

# Catalysis

## An Interview with ADRIAN PIPER

By Lucy Lippard

Last year, Adrian Piper did a series of pieces called "Catalysis." They included: **Catalysis I**, "in which I saturated a set of clothing in a mixture of vinegar, eggs, milk and cod liver oil for a week, then wore them on the D train during evening rush hour, then while browsing in the Marboro bookstore on Saturday night"; **Catalysis VIII**, a recorded talk inducing hypnosis; **Catalysis IV**, in which "I dressed very conservatively but stuffed a large red bath towel in the side of my mouth until my cheeks bulged to about twice their normal size, letting the rest of it hang down my front, and riding the bus, subway, and Empire State Building elevator"; **Catalysis VI**, "in which I attached helium-filled Mickey Mouse balloons from each of my ears, under my nose, to my two front teeth, and from thin strands of my hair, then walked through Central Park, the lobby of the Plaza Hotel, and rode the subway during morning rush hours"; **Catalysis III**, "in which I painted some clothing with sticky white paint with a sign attached saying 'WET PAINT,' then went shopping at Macy's for some gloves and sunglasses"; **Catalysis V**, "in which I recorded loud belches made at five-minute intervals, then concealed the tape recorder on myself and replayed it all full volume while reading, doing research, and taking out some books and records at the Donnell Library"; **Catalysis VII**, "in which I went to the Metropolitan Museum's **Before Cortes** show, while chewing large wads of bubble gum, blowing large bubbles and allowing the gum to adhere to my face . . . (and) filling a leather purse with catsup, then adding wallet, comb, keys, etc; opening and digging out change for bus or subway, a comb for my hair in the ladies' room at Macy's, a mirror to check my face on the bus, etc.; coating my hands with rubber cement, then browsing at a newspaper stand . . ." And so on.

**PIPER:** I hold monologues with myself, and whenever anyone passes near me, within hearing distance, I try to direct the monologue toward them without changing the presentation or the content of what I'm saying. Usually, when I know that someone is approaching me, I find that I'm psychologically preparing myself for their approach. I'm turning around to meet them, and I have a whole presentation for their

benefit, because they are there, and I'm aware of them. I'm trying *not* to do that. I'm not sure whether or not I'm involving myself in a contradiction. On the one hand, I want to register my awareness of someone else's existence, of someone approaching me and intruding into my sense of self, but I don't want to present myself artificially in any way. I want to try to incorporate them into my own consciousness.

**QUESTION:** Do you look at them?

**PIPER:** Yes. That's another thing I've been trying to work with. When I started doing this kind of work I found I was really having trouble looking people in the eye while I was doing it; it was very hairy. I looked odd and grotesque, and somehow just confronting them head-on was very difficult. It makes me cringe every time I do it, but I'm trying to approach them in a different way.

**QUESTION:** This is much subtler than the things you were doing last year. Are you still in that context?

**PIPER:** Yes. These came out of them. Not formally, but through the kinds of experiences that I was having when I was doing these things. I feel that I went through some really heavy personality changes as a result of them.

**QUESTION:** Just to be able to do them at all, in the first place . . .

**PIPER:** Well, a lot of things happened. I seem to have gotten more aware of the boundaries of my personality, and how much I intrude myself upon other people's realities by introducing this kind of image, this facade, and a lot of things happen to me psychologically. Initially, it was really hard to look people in the eye. I simply couldn't overcome the sense that if I was going to keep my own composure and maintain my own identity, it was just impossible. I would have to pretend that they weren't there, even though I needed them. Then something really weird happened; it doesn't happen all the time. Something I really like. It is almost as if I manage to make contact in spite of how I look, in spite of what I'm doing. There was a piece I did last Summer that was part of the work I was doing before. I had on very large knit clothes and I got a lot of Mickey Mouse balloons, which have three shapes, with the two ears. I stuffed them into the clothes, so I was not only very

obese, but I was also bulging out all over; it was very strange. I was on the subway and the balloons were breaking and people were getting very hostile because I was taking up a lot of space, and it just occurred to me to ask someone what time it was. So I did, and they answered me in a perfectly normal voice. This was very enlightening. I decided that was a worthwhile thing to go after. Somehow transcending the differences I was presenting to them by making that kind of contact . . .

**QUESTION:** How often do you do it?

**PIPER:** Maybe two or three times a week in different kinds of situations; wherever I find myself. I haven't started cataloging the kinds of reactions I have gotten . . . The scary thing about it for me is that there is something about doing this that involves you in a kind of universal solipsism. When you start realizing that you can do things like that, that you are capable of incorporating all those different things into your realm of experience, there comes a point where you can't be sure whether what you are seeing is of your own making, or whether it is objectively true.

**QUESTION:** Because you begin to have almost too much power over the situation?

**PIPER:** Yes. You know you are in control, that you are a force acting on things, and it distorts your perception. The question is whether there is *anything* left to external devices or chance. How are people when you're not there? It gets into a whole philosophical question. I found that at times it's exhilarating, too. It is a heady thing, which has to do with power, obviously . . .

**QUESTION:** What do you think it has to do with being a woman? Or being black? It's a very aggressive thing. Do you think you're getting out some of your aggressions about how

women are treated? Is it related to that at all?

**PIPER:** Well, not in terms of intention. As far as the work goes, I feel it is completely apolitical. But I do think that the work is a product of me as an individual, and the fact that I am a woman surely has a lot to do with it. You know, here I am, or was, "violating my body"; I was making it public. I was turning myself into an object.

**QUESTION:** But an object that wasn't attractive, the way it was supposed to be; instead it was repellent, as if you were fighting back.

**PIPER:** In retrospect, all these things seem valid, even though they weren't considerations when I did the pieces.

One thing I don't do, is say: "I'm doing a piece," because somehow that puts me back into the situation I am trying to avoid. It immediately establishes an audience separation—"Now we will perform"—that destroys the whole thing. As soon as you say, this is a piece, or an experiment, or guerrilla theatre—that makes everything all right, just as set-up and expected as if you were sitting in front of a stage. The audience situation and the whole art context makes it impossible to do anything.

**QUESTION:** Don't you feel that this is kind of infinite? That you have to cut it off someplace so that it *is* a piece,

and not life? If you're making art, you have to have a limit.

**PIPER:** I really don't know. For quite a while I felt absolutely unanchored in terms of what I was doing. I'm not sure I can describe that. Now I feel certain of what I'm doing because it is necessary for me to do it, but I do not feel terribly certain as to what my frame of reference is. It seems that since I've stopped using gallery space, and stopped announcing the pieces, I've stopped using art frameworks. There is very little that separates what I'm doing from quirky personal activity. Except I've been thinking a lot about the fact that I relate what I'm doing to people. Occasionally, I meet somebody I know while I'm doing a piece, and it seems okay to me, because it affirms what I'm doing as art. That gives me some kind of anchor. But when I just tell people what I'm doing, I don't think it has the same effect. What it does is reaffirm my own identity as an artist to me. If you ask me what I'm doing, I'll tell you I'm doing this, rather than saying, well, you know, I'm not doing any work lately, but I've been doing some really weird things in the street. I subscribe to the idea that art reflects the society to a certain extent, and I feel as though a lot of the work I'm doing is being done because I am a paradigm of what the society is.