consequently exacerbated the xenophobic fear, hostility, and incomprehension that generally characterize the reaction of whites to black popular culture in this society. All aspects of that culture, including its speech patterns, conventions of social interaction, its music, and its dance, have become the target of the last outpost of explicit and socially legitimated racism, I believe, because these are the last artifacts of black culture that are identifiably black, that is, have not been either appropriated or assimilated into white

culture (usually through the back door: witness Elvis's appropriation of Chuck Berry, the Rolling Stones' appropriation of Don Kovay, Bo Derek's appropriation of cornrows, Al Jolson's and Fred Astaire's appropriations of minstrelsy, Peggy Lee's appropriation of Ella Fitzgerald, etc.; the list is endless). I describe this reaction as racist, but in fact it is more generally xenophobic, because it is as much a response of anxiety and fear to perceived cultural differences that can be alleviated only by denying or appropriating them as it is a response of hostility or contempt to perceived racist stereotypes.

To see this, consider the progress of the black civil rights movement in this country. Blacks have attained whatever *political* parity we've attained by proving that we can conform to the requirements of white political participation just as well as anyone else (for example, by voting, being self-determining, socially and legally responsible, etc., in the ways prescribed by [y]our forefathers). Similarly, whatever *economic* parity blacks have achieved (as illustrated, for example, by whites' hiring token blacks, admitting token blacks into higher education and the professions, occasionally resisting the impulse to a general exodus when a black family moves into the neighborhood, etc.) depends on our ability to "fit in," that is, conform our public behavior to white social conventions (for example, speak standard English, play tennis and discuss the stock market with the boss, enthusiastically attend concerts of classical music, function at cocktail parties, etc.)

I have no objection to the acquisition and exercise of these skills: They are *skills*, that is, personal resources, and the more of those that people have, the more flexible and comfortable in a large variety of contexts they are likely to be. What is disturbing is the response on the part of the white majority to the appearance of any other, different skills and modes of self-presentation that fail to conform to those predominant conventions: Even some of the most well-intentioned and politically concerned whites tend to get so nervous and angry when confronted by the relatively alien social and cultural conventions of black, working-class culture that they may actually attempt jive talk, a "black" accent, and a diddybop strut when around working-class blacks in order to resolve the perceived dissonance, and of course the severe discomfort and sense of bad faith involved in this effort naturally dispose them to shun those individuals as much as possible.

Thus *social* parity and acceptance require conformity to white culture as well. What remains to be attained is a comparably minuscule degree of *cultural* parity; that is, the respect and recognition of identifiably black cultural conventions as a rich and aesthetically legitimate art form—not just due jazz in all its topical abstraction and formal complexity, and easier to accept for precisely that reason, but due black popular culture as well, because it is so explicitly and intimately tied to the African

roots of black creative expression. But if the xenophobic reaction to perceived cultural difference is as strong and widespread as I fear it is, the requirement of cultural conformity will be just as strongly imposed, funk music and dance will be more or less permanently consigned to a *genuinely* avant garde underground, and the Talking Heads and Steve Reich will be the closest that white society will allow itself to approach.

Of course, there are other possible explanations for the reactions of most whites to funk music and dance (even well-meaning and politically correct friends and acquaintances have described it to me as "animalistic," "crass," "vulgar," "exhibitionistic," "escapist," "decadent," and so on). Some argue, for example, that it's just a clash of cultures that is exacerbated by the fact that dance and music have an integral social function in black culture that is absent in white culture until you reach adolescence, at which point you're automatically supposed to perform like Fred and Ginger on the dance floor at dancing and necking parties, upon pain of permanent social ostracism; thus the anxiety and paranoia of many whites at having to "perform" on the dance floor. There's no question in my mind but that this *is* a part of the hostility that usually greets these aesthetic idioms; it's unfair to be required to be instantly competent at a social skill at which one has had virtually no prior social training, and those negative reactions don't easily disappear just because one has grown past adolescence. But this fact doesn't prevent people from trying vainly to dance complicated Israeli horas or Greek circle dances, even though they've had no prior social training in those skills, either.

Another explanation of the kinds of racism this idiom elicits is that there's a general tendency among the educated to dismiss any aspect of popular culture as unworthy of serious attention, and that this tendency increases in direct proportion to one's socioeconomic ascendancy into the higher reaches of the middle class. Again, while this seems to me to be generally true, it ignores the fact that we can be unctuously reverent of the popular culture of other societies: The phenomenon of King Sonny Adé reminds me of the early 1970s, when Steve Reich discovered the Ramayana Monkey Chant, and that was practically all we ever heard on progressive New York radio stations. So it seems to me that some popular cultures do make it past the intellectual and psychological barriers—as long as they keep a respectful distance.

Of course, it's also easy to understand how whites might feel threatened by being thrown into the middle of the black cultural milieu without having already learned the rules; blacks feel the same way about being thrown into the white one similarly unprepared. There are few experiences more unpleasant than the realization that not only can one do absolutely nothing "right" as defined by the prevailing so-

cial and cultural conventions but also that one calls attention to oneself—often hostile or derisive attention—by doing everything wrong. But this doesn't account for the dismissive, contemptuous, often paranoid response at having funk music and dance introduced into apparently all-white social contexts.

Finally, it has been suggested to me that the antipathetic reaction to funk music and dance is the inevitable consequence of its explicit sexuality, when thrown in the face of a predominant culture shaped so largely by repression and sublimation. I don't think this explains that response to lyrics that have nothing to do with sexuality but rather with self-transcendence, social unity, betrayal, self-respect, and the many other themes that are prominent in funk music; nor does it explain why whites are perfectly comfortable with sexually explicit language in Chaucer, Shakespeare, or Monteverdi. But I also recognize that for a culture obsessed with sex and the stereotype of blacks as more sexually potent than anyone else, it is easy to read sexual interpretations into these lyrics even when it is not appropriate to do so. This phenomenon just confirms my suspicion, reached largely by a process of elimination of alternative explanations, that the white response to this idiom is overwhelmingly racist and xenophobic, and that we won't make any real progress in race relations at the deepest level until we are able to confront and transcend this response.

My motivation in doing the *Funk Lessons* performances also has a very large self-interested component (of course). The ignorance and xenophobia that surround the aesthetic idiom of black working-class culture have affected the audience's comprehension of my performance work since 1972, when I did the *Aretha Franklin Catalysis* piece on the streets of New York, up to an audience-oriented performance in 1980, *It's Just Art.* After a performance of *It's Just Art,* for example, one member of the audience asked me why I was up there "shaking my booty"; further questioning elicited her opinion that the music of black working-class culture was inappropriate for inclusion in an examination of serious political topics, and that Phillip Glass or Mozart would have been more suitable. Another response I often encountered to this piece, as well as to an earlier audience-oriented performance, *Some Reflective Surfaces,* was that I was "using boring, monotonous disco music to comment on the decadence of Western culture."

These responses made me realize that I was not, in fact, as fully assimilated into white society as I had always thought. Having gone through the process of aesthetic acculturation into "high art" in art school, I had always supposed that I shared the same set of assumptions as the audience to the "high art" I produced: about formal inventiveness and exploration, and the value of using my experience of various aspects of social life and popular culture as resources for my work, and

so on. But these responses forced me to recognize that this supposition was false, and that in fact this audience would (or perhaps could) accept only a certain circumscribed range of inventiveness, exploration, and sociocultural art resources as aesthetically legitimate; a range circumscribed, in the final analysis, by ignorance and xenophobia.

