

Adrian Piper



We are among you

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Guiding Question

What does it mean to know?

Adrian Piper's artworks ask us to think about questions like these. Piper has explored how knowledge and understanding are shaped by social life both through her art and her work as a philosopher. She is especially interested in how people understand, or misunderstand each other: what happens when our knowledge of other people is distorted.

In the education context, Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe also distinguish between knowledge and understanding. In their view, this distinction helps teachers develop curriculum units for their students that begins with backwards planning the Essential Questions and Enduring Understandings they want students to arrive at by the end of the unit. These are tools that allow students to foster connections between their lives, the classroom context and the larger world rather than just being tested on right or wrong answers. In their version, knowledge is something that has a right answer (ex, the dates of the Civil War) whereas understanding is debatable and rooted in empathy along with critical thinking. Knowledge is important to building understanding but understanding is where the big, transferable ideas happen between self, world and texts.

In her writing on the 18th-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant, Piper explains that knowledge is not just a matter of receiving information from the world. For Kant, we come to know things by bringing together what we sense – sights, sounds, smells, touch, and so on – with concepts in our minds. These concepts help us organize or arrange what we experience, so we can recognize things, make judgements, and understand the world as meaningful.

For Piper, Kant offers a way to think about how our understanding of other people is shaped by our concepts. What happens when someone we meet does or does not fit our learned idea of what people are supposed to look, sound, or act like? Piper suggests that distorted ideas of other people, caused by fear or prejudice, can emerge when we mistake our limited concepts of “people like us” for the full reality. But because many of our concepts are learned, they can also be questioned, revised, and expanded.

Activities

The following activities are structured to sequentially build on each other.

[Activity 1: Guiding Question Loop Writing](#)

[Activity 2: Pretend](#)

[Activity 3: Catalysis](#)

[Activity 4: Return to Guiding Question](#)

Activities: Teens and Adults

Activity 1: Guiding Question Loop Writing

Loop Writing is an exercise designed to have 3-5 questions that must be answered quickly. The questions build upon each other and the final question asks the learners to reflect on what they notice about their own thinking.

1. When you think of the word “knowledge,” what immediately comes to mind? Jot down your first impressions and associations related to this word (don’t hesitate or self-censor!). Try to come up with at least 5 different associations.
2. Given what you say above, respond to the Guiding Question: What does it mean to know? Set a timer and focus freewrite for at least 3 minutes, letting your thinking develop. Again, don’t hesitate or self-censor. It’s okay if your thinking goes in another direction.
3. What does it mean to understand? Set a timer and focus freewrite for at least three minutes, letting your thinking develop. Again, don’t hesitate or self-censor. It’s okay if your thinking goes in another direction.
4. What does it feel like to not know? Consider a moment in which you didn’t know something or did not understand something. What was the context of this not knowing or not understanding and take a few moments to describe how you felt and why.
5. Reflect: look at what you wrote above and write down what you notice about your response. What did you immediately say? What kinds of people or associations come up for you in your writing? How do you see your thinking develop? Does it stay focused on the question or does it go elsewhere? Write down what you notice.
6. Finally, given what you wrote for the prompts above, consider what are some of the understandings you have as an individual versus those that you have being a part of a community.

Adrian Piper PRETEND



Adrian Piper, "Pretend," 1990, front cover, offset lithograph on paper, 9 ¹/₄ x 11 x ¹/₄ inches, book.

Activity 2: Pretend

Pre-reading:

1. Looking at the front cover of the book, what immediately comes to mind when you look at this cover?

Now think about the title “Pretend” and write down 5-7 associations around the word “Pretend.” What first comes to mind? Who pretends? What situations or environments do people pretend in?



Adrian Piper, "Pretend," 1990, front cover, detail, offset lithograph on paper, 9 ¹/₄ x 11 x ¹/₄ inches, book.

2. The only image on the front cover is of the “Three Wise Monkeys,” which she refers to throughout this book. Generate some associations and connections to this image. What do you think of? When do you remember first seeing this? What questions do you have related to it or related to seeing it here on the cover?

