



VOWING MORAL INTEGRITY: ADRIAN PIPER'S PROBABLE TRUST REGISTRY

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Original scientific paper – Received: 06/05/2022 Accepted: 01/09/2022

ABSTRACT

The artist and analytic Kant scholar Adrian Piper has been aptly described as “one of the most important and influential cultural figures of our time”. The award-winning work of installation and participatory performance art, Probable Trust Registry: Rules of the Game #1-3, implicitly poses philosophical questions of interest to contractarian philosophy and its critique, including whether through an art installation one can execute a genuine, morally binding commitment to be honest, authentic, and respectful of oneself. Especially for audiences who closely identify with her experiences, Piper’s artwork, like that of other important artists, has powerfully catalytic ethical potential. Motivated by admiration for the artist and a perceived conflictual relationship between women of color and conventional discourses of moral solidarity, I offer three different ways to understand Piper’s Probable Trust Registry. I suggest that Piper’s thought-provoking artwork, which implicitly nods at John Rawls and Charles Mills, can be interpreted as asking its audiences to agree to selections from a menu of rules that, in the alternative, embrace universal moral imperatives, predict future moral integrity, or vow moral integrity.

Keywords: *art; aesthetics; Adrian Piper; Charles Mills; conceptual art; performance art; contractarianism; critical race philosophy; Black Women Philosophers.*

1. Introduction

This essay is about an award-winning work of art, *The Probable Trust Registry #1-3*, by the artist and analytic philosopher Adrian Piper (Museum of Modern Art 2018/2, 308-09). Piper has been aptly described as “one of the most important and influential cultural figures of our time” (Butler and Platzker 2018, 7). An installation and performance, *The Probable Trust Registry #1-3* implicitly poses philosophical questions. The questions include this one: whether through an art installation one can execute a genuine, morally binding commitment to be honest, authentic and respectful of oneself, and whether if one can, when presented with the opportunity, one ought to. I argue that, in the case of Piper’s work, “no” is the answer. Nonetheless, especially for audiences who closely identify with her experiences, Piper’s artwork has powerfully catalytic ethical potential.

The ability of the Registry to bring about real moral change for the better in her audiences, is not undercut by the piece being a tongue-in-cheek comment on the well-rehearsed limitations of the social contract tradition in western moral and political philosophy (Silvers and Francis 2005, 40), advanced by Piper’s Harvard mentor John Rawls and numerous others. Nor is the ethical potential of encountering *The Probable Trust Registry #1-3* undercut by the dimension of irony apparent when the work is viewed from the perspective of the Jamaican-American philosopher Charles Mills’s much-cited postulate of a “racial contract” among White peoples to exploit and subordinate non-White peoples (Mills 1997, 11). Because Piper is of mixed-race European, African and Indian descent (Piper 2018) and grew up “colored” in Harlem, cunning resides in her installation’s invitation to her largely White audiences to declare allegiance to live by *her* Rules of the Game.

Piper’s artwork stimulates philosophic reflection about whether anyone ought to be willing to embrace superficially race-neutral and benign-sounding commitments that establish moral codes for the regulation of behavior that may not in practice serve all racialized communities equally. Against the backdrop of historical Eurocentric racism, colonialism, and subordination, is it reassuring that White people will “mean what they say” and “do what they say they are going to do” and “be too expensive to buy”? Are such moral Rules of the Game stacked against non-Whites—ultimately

against the famed Kant-inspired artist herself, even? Before addressing her art through my proposed lenses, it is essential to say something about the artist, to situate her in the fields of philosophy and contemporary art.

Piper's Importance

“[B]eing important to myself does not make me important *tout court*, and nothing can—not your attention, or help, or concern, or sympathy, or generosity, or interest, or vehement denial of what I am saying here. The pain I have inflicted on others and that they have inflicted on me does not even come close to counting on the scale of corruption and mutual degradation we inflict on one another; the agony we are now used to ignoring, so as to protect the small comfort and happiness we occasionally manage to extract from being trapped in these porous, leaky, badly designed physical shrines to planned obsolescence. (...) So you need not read any further.”

-Adrian Piper (2018)

Adrian Piper is a renowned artist and philosopher. She was born in 1948 and brought up in the majority African-American Harlem section of New York City. Piper has said that she “inherited” her analytical bent of mind from her father, a Jesuit-educated lawyer and son of a lawyer (Piper 2019, 106-107). Piper attended the now-defunct New Lincoln School, a private, progressive, racially integrated institution. At New Lincoln she was exposed to the Black Civil Rights Movement and to the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi and Indian philosophy (Piper 2019, 107). One of Piper's great-grandmothers was a native of India (Piper 2019, 107).

While in art school and college in New York City, Piper began to establish a reputation as an innovative conceptual artist (Lippard and Piper 1972, 76). Piper simultaneously emerged as a gifted student of philosophy. After college, she was admitted to Harvard University, from which she received a PhD in philosophy in 1981 under the supervision of John Rawls (Piper 2019, 113). Concerning Rawls, Piper has written:

my admiration for the majesty and ambition of John Rawls's project in *A Theory of Justice*, of anchoring a substantive social contract theory in value-neutral methodological principles already established in the social sciences, was unbounded. I knew that this was the way I wanted to do philosophy. (Piper 2019, 110; Rawls 1971)