To realize this forced me to make a choice: either to abandon a cultural idiom of communication that had always been part of my life and personal identity as a black woman, or else to share this idiom with my audience so I could use it successfully in my work as a recognized and comprehended medium of communication, or shared language. It also gave me a very different perspective on my status as an artist and relatively privileged member of society. I had always assumed that any meaningful political work I did had to involve utilizing the advantages of my middle-class education and aesthetic acculturation as resources "for the benefit of" the disadvantaged community from which I came; as though those resources

50.
Funk Lessons: Berkeley Performance (1983). Photographer unknown. Courtesy John Weber Gallery.

were unequivocally invaluable gifts, unparalleled by anything that that community might have to offer, and were to be distributed as widely as possible. This view now seems to me to be laden with patronizing, elitist assumptions about who has what of value to offer to whom. The funk idiom of black working-class culture is an unbelievably rich and enriching art form that I disseminate in the performances not only to facilitate comprehension of my other work but also for the cultural benefit of my largely white, upper-middle-class audience. That is, it is black working-class culture that has invaluable gifts to offer that audience, and not just the other way around.

The responses to the performances so far have been polarized—perhaps predictably: On one side are those who respond with interest, enthusiasm, the desire to test their biases, or use the performance situation therapeutically, as a way of trying to come to terms with deeply internalized racist stereotypes by which we are all victimized in one way or another. On the other side are those who begin by expressing objections to the overt didacticism of the piece: They argue that art should be subtle, suggestive, and ambiguous in its messages, and that anything communicated too explicitly is apt to seem heavy-handed. But pressing these objections further usually uncovers the underlying attitude fairly quickly, which is, Who are *you* to tell *me* what I need to know?—as though merely supplying new information were an affront to the recipient's intelligence. I think this attitude expresses a kind of provincial anti-intellectualism and arrogance that runs through much so-called avant garde sensibility, of which one assumption seems to be that an aesthetic free spirit on the contemporary art scene by definition knows and experiences all that is worth knowing and experiencing, and that it is, in fact, a kind of insult to suggest that there is any deficiency in information there to be remedied. I feel quite helpless in the face of this response, as it seems to me to be the kind of attitude that lacks the concept of gaining knowledge through dialogue and communication, and that is ultimately all that any new art has to offer. Certainly that kind of knowledge and insight is what my audience to this work offers me; if it didn't, I would have the very strong sense of thrashing and flailing around in a sensory deprivation tank with only my ego to keep me company.

Another explicit assumption of this attitude is, of course, the idea that an artist has no right to communicate *any* message or information from a stance of certainty of its value or authority, but I have suggested elsewhere ("Power Relations within Existing Art Institutions," in volume II) that this is a natural consequence of our general view of artists as essentially powerless and irresponsible. Thus, I sometimes have the sense that in doing these performances I am biting off much more than I can chew at one meal, but the only acceptable response I can find is to just keep on munching.

I suppose that what finally vindicates the performances in my own eyes (as well as the effort to continue engaging with very different kinds of people in doing them) is the undeniable *experience* people seem to get, almost invariably, from participating in them, including me: It just seems to be true that most of my white friends feel less alienated from this aesthetic idiom after having participated in it directly, and discussed their feelings about it in a receptive context, regardless of their reservations about whether what I'm doing is "art" or not, whether funk deserves the legitimation of "high culture" or not, and so on. For me what it means is that the experiences of sharing, commonality, and self-transcendence turn out to be more intense and significant, in some ways, than the postmodernist categories most of us art-types bring to aesthetic experience. This is important to me because I don't believe those categories should be the sole arbiters of aesthetic evaluation (see "Power Relations within Existing Art Institutions," in volume II).

But perhaps the real point of it for me has to do with the ways in which it enables me to overcome my own sense of alienation, both from white and black culture. As a Woman of Color (I think that's the going phrase these days; as my parents often complain, "What's the matter with 'colored'? Or 'colored woman'? That was a good, serviceable, accurate description forty years ago!") who is often put in the moral dilemma of being identified as white and hence subject to the accusation of "passing," it gives me the chance to affirm and explore the cultural dimensions of my identity as a black in ways that illuminate my personal and political connection to other (more identifiably) black people, and celebrate our common cultural heritage. At the same time, the piece enables me to affirm and utilize the conventions and idioms of communications I've learned in the process of my acculturation into white culture: the analytical mode, the formal and structural analysis, the process of considered and constructive rational dialogue, the pseudoacademic lecture/demonstration/group participation style, and so on. These modes of fluency reinforce my sense of identification with my audience and ultimately empower all of us to move with greater ease and fluidity from one such mode to another. It also reinforces my sense of optimism that eventually the twain *shall* meet!

Notes on Funk III

February 1984

"We're all cool here," he said _____ly.

He was a member of the audience. The performance was going smoothly, but I was unsatisfied: The space was too large for the number of warm bodies in it; the

amplifier had blanked out a number of times, was growing increasingly hot to the touch, and threatened to start smoking, or melt down, within minutes. In fact it did, but that was later, about halfway through. I was at that point in the performance, early on, where I was sensing and trying to articulate the audience's unease: at being spoken to directly, at being urged to talk back, at being asked to listen and move strangely to this music, at being encouraged to publicly express their feelings: of annoyance, self-consciousness, embarrassment, resentment, contempt, shame, or whatever else was keeping them stiff, silent, and unresponsive.

This doesn't happen with every audience. Some audiences view themselves as genuine collaborators (which is what they are in any case) and allow their gut responses to come out rapidly and cleanly. Whether these are positive or negative, they invariably heighten the energy and intensity of our contact, lower inhibitions, loosen muscles, and enable the magic of this music to work.

(Positive: for example,

1. The analytical part gives me a lot to think about
2. That was fun
3. Now I understand rationally why I don't like to party
4. It's about time someone gave this stuff the respect it deserves
5. Whatta workout)

(Negative: for example,

1. The music is mindless. Shut up and dance
2. You can't transmit Soul through academic analysis
3. Much ado about nothing
4. This stuff is sexist and racist
5. Don't assume I'm ignorant when there's nothing to know)

Other audiences seem to view themselves more as victims: They feel manipulated, patronized, suspicious of my accessibility and my vulnerability. In these cases, it usually helps for me to address these feelings directly—not only because it clears the air by communicating the fact that it's all right to have them but also because it reduces the audience—performer separation by communicating the fact that I understand these feelings too. This is one of those situations in which it's actually to

