

Adrian Piper



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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 (i.e., 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: Personal Cards

Activity 5: 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 free-write 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.
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? 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 parts of what you wrote reflect you as an individual? What part reflects your place in a wider community? Where do these points overlap, and where are they different?

Adrian Piper PRETEND



Adrian Piper, "Pretend" (New York: Adrian Piper and John Weber Gallery, 1990). Cover of artist's book. Rosemary Furtak Collection, Walker Art Centre Library, Minneapolis. © Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation.

Activity 2: Pretend

In this exercise consider images from “Pretend,” a book published in 1990 that compiles documentation of a series of Adrian Piper’s works from those years. The publication coincided with concurrent exhibitions at Exit Art and the John Weber Gallery. In addition to the loose leaf photographic documentation of the works, the publication includes essays by Mary Anne Staniszewski, and Piper.

Pre-reading:

1. Looking at the book’s front cover, what immediately comes to mind? Now think about the title “Pretend” and write down 5-7 associations around the word. What first comes to mind? Who pretends? What situations or environments do people pretend in?



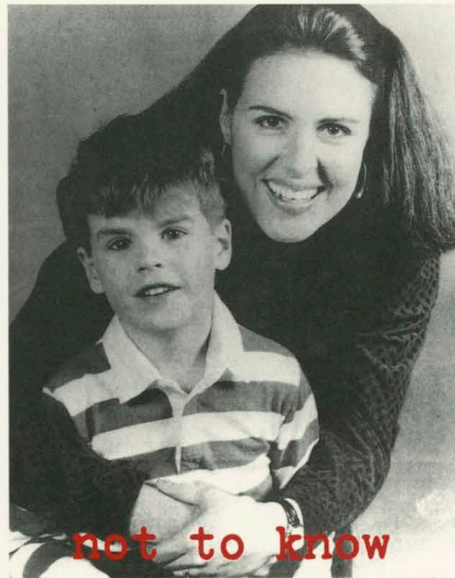
Adrian Piper, "Pretend" (New York: Adrian Piper and John Weber Gallery, 1990). Cover of artist's book (detail). Rosemary Furtak Collection, Walker Art Centre Library, Minneapolis. © Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation.

2. The only image on the front cover is of the “Three Wise Monkeys,” which she refers to throughout this book. Generate some associations to and connections with this image. What do you think of? Have you seen this before, and where? What questions do you have about it or about seeing it here on the book’s cover?

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



Pretend



not to know



what you know

Adrian Piper, "Pretend #2," 1990. Screenprinted text on three blackand-white photographs, mounted on foam core. 44" x 22" (111,7 cm x 55,8 cm); 44" x 35" (111,7 cm x 88,9 cm); and 44" x 31" (111,7cm x 78,7 cm). Brooklyn Museum, New York. Purchased with funds given by the Daniel and Joanna S. Rose Fund. Reproduced in Adrian Piper, "Pretend" (New York: Adrian Piper and John Weber Gallery, 1990). Artist's book. Rosemary Furtak Collection, Walker Art Centre Library, Minneapolis. © Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation.