For more about the “Three Wise Monkeys,” [follow this link](#)



Pretend



not to know



what you know

Adrian Piper, "Pretend," 1990I, offset lithograph on paper, 9 1/4 x 11 x 1/4 inches, book.

3. What do you notice about this particular image? What do you wonder? Write down 2-3 of each.

The artist uses three images in this artwork that are both similar and different. Name what you see as similar and different.

Across the three images, we see “Pretend not to know what you know” written in red. What does this sentence mean to you? What are particular situations in which people “pretend not to know what you know”? Why do you think the text is in red? (What other kinds of text are in red, i.e., warnings or teacher corrections)?

NOTE: What does it mean to pretend to know? What does pretending allow for or perpetuate?

Look again at the three images once you’ve thought about the sentence. What more do you notice and wonder about the three images now

Some additional questions to help you: How is the sentence broken up? Who is the intended audience/viewer for this artwork? Given the differences between the three women and children in the photo, who do you think the artist is speaking to?

For more about the “Three Wise Monkeys,” [follow this link](#)



Adrian Piper, "Pretend," 1990I, offset lithograph on paper, 9 ¹/₄ x 11 x ¹/₄ inches, book.

4. What do you notice about this particular collection of images? What do you wonder? Write down 2-3 of each. Consider what is happening in each image; where do you think the artist found or encountered these images?; why do you think the same image is repeated twice?

a) How does this compare/contrast with the previous image? What is similar and what is different? Write down at least 3-4 similarities and differences. (consider how many images you see; consider what they are showing)

b) The sentence “Why guess? We’re willing to explain” is written out. Who do you think is speaking? Who do you think is being spoken to? Generate several possibilities for each. Then consider what the “we” is willing to explain. To help you, look back at the previous set of images and what you wrote. Generate several possibilities for this as well.



Adrian Piper, "Pretend," 1990, offset lithograph on paper, 9 1/4 x 11 x 1/4 inches, book.



Adrian Piper, "Pretend," 1990, offset lithograph on paper, 9 1/4 x 11 x 1/4 inches, book.

5. What more does this artwork ask you to think about in relation to the Guiding Question: What does it mean to know?

Activity 3: Catalysis

1. What does “catalyst” mean: What comes to mind? Write down your immediate associations.

The term “catalyst” is derived from Greek καταλύειν, kataluein, meaning “loosen” or “untie”. The dictionary definition is “a person or thing that provokes or speeds significant change or action.” What are a few examples of catalysts?

2. Consider the role of change in your life. What situations have required you to change? What situations have encouraged you to change? Can you think of any moments in which you set off a change in a family dynamic, a classroom dynamic or in a friend dynamic? What happened and did you intend for this change to happen?

3. Consider your experiences walking through a public space or crowd. What kind of space is this, i.e., a city street, a mall, an airport, etc.? How did you feel moving through this space? Did you feel alone? Did you feel overwhelmed? Did you feel that you belonged or that you were out of place? How did you feel after you left it?

