‘Adrian Piper does not permit or approve the inclusion of her work in racially segregated exhibitions’. That is a statement from the form used to request loans from the Adrian Piper Research Archive, and it also captures a position that the Berlin-based African American conceptual artist has made public several times.

Piper withdrew, for instance, her video The Mythic Being (1973) from the 2013 exhibition ‘Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art’ at NYU’s Grey Art Gallery. Her statement to the curator was displayed instead, in which she argued that it would be more effective to curate ‘multi-ethnic exhibitions that give American
audiences the rare opportunity to measure directly the groundbreaking achievements of African American artists against those of their peers in ‘the art world at large.’”

Given this history of refusal, I was at first surprised to find a postcard announcement for Piper’s 1982–4 participatory performance Funk Lessons in the exhibition ‘We Wanted a Revolution, Black Radical Women: 1965–1985’, currently on view at New York’s Brooklyn Museum. The exhibition also featured two letters Piper wrote in 1983 to Linda Goode Bryant, who founded Just Above Midtown Gallery (JAM), regarding an exhibition that was never realized there. The space, as an interview with Goode Bryant in the accompanying sourcebook reveals, showed only work by African American artists until 1977.

The curators of ‘We Wanted a Revolution …’ Catherine Morris and Rujeko Hockley told me that they were well aware of Piper’s stance on ‘segregated’ exhibitions, and although they referenced her in passing through her presence in the JAM archive, ‘out of our respect for her position and her autonomy as an artist and thinker, we did not include her work or make any reference to her works that may be related to the themes and methods of the exhibition … Indeed, though we regret her omission as a featured artist, to do otherwise would have been unethical.’ Speaking to their contrasting views on such ‘segregated’ exhibitions, Morris and Hockley noted that while, in both title and subject, the exhibition ‘is focused purposefully on the work and experiences of black women
... it also features the work of men and non-black women of colour, and, through ephemera, references the work of white women artists, feminists, and art world influencers.’


‘Segregated’ exhibitions employ postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s concept of ‘strategic essentialism’—a strategy she later disavowed, but one that seems to have been recently retooled. This term—coined by Spivak in a 1984 interview with philosopher Elizabeth Grosz—describes the process of acting as if an identity (here, a race) shares intrinsic characteristics, in order to achieve political goals. It is to use essentialism, rather than to believe in it; it is a strategy, not an ideal. These dialectical views on, and history of, the ethics and political efficacy of ‘strategic essentialism’ are what interest me here, not matters of institutional rights or artistic intentionality.

Spivak, always admirably wary of claiming ‘mastery’, would later shift her position on ‘strategic essentialism’. By 1993, in an interview with Ellen Rooney, Spivak had begun warning against ‘strategic essentialism’ after witnessing its use not as a mobilizing slogan but as a master word, not as a means to an end (a strategy) but as itself justified. It had been twisted to reinforce essentialist notions. Similarly (and roughly contemporaneously), in her 1991 essay ‘Notes on the White Man’s Burden’, Piper challenged critics and curators to ‘situate the art of colored
people within the larger context of art history,’ rather than separating it, thus relegating it to an ‘unrelated, less valued category (such as ‘ethnic art’ or ‘sociology’) where its seminal influences on Euroethnic art can be ignored.’

Just as ‘strategic essentialism’ was perverted by theorists, identity politics became co-opted by museums. Artists from minority backgrounds were (and still are) often included only when making work about their minoritarian identities, reinforcing their status as ‘Other’ while simultaneously allowing institutions to wear the mantle of ‘diversity’. Candice Breitz recounts pressures to make work about her nationality in a 2001 interview: ‘While German artists are not expected to make work about wurst and Canadian artists are not expected to make art about ice-hockey, there is often a silent rule when it comes to the inclusion of artists from less mainstream art countries: ‘make art about where you’re from, and about what makes you different ... Or stay at home.”