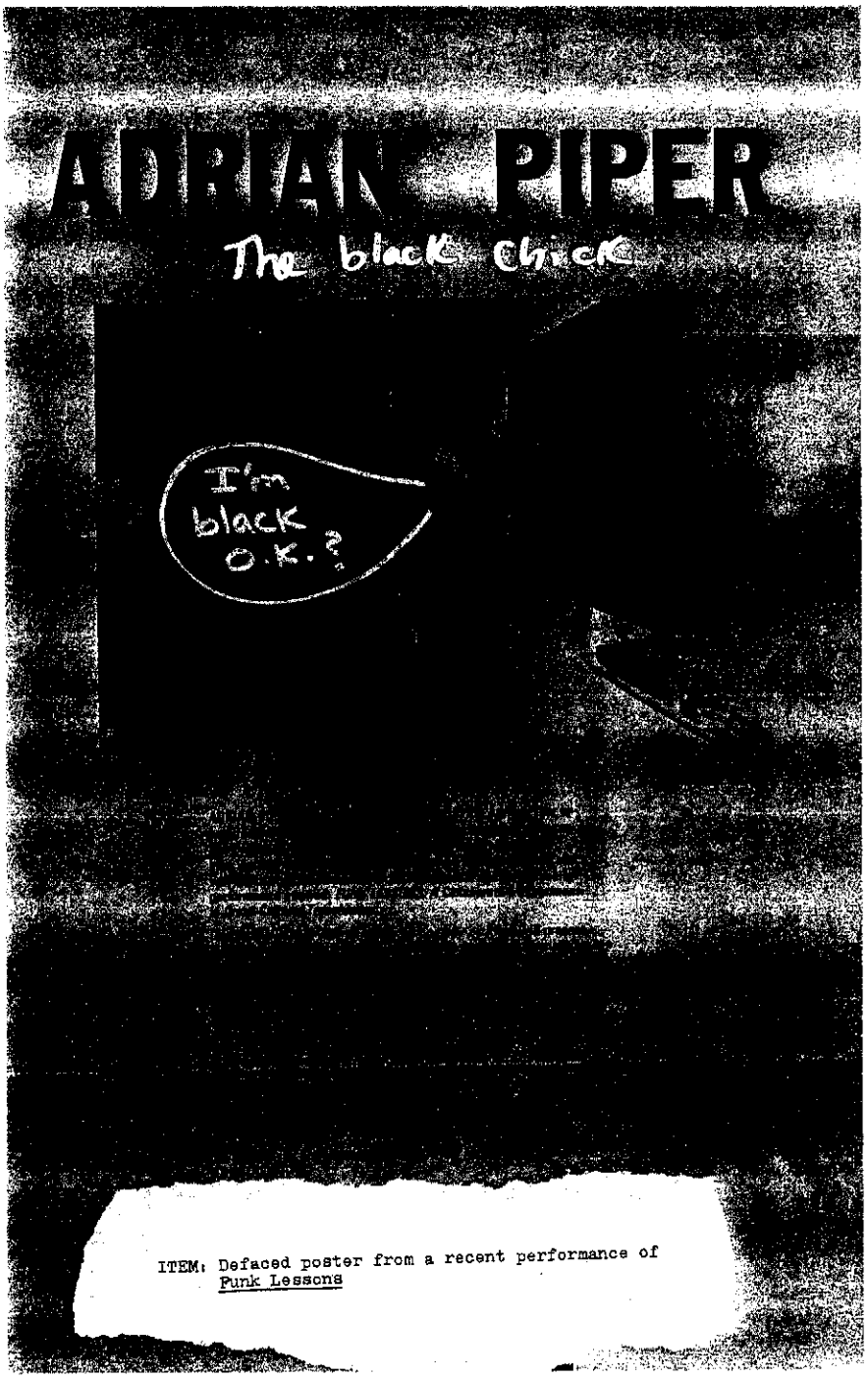
my advantage that I'm light and speak like a Richard Pryor imitation of a white man. I can communicate these feelings because I know what it's like to have them. However, it doesn't always help, because I don't always succeed in reducing the distance between me as a representative and advocate of an "alien" art form, and my audience who feels judged, criticized, and found wanting relative to it. This particular manifestation of a cultural inferiority complex is just one of the insidious ways racism spreads its cancer:

1. Afro-American working-class culture is *in fact* part of my white audience's culture, and not alien to it. As the choreographer Halifu Osumare has pointed out, it is Afro-*American* culture, and we all would have continued to waltz, polka, and minuet, like our European ancestors, without it.

2. But typically, white Americans cut off their legs and mistake them for their umbilical cords: Instead of recognizing their fundamental independence from their European forebears—an independence partly determined from the beginnings by the cross-pollination of Africa and Europe in the Americas—most white Americans aspire to symbiotic identification with Europe, while suppressing the most distinctively American facet of their identities, that is, their intrinsic hybridization—yes, genetically as well as culturally (see Joel Williamson, *A New People* [New York: Free Press, 1980]).

3. Why? *I* say it's the racism inherited from Europe's own cultural inferiority complex, originating in the ancient awareness of its enormous genetic and cultural inheritance from and indebtedness to Africa—an inheritance disseminated via North Africa's connection to Egypt, Greece, and Italy (where *do* all those pug noses and "swarthy" complexions and that curly hair come from, anyway?), assimilated into Indo-European culture, and severed at its African roots, but that's another story. In any case, Americans feel culturally inferior to Europeans and aspire to be like them, and this requires the denial and rejection of their own varying degrees of blackness. The suppression of an intimate aspect of oneself in order to identify with an alien other is, of course, a familiar mechanism in neuroses of all kinds, as is the anxiety and fear that suppressed aspect then elicits.

4. This suppressed blackness is then reconstructed as the alien and threatening Other—hence the xenophobic response of anxiety and fear to black culture (that we don't have this response to a *genuinely* alien Other is evidenced by our reactions to dolphins: Maybe they really are smarter, stronger, subtler, and more grown-up than we are, in addition to having a better sense of humor, but that's acceptable, as long as we all know who's boss [get it? heh heh]).



51.
Defaced Funk Lessons Poster (1983). Collection of the artist.

5. But here's the double bind: The anxiety and fear response to what is perceived as alien and threatening carries with it the implicit belief that the Other is *superior*: in strength, cunning, endurance, and understanding—hence the myth of blacks as bigger, stronger, cooler, sexier, wiser, hipper, meaner, and so on. White Americans then get to feel inferior, not only to what they are not (European) because of what they are (African-influenced) but also to what they are (African-influenced) because of what they are not (Afro-American). Blacks become an object of fear, loathing, admiration, and awe.

6. It then becomes presumptuous, an act of bad faith, to aspire to experience black culture sympathetically or through participation. It is seen as an attempt to pretend to be what one is not, to be hipper and sexier than one feels. To feel hip and sexy at all then becomes self-deception, a violation of one's authenticity. So to do anything that might make one feel hip and sexy, or look hip and sexy, or look as though one felt hip and sexy, or is supposed to make one feel and/or look hip and sexy, is, of course, psychologically, morally, and politically unacceptable on every level, and the only thing left to do is make a joke of one's self-hatred and withdraw.

"We're all cool here,"

he said hotly.

One stance that often works as an antidote to the syndrome of the Other is

Fuck it. Let's boogie.

But it's not always easy to assume this stance. People victimized by the syndrome of the Other can experience their own liberation only as shameless and wanton self-abandon, as the abdication of all dignity and self-respect; and the temptation is strong to view others' liberation in the same light. Not that I have anything against shameless and wanton self-abandon, in moderation, or against the occasional abdication of all dignity and self-respect. My point is simply that someone who tries to maintain personal authenticity by adhering to *any* circumscribed social or ethnic role will tend to view liberation from that role—anyone's liberation—as a personal threat. Perhaps a more sedate way of achieving liberation from the syndrome of the Other is to keep in mind that

1. black Americans are not typically victimized by this syndrome in the first place, so it's a misperception to view their cultural idioms as a personal threat;

2. white Americans might evade victimization by this syndrome by fully recognizing and celebrating all the dimensions of their cultural identity as Americans; because in fact,

    We ARE all cool here.

    We are ALL cool here.

Notes on Funk IV

October 1984

So is this music sexist? Does it exploit women, as some performance participants have charged? Consider, for example, lyrics like "Push, push, in the bush"; "That fox is fine, fine, fine with me"; "Best in the west" (which, as sung by Chaka Khan, would presumably exploit men, according to this reasoning); and so on. Let's begin by making some elementary distinctions. You met someone new. You both clicked. Last night you slept together, and today you feel better than you've felt in years. You tell your best friend (or roommate or favorite co-worker), "Lord! He/she was fantastic in the sack." Are you exploiting your new lover by saying this to someone else?