Despite an early epiphany that she wanted to do philosophy the way John Rawls did, her path in philosophy little resembled Rawls's. Piper would blaze her own unique path. She has made important contributions to art history and theory (Piper 1993, 1996, 1996/2). Her greatest contribution to academic philosophy is a two-volume self-published book, *Rationality and the Structure of the Self* (Piper 2013). As described by the American Kant scholar Paul Guyer, Piper has executed:

a monumental work in meta-ethics and moral psychology inspired by Kant, but dealing decisively with the history of a considerable portion of twentieth-century moral theory along the way. The work consists of two volumes, the first a critique of a "Humean" approach to its subjects and the second the defense of a "Kantian" approach. (...) Piper surveys numerous versions of "Humeanism", including not only the paradigmatic version of Richard Brandt but also, no doubt controversially, the "instrumentalism" of none other than John Rawls (...). [T]he gist of her criticism is that any purely preference-based conception of practical rationality (...) allows for no realization of a stable, unified self acting over time. (Guyer 2018)

Otherwise described, by Richard Bradley, Piper's philosophical magnum opus is a book that:

seeks to establish the basic principles of what she calls transpersonal rationality, the form of rationality constitutive of the Kantian conception of the self. Transpersonal rationality is governed by principles that require us to transcend our personal preoccupations and interests and focus on those that apply to all in equal measure. In contrast the rival Humean conception of the self, the main foil for her argument, draws on an egocentric form of rationality directed at the instrumental fulfilment of the agent's desires but not at their content. (...) [O]ne important strand of her argument, [concerns] (...) the interpretation of formal decision theory and its concepts and principles. Piper's position on this question is both very interesting and unorthodox. (Bradley 2018)

For reasons beyond her substantive contributions to aesthetics, moral theory and Kantian scholarship, Piper has historical importance to the field of philosophy.

At a time when there were few women of any race teaching philosophy full-time in the United States, the brilliant Piper boldly undertook a career in academic philosophy. When she obtained a PhD in philosophy in 1981 Piper became only the sixth U.S. woman racialized as African American to do so. She was preceded by Joyce Mitchell Cook (Yale University PhD), Angela Davis (Humboldt University PhD), Naomi Zack (Columbia University PhD), Laverne Shelton (University of Wisconsin PhD) and me (University of Michigan PhD). In 1979, before her PhD had been formally conferred and seemingly foretelling a bright future in philosophy, Piper obtained a tenure-track position as an assistant professor of philosophy at the top-ranked University of Michigan.

Piper did not move up the ranks at the University of Michigan. Following a tenure denial by Michigan—which had never tenured any woman philosopher—Piper relocated to Georgetown University. There she was tenured in 1987, becoming the first African American woman to be voted tenure by an American philosophy department (Piper 2019, 117; Romano 2013). After a brief, subsequent stint on the faculty of the University of California-San Diego, Piper was hired as a full professor with tenure by Wellesley College, an elite women’s college near Boston, Massachusetts, thus becoming the first African American woman to be granted a full professorship in Philosophy. At Wellesley she taught ethics, Kant and Indian Philosophy. Following battles with the school over fair employment and breach of contract issues, Wellesley took the extraordinary measure of revoking Piper’s tenure (Cherix et al. 2019, 319-322). Piper permanently left the United States, moving herself and the Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation to Berlin.

2. Piper’s Escape to Berlin

Piper’s move to Berlin was, in her words, an “escape” (Piper 2018). By leaving the country of her birth, Piper escaped subjection to the pathologies of institutionalized academic philosophy, graduating to the status of an

“emeritus” member of the American Philosophical Association. Suggested by a work of art that Piper gifted to me and my husband Paul Castellitto before she left the United States,¹ the artist may have felt unfree prior to leaving America—surrounded by hostile and indifferent people, and constrained from being her best self. The artwork in question is a pencil drawing on yellow legal paper. It depicts a naked black female angel, contained rather than in flight, her wings vibrating in express frustration. The angel is imprisoned behind lines printed and drawn on the page, like the slats of a Venetian blind through which she peers from a realm she is unable to escape. I view the imprisoned angel as Piper herself: its lean nude torso recalling that of the young Piper in the self-portrait *Food for the Spirit* (1971), photographically self-capturing her own materiality (Larson 2020).

Despite her importance as a pathbreaking teacher and scholar, Piper describes her overall experience in academic philosophy as a disaster: a “sustained descent (...) into the ravine, down in flames, and out of the profession” (Piper 2019, 106). Less dramatically, Piper has reported never feeling fully accepted by her philosophy colleagues in the United States. Her methods and ideas weren’t the standard mix. “To the self-identified continentalists, I was the analytic enemy in Kantian clothing; whereas to the Humeans, I was the Kantian enemy in analytic clothing”, she has written (Piper 2018, 112).

Problems Piper encountered in the field of philosophy—indignities, internecine squabbles, narrow-mindedness, bias and sexism—were not unique to Piper. They are reminiscent of those experienced just a few decades earlier by other pioneering women philosophers at Oxford and Cambridge. Philippa Foot, Elizabeth Anscombe, Mary Midgley and Iris Murdoch sought to break the mold, rigorously defending the meaningfulness and possibility of moral philosophy and spiritual life against extremes of logicism, empiricism, and positivism, embraced by leading male lights, including A. J. Ayer and R. M. Hare (Lipscomb 2022). (I once harbored similar ambitions, reflected in my New College of Florida undergraduate thesis (Allen 1974), which discussed Rudolf Carnap and the rejection of metaphysics by the Logical Positivists.) Similar to

¹ Adrian Piper, Untitled, 1992, pencil on yellow ruled paper, 12 1/2” x 8” inches, (AP/N-11-D). In the Collection of Anita L. Allen and Paul V. Castellitto.

the philosopher Iris Murdoch who turned to fiction and essay writing (Clark 2019), Piper achieved greater worldly success, more intellectual and spiritual freedom and better health outside of the strict confines of academic philosophy, in the broader world of arts and letters. On the basis of her experiences in the United States and given the vibrancy of the arts in Berlin, Piper's joyful "escape" is understandable.

