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## Adrian Piper and the Rhetoric of Conceptual Art

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### ABSTRACT

*Two questions have occupied art historical writing on the post-Conceptual, discursive, politically engaged art practises of the 1970s and after. Art historians have queried, firstly, the development of such committed art from the politically taciturn Conceptual art of the 1960s. Was that development a matter of historical accident—a contingent confluence of late modernism and of ground-shifting political developments of the late 1960s—or was there something intrinsically emancipatory to that moment: an aesthetic revolution, which facilitated the political one? Secondly, once art enters overt political discourse, what role do these practices occupy vis-à-vis ‘non-art’ political discourse? Do new, emancipatory kinds of rhetoric become available when political debate takes place within the distinct sphere of art making? I revisit these questions through the work of Adrian Piper. I read two bodies of Piper’s work alongside one other: her performance-based Conceptual pieces of 1968–1971, and her 1978–1992 anti-racist installation works. Drawing on this analysis and on the socio-political background of what social psychology has described as the rise of ‘modern’ or ‘subtle’ racism, I suggest that to assess the rhetorical effectiveness of Conceptual art we need to reconsider the identity of its viewers.*