Consider another case. You're at your consciousness-raising group (remember those?). You've gotten yourself into a lather about all your failed relationships with members of the opposite sex. You rage, "Men (women) are all pigs (bitches)." Can you be accused of sexist exploitation for having said this in a group? Would it be appropriate for members of this group to level this accusation at you under these circumstances? Consider a third case. You rave about your lover's sexual talents to your consciousness-raising group, which has twenty-five members. You want to share your exaltation, joy, and deep satisfaction and sense of peace with them, but without being too heavy or solemn about it. So you joke, "Mmmm-mm! The pecs (tits) on this man (woman) are a thing of beauty to behold!"

And so on.

Perhaps a general point begins to emerge here. The point is that language does not exist in a vacuum. It depends for its meaning and connotations on the specific context in which it is used. What may well be exploitative and sexist in the context of an editorial explaining why men and women should not have equal employment opportunities, or in the context of a parent instructing a child on the dangers and liabilities of the opposite sex, may not be at all in the context of the intimate exchange of confidences and feelings between or among friends.

What makes this last context different from the first two? One thing that makes it different is all the participants share a common understanding of how these utterances are to be interpreted. That is, they know what your deeper political views are (or at least assume they know); they know that you are using these words playfully, or ironically, or expressively; they know that you know that they know these things, and that you choose your words and phrases with an eye to their effects on them in particular. That is, they know that you know them as well as they know you—and so bracket the (relative to this context) extrinsic connotations of your utterances accordingly. Simply put, you and your audience understand each other.

Now consider what happens when an innocent bystander overhears your conversation, a bystander who is not a part of your group and has no understanding of the conventions of meaning and expression that govern it. Moreover, this interloper lacks understanding both of your intimate relation to the designated members of your audience—a relationship conditioned by shared knowledge, conventions, and experiences—and also of your relation to the person you're describing as dynamite in the sack, as having great pecs and buns, and so on.

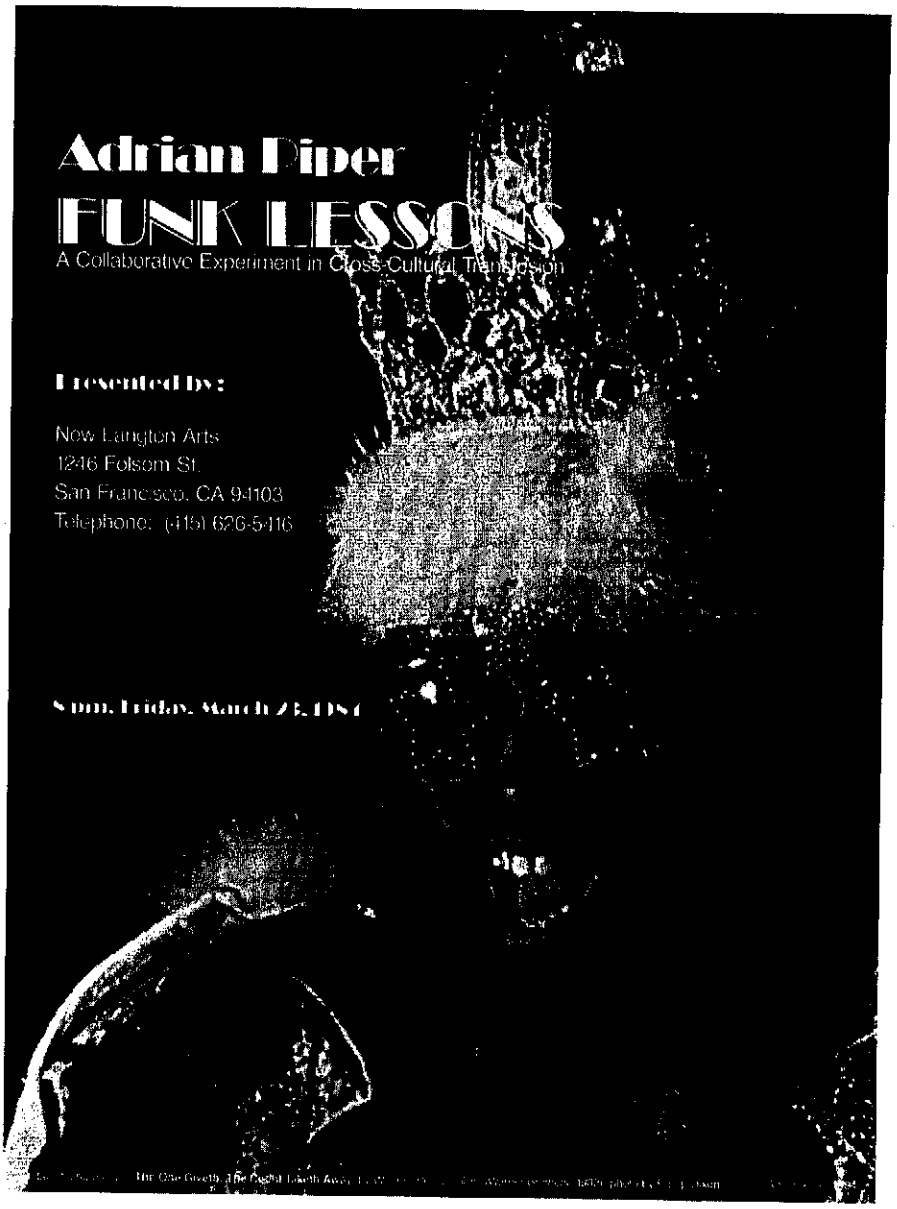
What sort of response might we expect from this interloper to your utterances? Well, if our interloper is politically correct, we might expect moral outrage as an initial reaction. But our interloper will have other psychological characteristics as well. If he or she believes that the world is his or her oyster, and so that there is no conceivable social context that may be at least initially inaccessible to his or her understanding, and that may therefore require him or her to reflect again on the accuracy or appropriateness of that initial response, then that initial response of moral outrage will tend to harden into an unconditional judgment that, *regardless* of whatever the characteristics that define this social context, its participants are sexist and exploitative in promoting and condoning the use of such language. This view is an especially convenient one for those individuals who are apt to become nervous when confronted by evidence of their own ignorance or lack of sophistication. For it enables them to deny that there is, in fact, anything further in the context worth knowing.

There are some other possible characteristics our interloper might have instead. One might be a strong sense of the limitations of his or her sensibility, and a recognition that more information about this context, its participants, their relationships and practices, and so on, needs to be gained before it can be decided whether that initial response of moral outrage is justified or not. Of course, this is not to claim that more information will prove to our interloper that his or her initial response was wrong, and this brings us to another possible characteristic he or she might have.

After achieving the familiarity necessary with this context, our interloper might still find such language morally repugnant, regardless of the extralinguistic assumptions that are here brought to its use. This would be, presumably, because our interloper has the interesting psychological feature of never, ever using racy language, ever, to describe any experience or feeling he or she has, ever, with anyone, regardless of context or degree of intimacy with his or her audience. This feature, presumably, would be the psychological basis of our interloper's conviction that the relations of familiarity and intimacy that characterize this context do not legitimate the use of this language.

This last would be an interesting psychological feature indeed. It might even lead us to wonder whether our interloper understood what familiarity and intimacy were.