Since Piper's departure from the United States, there have been positive developments for women and people of color in academic philosophy worth noting. There is now a critical mass of Black women philosophers. A "Collegium of Black Women Philosophers", convened by Dr. Kathryn Sophia Belle, has been a unique scholarly and wellness community for Black women for more than a decade (Gines 2011). In 2019 Charles Mills and Linda Alcoff mounted a two-day conference at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York entitled "Black Women Philosophers", devoted to displaying the contributions of seventeen American Black women in academic philosophy. A first for a Black woman, in 2018 I was elected President of the American Philosophical Association's (APA) Eastern Division. Another first for a Black woman, in 2021 I was awarded the American Philosophical Association's highest prize for service to philosophy and philosophers, the Philip L. Quinn Prize. Sadly, achievement and accolades have not completely shielded Black philosophers from abuse. As recounted in an interview with George Yancy published in the *New York Times*, shortly before I began as APA President, I was sexually harassed by a senior white male philosopher suffering from professional jealousy and frustration, who wrote in email to me that he brought my face to mind when he masturbated (Yancy 2018). Less than a year after someone viciously interrupted an online memorial service for Charles Mills attended by more than a hundred of his family members, friends and colleagues with rude noises and shouts of "nigger, nigger" and other hate speech, a Zoom presentation I was making on racial discrimination by Big Tech online digital platforms was similarly interrupted.

3. Art World Eminence

Piper's body of original, analytically rigorous writing in philosophy has not elevated her to an exalted status within American academic philosophy.

However, artwork—rich with philosophical learning, meaning and implications—has raised Piper to an exceptional status in the contemporary art world. Her artwork, much of which could be described as conceptual art, performance art or meta-performance art (Costello 2018), is exhibited all over the globe. It was comprehensively exhibited by the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York in a massive March 31-July 22, 2018 retrospective, “A Synthesis of Intuitions, 1965-2016”. As one commentator explained, Piper’s was the largest MOMA show ever mounted for a living artist and “[w]hatever mechanisms of recognition might have previously failed, Piper has finally gotten her well-deserved due from museum curators and art historians” (Allan 2020). Piper, who refuses to return to the United States, did not see the MOMA retrospective in person (Williams 2018). Piper’s artwork—which can affirm and confront—variously explores with philosophical acumen racialized and gendered identities. But more broadly and as importantly, her art delves into the cutting edges of perception, rationality, emotion, spirituality, authority and moral respect.

Piper narrates a history of modern and contemporary art that would situate her, alongside Sol LeWitt, as an artist for whom the idea of art has primacy over its “medium of realization” (Piper 1993, 577). Piper’s early work helped catapult a late 1960’s movement wherein “the self-reflexive investigation of concepts and language themselves” are the “primary subject matter of art” (Piper 1993, 577). The aspiration of contemporary art, Piper has suggested, is to spirit one away from the comfortable world of “universally communicable judgments of taste” and “into the deep regions of the mind”, the realm of “unsynthesized intuitions” (Piper 2018/2, 78).

Piper has argued in an essay entitled “The Real Thing Strange” that Kant was unwittingly committed to the existence of unsynthesized intuitions as a part of human experience (Piper 2018/2, 84). Some “appearances we recognize as unified objects”; others, the unsynthesized intuitions, we “merely intuit as spatiotemporally unrecognized presences” (Piper 2018/2, 84). An idea sharpened through her engagement with Kantian theories of judgment and rationality, unsynthesized intuitions are the “unfamiliar things and happenings and states and presences that confound and silence the mind and decompose the ego” (Piper 2018/2). Piper’s artwork produces experiences of anxiety, confusion and bewilderment that push art audiences to become more watchful, alert and self-aware.

I want here to focus on one such example of Piper’s remarkable body of artwork, *The Probable Trust Registry: Rules of the Game #1-3* (2013). For me, this art installation and performance piece is striking for the ways in which it creates a slick, eerily familiar, yet unfamiliar physical and psychological space that, like the best analytic moral philosophy—but without its attendant tendentious logics and epistemologies—encourages hard thinking about the nature and modalities of our moral obligations and commitments to ourselves and other people.

4. A Registry of Moral Integrity

“Cultivating a direct an unmediated relation to unsynthesized intuition on its own terms is not a sufficient condition for finally understanding it. But it is a necessary condition. It is necessary to seek out that anomalous presence beyond the edge of awareness that defies integration into conscious experience.”

-Adrian Piper (2019)

The Probable Trust Registry: Rules of the Game #1-3 (2013) (hereinafter “Registry”) is a philosophical puzzler. The artwork won the top prize at the 2015 Biennale Venezia-Biennale Arte. It was displayed at the Hamburger Bahnhof Berlin in 2017. A version of the Registry was included as the final work on display in the 2018 MOMA Art retrospective exhibition in New York. The Registry’s impact is an indivisible admixture of art and philosophy, a critical instigation for reflection on the language of moral performance (Austin 1962), and its social aims.

The Registry presents as participatory performance art. The material components of the artwork are an “Installation plus Group Performance”, consisting of three sets of embossed gold vinyl wall texts on greyish white walls, three sleek, circular reception desks, each desk staffed by a well-groomed, professional-looking administrative receptionist, contracts, signatories’ contact data and self-selected members of the public. The receptionists are performers whose role is to facilitate the process of participation by the self-selected art audience members who become what I will term “audience-participants” in the artwork when they approach the reception desks. To be included as Probable Trust registrants, the audience-participants sign and date a contractual “Declaration,” and sign a digital

data registry with their contact information, committing on the spot to one or more of the statements spelled out in the vinyl wall texts. The statements are the “Rules of the Game”:

- A.1 I will always mean what I say.
- A.2 I will always do what I say I am going to do.
- A.3 I will always be too expensive to buy.