4. What does “catalysis” mean? Try to define it.

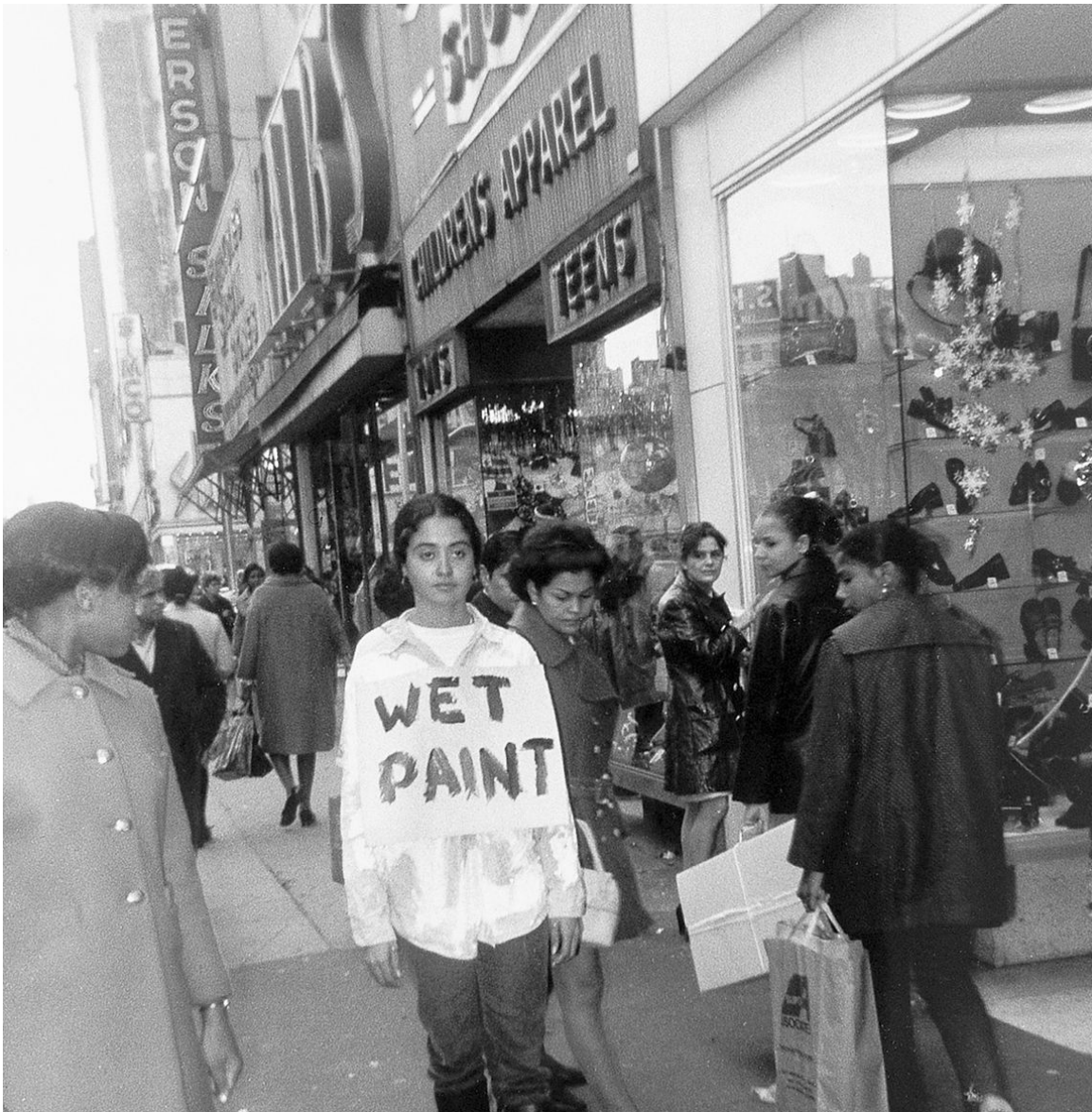
The dictionary definition is: (n) “Catalysis is the process of speeding up a chemical reaction—or lowering the energy required to start one—by adding a substance called a catalyst. The crucial defining trait of a catalyst is that it accelerates the reaction but is never consumed or permanently altered by it, allowing it to be used over and over.”

5. Next look at the images:

a) Describe what you see? Write down 2-3 notices and 2-3 wonders.

b) Where do “Wet Paint” signs typically get hung? What is their purpose? What happens if you touch the wet paint? Why are you warned about it? Why does Piper have a Wet Paint sign on her body?

c) Why is this called Catalysis? If the catalyst remains unchanged, what or who is the catalyst in this performance?



Adrian Piper, "Catalysis III," 1970. Documentation of performance black-and-white photograph, silver gelatin on baryta paper (print approx. 1998) 41 x 41 cm, framed 50 x 52 cm. Photograph: Bernadette Mayer.



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Adrian Piper, "Catalysis III," 1970. Documentation of performance black-and-white photograph, silver gelatin on baryta paper (print approx. 1998) 41 x 41 cm, framed 50 x 52 cm. Photograph: Bernadette Mayer.

6. Now look at the specific images that were taken of Piper's performance. What do you notice in the image below? Please note any details related to people and signs. What do you wonder about them?



