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### Adrian Piper's Human Emotion Detector

“Do I really have to do this?” the man asked me as he eyed the sign instructing museum visitors to hum as they approached the guard. A blank passageway prefaced by these textual directions, *The Humming Room* was created by Adrian Piper in 2012 for the traveling art show called “do it.” Curator Hans Ulrich Obrist said, “Ultimately, do it, is the result of a simple proposition: Create an instruction that someone else can use to make an artwork”<sup>1</sup>. Since then, the piece has been included in the *Venice Biennale*, as well as in Piper's retrospective shows at MOMA in New York and, currently, at The Hammer Museum at UCLA. I will use my own experiences as an employee of the Hammer Museum and rotating guard of *The Humming Room* to give multiple perspectives as viewer and performer on both sides of the authoritative aspects *The Humming Room* offers. I will also discuss aspects of *The Humming Room* that pertain to Conceptualism, as well as with performance and institutional critique. Lastly, I will argue that *The Humming Room* is a three dimensional model of Piper's views of metaethics, which relate to her philosophic work. Although *The Humming Room* is a very recent piece in regards to Piper's overall body of work, it is not only a culmination of art movements that Piper helped pioneer in the 1960s and 70s, but also offers glimpses of a new frontier in the world of art that involve the use of human emotion and the choices audiences make when engaging with contemporary art.

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<sup>1</sup> Obrist,do it, 9.

The Humming Room is found about 3 quarters of the way through Adrian Piper's Retrospective Show: Concepts and Intuitions, at the Hammer Museum, the piece is also a type of passway towards the final gallery space of the show. I understand that at MoMA in New York the piece is an actual room with one entrance/exit. At the Hammer, the piece, in my opinion, is a cube within a cube (the gallery itself), with two openings. One might even say that it can be mistaken for a small hallway if not for the signs at entrance and exit. Visually, the piece offers very little to the eyes: White cube with entrance and exit, 3 signs, two of them at entrance and exit that state "Begin Humming as You Approach the Guard." The third sign above the entrance states "To Enter The Room You Must Hum A Tune Any Tune Will Do." The only other visual aspect The Humming Room offers is the museum guard placed at the entrance, who is in fact an element of the piece and, apart from popular belief, not a robot or invisible, but an actual living person with thoughts and feelings.

Using the visual aspects alone I do see a connection with The Humming Room and Minimalism, one of the art movements Piper became involved with early in her career. Although there is two openings for entrance and exit, the piece is aesthetically still a white hollow cube. Once inside The Humming Room, all there is for you to see is white, blank walls. There is also a connection to Minimalism regarding what Thomas Fried had to say about "literalist" artwork: "one is, after all, always surrounded by things. But the things that are literalists works of art must somehow confront the beholder-they must, one might almost say, be placed not just in his space but in his way."<sup>2</sup> The way I see it, The Humming Room needs for us, the viewers, to understand and accept that it is "The Humming Room" for it to exist, and in this sense, The Humming Room

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<sup>2</sup> Fried, Art and Objecthood, 127

is a classic example of Minimalism, at least in Thomas Friends description of the movement. Without our acceptance, The Humming Room is just a naked room or hallway.

Apart from the plain white walls and 90 degree angles, the rest of the visual aspects of The Humming Room lead us into Conceptualism. It is the idea of what The Humming Room is and what it offers that is more important than how it looks. Also, The Humming Room is the result of a set of instructions, or a simple plan, as explained by Obrist. I believe the main idea or objective of The Humming Room is to get the museum visitor to participate in an act of self expression. According to Adrian Piper's long time friend and well known Conceptual artist, Sol Lewitt: "It doesn't really matter if the viewer understands the concepts of the artist by seeing the art. Once out of his hand the artist has no control over the way a viewer will perceive the work. Different people will understand the same thing in a different way"<sup>3</sup>. This statement is true regarding what The Humming Room offers. Once the viewer accepts and understands The Humming Room as a work of art, the viewer is almost forced into using their mind to process what sort of art this is? At this point Piper has lost control of the viewer's understanding and perception of what type of art the piece is. What Piper does control and offer to the museum visitors in this piece is choices, choices that also make The Humming Room a space for performance art.