What is the game for which these are the rules? There is no education provided by the artist or exhibitor as to the meanings, interpretations or contexts of the three rules. The statements (“rules”) are treated as if they are self-explanatory. For anyone who understands English, the statements are intelligible, yet it is likely different audience members understand the statements somewhat differently, against the background of their own experiences. When I first encountered the artwork, I read the statements from the perspective of my familiarity with western moral philosophy as statements concerning the requirements of moral integrity. Meaning what one says, is a matter of authenticity. Doing what one says one is going to do, is a matter of honesty. And being too expensive to buy is a matter of self-respect. A person of moral integrity strives to be authentic, honest and self-respectful. My knowledge of the artist from time we spent together on the faculty of Georgetown University and during a resultant ten-year friendship led me to also read the three statements as representing high ideals of moral integrity to which the artist herself subscribes and to which I believe she wishes that others, myself included, more widely subscribed.

As the art world knows, there is whimsy, irony and layered meaning in Piper’s artwork—it’s hard to know when she is to be taken at face value. Funk Lessons, really? Moral integrity is clearly not a game for Adrian Piper the philosopher. Piper’s tongue is nonetheless often in the artist’s cheek. The business-like attitude, faux legalism and professionalism of its expensive-looking set-up might lead an audience-participant to understand the Registry as an artwork, but/and a serious vehicle through which they can follow a sincerely intended prompt to make a genuine, morally binding commitment. The Registry potentially throws its naïve and sophisticated audiences alike off-balance, transporting them to that realm of what Piper calls “unsynthesized intuition”, wherein they are presented with something they do not have the capacity immediately to understand through their

normal frames—a sleek reception desk invoking a corporate office space at which they agree, not to pay for a hotel room or purchase insurance, but to be a good and perhaps, better person. Thus here, as she often does, Piper “directs her work toward individuals, presenting them with unexpected circumstances designed to bring to awareness—and to challenge—standard ways of perceiving and responding to others (Altshuler 1997).

What is the value of playing along (or, for that matter, going along) with Piper’s performance in this instance? There is worth in reflecting about whether one can and should publicly subscribe to one or more of the Rules of the Game. An audience-participant might consider, what is in it for them to publicly subscribe; or they might assume they and/or the world would be better off if they and others in implicit solidarity committed at the Registry to following the Rules of the Game. And there are a range of other possibilities.

Audience-participants are told that, using the information they supply, at the close of the exhibition they will be sent a confidential copy of the registry of signatories and thereby learn the other signatories’ identities. If they wish to contact a fellow signatory upon learning their name, they agree to do so only through the art exhibitor, which will release contact information only with a signatory’s explicit permission. Note that audience-participants are free to supply fictitious contact information, which some might do for the sake of privacy or in the spirit of make-believe (Walton 1993). Yet the representation that follow-up information comes with registration, could prompt those desiring continued engagement to supply truthful contact information. The original Registry documents are purportedly archived with the Adrian Piper Research Foundation archive and sealed for 100 years.

Some audience-participants likely perceive themselves in the spirit of play as *pretending* to accept the prompt to ascribe to the moral integrity statements, and *pretending* to believe they will be contacted in the future with information about whom else signed on. Yet the promise of follow-up appears to have been genuine. At the MOMA exhibition of the Registry in New York City, my adult daughter Ophelia Castellitto signed on to Rule A.2 (I will always do what I say I am going to do.) On the last day of the MOMA exhibit, July 22, 2018, she received via email a beautifully

formatted list of names purporting to be a list of the other people who signed on to Rule A2. We wondered whether the list was fictitious; each signatory could easily have been sent a list of names on which their name appeared along with numerous fictitious names. Despite promising to contact other signatories only through the exhibitors, my daughter and I discussed that one could use social media to attempt to verify (and even contact) the other signatories.

5. The Authority of Art

An artist who can induce someone to yield personal data and make a moral undertaking in the context of an art installation demonstrates the authority of art, and the receptiveness of the art public to authority. Rebellious or skeptical art audience members may have resisted Piper's bidding to subject themselves to her authority. In "The Humming Room", another of Piper's works appearing in the MOMA show, audiences are told by signage that they must hum a tune of their choosing to enter a gallery whose entry-way is guarded by a person dressed as a law enforcement officer (Cherix 2018). The Registry illustrates that the ability to exercise persuasive authority extends beyond the trappings of police power to the artistically rendered trappings of institutional bureaucracy, beyond *sotto voce* melodies to the guts of rational ethical imperatives.

Ought one yield to the authority asserted by an artist and her artwork? A similar question arises in a comparable context. In a "Founders Hall" gallery of the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, visitors walk among life-size statutes of the men who signed the original 1787 United States Constitution. The visiting public is also invited to "sign" the Constitution. Many visitors do precisely that, a public act of patriotism and loyalty to a flawed social compact (Allen 1999). Some visitors to the National Constitution Center might prefer not to endorse the 1787 document, which explicitly condoned human slavery, denied women the right to vote, and granted unequal political rights to indigenous North Americans. For a time, visitors signed by adding their signatures to the pages of big books of such signatures, and were given an index number that would enable them to locate their signatures in those books in the future. Later, signatories who provided contact information were sent

certificates stating that they had signed the Constitution. For a while there was a book that visitors to Founder's Hall could sign to voice dissent from the original Constitution. But the option to dissent in writing no longer exists. To dissent one simply declines to sign. Although it is not a work of fine art, I mention the "Founder's Room" because, like Piper's Registry, it potentially raises the question of whether one can or should seriously endorse a set of values by signing a document in an exhibition space. Yet I doubt that more than a few visitors take the signing invitation at the National Constitution Center as much more than a fleeting opportunity to express patriotism or patriotic dissent, a source of learning and fun suitable for a middle-school or family outing. Piper's Registry is contemporary fine art that succeeds in taking us someplace deeper.