At this point, I doubt that it is necessary to point out the conditions under which the idiom of Funk music developed, nor the highly circumscribed context in which it receives an audience. Afficionadoes know all too well the hours spent, upon first arrival in a new town, turning the radio dial for hours, trying to find the one—if that many—R&B station that plays Funk music, and how hard it is to recognize once you've found it because it has to run three commercials for every cut in order to stay afloat. Those who have succeeded in finding this station, and have called to request a record or ask for an identifying artist and title, may also be familiar with the surprise of the DJ or station manager at speaking to someone on the phone who lacks a recognizably (that is, stereotypically) working-class black accent. Such a DJ or station manager would be even more surprised at the misplaced moral outrage of our ignorant interloper. Because it is still a source of surprise, for many black Funk musicians and composers, that there are any white people listening at all.



52.
Funk Lessons Poster of Bootsie (1983). Courtesy John Weber Gallery, collection of the artist.

Funk Lessons (Performance Hand-Out Summary)

Characteristics of Black Dance (adapted from Dolores Kirton Cayou; courtesy of Halifu Osumare):

1. Relaxed back.
2. Bent knees.
3. Whole foot on floor.
4. Isolation of body parts: feet, knees, hips, shoulders, head, and so on.
5. Polyrhythmic: different rhythms carried by different body parts.
6. Unification of music with dance: Each kind of music has its own appropriate dance style.
7. Personalistic: variation and play on fixed dance conventions for individual self-expression.
8. Self-transcendent: use of dance to "become one" with the music; to be "possessed" by it. Your physical movements are determined by the music, *not* by your mind.
9. Participatory and nonexhibitionistic: dance as an involving communal event, *not* entertainment for a spectator audience.
10. Socially functional: dance integrated into ongoing daily life, *not* special and specialized feat of accomplishment.
11. Modular: extended choreographic patterns constructed from sequences of simple units of physical movement.
12. Repetitive: patterns repeated multiply, or until they become second nature.
13. Improvisational: simple units of physical movement lead into different movements, gradually or instantaneously transforming extended pattern.

Characteristics of Funk Music:

Structure

1. Frequent detours from major harmonic scale: use of dissonant, atonal, minor, major or minor 7th chords and melodic sequences; frequent modulations (key changes).
2. Multiple and multilayered melodies, each carried by a different instrument, voice, or chorus.

3. Multiple or multilayered polyrhythmic syncopations, each carried by a different instrument, voice, or chorus.
4. Self-composing: Rhythmic and melodic density enables listener to pick out unique, individual rhythmic and melodic sequences from among layers of rhythm and sound. The more layers one can discriminate, the more complex and sophisticated one's "compositions."
5. Creation of intimate or social space through spoken monologue or dialogue, respectively.

Content

1. Desire for self-transcendence: to "become one" with the music, one's lover, other people, the universe.
2. Sexual love: as source of pride, pleasure, self-respect, humor or play; as means of self-transcendence, achievement of unity.
3. Political themes: affirmation of self-respect; desire for unity or liberation; fear of self-obliteration, social or interpersonal betrayal, disunity; expression of dignity.

Funk Lessons Discography and Bibliography

Funk

[Origins in Soul: anything by James Brown]

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———, *Bootsy's Rubber Band* (Warner Bros., 1979).

———, *Ultra Wave* (Warner Bros., 1980).

———, *The One Giveth* (Warner Bros., 1982).

Parliament, *Motor City Affair* (Casablanca, 1978).

———, *Trombipulation* (Casablanca, 1980).

Tom Browne, *Love Approach* (Arista, 1980).

ConFunkShun, *Spirit of Love* (Polygram, 1980).

———, *To the Max* (Polygram, 1982).

Aretha Franklin, *Jump To It* (Arista, 1982).

Gap Band, *Gap Band IV* (Polygram, 1982).

Marvin Gaye, *Midnight Love* (Columbia, 1982).

Michael Henderson, *Wide Receiver* (Buddah, 1980).

The Brothers Johnson, *Light Up the Night* (A&M, 1980).

Chaka Khan, *Chaka Khan* (Warner Bros., 1982).

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Lipps, Inc., *Mouth to Mouth* (Casablanca, 1980), "Funky Town."

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27. My Calling (Cards) #1 and #2

Written in 1990 and previously unpublished.

The idea behind this series of performances, which I call *reactive guerrilla performances,* is intervention in order to prevent co-optation.

My Calling (Card) #1 (for Dinners and Cocktail Parties) April 1986–1990

In this first performance, the situation is one in which I find myself in otherwise exclusively white company at a dinner or cocktail party, in which those present do not realize I am black. Thinking themselves in sympathetic company, they (or any one of them) proceed to make racist remarks (it should be emphasized that this phenomenon occurs in groups of all economic and educational levels; it would be a mistake to think of it as primarily a working-class white phenomenon). My options:

1. I say nothing. The consequence is that they think it is all right to make such remarks, and I feel both offended and compromised by my silence. I also feel guilty for being deceptive.

2. I reprimand them abstractly, that is, without identifying myself as black. The consequence is that we have an academic discussion about the propriety, meanings, and intentions of these remarks that leaves fundamental dispositions untouched and self-deceptive rationalizations inviolate, and I again feel offended, compromised, and deceptive.

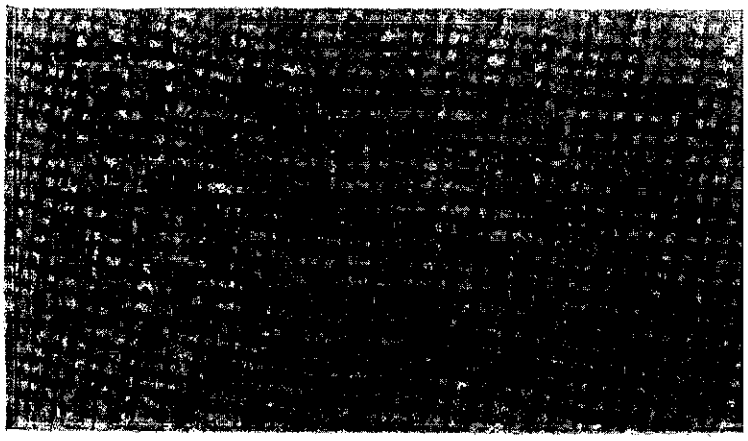
3. I reprimand them concretely, that is, by informing them publicly that I am black and am offended by their remarks. This violates subtle but rigid conventions about what subjects are appropriate topics of conversation at dinners and cocktail parties and opens an abyss of silence and mortification that everyone feels. The offender is humiliated and shamed for having been caught out; everyone else is embarrassed at having witnessed this; and everyone, including me, is enraged at me for having called attention to this social gaffe instead of ignoring it and helping to smooth things over. The social network has been rent, and I (not the offender, who is beneath notice) have ruined everyone's evening.

4. I announce that I am black at the beginning of the evening. It is hard to slip this information in without seeming forced or artificial. The consequence is that they are on guard, but view me as opportunistic (that is, a "professional black") and as trying to guilt-trip them, or as socially incompetent. Everyone feels uncomfortable.

5. Someone else lets it be known in advance that there will be a black person present. Everyone feels paranoid and spends the evening looking around and trying to figure out who the black person is. Shades of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers.*

6. Someone else lets it be known in advance that I am black. Everyone is on guard and spends the evening deploring racism and recounting their personal attempts to combat it.

7. I abdicate my black identity and "blend in." This is out of the question. Some branches of my family have tried this option, and the ones I know of have turned into really twisted people.