3. What do you notice about this particular image? What do you wonder? Write down 2–3 things for each question.

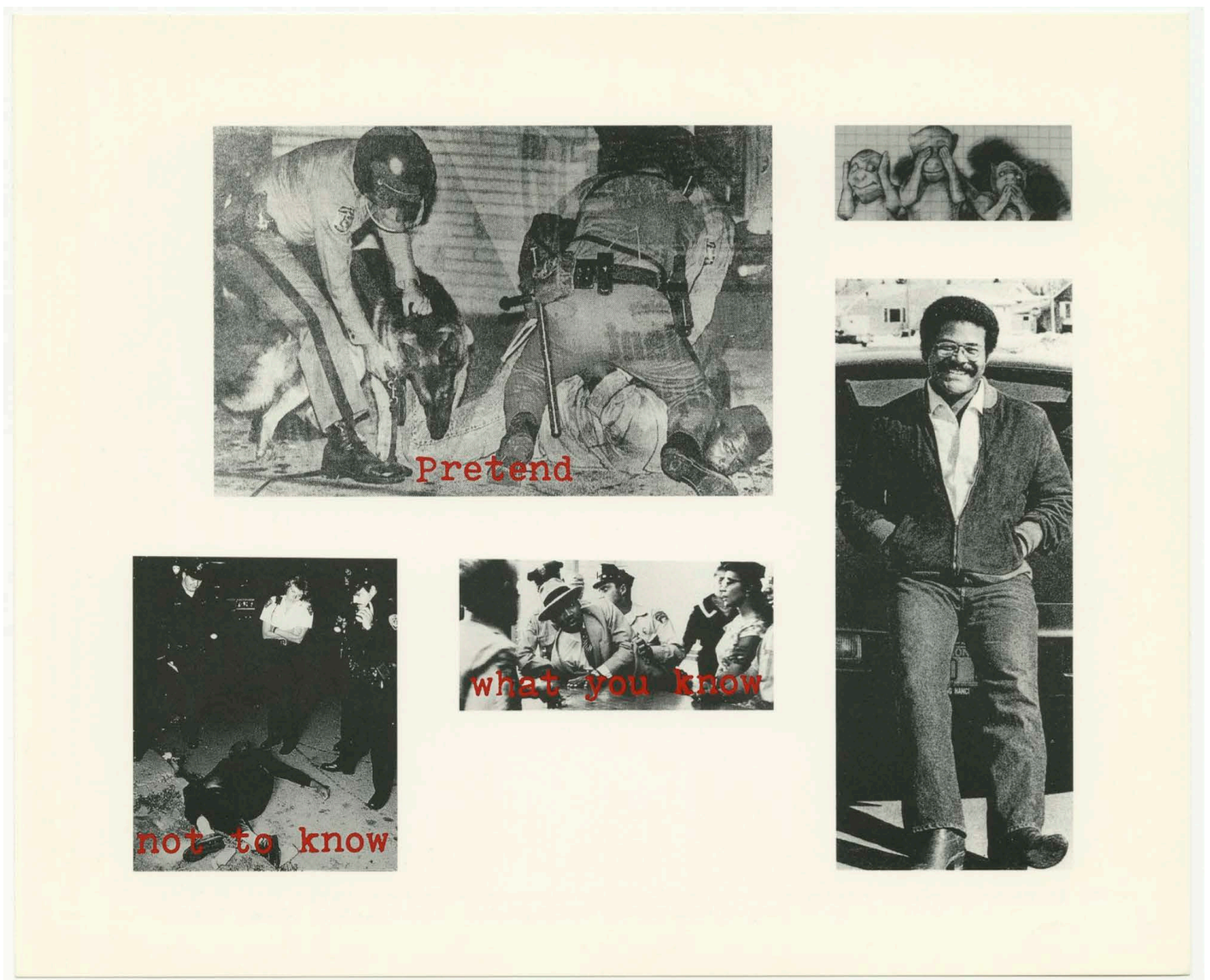
The artist uses three images in this artwork that are both similar to each other and different from each other. List 3-5 things that you see as similar and different in each image.

a) Across the three images, we see the words “Pretend not to know what you know” written in red. Responding in writing or group discussion, consider: 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, such as warnings or teacher corrections)? What does it mean to pretend to know? What does pretending allow for or perpetuate?

b) Look again at the three images once you’ve reflected on the sentence. Again responding in writing or discussion groups, consider what else you notice and wonder about the three images now.

c) Given the “three wise monkeys” from the cover image, why do you think these three images are important? Why has Piper chosen to use them on the book’s cover?

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 t



Adrian Piper, "Pretend #3," 1990. Four silver gelatin prints with screenprinted text and one silver gelatin print mounted on foam core. 44" x 64" (111,7 cm x 162,6 cm); 12" x 29" (30,4 cm x 73,6 cm); 67" x 29" (170,1 cm x 73,6 cm); 18" x 37" (45,7 cm x 94 cm). Photograph photo credit: Gerald Martineau/The Washington Post. Collection of Eileen Harris Norton. Reproduced in Adrian Piper, "Pretend" (New York: Adrian Piper and John Weber Gallery, 1990). Artist's book. Rosemary Furtak Collection, Walker Art Centre Library, Minneapolis. © Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation.