Del LaGrace Volcano recalls permitting The Guardian to title a 1995 feature on their work ‘The Bearded Lady,’ writing: ‘At the time I considered myself lucky to get the exposure and although I knew I was colluding with heteronormative transphobic ideology, it was a price I was prepared to pay in order to have my work travel beyond the queer bubble.’ Spivak similarly grappled with this conundrum in her seminal essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, where she asked how postcolonial scholars might study ‘third-world’ subjects without cooperating in the colonial project, without reinforcing otherness.
But artists also began carefully negotiating essentialism around the 1990s. Consider Felix Gonzalez-Torres: his 1991 piece ‘Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)’ never discloses the artist’s ‘identity’ as a Cuban-born HIV-positive gay man. A pile of colourful candy that viewers can take from and that is constantly replenished might speak to themes like greed and pleasure. But Ross was Gonzalez-Torres’s lover who died from AIDS-related complications the year the piece was made, the pile is Ross’s healthy weight (79 kilograms) and dwindles as you take from it, and the candies reference the AIDS drug AZT. None of this information is disclosed by the work itself, nor is it essential to the experience, but it does ground the work in Gonzalez-Torres’s ‘identity’ – refusing to become apolitical, impersonal, or blind to difference, and also refusing identity as a confine.

<https://frieze.com/event/art-architecture-conference>
Piper, too, would later make work that continued to deal with ethics more broadly, expanding the concerns at the heart of her earlier work which often confronted xenophobia, no longer taking her race or gender as the subject of her work. Consider Funk Lessons, wherein she taught her audience at UC Berkeley how to listen and dance to funk music. More recently, The Probable Trust Registry: The Rules of the Game #1-3 (2013), currently on view at Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof, invites participants to sign contracts agreeing to, for instance, ‘always mean what [they] say.’

Despite this disavowal and thoughtful negotiation of essentialism by figures like Spivak, Gonzalez-Torres, and Piper, identity politics has been retooled recently by a younger generation of artists and curators. One might include ‘We Wanted a Revolution’ in this, which considers a historical moment – black women working within movements of avant-garde art and second-wave feminism – between 1965 and 1985 but is mounted in 2017; evidence, perhaps, that nuance and ambiguity are less palatable in this political climate.
Juliana Huxtable’s recent show ‘A Split During Laughter at the Rally’ at New York’s Reena Spaulings also points toward this zeitgeist. The exhibition included a poster that read ‘TRANSSEXUAL’ in capital letters. It’s impossible to mobilize politics onto a protest sign without essentializing, or else the words simply won’t fit. Huxtable has been described as a ‘trans icon’ and often features her body in her work, writing, ‘I used to feel a bit powerless, and it was actually through playing with my body as an image file that could be manipulated, distorted, rendered, decorated, and placed in new contexts that I came to accept and feel at home in my body.’

Today, online, we represent ourselves through images or within limited character counts; the digital medium, like the protest sign, necessitates a form of essentializing of our own identities. Huxtable has used this as a tool, turning her body into a file that was 3-D printed by Frank Benson in his sculpture Juliana (2015), allowing her image to ‘go viral’ on Tumblr and infiltrate mainstream spaces like Vogue and the New Museum. If the digital medium is forcing essentialism, then projects like Huxtable’s are wise to retool it while remaining wary and prepared to combat the risks that this entails.

Earlier works, such as Piper’s *Funk Lessons*, which take the artist’s ‘identity’ as the subject, were often instrumental for breaking into the art world. But strategies of essentialism will always be short-term solutions that risk perpetuating essentialist notions. Thinking about the long-term in the face of oppression is, of course, a privilege, and as minority groups are increasingly targeted in our current political climate, I am sympathetic to both strategies. In practice, we can choose to participate in or not participate in, curate or not curate ‘segregated’ exhibitions. But more often we must negotiate like Gonzalez-Torres, asking questions that don’t have yes-no answers, such as: How do we actively pursue diversity without tokenizing? How do we celebrate difference without marginalizing it?

‘We Wanted a Revolution’ may consider an earlier moment, but shown today, it is framed through intersectionality: a way to understand one’s lived experience as produced by the interlocking axes of gender, race, class, sexuality, ability, and so on. Intersectionality provides one such negotiation. Reflecting on this history of ‘strategic essentialism’ in contemporary art, then, should push us towards encouraging resistance to the co-optation of such projects. And if artists and curators do engage with such strategies – surely we’ll continue grappling with them, especially as we push increasingly towards digital representations which necessarily essentialize – they must do so with a nuanced consideration for the longevity of their goals.

*Courtesy: Brooklyn Museum, New York; photograph: Jonathan Dorado*

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