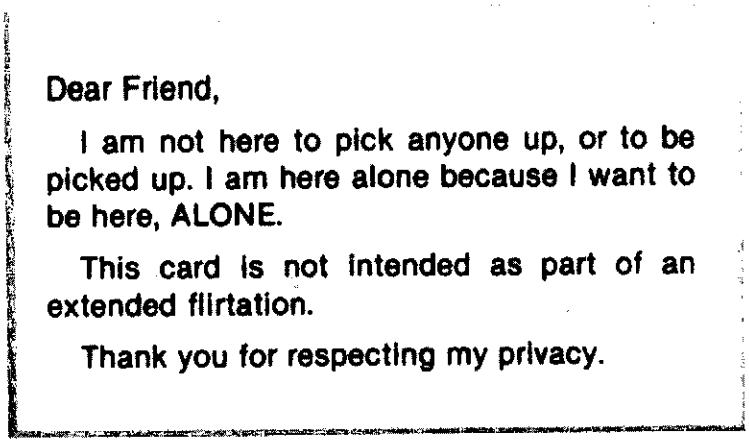


53.
My Calling (Card) #1 (1986–1990). Courtesy John Weber Gallery, collection of the artist.

8. I present the individual(s) who made the remark with my card. Some consequences: It established the possibility of dialogue between me and this individual without disrupting the group as a whole (The only evenings that are ruined are mine and the offender's). It allows me to express my anger in a semiprivate context that has already been established by the person who made the remark. This means I can assert my identity without being accused of being manipulative, etc. The general character of the statement and the rule-governed policy that governs its presentation convey the message that the offending individual is behaving in typical and predictably racist ways. It fights a stereotype by giving the offender a concrete experience of what it is like to be the object of one.

My Calling (Card) #2 (for Bars and Discos) June 1986–1990

This works on the same principles as #1 but is designed for occasions when I am sitting alone, reading a newspaper, and nursing a beer by myself in a bar. One major difference is that whereas in #1 my expression of anger and pain in the card is justified by the offending individual's hostility in making the racist remark, in #2 a come-on in a bar can be or can masquerade as the paradigm of friendliness; so it's up to me to deliver the message without being the first to violate that assumption. The card is distributed only after I have verbally expressed my desire to remain alone, politely at first and then with some vehemence. Typically it elicits further jokes, put-downs, attempts at flirtation, and so on, before the offender beats a sullen retreat. This card takes longer to work because it must combat the "no-matter-what-she-says-she-really-wants-it" fiction. But it ruins my evening so completely to have to use it, and I have to use it so persistently in bars and discos in the States, that in fact I rarely go into these environments unaccompanied anymore. I find restaurants and coffee houses to be much safer environments when I feel the need for the anonymity of the crowd.



54.
My Calling (Card) #2 (1986–1990).Courtesy John Weber Gallery, collection of the artist.

28. Flying

Written in February 1987 and first published in the catalog *Adrian Piper: Reflections 1967–1987* (New York: The Alternative Museum, 1987).

1. One of my two most treasured recurrent dreams, with variations:

I spring from the ground, executing high leaps, *tour jetés*, turns, somersaults, twists, and twirls. I float effortlessly through these figures, can stay suspended in the air for as long as I like. My ballet and modern dance teacher, Miss Copland, watches, transfixed. I run and leap, flapping my arms, and take off. At first I am flying close to the ground and often land without wanting to. But by running faster, leaping further, and flapping harder, I eventually ascend higher and higher, far above the people below me, who are watching, marveling, trying to catch me by the feet and drag me down. I soar above them, twisting, dipping, gliding, leaving them in the distance. This part is not effortless, and not without anxiety. I have to work hard to stay sufficiently far above them so that they cannot get at me. It takes skillful maneuvering and energetic flapping to keep them at bay, but I manage it. Eventually I relax into my ability to stay afloat above them, even leave them behind completely, as long as I concentrate. I alight on the roof of a building to rest and decide where to fly next, realizing that I must stay on the move, ahead of them, so they won't catch up with me and drag me to the ground. I try to avoid landing on the sidewalk; I try always to take off from an elevated perch—a rooftop, the top of a lamppost or tree or truck, the ledge of a mountain or skyscraper. Sometimes I take off from a perch that is so very high that it knots my stomach and takes my breath away to look down and see how far away the ground is. It's the view from an airplane on a cloudless day, but without windows, cabin, or seatbelt, and with even greater detail in what I see below me: sometimes mountain ranges, or plains, or city buildings; sometimes turbulent sea shores, or oceans with giant cresting waves and no land in sight. I feel dizzy with fear of being up so high and doubt my ability to navigate over these dangerous, distant, alien landscapes. But if I do not spring off my perch and into the air, they'll catch up with me, capture me, and drag me down. So I take a deep breath, jump, flap my arms vigorously—and catch a wind current! I'm still a bit dizzy because of the height, but I'm firmly sailing, soaring aloft, confidently navigating a dangerous and solitary journey, which I come to love and crave. I can do it. I've escaped.

Sometimes I can't escape, because I'm flying around the ceiling of a room in an apartment on a high floor and can't get out the window because it's only open at the bottom, and if I dip down to fly out the bottom half of the window they'll catch me, and the window is stuck at the top. So I kick at the top pane of glass with my shoe and shatter it, and dart out through the jagged hole, into the open air, among the tenements and skyscrapers. I land lightly on a rooftop, see them coming, and, without thinking, duck into the stairwell. I run/leap/float swiftly down endless flights of stairs, taking each flight with a single jump. I duck into the base-

ment, turning and twisting down innumerable labyrinthine passages, gray cement rooms poorly lit, searching for a window or an exit, hiding stilly in a corner or behind a wall when I feel them close by. It occurs to me that it was not a good idea to reenter a building in the first place. I see a high, sunny basement window on the opposite wall of a cluttered storeroom. I hold my breath, run, and dive for the window before they can get to me. I feel their hands closing around my ankles, but the velocity of my body as I hurtle through the window is too strong for them. I feel the glass crash around me as I emerge outdoors again, now spinning, twisting, bounding off the sidewalk into the cool night air. I flap my arms gently and float effortlessly above the streetlamps, to the treetops. This time I've really made it. I am invisible, disembodied, pure sexual desire, and the night holds no fears for me. Its spirits, indoors and out, are my old friends, and we coil through, around, and alongside people, objects, and one another, exuberantly, shamelessly, knowingly.

2. Abstraction:

Abstraction is flying. Abstracting is ascending to higher and higher levels of conceptual generalization; soaring back and forth, reflectively circling around above the specificity and immediacy of things and events in space and time, from a perspective that embeds them in a conceptual framework of increasing breadth and depth, a framework without horizon, ceiling, or basement; a framework composed of increasingly comprehensive concepts that generalize over increasingly comprehensive classes of things, organize them relative to one another, unify them into a coherent tapestry, a dizzying object of contemplation the details of which stun one into panic by their connectedness, significance, and vividness.

Abstraction is also flight. It is freedom from the immediate spatiotemporal constraints of the moment; freedom to plan the future, recall the past, comprehend the present from a reflective perspective that incorporates all three; freedom from the immediate boundaries of concrete subjectivity, freedom to imagine the possible and transport oneself into it; freedom to survey the real as a resource for embodying the possible; freedom to detach the realized object from oneself more and more fully as a self-contained entity, fully determined by its contextual properties and relations, and consider it from afar, as new grist for the mill of the possible. Abstraction is freedom from the socially prescribed and consensually accepted; freedom to violate in imagination the constraints of public practice, to play with conventions, or to indulge them. Abstraction is a solitary journey through the conceptual universe, with no anchors, no cues, no signposts, no maps, no foundations to cling to. Abstraction makes one love material objects all the more.