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?; how do they connect or differ from each other.

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) “Pretend not to know what you know” is also used in this artwork. What do you notice about how it is used?

c) How is the sentence broken up? Who is the intended audience/viewer for this artwork?



Adrian Piper, "Why Guess #1," 1989. Two silver gelatin prints mounted on foam core, with screen-printed text on one print. Each 35.93" x 33.56" (91,2 cm x 85,2 cm). Photograph photo credit: Ebony. Collection of Eileen Harris Norton, USA. Reproduced in Adrian Piper, "Pretend" (New York: Adrian Piper and John Weber Gallery, 1990). Artist's book. Rosemary Furtak Collection, Walker Art Centre Library, Minneapolis. © Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation.

5. 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.

c) How is the sentence broken up? Who is the intended audience/viewer for this artwork?



Adrian Piper, "Pretend #1," 1990. Screenprinted text on eight black-andwhite photographs, mounted on foam core. Six prints each 12" x 8" (30,4 x 20,3 cm) and two prints each 12" x 12" (30,4 x 30,4 cm). The New School Art Collection, New York. Reproduced in Adrian Piper, "Pretend" (New York: Adrian Piper and John Weber Gallery, 1990). Artist's book. Rosemary Furtak Collection, Walker Art Centre Library, Minneapolis. © Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation.

6. 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. Catalyst: 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. Catalysis: Do you know what this is? Consider your understanding of the term in relation to the following dictionary definition: (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.” In other words, the catalyst is important to the process of change but does not disappear or get lost in this process.

5. Next look at the images and respond in writing or group discussion to the following questions:

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

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

c) Why is this called Catalysis? If the catalyst is something that remains unchanged in a process of transformation, what or who is the catalyst in this performance?



Adrian Piper, "Catalysis III," 1970. Documentation of the performance. Three silver gelatin prints (reprinted circa 1998). Each photograph 16.14" x 16.14" (41 cm x 41 cm). Documentation photo credit: Rosemary Mayer. Generali Foundation Collection—Permanent Loan to the Museum der Moderne Salzburg. © Generali Foundation and Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation.



Adrian Piper, "Catalysis III," 1970. Documentation of the performance. Three silver gelatin prints (reprinted circa 1998). Each photograph 16.14" x 16.14" (41 cm x 41 cm). Documentation photo credit: Rosemary Mayer. Generali Foundation Collection—Permanent Loan to the Museum der Moderne Salzburg. © Generali Foundation and Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation.



Adrian Piper, "Catalysis III," 1970. Documentation of the performance. Three silver gelatin prints (reprinted circa 1998). Each photograph 16.14" x 16.14" (41 cm x 41 cm). Documentation photo credit: Rosemary Mayer. Generali Foundation Collection—Permanent Loan to the Museum der Moderne Salzburg. © Generali Foundation and Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation.

6. Now look at these photographs 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 the performance. Three silver gelatin prints (reprinted circa 1998). Each photograph 16.14" x 16.14" (41 cm x 41 cm). Documentation photo credit: Rosemary Mayer. Generali Foundation Collection—Permanent Loan to the Museum der Moderne Salzburg. © Generali Foundation and Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation.

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 the performance. Three silver gelatin prints (reprinted circa 1998). Each photograph 16.14" x 16.14" (41 cm x 41 cm). Documentation photo credit: Rosemary Mayer. Generali Foundation Collection—Permanent Loan to the Museum der Moderne Salzburg. © Generali Foundation and Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation.

8. 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 the things you notice and wonder 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 Piper is the catalyst, what is the thing that changes? If people around Piper are the catalyst instead, what would be the thing that changes? If you think the catalyst is the “Wet Paint” sign, what role does Piper as the artist play? Who does she become?

9. 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?

For more context, “Catalysis III” is part of a series of public performances that Piper conducted in New York City between 1970–71 in which she presented herself in unexpected ways, such as by wearing smelly clothes or putting a bath towel in her mouth, to prompt reactions from the wider public. Read a text that Piper wrote about the artwork [online here](#).