Adrian Piper, "Catalysis III," 1970. Documentation of performance black-and-white photograph, silver gelatin on baryta paper (print approx. 1998) 41 x 41 cm, framed 50 x 52 cm. Photograph: Bernadette Mayer.

7. Do the same for this second image. What do you notice in the image below? Please note any details related to people and signs. What do you wonder about them?

How is this image different from the previous one? Write down what you notice.



Adrian Piper, "Catalysis III," 1970. Documentation of performance black-and-white photograph, silver gelatin on baryta paper (print approx. 1998) 41 x 41 cm, framed 50 x 52 cm. Photograph: Bernadette Mayer.

7. What do you notice in the image below? Please note any details related to people and signs. What do you wonder about them?

How is this image different from the previous one? Write down what you notice.

Connect your notices/wonders to the idea of the catalyst you thought about before looking at the images. Who is the catalyst in this performance? Is it hard to tell? If so, why. If you think Piper is the catalyst, what changes if the other people in the image are the catalysts? If you think the catalyst is the “Wet Paint” sign,

Finally, consider why Piper titles this performance “Catalysis III.” Generate a few possibilities for why she might do so, drawing from your responses to the questions to help you.

What more does this artwork ask you to think about in relation to the Guiding Question: What does it mean to know?



Adrian Piper, "Catalysis III," 1970. Documentation of performance black-and-white photograph, silver gelatin on baryta paper (print approx. 1998) 41 x 41 cm, framed 50 x 52 cm. Photograph: Bernadette Mayer.

Activity 3: Return to Guiding Question

Please do this after engaging with the different sections.

Please have the writing you have produced in front of you and feel free to return to the various sections of this Guide if that is helpful. You are welcome to respond to every question below or to choose one or two to develop your thinking around.

a) How does Piper's artwork put what it means to know into question?

b) What about your own relationship to knowledge does Piper put into question? How does Piper put what you know into question? How does Piper make you reevaluate how you know and what you know? How does Piper's artwork put what it means to know into question?

c) How does Piper's artwork put what it means not to know into question? How does she prompt us as individuals and as members of a community?

Biography

Adrian Piper (b. 1948) is an artist and philosopher whose conceptually rigorous and politically incisive practice investigates how identity, knowledge, and social perception are formed. Working across drawing, sculpture, photography, video, installation, writing, and performance, Piper is known for developing artistic strategies that challenge viewers to examine the assumptions, habits, and social structures through which they understand themselves and others. Her work has been especially influential for its sustained interrogation of race, gender, xenophobia, subjectivity, and the relationship between personal experience and wider political life.

Piper emerged in New York in the late 1960s as part of the first generation of Conceptual artists. After graduating from the School of Visual Arts in 1969, she developed early conceptual drawings and geometric works before turning increasingly to performance as a means of testing the social and psychological effects of art in everyday life. Alongside her artistic practice, Piper pursued advanced study in philosophy, earning a BA in Philosophy from the City College of New York in 1974 and a PhD in Philosophy from Harvard University in 1981. In 1987, Piper became the first tenured African American woman professor in the field of philosophy in the United States. Piper's work has been widely exhibited and collected internationally, and she has been awarded fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation, as well as the Golden Lion for best artist at the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015.

Piper continues to develop forms of artistic and philosophical inquiry that ask how individuals come to know themselves in relation to others, and how entrenched systems of perception can be brought into view, questioned, and transformed.

Colophon

Reading Resources: Adrian Piper was produced by Wendy Tronrud (A.R.T. Education Advisor) in collaboration with A.rt R.esources T.ransfer (A.R.T.) in 2025–26.

Adrian Piper was the A.R.T. Library Program’s Honoree in 2025; we distributed 21,488 art books at no cost to 392 public libraries, schools and prisons in her name.

This program is supported, in part, by public funds from the [New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, in partnership with the City Council.](#)

Further support was granted by:

[National Endowment for the Arts](#)

[New York State Council on the Arts](#)

[Teiger Foundation](#)

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Very special thank you Adrian Piper.

Design by Other Means.

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