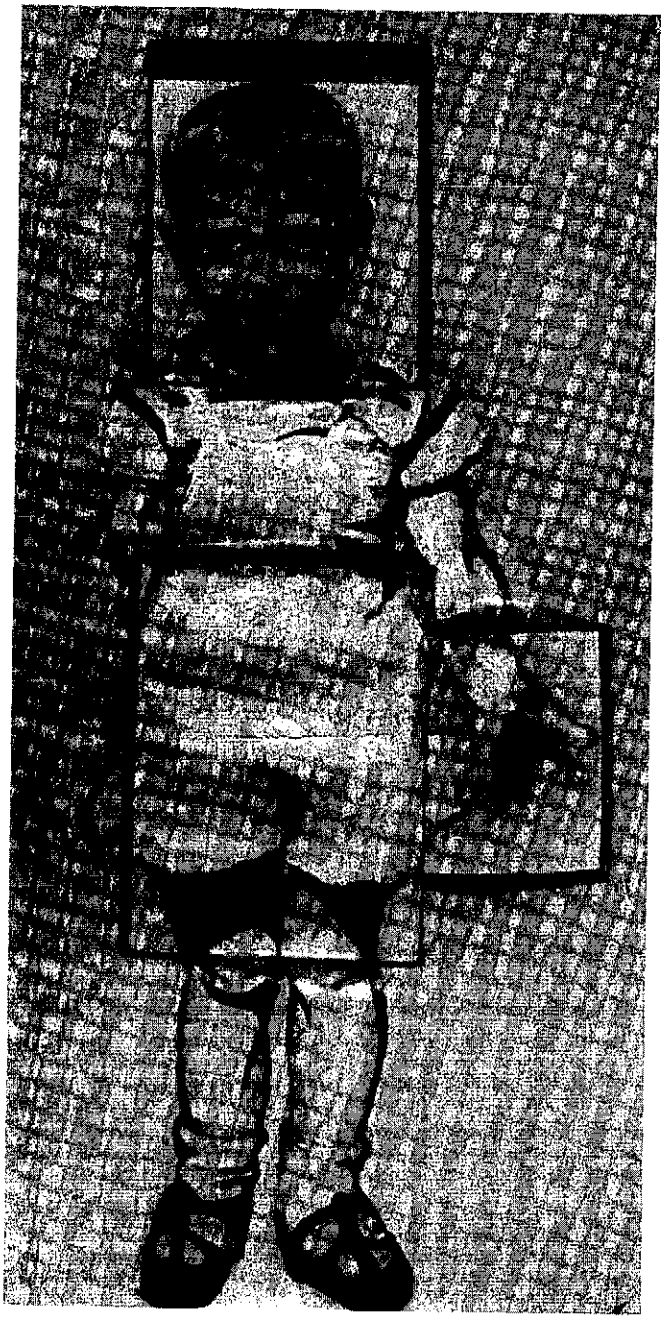
3. Two flights:

3a. Abstraction from materiality, 1967–72:
Early on, I was dazzled by ideas but intuited them dimly and confusedly; art making was engrossing, but muddied and distorted by my restless intellectual meddling in the creations of sensory intuition. I could heed neither intellect nor intuition because both were tangled and inchoate. My adolescent adventures separated, clarified, and coordinated both.

Until 1967 I was drawing, sculpting in clay and cardboard, and doing representational painting, often monochromatic, with a real object embedded in the canvas at the appropriate representational location. I had started to attend the School of Visual Arts in 1966, and to see exhibits in New York and read art magazines. I started to distinguish subject matter from formal concerns, and to explore the latter. I thought about perspective, about objects receding and protruding in space, and about the representation of these versus the reality of them versus the reality of their representation (*Michael Sternschein*, 1967).

I took a first step by ascending to the level of abstract three-dimensional objects, stripped of all subject matter and features extraneous to my preoccupation. It was very difficult to abandon specific subject matter in order to work on these issues further, because I love to draw—the process of penetrating the meaning of the object, the product that appropriates it. But I had learned by then to respect the demands of my intellect. I stopped representing immediate objects and circumstances but have continued to reflect them. My work during this period was very strictly minimalist. All aesthetic decisions were dictated by my exploration of perspectival spatiotemporality. I thought further about the space perspective defines, and in which objects protrude and recede (*Untitled Drawing*, 1967).

I made another small hop, this time to the level of abstract thought about space, time, and the objects within them; their materiality, concreteness, their infinite divisibility and variability, their indefinite serial progression through stages, their status as instances of abstract concepts. Sol LeWitt's work and writings offered me the tools and encouragement to pursue this line, against the disapproval of some of my teachers at SVA. I began to carve up humble, dusty, austere objects on grids and maps, vary their properties and relations, and line them up sequentially (*Untitled Three-Part Painting*, 1968). I stopped attending school but occasionally brought in photos to show my teachers. I worked furiously, constantly, and hermetically.



55.
Michael Sternschein (1967). Courtesy John Weber Gallery, collection of the artist.

For me the great leap intellectually was to abandon three-dimensional constructed objects altogether as tools of investigation. Concrete pieces of paper—typing paper, graph paper, maps, and photographs—and audio tapes would do just as well. However, this was easier psychologically than the decision to abandon representational subject matter had been, because constructing three-dimensional objects cost a lot of money, took a lot of energy, and progressed far too slowly relative to my thought processes about them in any case. But marks on paper or sound tape could also refer: concretely to themselves, or to the surface they existed on, or to the conditions under which they were perceived; abstractly to absent objects, events, or locations; to nonperceptual objects, such as space, time, and numbers; to general concepts expressive of the possible and the abstract, rather than the actual and concrete (*Utah—Manhattan Transfer,* 1968). Reality could be rearranged, relocated, varied, shot through with metaphysics. I was drunk on intellectual construction, theory, abstract structure; swooping and swerving crazily through uncharted sky.

From that distance, all three-dimensional objects, found or constructed, sentient or inanimate, myself or others, were noumena: enigmatic entities assigned meaning by the encompassing conceptual framework within which they are embedded. I utilized those objects and media that most fully embodied my conceptual concerns (a principle to which I still adhere). I experimented with my own objecthood, transforming it sculpturally as I had other objects, took it into the street, confronted others with the end products, and watched the effects on my social relations (the *Catalysis* series, 1970–72). I traumatized myself, burned out, and began to withdraw from the art world into the external world. The political upheavals of 1970—Kent State, Jackson State, Nixon's invasion of Cambodia, the student revolts, the women's movement, and others' responses to my perceived social, political, and gender identity braked my flight a bit, reflecting back onto me, enclosing me in my subjectivity, shocking me back into my skin [see "Talking to Myself: The Ongoing Autobiography of an Art Object"]. I struggled to transcend both (the early *Mythic Being/Village Voice* series, 1973–74). It didn't work. I plummeted back to earth, where I landed with a jolt.

3b. Abstraction from identity, 1972-present:
In 1969, I wrote an essay called "Hypothesis," which was to be reprinted in the "Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects" exhibit catalog. It was about space and time as forms of perception and provided the conceptual underpinning for the *Situation* series I was working on at that time. My best friend, the late Phillip Zohn,

who studied philosophy, strongly suggested to me that if I was going to pursue this line of thought, I should get serious and read Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason.* I did, and immediately became obsessed (in a way I had not with Wittgenstein). In 1970 I enrolled at the City College of New York with a major in philosophy and a minor in Medieval and Renaissance musicology. I took almost every course listed in the Philosophy Department catalog.

In academia, the interpersonal ramifications of my social and political identity began to close in on me even further. Feminism made intolerable my college boyfriend's derisive condescension about my "weirdo" art. Another time he said, You won't have any trouble getting accepted to graduate schools; a black woman can go anywhere these days, even if she looks like you. One of my college philosophy professors, upon seeing a discussion of my artwork in the *Village Voice,* said, That's not art. Who [or perhaps it was Whom] do you think you're fooling? Later he defaced with obscenities a poster advertising a feminist speaker. Another one lost his temper and yelled at me for questioning his views. A third began his ethics course with a speech about why women should not fight for equal rights. In graduate school, I had a reputation for partying hard. A fellow student once complemented me on my English. Another accused me of being flirtatious when I trounced him in argument. I learned about no-holds-barred academic one-upmanship, and about the politics of deference (without ever managing to master either). I made some close, enduring friendships. I met a few very modest individuals with intimidating, overpowering intellects; and many intimidating, overpowering individuals with very modest intellects.

Some of my artwork during this period (the later *Mythic Being* performance and poster pieces, 1975–76) reflected the ongoing initiation into interpersonal confrontation, political alienation, failures of communication, rejection, ostracism, and mutual manipulation I had been experiencing in my social relations. But as my philosophical training began to take effect, it purified the imagery in my artwork of excess theoretical baggage and offered me a new kind of reflective conceptual tool. The work began to make political sense of my anger, my confusion, and my past in an intelligible vocabulary and simplified form that had previously eluded me (*Three Political Self-Portraits,* 1978–1980). It began to reflect the politically retrograde stereotypical responses I was experiencing as objects of contemplation and humor (*Art for the Art-World Surface Pattern,* 1977). I was absorbing a lot philosophically: practicing, exercising, tooling up for another flight, this one to be honed by intellectual discipline and rigor. It was hard. There were constraints and rules—valid and important ones—that had to be mastered and separated from the blinders, taboos, and perfunctory rituals. One step forward, two steps back; a run-

ning leap into the air, a tug on the chain, tripped up, stumbling, grounded again, a hop forward, two hops back, tug to heel, start again on higher ground. At the end of graduate school, I was poised to fly, itching to take off.

My first academic job nailed my feet to the ground. A senior colleague invited me to breakfast, apparently in order to explain to me at length how women's sanitary napkins had ruined the plumbing in his apartment building. Another invited me to dinner, where I listened to him and his guests deplore the worthlessness and vulgarity of black working-class music. A third, a WASP, joked about the plethora of Jews to be found in the university vicinity. His wife, also an academic (and WASP), dismissed my worries about sexism with the comment that I was just too refined to deal with it successfully. A fourth, a married metaphysician, made sexual overtures to me in my office, remarking casually that he was a moral cretin. A fifth accused me of insulting him when I presumed to criticize his views. Yet a sixth incited the male graduate students to boycott my courses, by publicly airing his view that I was a man-hating closet lesbian who befriended only effeminate men. A seventh wrote me an official letter reproving me for not deferring to his criticisms of my work. His five-year-old asked loudly at dinner, Why isn't Adrian married? An eighth advised me to have children, and, when I demurred, commented that it stood to reason, because I was very self-centered, and also probably worried that my children would turn out much darker than I was. This is a partial list.

I marveled that such people could be so smart in their respective fields, yet so very provincial and tasteless in all other areas of life. As elitists each of whom violated all of *my* elitist assumptions about the "intellectual aristocracy," that is, the implicit connection between education and courtesy, cultivation, sensitivity, integrity, honesty, and so on, they fascinated and repelled me. I tried to, but couldn't, crack the fears, fantasies, and stereotypes they projected onto me (*Four Intruders plus Alarm Systems*, 1980), the walls of mistrust and suspicion they erected between us (*Vanilla Nightmares*, 1986-): mistrust of my motives, my self-presentation, my equilibrium; suspicion that I was trying to use them, guilt-trip them, take advantage of affirmative action policies by identifying myself as black. They forced me to see what they saw:

> *I am the racist's nightmare, the obscenity of miscegenation. I am a reminder that segregation is impotent; a living embodiment of sexual desire that penetrates racial barriers and reproduces itself. I am the alien interloper, the invisible spy in the perfect disguise who slipped past the barricades in an unguarded moment. I am the reality of successful infiltration that ridicules the ideal of assimilation* (Funk Lessons, *1982–84*). *I represent the loathsome possibility that everyone is "tainted" by black ancestry: If someone can look and sound like me and still be black, who is unimpeachably white?*

> *Some of those, both black and white, who later become my friends, upon first meeting, peer closely at my face and figure, listen carefully to my idiolect and habits of speech, searching for the telltale stereotypical feature to reassure them. Finding none, they make some up: "Ah," they say, "but of course your hair is wavy . . . ," or, "Perhaps a certain flair of the nostrils . . . ," or, "But the way you dance is unmistakable . . ." (*Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features, *1981). Or they find out my identity later, after we've become friends, and go through a period of cognitive dissonance, a bout of mild perceptual disorientation, before our friendship dissolves these preconceptions.*

Blacks who look and sound like me bring out racism in those who want to believe they have transcended it, racism expressed in a virulent desire to examine, to pry, to fantasize; in a compulsion to impose the stereotype even at the cost of good manners. We are unwilling witnesses to the forms racism takes when racists believe there are no black people present (*My Calling [Card] #1*). We don't like what we see. It humiliates us to be forced to observe the hostile underside of the system of norms to which we have been so thoroughly acculturated. Sometimes what we observe hurts so much that we want more than anything else to disappear, disembody, disinherit ourselves and our consciousness from our black identity. And then we pass for white and lie to our children about who we are, who they are, and why they have no relatives (*A Tale of Avarice and Poverty*). Some southern historians have estimated that the actual proportion of Americans of black ancestry is not 10 percent but closer to 15 or 20 percent. But of course many of them don't know they are black. And we don't know it, either.

Each of these responses—fear, fantasy, mistrust, suspicion, anger, confusion, ignorance—obstructs my self-transcendence, my ability to lose myself temporarily in the other, in the world, in abstract ideas. These are the barriers my art practice reflects, because they are the ones that keep me grounded. Unlike materiality, I can't transcend these barriers *solely* through the intellectual act of ascending to higher conceptual levels and reflecting on them from a distance. I am no longer drunk on abstract theory, because the sobering facts press in on my daily life too insistently. To be sure, it helps to try to understand philosophically these "moral cretins" (many of whom in fact work in moral philosophy), make sense of their behavior, locate them as test cases within the larger framework of my research in metaethics, and develop a sense of humor about them, some feeling of compassion for them. Doing philosophy disciplines my urge to fly, improves my sense of direction, and enables me to soar, for a time, above the moral cretins. But it doesn't change their behavior, or the behavior of more readily identifiable (because less highly educated) others like them. So they always bring me down again eventually. And there is no escape: I know I will find such individuals in every institution in this society.

56.
Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features (1981). Courtesy John Weber Gallery, collection of the artist.

However, academic philosophy also contains some of the very finest individuals I have ever met, whose personal integrity I admire and whose intellects I respect. I engage with those I respect as professional colleagues but remain vigilantly ready to flee from attack by the moral cretins. So partly by my own choice, partly by accident of my birth and position in society, I am cornered, hemmed in, somewhere in the basement of the building, preparing to crash my way out. My art practice is a reflecting mirror of light and darkness, a high sunny window that holds out to me the promise of release into the night.