



**Adrian Piper, *Food For The Spirit #1, 1971.***

**Adrian Piper, "Food for the Spirit: July 1971"**

**Thomas Erben Gallery, through Sat 31 (see Soho).**

**D**uring the summer of 1971, while reading *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* and otherwise "fasting, doing yoga, and isolating [herself] socially," Adrian Piper fell deeper and deeper under Kant's spell. As an antidote, whenever she began to lose her "sense of self," she would go to the mirror and photograph her nude body; it was a way to prove to herself that she did indeed exist—that she was in fact "still there."

The 14 silver gelatin prints in this show document Piper's struggle that summer. Also included in "Food for the Spirit," as the project was eventually named, is a three-ring binder filled with

smaller prints of the same photographs—along with pages ripped out of Piper's heavily annotated copy of Kant. All of the photos are a dusky silver-gray: In most of them, Piper's small form can be made out hovering in the shadows. In a few, however, she is nearly invisible, her identity "lost" to the darkness of the room.

As with most of Piper's work, "Food for the Spirit" is a lot more complicated than a simple presentation of pictures. (This is a woman, after all, whose summer reading was Kant.) For Piper, these photographs are analogous to a proof in logic, and one in which identity politics figures prominently.

Looking closely at the pages of Kant's *Critique* exhibited here, you can find a highlighted passage stating that the reality of form is lodged "not in the object itself, but in the subject to which the object appears." Later, Kant posits that objects should be viewed as "appearances" that "do not present things as they are in themselves."

For Piper, a light-skinned African-American whose work has dwelled heavily on the significance of race in our culture, Kant's words ring hauntingly true—especially since she herself is often mistaken for white. What these works demonstrate more than anything is Piper's ability to combine her own experience with Dead White Guy philosophy to examine identity on the deepest of levels.—*Martha Schwendener*