Because Piper is famously and integrally an analytic Kant scholar, former mentee of John Rawls and student of the contractarian tradition in western moral and political thought, I surmise she was fully aware that her artwork poses—rather than begs my questions. What is the possibility of moral commitment through engagement with art? What is its advisability? I would argue that art spaces—installations, galleries, museums—are places in which genuine moral commitments of all sorts can be made, and that encountering an artwork such as the Probable Trust Registry can have the impact of a deeply meaningful ethical catalytic change experience even though it is unlikely that the performance artwork can itself bind its participating audiences to moral integrity. Toward describing how and why for me the Registry was a catalytic agent for me, as a Black-identifying woman philosopher, I want to distinguish three ways to understand what the Probable Trust Registry invites its audiences to do.

6. Three Interpretations of the Probable Trust Registry

“One reason for making and exhibiting a work is to induce a reaction or change in the viewer. The stronger the work, the stronger the impact and the more total (physical, psychological, intellectual, etc.) the reaction of the viewer. (...) Separating the work from the artist (...) gives it independent status as an artwork but decreases its potential strength as a catalytic agent.”

- Adrian Piper (1996)

Rich with potential as a catalytic agent, there are at least three ways to understand what the Probable Trust Registry invites those who encounter it to do. First, one could understand the Registry as a vehicle for acknowledging a set of transpersonal, universal moral integrity imperatives that are the rules everyone ought to live by. Second, one could understand the Registry as a way of making and sharing with others a prediction about one's future moral conduct, where moral integrity is predicted. Third, and most compellingly, the Registry could be understood as calling upon audiences to make, and share that they have made, a moral integrity vow, in solidarity with others.

a. Interpretation One: Universal Imperatives

The Registry could be interpreted as asking its audiences to participate in acknowledging the existence of three moral imperatives. On this interpretation, the egocentric "I will" statements really convey a set of "universal prescriptions" (Hare 1963), pertaining to each of us and signaling our common expectations of consistent adherence:

- B.1 Everyone ought to always mean what they say.
- B.2 Everyone ought to always do what they say they are going to do.
- B.3 Everyone ought to always be too expensive to buy.

Though tempted by the Registry, an audience-participant might nevertheless hold back from signing up to subscribe to these three statements interpreted as directions about what *every* moral agent *always* ought to do. Indeed, a moral philosopher might advise against signing onto B.1, B.2 and B.3. The statements are not just categorical; they are arguably, *too* categorical. That is because it is easy to imagine situations in which one *ought not* mean what one says, *ought not* do what one says one is going to do, or *ought not* be too expensive to buy. Sometimes politeness, tact or diplomacy requires that we not mean what we say. And sometimes we ought not do what we say we will do, because we should not have said we would do a particular thing in the first place, or because circumstances have materially changed. Suppose one is kidnapped and held for ransom by a violent gang. Flattering the kidnappers, falsely promising not to call the police if released by the kidnappers, and asking one's family to pay a ransom to the kidnappers could be the key to survival. In the unusual instance of needing to escape

crime victimization a person would be ethically justified in not meaning what they say, doing what they say, or being bought.

Furthermore, moral growth sometimes requires that we abandon what we may have said we would do. For example, a newly self-aware person P who understands that they are beneficiaries of what Charles Mills calls the “racial contract” might well wish to begin to do better by nonwhite persons, by violating B.1 and B.2. Mills would argue that historically what many privileged White people have said they are going to do is to exploit and subordinate a population “whose intrinsic savagery constantly threatens reversion to the state of nature, bubbles of wilderness within the polity” (Mills 1997, 83). Person P would violate B.1 by giving only lip service to racism and B2 by abandoning exploitative commitments and arrangements expected of them.

That there are plausible exceptions to moral imperatives is a detail that Piper could fairly assume her audiences know implicitly how to accommodate. Think of how Americans commonly regard moral undertakings. When they take the traditional marriage vow to love and cherish another in sickness and health, until death, most know that the vow does not require that they remain in the clutches of a spouse who is physically abusive. The Registry, the work of a nonwhite woman, is best interpreted to assume the actual social, political and economic background conditions of immorality, criminality, racism and inequality that are the contexts of our moral lives. The moral philosopher invited to participate in the Registry might quickly conclude that Piper’s three statements embody at best only *prima facie* principles of integrity not absolute action guides. The imperatives one ought to embrace would look more like this:

- C.1 In most instances, everyone ought to mean what they say.
- C.2 In most instances, everyone ought to do as they say they are going to do.
- C.3 In most instances, everyone ought to be too expensive to buy.

b. Second Interpretation: Predicted Futures

Next, the Registry could be interpreted as asking audiences to become audience-participants who make and register a prediction about their own

future conduct—about what they (“I”) will do in the future, inducing mutual trust:

- D.1 In the future, I will always mean what I say.
- D.2 In the future, I will always do what I say I am going to do.
- D.3 In the future, I will always be too expensive to buy.

This predicted future interpretation is suggested by the fact that Registry is entitled a “probable” trust registry. Some audience-participants will believe they are already effective moral agents and who will continue lives of moral integrity—hence the prediction. For others, experiencing the artwork is a potential catalyst for greater moral integrity—hence the prediction. Trust is always about the future. Yet no one can say for sure how the vaunted trust will pan out.

The predicted future interpretation faces an important difficulty. There is no distinct content in or context for the artwork to prompt the artwork’s audiences to make predictions about their future moral integrity—authenticity, honesty, and self-respect. Seeing a set of sleek desks in a museum or art gallery is unlikely all by itself to prompt formally registering a prediction about one’s future conduct.

Arguably, the audiences’ understandings of the overall global context and societal ills could prompt accepting Piper’s invitation to register predictions about future conduct. Yet mindful of the context of political conflict, inequity, suffering and peril, some art audiences might more easily embrace invitations to make contextually specific predictions such as, for example:

- E.1 In the future, I will become an anti-racist.
- E.2 In the future, I will reduce my carbon footprint to slow climate change.
- E.3 In the future, I will help secure clean drinking water and medicines for the poor.

Piper’s contextually non-specific A.1, A.2 and A.3 or their predicted futures interpretative variation D.1, D.2 and D.3 might fail to touch the hearts and minds of her most morally engaged audiences.

Arguably moral integrity predicted in Piper's A.1, A2 and A.3, also predicts successful moral conduct foretold in my E.1, E.2 and E.3. Audiences thus might assume that by predicting general future moral integrity, they are also predicting an overall better moral future relating to contextually specific priorities such as the amelioration of familiar global woes including racism, climate-disaster neglect, and resource inequity. Again, unlike analytic ethics, good art does not need always to spell everything out.

It is when the Registry is experienced in the context of Piper's overall body of work and personal biography that its invitation is most plausibly and powerfully understood as an invitation to predict a future of improved moral integrity. When contextualized in the life and art of Piper, the Registry could prompt its audiences to predict their own moral integrity. Piper has written that: "Separating the work from the artist (...) gives it independent status as an artwork but decreases its potential strength as a catalytic agent" (Piper 1996). In relation to Piper herself, I agree.

Connecting Piper to her artwork increases its potential strength as a catalytic agent, as something that precipitates change. As a Black woman and a philosopher, Piper's work has been for me a powerful catalytic agent. Over time, I have indeed been changed by seeing exhibitions of Piper's work. Experiencing Piper through her biography and her artwork can prompt a person to want to be better (as it seriously has in my case) and could also prompt a person to respond favorably to an opportunity, such as the Registry, to publicly join others in a pledge to do as moral integrity demands in the future (as I did not in my case).

Sometimes Piper's Registry is installed alone, in isolation from her other work. Piper included the Registry in the retrospective of her work exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York in 2018. The comprehensive and retrospective exhibition of Piper's work, dating back to her adolescence provided an optimal context for audiences to learn and grow—and even to predict greater moral consistency in the future precisely as a by-product of seeing the show.

In the MOMA exhibition, the gallery just before the Registry housed emotionally arousing artwork documenting, *inter alia*: the artist's problems with Wellesley College that led to her termination from an historic

tenured full professorship; the artist's disillusionment with the philosophy profession and her country; and the artist's frustration with race and racial identity that led her to declare the end of her identity as a Black person. The Registry was the last artwork in the show, at the show's point of exit. It shared a room with a video of Piper joyfully dancing in the streets of Berlin. Located in an adjacent room before but close to the Registry was a mesmerizing video performance by Piper of prolonged paroxysms of tearful hysteria suggesting the artist had finally reached the end of her ropes. Against the background of such artworks, many of which invoked wrongs of race discrimination and suffering, one might well be moved to predict that, as a result of seeing the emotionally and morally engaging show one would behave differently and better in the future. If memory serves me correct, I signed the Registry at the MOMA exhibit, despite it seeming beside the point, for the sake of encouraging my aforementioned daughter, an art student at the time who attended the exhibit with me, to more fully engage.

Throughout Piper's lifetime, women in academia faced intimidation and punishment for saying what they mean, doing what they say they will do, and refusing to sell themselves short. It is no accident that the cover of the exhibition catalogue book, *A Synthesis of Intuition*, reproduces an artwork of Piper's in which the image of Professor Anita Hill as a child is superimposed on words representing the kinds of things said to Black women who dare to speak their truth (Cherix 2018). The words include "You are making too much of this", "How do you know?", and "I am mystified by your reaction". At the MOMA, signing the Registry after experiencing a retrospective of Piper's art, could be a way to say to the artist and exhibitor: "You made your point to me; you reached me; I am changed". A Black woman philosopher affirmed by the exhibition, at its end I predicted greater strength to uphold my moral integrity—being frank, sticking to ambitions, and not "selling out"—despite pressures to the contrary. I did not, however, much want to play along, or go along with the Registry itself.

My professional experience with academic philosophy has been more positive than Piper's. Yet it started badly. At the age of 24, I attended my first meeting of the American Philosophical Association (APA), where I interviewed for college and university positions. My ability to do

philosophy was questioned and I was approached out of the blue for casual sex by much older White men, once by none other than John Searle who tried to persuade me to visit his hotel room. (Although I kept my loathsome experience mostly secret until now, John Searle has been publicly accused of sexual harassment by a number of people over the years. In June 2019 he was stripped of his emeritus faculty status at the University of California because of sexual harassment.) My first APA meeting was a thoroughly humiliating experience that left me feeling like a pair of breasts rather than a scholar. Leaving the meeting, I wondered if to be employable, I would have to overlook discrimination and objectification. For a long time, it seemed that I would. I was barely able to describe my experience of that first APA philosophy convention in words. In fact, I produced two collages at the time to convey my reactions in pictures. “Portrait of a Lady Please Take Me with You” (Figure 1), depicted an exotic “fish out of water” seeking acceptance; and “Untitled,” (Figure 2), depicted an earnest black woman being interviewed by a distracted White man smoking and sipping a cocktail.

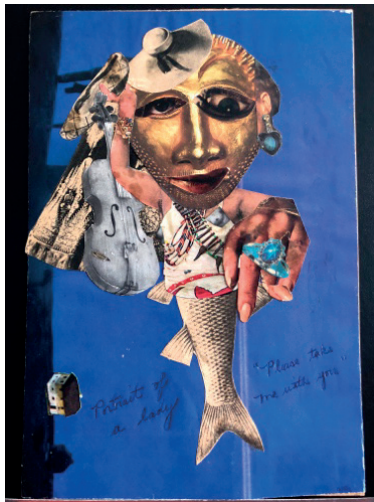


Figure 1. Portrait of a Lady, Please Take Me with You. Paper Collage, 7”x10” (1978). ©Anita L. Allen, 2022. The copyright for Figure 1 is exclusively owned by Anita L. Allen and is not subject to any Creative Commons license.



Figure 2. Untitled. Paper Collage 11½” x 14 ½” (1978). ©Anita L. Allen, 2022. The copyright for Figure 2 is exclusively owned by Anita L. Allen and is not subject to any Creative Commons license.

Piper’s work is designed to be a catalytic agent. Over the decades, the catalytic artworks have become more subtle than the in-your-face work of her youth—including *Catalyst I*, the extremely bizarre performance in which she

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, [and] then while browsing in the Marlboro bookstore on Saturday night. (Piper and Lippard 1972)

Encountering Adrian Piper’s work over the years has more than once prompted me toward greater moral integrity in my professional life, with positive results in leadership, mentorship, and self-esteem. The Whitney Museum in New York in 1990 featured Piper’s installation, “Out of the Corner”. The work consisted of a gallery installation of 64 identically framed photographs of Black women from *Ebony Magazine* and a video of the artist poised and conservatively attired discussing the irrationality of how Americans assign race. Unused to seeing images of real black women in an art museum, I took special pride in the exhibition and found it affirming, as I imagine other Black female viewers of whatever skin-tone did. Through Piper’s arrival, we had all arrived.

c. Third Interpretation: Taking a Vow

The Registry does more than invite the public to acknowledge a set of *prima facie* obligations or to make predictions about their future conduct, perhaps catalyzed by Piper’s art and life story. There is a third way to understand the Registry. It asks audience-participants to join others in taking a vow to behave in a certain idealized way in the future. A.1, A.2 and A.3, are accordingly interpretable as:

F.1 I vow to mean what I say.

F.2 I vow to do what I say I am going to do.

F.3 I vow to be too expensive to buy.

Vows can be private. One could take a completely private vow inspired by the Registry—or Piper’s other artwork in combination with the Registry—that is shared with no one. If one goes along or plays along with the Registry, the F.1, F.2 and F.3 vow is partly public. The audience-participant will be seen and heard by other visitors in the exhibition space. Administrators at the reception desk will shepherd them through the digital “paperwork” process. If the genuine contact information of the audience-participant is consensually collected, archived for a hundred years and shared with fellow registrants, then data privacy, in the sense of control over personally identifiable information, is waived.

While the future prediction interpretation of the Rules of the Game captures my experience with the Registry, the taking a vow interpretation—a vow that is private and self-directed (vowing privately to oneself) also captures my experience. It would be accurate to say that as a result of encountering Piper’s artwork in her retrospective, I both vowed to be a morally better person and predicted that I would be. It would *not* be accurate to say that I either vowed or predicted moral integrity through the act of becoming a signatory to the Registry.

The Registry arguably invites one to take a vow whose public performance communicates to the artist, exhibitors, witnesses, and other registrants that one has made a personal commitment to live in accord with moral ideals of integrity, authenticity, and self-worth. To whom is the vow directed? From one perspective it would appear the Registry vow is personal, directed at

oneself for the betterment of oneself (compare Catholic priestly vows). Yet it is also a communal vow because the Registry invites everyone in the community of art audiences to take the vow. The implication is that if a quantity of individuals take the vow, then a small advance is made toward making the world a better place. The Registry is a vehicle toward solidarity and trust aiming at the common good. The point of the vow is moral self-improvement, and the creation of a more trusting relationship with others. While it could be meaningful to take the vow privately, the partial publicity and accountability of the Registry could fortify the will against backsliding (*akrasia*) and bring about a degree of the collective trust.

The Registry incorporates some of the discourse and trappings of contractarianism, but does not and cannot bring about a genuine moral obligation. (I am not sure Piper would agree, but she does not condition the success of her artwork on whether her audiences agree with her.) There is no obligation despite the fact that audience-participants are competent adults who execute an agreement. While it could be argued that the Registry is simply asking people to pledge adherence to one of several principles of everyday morality, the lack of education and transparency concerning the ambiguity of the Rules and the societal background assumptions of the Game undercut the ability of the artwork to effect a genuine agreement creating rights and obligations.

An assumption of classical Anglo-European social contract theory from Thomas Hobbes to John Rawls is that rational, self-interested individuals bind themselves to one another and rules of conduct through acts and attestations because they understand that it is vitally in their self-interest to do so. But historical social contracts, such as the original United States Constitution and Mills's racial contract creating "global European economic domination and national white racial privilege" (Mills, 1997, 31) have often and largely left nonwhite peoples outside of their protections. Some of Piper's contemporary followers will have a bad taste in their mouths about the Game (rigged against some) and its Rules (unevenly applied to some). Does the fact that the Registry is the product of a tolerant, brilliant Black woman mean marginalized people will equally embrace and benefit from participation in her Trust?

Interestingly, the Registry is mostly process. It expressly articulates no terms of a substantive bargain from which participants can expect to benefit in specific ways. A registry of personal vows selected from a menu of three, aptly describes the Registry. As a work of art, the Registry functions to encourage taking a vow to behave in a certain way, and purports to provide a data secure procedural mechanism for vow-takers to know whom else has taken the vow.

The Registry's information-sharing feature fosters a modicum of accountability that also potentially enables registrants know whom they can (probably) trust. This is the good news. The bad news is that billions of people will not have signed the registry. Moreover, as I suggested earlier, in the digital age, information shared with registrants about other registrants' names can be reshared, and also affords means of contact through popular social media and the internet, unmediated by the exhibitors or artist. There is no reason to assume promises of confidentiality and reserve secured in performance artwork would be honored. And, of course, knowing who can be trusted, is also knowing who can be taken advantage of because of their trustworthiness. Viewed realistically, signing the data registry with genuine contact information may hold significant risks of shaming and exploitation. Better to make the vow to oneself, but not sign onto the Registry.

7. Catalyzing Moral Agency and Integrity

The Registry assumes we know what we need to do, we just need a nudge to do it. The Registry is a nudge that trades on the authority of art and the trappings of law, moral contractarianism and organized bureaucracy. The question whether it is possible to make a serious moral commitment or binding obligation in an art exhibition has a direct answer. Of course one can make a meaningful moral commitment in an art space. It is less clear one can make such a commitment through the express prompt of a performance piece.

There is nothing about being in the presence of great art or in a museum or gallery that precludes moral seriousness. To the contrary, art spaces may be as good as some and better than many for moral undertakings. For reasons unrelated to any artwork, an individual who happens to be in an art

gallery might vow to take better care of their health for the sake of a young dependent family by giving up smoking cigarettes. Moreover, being in an art space could inspire a morally significant undertaking inspired by the art itself. For example, being in the Sistine Chapel beneath Michelangelo's glorious paintings might prompt a spiritual reawakening that leads a lapsed Catholic to recommit to her religion. One could make a serious marriage proposal in a museum, and indeed it could be highly romantic to do so in front of a favorite work of art. For example, it could be very romantic for an African American woman to make or accept a sincere marriage proposal in front of the official portrait of former First Lady Michelle Obama at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. One could also make a serious vow to address one's mental health engaging the vibrant artwork of Vincent Van Gogh; to be a bolder designer while engaging the mind-bending drawings of M.C. Escher; or to be more engaged politically while viewing Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*.

One can make a serious moral commitment in an art gallery, museum or art exhibition space, and genuine moral improvement or moral vows can be catalyzed encountering artwork. I maintain that this happened in my own case viewing Piper's "Synthesis of Intuition" retrospective at MOMA. Yet I do not think the audience-participants who sign on to the Registry should by virtue of their registration alone be understood as making a serious, binding moral vow or commitment of any sort. Some audience-participants will be pretending. Some will play along or go along with the work of art for the sake of recreation or even to express admiring support for the artist. One of the philosophy-trained people who visited the MOMA show with me was deeply moved by some of Piper's work, but is not one to ever "go along" or "play along" with performance art. This individual stood on the sidelines as my college-aged artist daughter and I approached the registration desk. I am not one hundred percent sure I decided to sign the agreement—I know my daughter did. I probably signed using a fake contact information. But for me, by the time I would have signed any agreements, vows inspired by Piper's moral integrity rules had already been taken, privately. The art had worked its moral power. I hope it worked some of its moral power over my exhibition companions, too.

Although a person could make a serious moral commitment of various sorts in an art gallery, museum or art exhibition space, it is not clear that every person can. Someone who has never thought seriously about moral

matters will need more than a single gallery visit to set an ethical course. Just as one Funk Lesson with Piper didn't make anyone into a funky dancer (Cherix et al 2018, 23), one encounter with Piper's Probable Trust Registry doesn't make anyone an informed moral agent whose signature constitutes a genuine act of moral self-obligation in trust and solidarity with others. Signing the Registry doesn't mean an audience-participant has genuinely assumed the burdens of moral integrity, but it could importantly signify that they want to get started on the path to moral integrity. I have made a less modest claim for myself—that encountering the Probable Trust Registry in the context of viewing a sweeping retrospective of Piper's work, combined with knowing the artist's biography, did more than start me on a path, it catalyzed informed, genuine, private vows to be a better person and mentor, and a more resilient academic professional.

8. Conclusion

Motivated by admiration for the artist and a perceived conflictual relationship between women of color and conventional discourses of moral solidarity (Mills 1997; Allen 1999; Silvers and Francis 2005), I have offered three different ways to understand Piper's Probable Trust Registry #1-3, a tongue-in-cheek and ironic engagement with moral imperatives and social compacts. I suggest that Piper's thought-provoking artwork can be interpreted as asking its audiences to agree to selections from a menu of Rules of the Game that embrace universal moral imperatives, predict future moral integrity, and/or vow to act with moral integrity.

I distinguished making a moral commitment in an art space from making a moral commitment expressly prompted by a work of performance art, arguing that the former is possible and the latter unlikely. Piper's Registry process does not effect genuine moral undertakings. But the beauty of art is that one need not insist upon an only way or a best way for all to understand. Three or more meaningful understandings can easily or uneasily coexist in the realms of experience and interpretation. And perhaps there is a perspective I have missed from which the audiences who co-perform Piper's Registry are making genuine moral undertakings whether they ought to make them or not. Piper escaped to Berlin. Maybe there is someplace better for each of us that Piper can help us get to.

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Figure 1. Anita Allen, "Portrait of a Lady, Please Take Me with You," 1978, paper cutouts, cardboard and ink, 7"x10" (1978). Photo credit and copyright, Anita L. Allen.

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