There is 3 possible choices that are offered when you engage with The Humming Room. I am not too sure if you can officially call choice an actual performance, but it is this choice that leads up to a performance upon entering the room. As a current guard at the Hammer, I have observed all three choices that are possible when a visitor comes near the piece. Only two of the

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<sup>3</sup> Lewitt, Paragraphs on Conceptual Art, 14.

choices lead to a performance. I believe the performance takes place within the cube so the first choice has no performance. This first choice is deciding not to hum and not enter The Humming Room. I have seen a good amount of people turn around and exit out the front of the show just because could not, for whatever reason, hum. One of the students in my advanced drawing class this quarter explained her decision to not hum to me: “It was too embarrassing! There was too many people! I couldn't do it! I walked all the way back to the front entrance of the show and walked out! Later on I went back and I noticed a group of people going in together and I slipped in with them.” The act of choosing not to do it falls into another aspect of The Humming Room that I get into later.

The second choice is to follow all instructions. One exemplary visitor began this journey first by observing the signs, and then looking at me for a couple seconds. She then walked over to another piece, in my opinion contemplating what she just observed. She then approached the entrance and myself and began humming. As instructed by my supervisors, I began to hum back. Now we are both humming together and the coolest thing happens, her eyes light up as she forms the cheesiest smile I have ever seen! And as she heads towards the exit of The Humming Room she looks back to me, never losing eye contact, and hums all the way out of The Humming Room! This, in my opinion, was a two-person performance.

Sometimes, they don't look back at me, but do smile the whole way. That's the one thing almost all the visitors have in common is that they all smile once they get to humming. It's the ones who decided not to enter or enter and not hum that never smile. This is the function of the space in The Humming Room: to provide a space for a small moment of self expression that leads to a small moment of happiness. Whether its performed by a single person or more, the act

of humming in The Humming Room almost always leads to smiles. As the guard, seeing people smile and visibly satisfied that they made this choice makes me want to try to get as many people that approach the room to enter while humming.

The guards are instructed to encourage the visitors to hum if they appear like they are on the fence about it or ask if they really have to do this to enter. The official instruction is to encourage humming as much as possible, but we cannot get physical and we cannot officially impede or block visitor's movements, i.e. if they continue walking without humming we cannot get in there way, we must allow them to pass. This actually happens quite often. Some visitors will absolutely not hum. An example of common conversations regarding this:

Visitor: "do I really have to hum to go through?"

Me: "The artist encourages you to hum a little tune in The Humming Room as you proceed to the next gallery."

Visitor: "I don't want to do this, I just want to pass through."

Me: "Go on through, enjoy your visit at the Hammer museum."

Another encounter went like this:

Visitor: "Hey do people actually do this shit?"

Me: "The artist encourages you to hum a little tune in The Humming room as you proceed to the next gallery."

Visitory: "Fucken Stupid"

At this point he bypasses me and looks back at me in defiance. I couldn't help but feel like the bad language and defiant gaze was personal. This situation was rare, but it does exemplify another aspect of the humming room from another art movement.

Institutional Critique may be the main thing the artist was thinking of when creating the piece. In the MoMA Catalogue, Piper adds about institutional critique “I think The Humming Room can be viewed as an alternative path into that exploration, by poking gentle fun at institutional authority rather than despairing over its corruptions.”<sup>4</sup> She goes on to explain that: “When I was growing up, I knew a lot of African-American artists who worked as museum guards. Sol (Lewitt) worked as a museum guard at one point. I hope whoever guards The Humming Room at MoMA will get a kick out of making people hum a tune in order to get through the show.”<sup>5</sup> As a guard who has great fun in watching people torment themselves over the decision to hum or not, I do agree that the majority of the security and guards are minorities. This brings to mind the institutional critiques of Fred Wilson. There is a story that goes like this: For one of his art tours, Wilson actually showed up dressed as a museum guard, and it was no surprise to him that not one single person on the tour recognized him! This proved his point that guards at museums are invisible. In making us (the guards) visible, and allowing us to engage with the visitors in a way much different way from being a figure of “silly authority,” Piper manages to show us, the minority guards, a little love, while at the same time using a part of the institutional framework (the guards and the illusionistic authority they represent) to critique the power above the guards, who in almost every fine art institution is comprised of all white, all male, supervisors and curators. The author of the essay in the MoMA catalogue, Christophe Cherix says it all : “And we, the curators of the exhibition, are ultimately the “silly authority” in charge of the project. Curators are invested with expertise, with control, but both are meaningless if not in service of artists and their work.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Piper, A Synthesis of Intuitions, 21.

<sup>5</sup> Piper, A Synthesis of Intuitions, 27.

<sup>6</sup> Cherix, A Synthesis of Intuitions, 28.

It is at this stage in culmination of art movements that The Humming Room moves into frontiers of artistic aspects that deal with the subject of participatory human emotion. To be extremely simple about it, The Humming Room is a detector of human embarrassment, vulnerability, intimacy, feelings about authority, and an overall detection of “good” and “bad” people.

Embarrassment is probably the most common human emotion that I have observed as a guard of the humming room. It is as equally prominent in young and old, boy or girl, does not matter. One time, a family of four was at the show. Father, mother, daughter, and son. A nice looking family. As they all approached The Humming Room, I greet them with my common: “welcome to the humming room...” The entire family then takes a step back and get into a type of huddle(family meeting). After some giggling and head nodding, and some head shaking, I notice the father and daughter walk up together, both look at me, and both begin to hum together as they walk in. When they notice I am humming back, the daughter, who is about 6 or 7 years old, giggles some more! It was a glorious moment in art history.

I then turn back to the next pair, and realize they are not moving! They stood there, mother and son, and waited for father and daughter to come back! When father and daughter come back, father turns to me and says, “hey man, they’re not going to do it, can we pass through to the exit.” As all four pass through The Humming Room together the daughter looks back at me one last time and hums some more. I have to admit I was a little disappointed that mother and son would be so embarrassed to not perform with me! But that is the way of The Humming Room, detecting some of our most vulnerable human emotions.

What visitors do not fully realize is that in following the instructions there is a reward to be had. By humming a little tune, you open up the opportunity to freely express yourself, overcoming the initial embarrassment, even if just for a couple small moments, and allowing these moments of intimacy between absolute strangers. I believe that this is where you find new aspects of art in general that can be expanded on, but it is the visitor who must make that choice. Piper is the one who creates the entrance, but we as an audience must take that bold step forward. That is a very discomfoting notion. Imagine you visit a museum to see some art and you end up facing your fear of public embarrassment? There is a level of courage that must be reached to take that step. I have seen people from all walks of life make that step effortlessly, with smiles on their face, just as often as people who shrink at the idea, and run away in fear of public shame. I have never encountered a work of art that was more about me and my choices than what the artists had to say, and that, in my opinion, is a new frontier of contemporary art.

As a detector of “good” and “bad” people, what I mean is that we get this notion about society that if we follow the rules, we are “good” people, and if we break these rules in society, we can be looked at as “bad.” As a person who has been formerly incarcerated, I broke plenty of rules, and paid the usual price, which in my opinion usually goes double for minorities. Although my deep opinions about what good and bad people are in society are, like Piper says, “jaded,” I do see the rewards of following the rules to The Humming Room. It’s what the piece offers for following those rules that is different from what society offers, and the reason why it is art and the street is the street. Imagine if you were rewarded with artistic expression every time you didn’t run a stop sign? Society would be full of Picassos!

I have discussed aspects of The Humming Room that pertain to Conceptualism, as well as with performance and institutional critique, but I believe The Humming Room is more than that. Piper seems to use these art movements only as a way to culminate in a new way in creating contemporary art. The artist is infusing the participation of human emotion into the artwork in a way that I believe has never been done before. The 3-dimensional model of Piper's views on choices and authority seem to relate to her being a master philosopher, but since she is nowhere to be found while inside The Humming Room, whatever she intended is out of her hands once we, the audience make the choice to enter. To perceive all this from what could also be just a plain white hallway in a museum, shows not just the genius of Adrian Piper, but also her compassion, hope, and encouragement for a more artistically inclined society. If you need a simple way to quickly let out some artistic expression, meet me in The Humming Room.

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