Adrian Piper, "Catalysis III," 1970. Documentation of the performance. Three silver gelatin prints (reprinted circa 1998). Each photograph 16.14" x 16.14" (41 cm x 41 cm). Documentation photo credit: Rosemary Mayer. Generali Foundation Collection—Permanent Loan to the Museum der Moderne Salzburg. © Generali Foundation and Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation.

Activity 4: Personal Cards

“Dear Friend,
I am black.

I am sure you did not realize this when you made/laughed at/agreed with that racist remark. In the past, I have attempted to alert white people to my racial identity in advance. Unfortunately, this invariably causes them to react to me as pushy, manipulative, or socially inappropriate. Therefore, my policy is to assume that white people do not make these remarks, even when they believe there are no black people present, and to distribute this card when they do.

I regret any discomfort my presence is causing you, just as I am sure you regret the discomfort your racism is causing me. Please do this after engaging with the different sections.”

1. Consider this text from Adrian Piper’s “Calling Card (I am black),” (1986) which was part of a series of performances in which Piper distributed cards to people she met in response to their actions or their assumptions about her.
2. Returning to our Guiding Question, “What does it mean to know?”, when you first meet someone, what do you think they see or notice about you? Have you ever been falsely identified or mistaken? How did that make you feel? Please take a few minutes to write this out (and discuss it with someone if that’s possible).
3. Take a few moments to do this [Social Identity Wheel](#) and reflect on which aspects of your identity you think most about and which ones you think less about or do not think about at all.
4. What did this Wheel help you see about how you relate to your social identity? In other words, how does the Social Identity Wheel change how you think about your identity, or identity in general?

5. Take a moment to read Piper's artwork "Calling card, 'Dear Friend, I am Black...'" Please write down or discuss your first reactions to it, keeping the Social Identity Wheel in mind.
6. Next, consider that this is an artwork that viewers might encounter in the context of a museum or art gallery wall.
 - a) Why does Piper communicate this through a card and not directly to a person? What does this gesture imply about what can be said or not said, "known" and "not known," in the wider social context?
 - b) What is Piper trying to convey to viewers, no matter their social identities? What makes this art?
 - c) If we consider this artwork in relation to the previous exercises about "Catalysis III," what do you think is the catalyst here?
7. Finally, how does this particular artwork relate to our guiding question, "what does it mean to know?" Look over your responses to all the questions here and respond to the question with initial ideas. After you do so, consider how the social contexts we live in, and our identities in relation to those contexts, inform how we come to know someone or something.

Activity 5: Return to Guiding Question

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. As you respond to each question, look over your writing from the various activities and feel free to discuss this question in relation to one of Piper's artworks or all that you considered as a part of this guide.

- a) How does Piper's artwork put what it means "to know" into question?
- b) How does Piper's artwork put what it means "not to know" into question?
- c) How does Piper make you reevaluate how you know what you know?
- d) How does she ask us to rethink what it means to know as individuals vs. as members of a community and a society?

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.r.t 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.

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Very special thank you Adrian Piper.

Design by Other Means.

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Cover image: Adrian Piper, “Safe,” 1990. Mixed media installation. Four silver gelatin prints with screen-printed text mounted on foam core, audio soundtrack. 42” x 30.25” (106,6 cm x 76,9 cm); 39.25” x 24.64” (99,8 cm x 62,6 cm); 30.43” x 24.88” (77,3 cm x 63,4 cm); 44.37” x 39” (112,7 cm x 99 cm); audio CD 00:07:32. Detail: #1 of 4. Photograph credit: Ebony; Ebony/General Fords Corp; Parsons School of Design; AT&T/ NYT. Collection of Tate Gallery, London. Photo Credit: Andrej Glusgold. Reproduced in Adrian Piper, “Pretend” (New York: Adrian Piper and John Weber Gallery, 1990). Artist’s book. Rosemary Furtak Collection, Walker Art Centre Library, Minneapolis. © Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation.