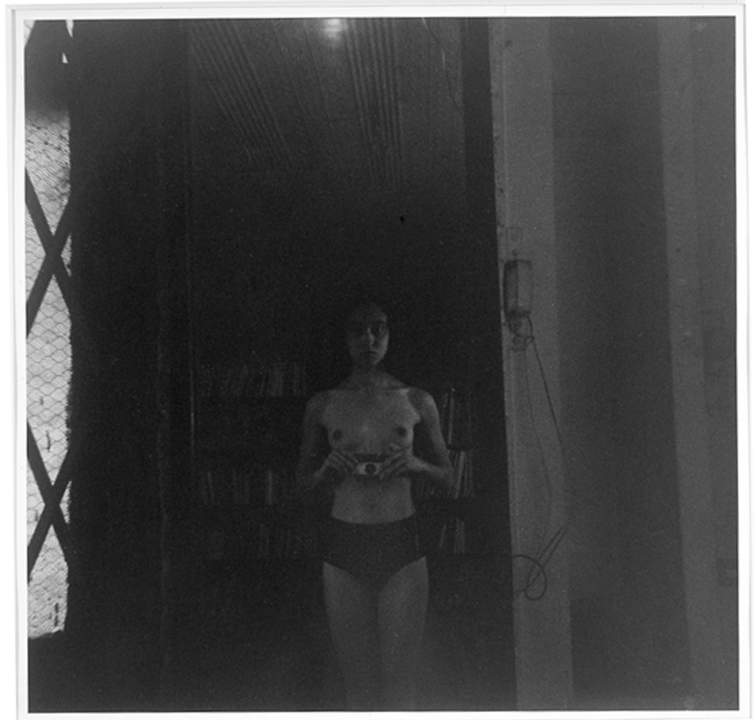


Thomas Erben Gallery

REVIEWS

Her futile effort to synthesize “pure reason” with what she termed “bodily self-assurance” is rendered with such intimacy, intelligence, and economy that the political charge of the project seems almost an aftereffect.

—Jan Avgikos



Adrian Piper, *Food for the Spirit* #2, 1971,
silver print, 14 ½ x 15”.

ADRIAN PIPER

THOMAS ERBEN GALLERY

In the summer of 1971, Adrian Piper produced a series of self-portraits, *Food for the Spirit*, that unfolds around the measured repetition of a single action: standing expressionless before a large mirror, peering into her reflection, she photographed herself in the act of photographing herself. Though her state of dress varies from house clothes to underwear to nothing at all, she always assumes the same pose, clutching her Brownie camera just below her breasts, and positions herself at a similar remove from the mirror.

As a series (which had never before been

shown in its entirety), the photos convey an instability that is readily discerned as a function of the images' frames wobbling in relation to a center (Piper's body) that is never in exactly the same place. But the pictures demonstrate a more fundamental level of restlessness as well: Piper's apparently simple procedure necessitates her being in two places at once, both in front of and behind the camera, simultaneously subject and object. This splitting or doubling was a common strategy in early '70s photographic and performance works produced by women who sought to problematize self-portraiture as a means of opening it to feminist critique. The mirror and the camera—instruments of representation par excellence—have been powerful tools for an investigation into the malleability and elusive nature of femaleness, a cornerstone of postmodern identity politics as manifested in the work of Piper's peers (such as Ana Mendieta, Eleanor Antin, and Hannah Wilke) and successors (Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, and Lorna Simpson).

Food for the Spirit is more than portraiture for its own sake, however. It documents a “private loft performance” executed over several weeks during which Piper studied Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, pages from which, full of her scribbled notes, were included in the show as collateral. In a statement accompanying the exhibit, the artist recounts that “whenever I felt that I was losing my sense of self due to the profundity of Kant's thought, I went to the mirror . . . to make sure I was still there,” taking her own picture while reciting the passages in the *Critique* that put her identity in philosophical jeopardy. She abandoned the project when these attempts to “anchor” herself proved unsuccessful.

Piper was among the first artists to probe the depths of the predicament of being female and black. She made these self-portraits without a flash attachment, using only the available light that came primarily from a window opposite the mirror; the resulting tonal range is so dark and limited that we find ourselves groping, resorting to imagination as much as to sight to wrest the image of her body from the shadows. In contrast to the combative theatricality of her contemporaneous *Catalysis* series—guerrilla public performances in which she adopted various guises to masquerade as a social pariah—the mood in *Food for the Spirit* is private and reflective. Indeed, with respect to the polemics that have characterized her art for three decades, this early work is a rare showing of Piper with her guard down.

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