

Ur-Mutter #8:
Framing Art's Political Impotence

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ABSTRACT

KIMBERLY BOBIER: *Ur-Mutter #8*: Framing Art's Political Impotence
(Under the direction of John P. Bowles)

Adrian Piper's 1989 photomontage *Ur-Mutter #8* juxtaposes two provocative images. Both are reproduced from mass circulation periodicals that the artist adjusted to the same size and grayscale gradient. On the left is Jeff Koons's *Artforum* advertisement for his 1988-9 exhibition, *Banalities*; on the right is *New York Times* photojournalist Peter Turnley's picture of a malnourished Somali mother and her child. Turnley's somber family portrait seems jarring beside Koons's theatrical shot of himself as a schoolteacher indoctrinating a classroom of American kindergarteners. My paper explores how Piper's appropriation frames Koons's ironic critique of mainstream art institutions' exploitative practices as an affirmation of them. I argue that *Ur-Mutter #8* exposes ways in which his depiction of art's impotence diminishes the significance of art for marginalized people who must fight for images and words in order to represent themselves. Because art's political relevance varies when approached from different perspectives, I contextualize *Ur-Mutter #8*'s imagery in terms of Piper's and Koons's relationships to art establishments, art criticism, and art history during the late 1980s and early 90s. Through this analysis, I find that Koons's light treatment of social disparities suggests an aloof and privileged position whereas Piper's work appears more concerned with interrogating social insecurities. Her photomontage demonstrates that art is political because it demands that we negotiate representations with our own actions and beliefs.

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Introduction

In her photomontage *Ur-Mutter* #8, conceptual artist Adrian Piper stages a dialogue between two images, each extracted from a distinct but related discourse (Fig.1).¹ Both are reproduced from mass circulation periodicals. On the left is Jeff Koons's *Artforum* advertisement for his 1988-9 exhibition, *Banality*; on the right is *New York Times* photojournalist Peter Turnley's picture of a Somali child and woman. Turnley's grave documentation of this solitary, malnourished mother and son pair clashes with Koons's theatrical shot of himself as a schoolteacher inculcating a crowd of American schoolchildren.² The chalkboard behind him is full of covered words, but three lines legibly read: "EXPLOIT THE MASSES," "SENTIMENTALITY" and "BANALITY IS THE SAVIOR." As if in response, Piper's silk-screened phrase, "Fight or die" sits below the *Ur-Mutter* subject. Through this textual addition, Piper seemingly attributes a bold voice to a person that the western media often depicted as a victim. Turnley's photograph emphasized this victimhood, capturing the sitter in a pose that accentuates the thinness of her body,

¹A photomontage is a composite picture "formed by combining images from separate photographic sources. The term was coined by Berlin Dadaists c. 1918 and was employed by artists such as George Grosz, John Heartfield, Raoul Hausmann and Hannah Höch for images often composed from mass-produced sources such as newspapers and magazines." David Evans, "Photomontage," Grove Art Online, accessed March 28, 2012, http://www.oxfordartonline.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/subscriber/article/grove/art/T067233?q=photomontage&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit.

² Jeff Koons and Robert Rosenblum, *The Jeff Koons Handbook* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 92.

the sunken contours of her face, and her isolation within the composition. These markers of destitution – famine, fatigue, and seclusion– exemplify depictions of the concurrent Somali Revolution (1986-1992) in the American press.³ Moreover, Piper’s appropriation raises questions about the work as a rendering of helplessness. Through this lens, one might see the darkness of the woman’s body, enhanced by the high-contrast lighting, as a link to stereotypes of helpless Africans and African Americans. Re-interpreting and complicating stereotypical readings, Piper casts this mother as an individual with the courage and incentive to protest Koons’s ironic treatment of exploitation. By picturing the agency of the Somali woman through poignant imagery and text, *Ur-Mutter #8* can help viewers to recognize the humanity of other exploited subjects. As my paper will discuss, Piper’s manipulation of two photographs implies that as much as Koons’s publicity stunt critiques the corruption of mainstream art institutions, his suggestion that art is a politically feeble and exploitative tool undermines the importance of art for those who must fight for images and words in order to represent themselves.⁴

In 1989, when Piper made *Ur-Mutter #8*, she and Koons were highly prolific figures whom critics considered influential in debates about art. Despite the copious

³ The U.N. pronounced the perilous state of affairs in Somali a humanitarian crisis in 1991. Jim Naureckas, “Tragedy Made Simple: Media on the Somalia Intervention,” *FAIR: Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting* (March 1993), accessed November 6, 2011, <http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=1211>.

⁴The Director of the Adrian Piper Research Archives sent me a reproduction of *Ur-Mutter #8* because I was not able to locate one elsewhere. Aside from the image and its basic identification information, the staff at the Archives found no records of this work or its series. Through my own research, I uncovered references to the series as a whole as well as some of the individual works within it, but the exhibition history and current whereabouts of *Ur-Mutter #8* remain unknown. Director of the Adrian Piper Research Archive, e-mail message to the author, October 31, 2011.

scholarship on each artist, there is close to no literature on *Ur-Mutter #8* or on what the tensions between Piper's and Koons's dialectical positions reveal about their work. To address such queries, I will explore the artists' relationship to art institutions, art criticism, and art history during the late 1980s and early 90s in conjunction with the various contexts of *Ur-Mutter #8*'s imagery and motifs. Ultimately, I will argue that, with this photomontage, Piper problematizes Koons's devaluation of artists' intellectually and socially constructive goals, drawing attention to the ways that such devaluation sustains the myth of art's triviality. *Ur-Mutter #8* seems to use Koons's ad as an example of art's capacity to obscure societal conflicts. That said, this photomontage also appears to suggest that by subtly distancing viewers from their acculturated perceptions, art can offer alternative insights. Piper removes two mass-produced images from their contexts and her startling adaptation of them underscores some of the biases endemic to American visual culture. Moreover, her adaptation provides viewers a model for overturning such biases.

While I am concerned with how an interrogation of art's political efficacy and exclusionary functions changes when expressed from different vantage points, I am also interested in how *Ur-Mutter #8* challenges viewers to negotiate conflicting perspectives for themselves. As I broach these considerations, I want it to be clear that I do not regard *Ur-Mutter #8* in terms of binaries (Koons vs. Piper, man vs. woman, white vs. black etc.), but as a work that underscores the interrelations among disparate stances. During the late 1980s, Koons and Piper both belonged to a loose network of American art professionals who championed progressive and provocative ideas. Although their visions often diverged, individuals as distinct as Piper and

Koons worked against right-wing censorship and increasingly conservative public policies.⁵

At this time, when the freedom and funding of artists was threatened, Piper and Koons continued to test the limits of what was publicly permissible by excavating the obscenities already embedded in the everyday and its visual materials. Koons gained a reputation for broadcasting the sexual, yet sterile lure of commodity culture by enshrining new vacuums in lit vitrines and showing exaggerated pornographic images in the format of monumental paintings. As Tricia Van Eck put it, *Banality* marked “a distinct shift in scale” in Koons’s work. This collection featured heroically-sized and high-quality sculptures of cute, American kitsch figures like the Pink Panther, done in porcelain wrapped around a topless woman. Van Eck reported that, with this show, Koons magnified the sensuality and shame with which Americans endow their commercial icons (Fig.2).⁶ Piper also broached the alienating aspects of consumer society in series such as *Vanilla Nightmares* (1986-1990) and *The Mythic Being* (1972-75) both of which foreground racial stereotypes disseminated by mass-produced sources of information and entertainment (Fig.3).

By combining images from an art magazine and a newspaper, *Ur-Mutter* #8 indicates that such mainstream media only superficially represent the whole of society (including the marginalized demographics that the *Ur-Mutter* subject

⁵Wendy Steiner, *The Scandal of Pleasure: Art in the Age of Fundamentalism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 11-16.

⁶Tricia Van Eck elaborated *Banality*’s evocation of erotic desires and culturally conditioned guilt when pointing to *Stacked*, a wood sculpture of five barnyard animals suggestively piled on top of one another. She wrote: “*Stacked* echoes Koons’s insistence on pleasure when it involves sexual taboos such as pairing sexuality and innocence.” Tricia Van Eck, “Banality,” in Francesco Bonami, ed. *Jeff Koons* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 59.

embodies) and further estranges disenfranchised groups by subtly endorsing their oppression. I build on existing interpretations of the photomontage's content to argue that both Piper's and Koons's allusions to popular American culture reveal the insincerity of its democratic claims. I further elaborate upon ways in which the work's references to education and the avant-garde implicate art in this hypocrisy.

Commentators at the time of Koons's exhibition disputed whether *Banalities* criticized or glorified commercial art dealings. In the years following the exhibition, reviewers often posited Koons's bold statements about the perversity of popular and artistic expression as either an advance in critical discourse or an impediment to it. Writers that saw *Banalities* as a mockery of this discourse's enmeshment in commercial culture worried that Koons's work might delegitimize art's critical edge and transformative influence. Because Piper grappled with such critical quandaries in her artwork, art shows, and art publications, it is worth considering how *Banalities*'s reception informs her appropriation of the exhibition's ad. Whereas Piper professed that she found the show shallow and deceitful, some saw depth in Koons's deceptive ways.⁷ Indeed, Paul Wood called Koons's work "one of the few half adequate responses to humanists" who deny and hence are unequipped to deal with the inevitable bureaucratization of the artistic enterprise in a politically enfeebled climate.⁸ Rather than pursue an empathetic message, Koons imitates the ails of society (e.g. narcissism, commodity fetishism, aggressive public relations) in a cold and unforgiving manner. Wood applauded Koons for demonstrating that one can

⁷Adrian Piper, "A Paradox of Conscience: Analytic Philosophy and the Ethics of Contemporary Art Practice," *New Art Examiner* 16, no. 8 (April 1989), 31.

⁸Paul Wood, "Enantiogramme," *Oxford University Art Journal* 12, no. 2 (1989), 109.

assert agency “against such a world” by “outwitting it.”⁹ Correspondingly, in the *Artforum* shot, Koons tries to entice the journal’s supposedly educated audience by attacking and ironically aligning himself with the arrogance of these imagined readers. Posing as a self-righteous instructor, he mocks their didacticism, while making a spectacle of his own knowledge and influence.

However, as much as Wood admires the artist’s cunning, he worries that buying into Koons’s art means becoming its fool.¹⁰ Other writers, like Laurie Palmer and Peter Schjeldahl, shared these concerns. Megan Cox went even further arguing that Koons’s work was just an empty PR campaign.¹¹ Also doubting the substance of Koons’s output, art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau grouped him with a “third wave” of “postmodernist photographers” who emulated the style of first-wavers’ subversive application of the popular vernacular, but failed to interrogate it as their predecessors had.¹² In Solomon-Godeau’s opinion, the initial postmodern photographers analyzed specific codes and operations of advertising, whereas the artists such as Koons merely perpetuate “stupefied or celebratory fascination ...with the image world of commodity culture.”¹³ Such appraisals in the late 1980s reflect art critics’ aversion to work, which they believed naively sanctioned commercial forces.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Meg Cox. “Feeling Victimized? Then Strike Back: Become an Artist: Trend-Spotters Ooh and Ah When Jeff Koons Puts Basketballs in a Fish Tank,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 13, 1989, A8.

¹²Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Living with Contradictions: Critical Practices in the Age of Supply-Side Aesthetics,” *Screen* (Summer 1987), 11.

¹³Ibid., 12.

Ur-Mutter #8 spotlights the stupefaction that Koons's ad ascribes to art and in so doing suggests his lack of critical insight into art's political currency. However, Brian Wallis turned the tables on commentators such as Solomon-Godeau by asserting that Koons's work—with its “willful ambivalence,” “self-mythologization,” and most importantly, its seeming absence of criticality—is remarkable for its capacity to arrest prevailing art discourse. According to Wallis, those offended by Koons's work “resort to visceral response,” which “demonstrates an utter failure of criticism.”¹⁴ “It is surprising to discover the near-hysterical terms with which many professional art critics respond to [Koons's] work,” Wallis writes. However, when one refers to the articles by Elizabeth Hess, Rosalyn Krauss, and Adrian Piper that Wallis cites the authors responses do not come across as irrational.¹⁵ Each of these critics articulately voices her reservations about the sensational aspects of Koons's practice, fearing that his example might distort or taint more profound artistic endeavors. Finding Koons's photographs one-dimensional, Hess compared the voyeuristic effects of his sexual imagery with that of his contemporary, Cindy Sherman. Hess suggested that Koons's shots of he and his former wife in pornographic poses are mildly interesting inasmuch as they render heterosexual unions that appear both idealistic and humiliating. Yet, Hess argued that Sherman's close-ups of dismembered genitalia and body parts are decidedly more complex for they symbolize the impossibility of romance in a world where the sexual order

¹⁴ Brian Wallis, “We Don't Need Another Hero: Aspects of the Critical Reception of Jeff Koons,” in *Jeff Koons*, ed. John Caldwell et al., (San Francisco: Gilt Debossed Boards, 1992), 28.

¹⁵ When I read the aforementioned essays by Hess, Rosalyn Krauss, and Adrian Piper, I found that Wallis had decontextualized and simplified the authors' arguments. Ibid.

permits women “to be devoured like meat.”¹⁶ While Hess implied that Koons’s graphics are a simplified version of a concurrent artist’s, Krauss argued that Koons takes advantage of art historical forerunners’ revolutionary application of a commercial vocabulary. In her opinion, the Dadaists used “the media against itself,” whereas Koons deployed art as a gateway to the media.¹⁷ Both Hess and Krauss encouraged their readers to see past Koons’s eye-catching visuals and identify his oeuvre as a generic and reductive vision of sexual relations and mass media. These interpretations of Koons as a proponent of dominant culture correspond with *Ur-Mutter* #8’s intimation that his *Artforum* ad neglects the views of people who are excluded from dominant culture.

After quoting Hess and Krauss, Wallis includes a line from one of Piper’s essays, an essay that illuminates how Piper’s experience of *Banality* may have influenced *Ur-Mutter* #8. Piper wrote “A Paradox of Conscience” as Koons’s exhibition was closing. In this essay, Piper contended that *Banality* epitomizes mainstream art institutions’ “Euro-centricity,” moral corruption, and feigned self-consciousness. In her opinion, Koons succumbs to avant-garde values of transgression for transgression’s sake and in so doing derides the “other criteria by which one might evaluate a work of art, such as didactic effectiveness, social or spiritual significance or aesthetic integrity.”¹⁸ Piper noted that artists like Duchamp and Warhol involved in this avant-garde tradition surpassed its limitations by using

¹⁶Elizabeth Hess, “Sherman’s Inferno,” *Village Voice*, May 5, 1992, 107.

¹⁷Rosalyn Krauss as quoted in Paul Taylor, “The Art of P.R., and Vice Versa,” *New York Times*, October 27, 1991, 35.

¹⁸ Piper, “A Paradox of Conscience,” 31.

transgressive tactics to shed light on common aesthetic ideas and “commonplace popular culture.” In contrast, she insinuated that Koons’s avant-gardism lacks the “intellectual conscience” of these other artists because he presents the violation of intellectual principles as an end in itself.¹⁹

Ur-Mutter #8 visually expresses the deficiencies that Piper attributes to avant-garde and mainstream art trends. This work resituates Koons’s image so that viewers can think beyond its ties to press pages and galleries and contemplate whether the standards set by the ad’s art context within a mainstream art magazine defy common ethical standards—whatever those may be. With *Ur-Mutter #8*, Piper uses Koons to pry open surrounding debates about art’s purpose and practical implications. *Ur-Mutter #8*’s merger of competing worldviews is jarring, and, in this sense, the work incorporates Piper’s visceral reaction to Koons’s work. However, Piper’s piece does not signal a breakdown in criticism, but rather an inquiry into whose interests the prevailing critical ideas serve. *Ur-Mutter #8* might prompt viewers to wonder, for instance, whether Koons’s scene affirms bourgeois Americans’ privilege to ponder art and anxieties about consumerism, while people in Somali worry about starving. Do the issues of artistic representation conveyed by the *Artforum* ad distract us from more pressing world problems? Is the very existence of such philosophical discussion about art that Koons and Piper take up predicated on the suppression of poor, non-Western, and non-white people like the *Ur-Mutter* subject?

By broaching these very dilemmas, *Ur-Mutter #8* mobilizes art as a tool for raising political and moral awareness. I sympathize with Bruce Checefsky’s

¹⁹Ibid., 30-31.

proposition that the confrontational elements in Piper's work are best conceived as a means of prompting "viewers to examine their own preconceptions and prejudices."²⁰ As will be shown, Piper's approach relates to others, who, in the 1980s, saw the re-conceptualization of artistic frameworks as not only possible, but also imperative to the project of equality (racial, sexual, cultural, social etc.).

Ur-Mutter #8 motions toward these conceptual shifts by reformulating Koons's and Turnley's photographs. My first chapter investigates how the arrangement of the work draws attention to the display of privilege in Koons's ad in tandem with concurrent notions about racism, sexism, and imperialism. Reframed by Piper, Koons's image appears to undermine the seriousness of these disparities with his theatrical and ironic display. Looking at his other three promotional advertisements for *Banality* and commentary on the show, I will consider ways in which the intellectually and psychologically provocative qualities that critics attribute to his output depend on the artist's portrayal of his own privileged position. Although I go on to detail the cultural and social aspects of his privilege throughout the chapter, with a quick glance at the *Artforum* ad it is easy to tell that Koons is the only adult and most central figure in the picture. These and other signifiers indicate Koons's authority over others as he performs the role of a teacher passing on his opinions to impressionable children. This image of artistic indoctrination could be taken as a social comment on artists' tricks for seducing and brainwashing the public, but in *Ur-Mutter* figure's refusal of Koons's ideology (however ironic) demands that viewers reflect on her objection.

²⁰Bruce Checefsky, "Ohio: Adrian Piper, The College of Wooster Museum of Art Wooster." *New Art Examiner* 18, no.4 (December 1990), 45.

Her stern expression reads like a warning sign, suggesting that the ad engenders the manipulative practices it spotlights. Reinforcing these suspicions, the other artworks in Koons's *Art Magazine Ads* series allude to his collusion with the commercial art establishments that he critiques. Whereas fans praise the paradoxes in his work as clever and self-aware, *Ur-Mutter #8* implies that Koons's mockery of art's political uselessness and asymmetrical power relations is based on his privilege. By setting the *Artforum* ad on the viewers' left and Turnley's photograph on the viewer's right, Piper places Koons so that he literally turns his back on the Somali woman, as if to insinuate that he has the luxury of ignoring how these unfair dynamics encumber the disadvantaged.

It follows that chapter two explores how Piper frames Koons's insistence on art's futility as a convenient strategy for thwarting responsibility. His ad's equivocation falls apart before the *Ur-Mutter*; his photograph does not account for this woman's situation, although her impassioned words declare that his actions affect her. Koons's disregard for alternative outlooks is symptomatic of the prevailing avant-garde theories at the time. By the 1980s, some artists and art writers had begun to condemn avant-garde narratives for largely neglecting feminist and female views.²¹

Taking this line of inquiry further, artist and writer, Lorraine O'Grady claimed that

²¹Craig Owens feminist writing on narratives of postmodern art was especially influential and resembles feminist critiques of avant-gardism (including both its postmodern and non-postmodern strains). In 1989, one article in the prestigious women's studies journal *Sign* pronounced Owen's essay, "The Discourse of Others Feminist and Postmodernism," an exceptional and widely cited example of the "richness of insight into cultural phenomena that the conjunction of feminist and postmodern perspectives offers," 17. Frances E. Mascia-Lees et al., "The Postmodernist Turn in Anthropology: Cautions from a Feminist Perspective" *Signs* (Autumn, 1989), 17. Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others Feminist and Postmodernism," in ed. Hal Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983).

many avant-garde theories suppressed the perspectives of African-Americans and other ethnic minorities by relativizing different subjective frameworks. Similarly, she doubted that it was a coincidence that avant-gardes began to deny the possibility of originality just as traditionally underrepresented groups started to make headway and to popularize new ways of looking at things.²² Koons's *Artforum* ad evidences that he was cognizant of the biases of artistic and cultural traditions. For instance, he acknowledges the assimilating processes that constitute American society by focusing on a classroom, the place where children are initiated into their culture. Yet, I will argue that without pointing to the historical contingencies of these assimilationist processes, he casts this status quo of the moment as inevitable. To elaborate on this point, I later explain how Koons's own statements and those from reviewers support the notion that his work underrates the importance of the past.

In contrast, Piper's *Ur-Mutter #8* highlights the constructs and contingency of power relations by alluding to historical methods of display as well as the specific context of Turnley's picture. His black-and-white shot recalls news and ethnographic documentation of Africans, which often diminish these subjects' agency, individuality, and modernity to instead overstate their lack of material resources, stereotypically black physical features, and close connection to nature.²³ Given Westerners' prevalent misunderstandings of Africans, it is possible that the Somali woman's weary expression points to a psychological barrier between the sitter and the

²²Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," in *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action*, ed. Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer, and Arlene Raven (New York: Icon, 1994).

²³Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 65-66.

photographer. To better comprehend how the *Ur-Mutter* image inflects xenophobic attitudes in the late 1980s, I address scholarship about the portrayal of Africans in popular American mass media during the period. Dealing with the anxieties that pervade such depictions, Piper concurrently drew haunting black figures over *New York Times* articles in her *Vanilla Nightmares* series (1986-90). This body of work suggests that racist fears and fantasies underlie the propensity for images that demean black people and ignore them, as Koons appears to do in *Ur-Mutter #8*.

Ur-Mutter #8 recalls marginalized groups' struggle to gain recognition from dominant culture and art's capacity to help them. In my final section, I discuss the exclusions and restraints of American mainstream art institutions. While Piper has written about her professional obstacles that resulted from her race and sex, in 1991, writer Derek Bishton credited Piper for being one of the few African-American women to break into the American art market.²⁴ Delving into the bigotry of this market, Howardena Pindell surveyed reviews, articles, books, and curated exhibitions from 1980-88 in New York, where much of the nation's mainstream art activities were concentrated at the time. The resulting statistics illustrate that the agents of New York's art industry (mainly museums, galleries, auction houses, collectors, critics, and art magazines) formed an enclosed circle of trade that informally, but consistently ostracized people of color.²⁵ Given this backdrop, one might say that the *Ur-Mutter* series's black female subject and black female artist doubly signify an unwelcome

²⁴Bishton, "Fear of the Other," 48.

²⁵Howardena Pindell, "Art World Racism: A Documentation," *New Art Examiner* 16 (March 1989), 32-36. Originally presented at Agencies of Survival conference at Hunter College, New York City, June 1987.

presence in the galleries where the photomontage circulated. The *Ur-Mutter* character's place outside the picture plane of Koons's art exhibition ad speaks to her systematic marginalization from art venues. Read this way, *Ur-Mutter* #8 elicits reflection on how institutions co-opt art to fortify unfair structures and how art can be a means of breaking down these systems.

Ur-Mutter #8 implies that people can counter their social subordination by dismantling visual hierarchies. The proximity of Turnley's photograph and Koons's ad upsets categories of identity and representation. The pictures may denote different periodical types (general vs. artist and academic), continents (North America vs. Africa), sentiments (tragic vs. ironic and triumphal) and styles (realistic vs. theatrical), but by placing these images side by side, Piper enhances the artificiality of such divisions. These comparisons encourage the viewer to meditate on how the modes of representation that society imposes on certain demographics segregates people. To examine motives behind visual segregation, I analyze *Ur-Mutter* #5, which invokes the phobia of miscegenation by hinting at white Americans' interracial foundations. The *Ur-Mutter* motifs also functions in Piper's *Pretend* series (1990), where it recalls Americans' failure to accept their own black lineages and overcome fictional divisions among themselves. Expanding on the possibility that Piper's *Ur-Mutter* (a German term which translates to first or earth mother in English) operates as a unifying symbol of nature and culture, I touch on her relation to German ontological concepts of the *urmutter*, 1970s Earth Mother/ feminist Goddess imagery,

and the notion of Africa as the cradle of humanity.²⁶

Through its interrogation of complex social tensions and legacies, *Ur-Mutter* #8 contributes to Piper's larger project to destabilize categories of identity as well as entrenched separations between life and art. However distinct, Koons's *Artforum* ad also disrupts social barriers by blurring the realms of high and low visual culture. He troubles elite art outlets' relationship to the masses by inserting a self-promoting advertisement, reminiscent of the flashy popular advertisements already prevalent in the pages of *Artforum* journal that appealed to readers schooled in critical theory. Given Koons's and Piper's engagement with multiple cultural spheres and strata, I understand their works as socially inclusive to some degree. Each artist grapples with specialized discourses (e.g. the politics of art/ representation), but does so through widespread visual formats (e.g. advertisements or news documentation) and far-reaching themes (e.g. exploitation and racism) that a general public would likely decipher. Nevertheless, I also question how *Ur-Mutter* #8's images internalize institutional positions that limit political effectiveness. While Piper indicates that Koons's privileged and pessimistic stance re-inscribes hegemony, I contend that she overestimates the accessibility of her own artistic strategies. Thus *Ur-Mutter* #8 not only explores ideological investments in art's impotence, but also evidences how artistic conventions can lead to the unconscious perpetuation of such impotence.

Piper's photomontage urges its viewers to contemplate what it means to participate in the artistic enterprise. How do and should we identify with the various subjects and representational strategies seen in *Ur-Mutter* #8's two images? The sides

²⁶Donald C. Johanson and Kate Wong, *Lucy's Legacy: The Quest for Human Origins* (Three Rivers Press: New York, 2009), 270.

seem extreme: surrender to authoritarian exploitation like the children in Koons's ad or sacrifice everything to fight it like Piper's Somali character. By complicating these stances and eliciting viewers' unease with each, *Ur-Mutter* #8 insists that art and everyday life have political weight because both demand that we reconcile representations with our own actions and beliefs.

Chapter 1

Questioning Positions: The *Artforum* ad and the *Ur-Mutter* Image

Ur-Mutter #8 draws attention to the show of privilege in Koons's *Artforum* ad in relation to debates surrounding racism, sexism, and classism during the 1980s. In Piper's arrangement, Koons's image appears to undermine the seriousness of these inequalities with his pompous and ironic display. By treating uneven power dynamics more firmly, the *Ur-Mutter* image casts doubt on what comes across as Koons's sly approach to the issue of exploitation. In the *Artforum* ad, there is a discrepancy between his character's angelic face and the supremacist messages that this instructor presents. Does the incongruent behavior depicted here serve to mystify the terms of Koons's art and/or the social conditions surrounding them? Examining pieces from Koons's *Art Magazine Ads* as well as the artists' self-confined rhetoric, I argue that the equivocal attitude conveyed by his work functions, in part, as a means to suppress alternative perspectives and reaffirm Koons's privileged place in dominant society. As a counterpoint, the *Ur-Mutter* picture helps to reveal the biases implicit in the *Artforum* ad as well as the systems and ideologies that support them.

The *Artforum* ad exaggerates Koons's dominant position in society, but however self-conscious or self-incriminating his gesture, when compared to the *Ur-Mutter* image, Koons's affected attitude can be read as a confirmation of his high status. His

show of power against the *Ur-Mutter*'s visible lack of power is immediately apparent. The *Artforum* section of the photomontage features Koons as a smug, athletic teacher, leaning toward a crowd of school children. This view of American abundance, of multiple, well kempt and energetic kids, clashes with the neighboring shot of a solitary mother cradling her child. While the woman's pose references Western portraits of the Madonna and Christ, her dark-skinned, malnourished body recalls stereotypical renderings of African and African-American subjects.²⁷ Also playing off viewers' expectations, Koons typecasts himself as a WASP (a somewhat derogatory label that literally stands for White Anglo-Saxon Protestant).²⁸ Again, the contrast between Koons's appearance and other subjects' distinguishes his role: a child with Asian facial features highlights the artist's whiteness; a white girl to his left accentuates his masculinity; and a white boy, the student closest, but still beneath Koons, emphasizes the adult artist's high standing.

Although this ad, like the *Ur-Mutter* picture, reworks visual stereotypes, Piper's and Koons's appropriations convey different attitudes. Whereas the Somali woman imparts gravity through her furrowed brows, locked lips, and direct stare out at the viewer, Koons's gentle smile and upward gaze expresses levity. Imitating the neoclassical pose for divine inspiration, he looks to the right, beyond the picture plane and the young group clamoring for his attention. This man's affiliation with absolute

²⁷Art historian Jennifer González and art writer Derek Bishton both call the *Ur-Mutter* image an appropriated stereotype of poor black people. Derek Bishton, "Fear of the Other: Adrian Piper at the Ikon," *Creative Camera* 5 (Feb/Mar 1992), 48. Jennifer A. González, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2008), 178.

²⁸Irving Lewis Allen, "WASP—From Sociological Concept to Epithet," in *Ethnicity* 2 (1975), 154.

authority is furthered by the phrases on the chalkboard behind him: “EXPLOIT THE MASSES,” “SENTIMENTALITY” and “BANALITY IS THE SAVIOR.” These lines invoke theorists like Karl Marx and Jean Baudrillard who respectively warned against the suppression of capitalist and consumer systems. In the ad, this text condemns a supposedly innocent elementary school setting and a fashionable art magazine for participating in these capitalist and consumerist structures. The picture further prompts conflicted emotions because Koons’s chalky messages complicate *Artforum* readers’ relationship to dominant culture. Do the messages accuse *Artforum* readers of disavowing the mass culture of the middle and working classes to pursue high culture? Or maybe the suggestion is that mass culture has defeated elitist art canons? In either case, it would be hard to say whether the excessiveness of the scene is supposed to make readers laugh at their fervor for art or feel mortified. These are open questions that Koons leaves for his audience to negotiate.

Ur-Mutter #8’s text addresses such dilemmas of audience complicity with a more definitive statement: “Fight or die.”²⁹ Silk-stenciled in red against gray tones and below the withering mother and child, this phrase interjects a sense of urgency. When looking at the *Ur-Mutter* subject, exploitive forces (imperialism, racism, sexism, etc.) particular to her experience do not come across as trivial, sentimental, or banal, but

²⁹Piper’s incorporation of text here recalls contemporary Barbara Kruger in that both artists’ use the written language as a visual element. Alexander Alberro claims that in Kruger’s appropriations, text’s direct address to the viewer reveals that art’s meaning relies on its viewer’s subjective position in relation to a given artwork’s cultural codes as well as his or her relation to the identity that these codes represent. I conceive the *Ur-Mutter #8*’s phrase “fight or die” to underscore the subjectivity of interpretation in a similar way. Alexander Alberro, “Picturing Relations: Images, Text, and Social Engagement,” in Alexander Alberro, Martha Gever, Miwon Kwon, and Carol Squiers (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2010), 195, 199.

life threatening. Koons, located in a separate section of Piper's work, appears detached from these considerations. His distance and sense of ease seem reliant on the authority and material comforts that he appears to possess. Perhaps he can afford to treat the issue of discrimination lightly in a way that the *Ur-Mutter* cannot. His picture hints at complex power dynamics by implicating his subjects and audiences in the corruption of education, art, and consumerism, but the ad does not acknowledge how such problems create significant disadvantages for less privileged groups. On the other hand, Piper's appropriation alludes to the different consequences of discrimination for different people and reveals viewers' personal responsibility for consuming or contesting it. This photograph of a real person suffering is serious, and, in its seriousness, the shot rejects the indecisiveness evoked by the *Artforum* picture. Thus, Piper's juxtaposition of magazine cutouts suggests that even if Koons's ad mounts a critique on exploitation, his apparent dismissal of the exploited is a pretense worth fighting.

I contend that Piper's incorporation of Koons's work in *Ur Mutter #8* disputes the morality of the ambivalent and distanced attitude toward societal injustice evident in his *Artforum* ad. This attitude appears especially dubious, when Koons's sly and evasive posturing works in his favor. In the *Artforum* ad, the artist flaunts his personal profit. Furthermore, since the ad's composition situates the magazine readers among the loyal students whom Koons manipulates, the artist signals that he antagonizes his audiences as a means of profit (Fig.4). Discussing Koons's engagement with wealthy audiences, Peter Schjeldahl explained that Koons targets "a new oligarchy which, after years of throwing money at art of all sorts, at last has in Koons a major artist

specifically attuned to its finer feelings: lust for possessions and anxiety about the lower classes.”³⁰ However, more than attacking a singular demographic, it seems that Koons targets aloof mentalities by quoting the high-minded ideals and art historical traditions that art professionals and patrons employ to justify what they do. Yet Koons’s participation in these educated and/or moneyed art circles is ironic because he broadcasts their very superficiality. Literary scholar Linda Hutcheon theorized irony as an interpretive move; the ironic assertion explicitly states one meaning, but implies an additional and different attitude toward what is said.³¹ In the case of the *Artforum ad*, irony yields uncertain ideological implications because the nature of the connection between what Koons puts forth and his attitude toward it is difficult to pin down. As mentioned earlier, critics disputed whether his manner was smart and acerbic (as Paul Wood and Brian Wallis inferred) or merely callous (as Megan Cox and Rosalind Krauss decided). Given the polemics surrounding Koons, Alison Pearlman, author of *Unpacking Art of the 1980s*, cited him as one of the most ironic and opaque artists from the decade. She described Koons’s evasive mentality by pointing to the combination of “self-aggrandizing comparisons, exaggerated claims to mass communication and appeal, and unqualified affirmations of capitalism that pervade his art and statements.”³² Pearlman was among many art professionals who insisted on the arrogant allusions in Koons’s work as well as the indecipherability of

³⁰Peter Schjeldahl, “Jeff Koons,” in *The ‘7 Days’ Art Columns 1988-90* (Great Barrington, Mass.: The Figures, 1990), 84.

³¹Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge: The Theory of Politics of Irony* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 11.

³²Alison Pearlman, *Unpacking Art of the 1980s* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 143.

his intent. Situating hers as a common sentiment, she concluded: “Jeff Koons—bullshit artist or sincere simpleton? His deadpan presentation keeps even the most jaded among us guessing.”³³

Ur-Mutter #8’s message also keeps viewers guessing; the means of fighting exploitation and what it means to “fight” are left unspecified. Yet by meeting Koons ambivalent depiction with her uncompromising *Ur-Mutter* character, Piper signals her own uncompromising rejection of social inequities. The impression that the artist takes a firm stance in *Ur-Mutter #8* corresponds with writing on Piper at the time. In the late 80s and early 90s, critics were quick to note an anti-racist thrust in her work. Bishton called her project a relentless attempt to “dismantl[e] racism,”³⁴ while Jo-Ann Lewis understood Piper’s techniques as, “convey[ing] a palpable sense of entrapment felt by black people.”³⁵ Later reflecting on Piper’s career, art historian John P. Bowles observed that some scholars and reviewers were more dismissive of her methods and “frequently characterize[d] Piper as an angry black woman.”³⁶ Yet, even as writers interpreted the impetus and effects of her practice differently, the literature indicates that there was more or less a critical consensus on Piper’s ethical aims.³⁷

³³Ibid.

³⁴Derek Bishton, “Fear of the Other: Adrian Piper at the Ikon.” *Creative Camera* 5 (February/March 1992), 4.

³⁵ Jo-Ann Lewis, “Images that Get under the Skin: Artist Adrian Piper, Fighting Racism with 3 Exhibits,” *The Washington Post*, June 22, 1991, G5.

³⁶John P. Bowles. *Adrian Piper: Race, Gender, and Embodiment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.

³⁷If there is a census on Koons’s ethical stance, it would be based on the widespread notion that he upsets established moral codes. In the 2011 edition of the survey text, *Art Since 1900* one finds his name under the glossary’s definition for anomie: a condition in which “the fundamental contracts of social ethics that had traditionally regulated the interaction among

While Piper's *Ur-Mutter* #8 underscores the absence of scruples and presence of privilege in the *Artforum* ad, her critique can also be read in the context of the series to which the ad belongs. The *Artforum* image is just one of four 1988 promotions that Koons published for *Banalität*. The three other *Art Magazine* ads debuted in *Art News*, *Art in America*, and *Flash Art* (Fig.5, 6, 7). In each case, the artist ironically acts out a character whose power depends on the subjugation of others. Along with his role as teacher in this series, Koons plays a gentleman in a tropical wonderland beside seals-turned servers, a debonair playboy attended by bikini-clad women, and a "male chauvinist pig" sandwiched between two actual swine.³⁸ Laura Cottingham reads these images as examples of "art that legitimizes the power relations of Euro-derivative male domination." For her, the derogatory subtext of the series outweighs any nuance or humor it elicits. When describing Koons's fanciful jungle scene of himself lounging in front of a cabana, Cottingham argues, "Koons is constructed as the 'master,' perhaps the king of a tropical paradise; the seals are stand-ins for (black) slaves."³⁹ In my opinion, it is unclear whether this connection to the historical enslavement of Africans and African Americans is deliberate on Koons's part;

subjects, and between subjects and the state, have been canceled... typical examples could be found in the overall attitudes of capitalist neo-liberalism that has systematically dismantled fundamental social institutions such as education, healthcare and the elementary political processes of participation and representation." While *Artforum* ad evokes this collapse of social contracts in multiple and complex ways, it pronounces the degradation of democratic participation and representation at the level of education. Hal Foster et al. *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, second edition, vol. 2 1945-2010 (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2011), 783.

³⁸Laura Cottingham, *Seeing through the Seventies: Essays on Feminism and Art (Critical Voices in Art, Theory and Culture)* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: G&B Arts International, 2000), 58.

³⁹Ibid.

furthermore, this series is not as clear-cut as Cottingham might suppose.

Nevertheless, her analysis supports my contention that *Art Magazine Ads* dramatizes the theme of leisure from the vantage point of white male supremacy. Because Koons does so without addressing the implicit side of inferiority where he places children, women, and animals, his work seems to snub their alternative views.

The excessive presentations of supremacy in *Art Magazine Ads* implies that they are tongue-in-cheek; however, this playful quality in Koons's art can also be seen as a tactic for warding off alternative perspectives and outside critique. Although in the series, the artist mocks his influential status, he neglects to interrogate it. Koons's heavy-handedness is ironic, but the exuberance of his artificial props and candy-colored settings appear to celebrate, just as much as they meditate on, the shallowness and commercialism of his career. Commenting on the self-incriminating content in these photographs, Koons told one reviewer, "I wanted to debase myself, and call myself a pig, before the viewer had a chance to."⁴⁰ Here, the artist seems proud of his reputation for being a chauvinist. Even with his ironic and equivocal ways in mind, with this remark Koons suggests that his insulting gestures are forgivable and perhaps impressive because he makes fun of himself for such vulgar conduct. In foregrounding his culpability, Koons seeks to first attract, but ultimately divert scorn. Addressing his propensity for taunting approaches, Annette Huse wrote, "Koons seems to take an almost larcenous pleasure in, for instance, pre-empting anticipated criticism... Yet inherent in his type of humor is a subliminal aggressiveness that

⁴⁰Jeff Koons and Robert Rosenblum, *The Jeff Koons Handbook* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 90.

permeates his work...”⁴¹ Koons’s defensive slant appeals to hostility over sensitivity, thereby detracting from a mindful confrontation with the taboo topics in *Art Magazine Ads* (e.g. xenophobia, racism, and sexism). More than grappling with these topics, he summons them to offend and problematize the sensibilities of the snooty readers whom he imagines. Arguably, in deflecting culpability onto audiences, Koons illustrates his ability to wield blame and escape his responsibilities. Every detail in the classroom looks carefully orchestrated: the alphabet bordering the maxims on the board, the spotlight on Koons face. Nevertheless, it is almost as if a sincere tinge of triumph underlies the teacher’s rehearsed smile.

Before addressing how *Ur-Mutter #8* draws attention to Koons’s underhanded methods, it is necessary to discern the self-contained quality that typifies his style. Just as critics commented on Koons’s defensive strategies, others elaborated on the ways in which the staging of his work controls viewers’ interactions with it. Laurie Palmer described this sway in the *Banality* exhibition hosted by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago:

[T]he artist’s articulate explanations—offered on videotape in the gallery’s videotape...surround each piece like giftwrap...The result, in this case, is work with a perfect pedigree but little potential for engagement beyond the bounds of its self-defined terms. There is no room left for the audience; its position is too neatly and articulately circumscribed.⁴²

The writing on the blackboard in the *Artforum* ad operates similarly in that it encourages certain associations with the scene (Marx, the art market, religion,

⁴¹Annette Husch, “Archetypes for Survival. Or, How Art Can Comfort.” In Annette Husch, ed. *Jeff Koons, Celebration* (Berlin: Staatliche Museen, 2008), 102.

⁴²Laurie Palmer, “Chicago: Jeff Koons: Museum of Contemporary Art,” *Artforum* 27, October 1988, 153.

consumerism etc.) and entangles these associations, binding them together so tightly that viewers are hard-pressed if they dare to take apart the artist's construction.

Michael Brenson noted that Koons's objects physically embody the artist's calculated and narrow rhetoric. Brenson pointed to the high production value of his sculptures and their over-wrought yet smooth surfaces. Although Koons commissions master Italian artisans to craft his three-dimensional projects, the invisibility of the human touch in such works, Brenson claims, speaks to "the lack of interpersonal and physical contact in mass-media culture, where people are encouraged or compelled to invest their desire in images rather than in the weight of actual people and things."⁴³ This dehumanized aspect of Koons's figurines seems to project a sense of finality or even death. Articles often cite this opinion with regards to his life-sized ceramic of Michael Jackson. A Sotheby's catalog, for instance, touts this white and gold sculpture for its striking ghostliness and grandiosity.⁴⁴ In keeping with most of Koons's output, *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* (1988) infuses the common imagery of Pop art with the cool precision of Minimalism.⁴⁵ The glossy sheen of Koons's *Artforum* ad in the journal and the image's choreographed nature also recalls these artistic influences, while underscoring the ad's purpose as a commercial product itself. Brenson's analogy between the harshness of consumer culture and Koons's

⁴³Michael Brenson, "Shifting Image," *New York Times*, December 2, 1988, C22.

⁴⁴Alison M. Gingeras, "Michael Jackson and Bubbles by Jeff Koons," in Sotheby's, *Michael Jackson and Bubbles by Jeff Koons* (New York: Sotheby's, 2001), 12-14.

⁴⁵According to Francesco Bonami, art commentators have frequently noted that Koons's work "mixes the rigor of minimalism with the superficiality of pop art." Bonami goes on to say that "some took the short cut and called Koons's art 'post-art' but this could be as much 'post-pop' as 'post-minimalism.'" Francesco Bonami, "Koons 'R' US," in *Jeff Koons*, ed., Francesco Bonami (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 12.

work emerges here with Koons's body language, which betrays an absence of intimacy. Gazing upward, he blatantly ignores the students whose raised hands reach out toward him. If the *Artforum* ad's function as an ad contributes to its self defined terms, the picture looks all the more closed off when one notices how it restrains human interaction among its subjects and with its audiences.

At best these restrains can be taken as critical or humorous commentary and, at worst, as uncritical and oppressive; *Ur-Mutter* #8 prompts the latter interpretation. Piper's appropriation strips the *Artforum* image of its former sleekness, as if to redirect focus on the ad's disturbing narrative. In *Ur-Mutter* #8, Koons's once shiny and colorful photograph re-emerges as a black-and-white picture on matte paper. Additionally, the work is no longer sealed in a sponsor's magazine, but set beside an image that talks back to it—verbally and visually. While the opposition declared by the *Ur-Mutter*'s words may be evident, the main components of this image can also be construed as a means of protest because they represent things that Koons's classroom shuts out: interpersonal bonds, poverty, and the outdoors. Whereas Koons appears to maintain a physical and psychological distance from his children, the *Ur-Mutter* holds her son as he clings to her chest. The sparse clothing and thin bodies of this pair implies a lack of resources. Similarly, the mother and son seem to lack shelter, given the blur of vertical poles (possibly façades or trees) behind them and the solid formation on which they sit (a street or a stump). In contrast, Koons's setting includes nothing of the outdoors; this image shows not so much as a window. His composition signals that onlookers have nowhere to go, no agency; backs of heads in the foreground locate viewers in the crowd of students and below Koons's hovering

figure. Such indications of entrapment become especially pronounced when next to the open expanse of the *Ur-Mutter*'s background. With the dynamics between the two sections (one portraying social detainment and the other displacement) help account for the photomontage's jarring effect.

Furthermore, a troubling narrative unfolds when one considers how the discrepancies between the *Artforum* ad from the *Ur-Mutter* image evoke socialization processes that confine young inductees and teach them bourgeois norms, but exclude people and things that deviate from these norms. Indeed, Piper's arrangement sets up the Somali mother as an outcast and because the woman's body is bigger than Koons's classroom, she could not fit into it she tried. But she does not try; her seated pose insinuates that she is both unable and unwilling to enter his domain. Whereas the initial *Artforum* ad subtly omits dissenting perspectives, the *Ur-Mutter*'s added presence makes Koons's negation appear obvious and forced. In *Ur Mutter* #8, this photograph of a relatively large Somali woman is like the elephant in the room and Piper places Koons just inches away from this subject so that his turn to the opposite direction conveys the artist's refusal to acknowledge her.

Peter Schjeldahl likens Koons cold and sterile sensibility to that of the artist's professed idol, Michael Jackson: "like MJ whom he admires, [Koons] has the Gloved One's aura of naïve decadence down cold, and he gives hints of similar don't-touch-me phobias about germs, dirt, and other sorts of imperfection, such as poverty and sex."⁴⁶ Yet, this impulse to retract from social hardships and the people experiencing them was not unique to Koons or his heroes, but was, as many art critics noticed, a

⁴⁶Schjeldahl, "Jeff Koons," 82.

widespread phenomenon in the 1980s. During this period, the Reagan administration subsidized development initiatives for the wealthy, while cutting public funding and restricting welfare programs, thrusting more than five million working families into official poverty as a result.⁴⁷ In their 1984 essay, “The Fine Art of Gentrification,” Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan argued that art businesses supported national inequities, by contributing to the white-collar (and white people) takeover of blue-collar American cities. Using the East Village, one of New York City’s poorest neighbors, as a contemporary case study, the authors discussed how those involved in the growing art scene here took advantage of the area’s “bohemian and sensationalist” connotations, while driving out former residents.⁴⁸ Because Koons launched his career at this place and time, he would have been a part of these shifting demographics. He participated in East Village exhibitions such as *The New* (1980) at the New Museum of Contemporary Art; *Time after Time* (1986) at the Diane Brown Gallery (since relocated); and *Jeff Koons* (1985) at International with Monument.⁴⁹ Although artists, dealers, and the art press hailed the area a “New Frontier,” Craig Owens saw the optimistic reactions as evidence of the New York art community’s alliance with the marketplace that they claimed to defy.⁵⁰ Koons points to a related

⁴⁷Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan, “The Fine Art of Gentrification,” *October* 31 (Winter 1984), 95.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 104-5.

⁴⁹Eugene Candau, “Exhibition History and Bibliography,” in *Jeff Koons*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, ed. John Caldwell et al (San Francisco: Gilt Debossed Boards, 1992) 123-131.

⁵⁰Craig Owens, “The Commentary: The Problem with Puerilism,” *Art in America* 72, no. 6, (Summer 1984), 162-163.

contradiction in his *Artforum* ad by highlighting how supposedly oppositional art subcultures have surrendered to the dominant culture. To this end, he ironically fashions himself an art dictator and the audience his disciples. Yet Koons's critique does not come across as wholly oppositional either. The ad's rendering of obedient and dapper children does not help audiences visualize the detriments caused by imbalanced social systems. Like this cheery sight, the confusing ideological messages on Koons's blackboard obscure the dire issue of exploitation. On the other hand, Piper gives exploited populations a human face through the visage of the *Ur-Mutter*. This is not to say that Koons was instrumental in consolidating national power structures or that Piper was exempt from participating in them, but rather that Piper's work dares viewers to see society's untouchables, whereas Koons treats these people just as invisible as governmental and artistic institutions did.

Moreover, by making a spectacle of his success with the art establishment in his work, Koons—a WASP—gives the impression of both benefiting from and promoting mainstream America's propensity for what Cottingham deems “straight white male centrality.”⁵¹ Cottingham went as far as to align Koons's work with a resurgence of sexist approaches to art. When accounting for his rise to fame, she wrote:

Since the mid-eighties, a period when a number of American women artists began to accept the institutional laurels of super star status, there has been a backlash of visibly misogynist art produced and shown in New York, and rewarded by the most prestigious collectors, galleries, and museum exhibitions.⁵²

⁵¹ Cottingham, *Seeing through the Seventies*, 57.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 61.

Also noting the conformist and inflated character of Koons's art, Solomon-Godeau situated it in the context of an expanding contemporary art market whose newly initiated art dealers, crop of collectors, and mammoth corporations diminished the revolutionary spirit that had characterized prior avant-garde art.⁵³ Pursuing this line of inquiry, Paul Taylor discussed the shifting relationships between artists and the Western commercial market throughout the twentieth century. In his 1991 essay, Taylor explained that, "Originally, mixing art with public relations was a way to circumvent the elitism of the art world," but by Koons's time artists' business dealings served as "testimony to the profitable convergence of post-modernist irony and aggressive marketing. In turn, for the first time, the biggest public relation firms began to take on artists as clients."⁵⁴ Koons, a former stockbroker, excelled at these business ploys. He purchased advertising space for himself in magazines, a technique becoming increasingly popular among artists. While his *Artforum* ad expresses a kind of shamelessness, it also marks new standards of brazenness, or in other words, it illustrates that artists' commercial ambitions and collusions had reached new heights in the 1980s.

The *Ur-Mutter #8* parallels these competitive and money-driven impulses with white male domination. In the *Artforum* ad, the artist portrays himself as an influential artist dramatizing this privilege to supposedly garner even more attention and patronage. Piper documents her distaste for this unabashedly egotistical approach in her photomontage and elsewhere. After attending Koons's *Banality* exhibition, she

⁵³ Abigail Solomon Godeau, "Living with Contradictions: Critical Practices in the Age of Supply-Side Aesthetics," *Screen* (Summer 1987), 4, 16.

⁵⁴ Paul Taylor, "The Art of P.R., and Vice Versa." *New York Times*, October 27, 1991, 35.

published an article detailing how his practice represents “the greed, gluttony, contempt, and self-hatred that so much contemporary Eurocentric artmaking cultivates as virtues.”⁵⁵ Given this background, Piper’s photomontage can be understood as an attempt to grapple with the conventions of European art that she ascribes to sexist, racist, and classist premises.⁵⁶ Having studied ways in which *Ur-Mutter #8* reworks Koons’s ad to bring out the potential prejudice that might underlie it, in my next chapter, I describe and unpack discourse about what Piper calls “Eurocentric” conventions in the 1980s. In effect, Piper’s appropriation implies that Koons secures his authority by suppressing perspectives and people that challenge his claim to privilege.

⁵⁵Piper, “A Paradox of Conscience,” 29.

⁵⁶Piper has stated elsewhere that in the United States, the mainstream art historical canon imposes “an Eurocentric, Christian, heterosexual male ethos on all of us in order to maintain a uniquely American identity against the incursion of other.” Piper, “The Triple Negation of Colored Women Artists” published in catalog *Next Generation: Southern Black Aesthetic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1990), 161.

Chapter 2

Relativizing and Reclaiming Subjectivity

Ur-Mutter #8 reframes Koons's ad's show of political futility and disregard for subjectivities apart from his own as a convenient strategy for denying social responsibility and differences. Viewers might apply the *Artforum* ad's moral and critical confusion to their own experiences, but the work's equivocalness falls apart before the *Ur-Mutter* subject. As employed by Piper, this subject is a marker of difference. On the one hand, she stands for those who are alienated from a culture of consumerism and Western art. On the other, her alienation confirms that she has a relationship to these discourses; her alternative view menaces them. Wishing to disentangle this relationship, Adrian Piper matches the *Ur-Mutter* with the *Artforum* ad to scrutinize the threat of alterity and those threatened by it. In this chapter, I describe how Jeff Koons's subversive ad rests on avant-garde norms, which the *Ur-Mutter* figure casts as patriarchal and Eurocentric. The *Artforum* picture universalizes these avant-garde views, by relativizing social positions and de-historicizing contemporary social hierarchies. Throughout this discussion, I consider how *Ur-Mutter #8* denaturalizes dominant artistic conventions through its allusions to the historical processes, stereotypes, and repressed subjectivities that Koons's work diminishes.

The *Ur-Mutter* character exposes the problematic implications of the indifference conveyed in Koons's ad. While the character insists on her visibility and asserts her voice, the *Artforum* ad seems to reject individuality, leveling the differences of its subjects, audiences, and sources. Koons proposition, "Banality is the Savior" is no doubt extravagant and exceeds literal readings. However, the theme of accepting banality and homogeneity underpins a great portion of his work, as art critics noted at the time. For example, Brian Wallis said this much when positing Koons's deployment of visual conventions as an attempt to negate the "belief in originality of individual creative expression and substitute the notion that all images are merely composites of recoded iterations of preexisting forms."⁵⁷ Koons's elementary schoolroom can be thought of as a breeding ground for hegemony. Despite subtle variations among them, the students appear to be iterations of one another; fractured bodies, raising their right hands in unison. Perhaps the picture pays tribute to conformity as the happy faces of the teacher and his pupils infer a joy in perpetuating common convictions as well as the uselessness of questioning authority.

Cynicism and neglect of alternative outlooks in Koons's ad is emblematic of late neo-avant-garde art. During the late 1980s and 1990s, art critics and historians aligned Koons's practice with these aspects of the neo-avant-garde.⁵⁸ A brief

⁵⁷Brian Wallis, "We Don't Need Another Hero: Aspects of the Critical Reception of Jeff Koons," in *Jeff Koons*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, ed. John Caldwell et al. (San Francisco: Gilt Debossed Boards, 1992), 27.

⁵⁸German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk describes modern cynicism as a post-industrial, post-Enlightenment mentality, held by people who recognize the practical failings of their societal ideologies, but continue to work in service of these ideologies. While this 'enlightened false consciousness,' results in a dismal worldview, Sloterdijk identifies a life-affirming alternative, Kynicism, which still rejects institutionalized ideals, but operates outside of them and is characteristically cheeky. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael

overview of the various iterations of avant-gardism illuminates his place within narratives of twentieth-century western art as well as Piper's objections to such accounts. In the 1960s, Peter Burger promoted the concept of the historical avant-garde, a collection of revolutionary artists who emerged around World War I. As Johanne Lamoureux put it, in Burger's mind, these artists strove "to dissolve the boundaries between art and practical life, to attack the institution of art and artistic autonomy."⁵⁹ Hal Foster distinguished two phases of avant-gardism that followed the first wave: one during the 1950s when artists aimed to restore the historical avant-garde's practices and another ongoing movement in progress since the 1960s. In Foster's opinion, the latter type challenges the optimism and originality ascribed to the historical avant-garde and points to the institutionalism of avant-gardism itself.⁶⁰

Koons's 1989 ad mimics the avant-garde's grandiose claims of revolution by skeptically reworking them. As discussed in Chapter 1, the confining composition and rhetorical cues here render cultural life as imprisonment rather than liberation. The image suits Foster's model inasmuch as the picture upends bohemian, political, and didactic approaches to art that characterized the avant-garde from previous

Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). Hal Foster somewhat merged the separate defeatist and cheeky mentalities when he talked about Koons's aesthetic as one "of cynical reason." Hal Foster, "The Art of Cynical Reason," in *Return to the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1996), 124. Though Koons critics' understandings of cynicism likely varied, Anthony Haden-Guest reported that the artist was "routinely attacked as a cynic." Anthony Haden-Guest, "the Track of the 'S' Word: A Reporter's Notes," in *Sticky Sublime*, ed. Bill Beckley (New York: Allworth Press, 2001), 54.

⁵⁹Johanne Lamoureux, "Avant-Garde: A Historiography of a Critical Concept," in *A Companion to Art since 1945*, ed. Amelia Jones (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 202.

⁶⁰Foster, "Who's Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?" in Foster, *Return to the Real*, 11.

decades. Unlike bohemian promotions of the unconventional and progressive reform, this picture accentuates conformity, by staging a scene in which children obey their elder and copy their peers' body language. Similarly, by showing politically charged phrases on the board and the schoolroom setting as instruments of conformity, Koons seems to deride progressive associations with political and educational engagement.

German artist and a former professor at the Dusseldorf Academy of Art, Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) was a famous advocate of such engagement. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Beuys toured universities and art museums, expounding on his social and cosmic philosophies.⁶¹ In content and form, the *Artforum* ad bears a resemblance to documentation of Beuys's lectures. Photographs of these events, like Koons's image, show a charismatic man with chalk in hand, surrounded by an animated audience, all placed in front of blackboards (Fig.8). Beuys saved over 100 of these boards, which now circulate as coveted art objects, preserving his lessons.⁶² MoMA PS1 owns one such object, *Untitled (Sun State)* and the museum's caption specifies that for Beuys, the scribbled words, graphs, and sun covering the board operate "as a kind of astrological chart embodying his ideas of the ideal state, in which democratic principles inform cultural life (freedom), law (equality), and economics (fraternity)" (Fig.9).⁶³ Koons's ad hits on similar themes, but in a

⁶¹Volker Harlan, "Art at the threshold," in Joseph Beuys and Volker Harlan, *What is art? : A conversation with Joseph Beuys*, trans. Mathew Barton and Shelley Sacks, (East Sussex: Clairview, 2004), 105.

⁶² Joan Rothfuss, "Madrid Paris: Joseph Beuys," *Burlington Magazine* 136, no. 1095 (June 1994), 401.

⁶³MoMA, "Joseph Beuys. *Untitled (Sun State)*," accessed February 3, 2012, http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=36537.

decidedly cynical way. Whereas Beuys envisions culture as a liberating apparatus, Koons implies that its arbiters are tyrants. As a teacher, Koons inflicts harsh messages on impressionable kindergarteners who appear locked into his circle as they huddle around him, creating a human barricade. Reinforcing this sense of constraint, the visual hierarchy depicts a law of inequity, by situating Koons, a white, adult male, on top of the composition and placing the non-Europeans, females, and young at the bottom. These schoolchildren vie for Koons's attention, for distinction in the midst of a crowd. If there is a paradigm of economics here, it is a competitive system of exchange rather than a fraternal one. Moreover, Koons's crude message to "exploit the masses" comes across as a jab at liberals' talk of social conscience or artists' idealistic claims about working for the common good.

Whether or not Koons consciously references Beuys, he discredits the belief in art as activism, education, and innovation instead hinting that capitalist consumerism absorbs not only art, but everything. The fate of Beuys's work somewhat illustrates this point; his radical lectures are now bought, sold, and displayed in the form of his blackboards, which, in a sense, have become embalmed and iconic traces of protest. Whereas Beuys's meant to oppose institutions and used art as a political platform (e.g. rallying his students to create the German Student Party), Koons's art leverages institutional and commercial modes.⁶⁴ He included his publicity work like the *Art Magazine Ads* in museum catalogs and retrospectives as artwork, while critics talk about his actual exhibitions as media extravaganzas that catered to the popular press

⁶⁴Rothfuss, "Madrid Paris: Joseph Beuys," 401.

and art market.⁶⁵ As previously noted, Koons is known for expressing the dominance of commodity culture, the futility of resisting it, and the rewards this culture reaps for those willing to embrace and manipulate it. David Daniels, for one, talked about how *Banalities* metaphorically put visitors' commercial possessions on pedestals to force people to reconsider feelings of shame toward consumerism and yield to its temptations. The critic concluded that Koons's game involves mounting "pop sentimentality in places where we expect to find art—and profiting handsomely from it."⁶⁶ Taking Koons's strategies into account, Foster pronounced the artist's brand of neo-avant-gardism "triumphal determinism."⁶⁷ While this title seems appropriate, Foster puts it forth as a strain within an artistic genealogy and does not interrogate its underlying sociological bias. By celebrating the status quo's fixed nature, Koons's triumphal determinism operates as a kind of evolutionary determinism, which justifies some groups' advantages and others' disadvantages. In this respect, the triumphal messages that Koons's works communicate are aimed at people already benefiting from the ideals and the white, middle class lifestyle that consumer culture represents.

Piper's piece insinuates that Koons's art does not have the same victorious resonance for viewers who do not participate in the white middle class. *Ur-Mutter* #8 suggests that by positing dominant culture as the determining factor of art and identity, neo-avant-garde theories undercut those perspectives traditionally omitted

⁶⁵Solomon-Godeau, "Living with Contradictions: Critical Practices in the Age of Supply-Side Aesthetics," *Screen* (Summer 1987), 4.

⁶⁶David Daniel, "Jeff Koons," *Art & Antiques* 6, no. 3 (March 1989), 38.

⁶⁷Foster, "The Art of Cynical Reason," 114-116.

from dominant culture. Piper's inclusion of the Somali woman's picture suggests that consumerist systems and the discourses around them ostracize her. The sitter's pictorial space constitutes a world apart from Koons's classroom. The traces of community, technology, modern education, and commercial life in the *Artforum* ad are absent from her portrait. In addition to this contrast, the negative space enveloping the mother contributes to the impression of her seclusion. Furthermore, the photograph's cropping obscures other signs of life behind the woman, thereby casting her as an image of dispossession. Yet, whatever the sitter's actual circumstances, her photograph is a product of technology and consumed by the readers of the *New York Times* where Piper saw it.

The Somali woman's appearance in the newspaper reflects the tendency of the Western mainstream to represent non-Westerners' presence, but not their contexts or views. Michele Wallis found that proponents of historic and contemporary avant-gardism share this bias, when she commented on their "inability to take into account anything but the production of European-descended artists and critics."⁶⁸ Piper went further, arguing that these discursive blind spots have been deliberate. Her treatment of Koons's ad seems to connect him with what she dubbed, "the disingenuous Euroethnic postmodern [artist's] claim that there is no truth about anything" as a tactic for warding off "objective testimony of the truth of prejudice, repression, and

⁶⁸Michele Wallace, "Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Problem of the Visual Afro-American Culture," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), 39-50.

exclusion.”⁶⁹ Piper suggested that typical postmodern artists who subscribe to Eurocentric ideologies and whose work champions life’s ambiguities (moral and otherwise) do not earnestly believe that all ideas and situations are relative or irrational. Instead, (consciously or unconsciously) they feign this belief in order to trivialize structural inequities and to justify the discriminatory conventions that their work maintains. Piper indicates that if people perceive these postmodernist artists’ practices as bigoted, the concept that definitive truth is impossible gives said artists ground to reject such perceptions as merely subjective opinions. Without delving into postmodern art, its intersections with the neo-avant-gardism, or Koons’s affiliation with both categories, here it is sufficient to say that Piper’s objections to postmodern art’s Eurocentric leanings correspond to critiques of avant-gardes posed by scholars – especially those of feminist thought and African-American art and culture– who hold that avant-gardes have programmatically diminished marginalized perspectives.⁷⁰

Overturning the subordination of such perspectives, Piper’s appropriation of the *Ur-Mutter* frustrates depictions of women’s subservience such as those seen in Koons’s *Art Magazine Ads* and corresponding avant-garde imagery. In his *Art Magazine Ads*, Koons personifies the heterosexual masculine actor, presenting himself as both the visual focal point and the figure upon which all other subjects’ actions depend. Yet, whereas his *Art in America* ad shows scantily clad women waiting on Koons and the *Artforum* ad a girl fawning over him, *Ur-Mutter* #8 disrupts

⁶⁹Adrian Piper, “The Triple Negation of Colored Women Artists.” in Vol. 2 of *Out of Order, Out of Sight 2: Selected Writings in Art Criticism 1967-92*, ed. Adrian Piper (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 168-169.

⁷⁰For more discussion on the intersections between postmodern art and neo-avant-garde art see Foster, “Whose Afraid,” 32, 202.

this vision of female complacency and re-envisioning it as a patriarchal fantasy. The *Ur-Mutter* rebels against this fantasy; she appears not to acquiesce to potential onlookers. Her upright, closed posture makes her look solid and stern. Through such cues, *Ur-Mutter* #8 points to a shift in the sexist relations, which art historians Carol Duncan and Pollock contended that avant-garde art reaffirms.⁷¹ Clarifying Duncan and Pollock's arguments, Ann Gibson explained that historically avant-garde work posited (socially constructed) feminine attributes and females as weak in order to idealize and codify heterosexual male vigor and control.⁷² Like the *Artforum* ad, Turnley's photograph might expose men's presumed authority to control women's physical space. The Somali woman's austere pose and protective handling of her child may give one the sense that the photographer has intruded on this sitter's space. However, because in *Ur-Mutter* #8 it seems that the woman refuses to be regarded as a passive visual object, Piper's photomontage challenges viewers' complacency with representations of male supremacy.

Yet, the *Artforum* ad fosters this complacency since Koons's picture naturalizes a male-centered and Eurocentric status quo by trivializing differences of his appropriated subjects and their historical frameworks. Koons jumbles his sources, none of which are clear. The picture collapses disparate archetypes and distorts their

⁷¹Carol Duncan, "Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth-Century Vanguard Painting," in *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, ed., Norma Bourde and Mary Garrad (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 293-313. Griselda Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits, 1888-1893: Gender and the Color of Art History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992).

⁷²Gibson summarizes these feminist arguments, explaining "[Avant-garde (or vanguard) art has been universalized as male...a status confirmed by opposing his active, heterosexual masculine agency to the passive, feminized and objectified status of his art and the females it so often represented. Ann Gibson, "Avant-Garde," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, 2nd ed. ed. Robert Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 211.

contexts. Gazing heavenward, Koons resembles a preacher or a prophet as he teaches his students (potential devotees) to accept “BANALITY AS SAVIOR.” Then again, the looming figure of Koons could be taken for a dictator campaigning social and political principles of domination (e.g. “EXPLOIT THE MASSES”) to young, gullible followers. The word exploitation might also allude to the ways in which Koons assumes the role of an art maverick by putting inflammatory exhibition ads in art magazines to both offend readers (for instance, through a parody of art heroes like Joseph Beuys) and gain readers’ sponsorship. But more than anyone else this man is recognizable as Jeff Koons and he draws on these other personas to validate his own celebrity.

A pastiche of familiar, yet vague associations, the *Artforum* version of this photograph deploys contemporary mass advertisements’ incorporation of bright, crisp colors, alarming scenarios, and subliminal messages to attract viewers. Just as Koons detaches the signifiers of his sources from the circumstances that they initially signified, according to art critic Michael Brenson, Koons also borrows the look of art historical sources to tantalize audiences, but robs these art historical forms of their intellectual significance. For example, thinking about Koons’s sculptures from the *Banality* exhibition, Brenson wrote

What the artist has done is try to retain the popular aspects of Gothic sculpture while draining it of its spiritual and formal weight...there is not an ounce of the elegance, searching and gravity that have made Gothic sculpture and paintings signposts of the mind.⁷³

This notion of Koons emptying past artistic traditions of their substance corresponds to criticism waged against the neo-avant-gardes.

⁷³Michael Brenson, “Shifting Image,” *New York Times*, December 2, 1988, C22.

Abigail Solomon-Godeau seconded Brenson's thoughts on Koons in her essay, "Living with Contradictions," where she tried to undo the conflation of artists who take up avant-garde "appropriative strategies" to interrogate mainstream practices and those who used these tactics to override such interrogations.⁷⁴ Solomon-Godeau explained that art professional and dealers wrongly ascribed the "critical specificity" of early postmodern photographers (e.g. Martha Rosler, Richard Prince, and Sherrie Levine) to the more generic approaches of a later wave of post-modern photographers (e.g. Frank Majore, Alan Belcher, and Stephen Frailey). As Solomon-Godeau saw it, this second group ultimately "precluded" an intellectual analysis of commodity culture by expressing a "stupefied and celebratory fascination" for its products.⁷⁵ Like the younger post-modern photographers, Koons quoted artistic traditions, accentuated their formulaic aspects, and downplayed their contextual circumstances.

This deflation of what Brenson deems "cultural weight" is also consistent with the sense of a-historicism conveyed by the *Artforum* ad. This lack is a trademark of Koons work and, according to Brenson, also "a feature of consumer society in which the moment is everything." The social order delineated in Koons's classroom parallels social hierarchies of its time, but without referring to the historical processes and contingencies that secure these hierarchies, the image displays them as inevitable. Brenson reinforced this notion when he argued that *Banalities* "[was] a wonderful affirmation that the infatuation with the moment, the lust to acquire and the belief in

⁷⁴To be clear, in this article, Solomon-Godeau did not offer an extensive analysis of Jeff Koons, but she did classify him as one of the Stimulationist artists who stunted the criticality of avant-garde appropriative strategies. Solomon-Godeau, "Living with Contradictions," 4, 12.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 12-13.

the irrelevance of the past are just fine.”⁷⁶ Similarly, the *Artforum* ad for *Banality* muddles the historical conditions of its references in favor of glorifying the new, which, in this case, is the exhibition itself. As Brenson’s disapproving tone implies, consumer culture’s fixation with the present is shortsighted and I argue that the shortsightedness conveyed in Koons’s ad supported power structures of the late 1980s by discouraging people from considering how such dynamics have evolved over time and the ways in which they could or should change in the future.

In contrast, *Ur-Mutter #8* urges viewers to interrogate how the present status quo came into being by alluding to the provenance of Piper’s images and whose interests these images served. Like Koons, Piper uses avant-garde tropes such as montage, but Piper’s integration of this mass-produced photograph opposes reductive understandings of her subject.⁷⁷ When discussing the appeal of this picture, Piper referred to it as a “very beautiful and iconic image” of two Somali people who “are obviously in pain.”⁷⁸ Though admiring the artistic, symbolic, and emotive merits of the work that render the subjects meaningful individuals, she also touched on its initial publication’s suppression of their individuality. Although *Ur-Mutter #8* does not include the newspaper text that accompanied it, the picture itself visually confirms Western ideas that Africans are impoverished and demoralized. Despite its ties to stereotypes, the photograph functioned as a piece of allegedly objective coverage before Piper’s appropriation. She calls attention to the context of the image

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Peter Burger saw montage as a hallmark of the historical avant-garde because fragmented imagery implies that art is not self-sufficient Gibson, “Avant-Garde,” 211.

⁷⁸Brenson, “Shifting Image,” C22.

by crediting its maker, Peter Turnley and his sponsor, Black Star, a New York–headed agency for photojournalism, corporate, and stock photography.⁷⁹ The fact that this organization supplies news footage and visual publicity speaks to not only the blurred boundaries between these two circuits, but also the way that political and business agendas permeate official languages of representation.

The dissemination of images involves ethical concerns regarding power, ownership, and responsibility, which Piper makes explicit in *Ur-Mutter #8* by identifying her sources with labels. During Elizabeth Hayt-Atkins’s interview with Piper, the artist remarked: “In my value system, as a result of my Afro-American experiences, I see appropriation as an excuse for ripping off other people and not giving them credit. To me, it represents a certain kind of moral degeneration.” For this reason, she stated, “I always give credit to photographers and anyone else who works on my pieces.”⁸⁰ Piper’s attributions help distinguish her self-conscious recycling of visuals from Koons opportunistic reproduction. His *Artforum* ad elides the origins of the borrowed forms and concepts that it includes to instead highlight how Koons capitalizes these forms and ideas. To avoid communicating a similar impression, Piper uses explanatory labels to demonstrate that she will not take credit for ideas that are not her own. Moreover, without citations, it is easier for viewers to lose sight of whose desires and biases an image serves. Bringing these matters to the

⁷⁹Black Star: Photography, Photojournalism and Stock Photography” *Black Star*, accessed November 6, 2011, <http://www.blackstar.com/>.

⁸⁰Elizabeth Hayt-Atkins. “The Indexical Present: A Conversation with Adrian Piper.” *Arts Magazine* (March 1991), 49-50.

fore, *Ur-Mutter #8* reveals the *Artforum* ad to be an endorsement of Koons and the privileged social groups to which he belongs.

Piper's photomontage also exposes potential biases underpinning Turnley's portrait, which was taken during the Somali Revolution (1986-91). Jim Naureckas, the editor of media watchdog FAIR (Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting), lamented that during this crisis, Somalis were unnecessarily "depicted as either passive victims waiting for U.S. help or as drug-crazed thugs."⁸¹ The isolation, sunken posture, and thin body of the woman in Turnley's image bolsters this impression of helplessness, while illustrating the famine and civil unrest distressing her country. Yet, Somalis were not simply defeated by this humanitarian crisis as most Western news outlets implied. According to officials of Africa Watch, a human rights organization, Somalis assumed the majority of famine relief initiatives, even when televised reports heralded Americans and Europeans as the agents of relief.⁸² Without providing this background information, Piper recalls the greater power imbalances ingrained in the photograph by citing Turnley and his employer in her labels of *Ur-Mutter #8*. Their English names in conjunction with those of the American organizations Black Star and *New York Times* signal that this picture of non-Western people is seen through Western eyes.

Moreover, Turnley's photograph belongs to a category of images, which portray undernourished and exoticized sitters. After studying this typology in 1985, cultural

⁸¹ Jim Naureckas, "Tragedy Made Simple: Media on the Somalia Intervention," *FAIR: Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting* (March 1993), accessed November 6, 2011, <http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=1211>.

⁸² Ibid.

and literary historian Sander Gilman concluded: “For many contemporary Americans, the most familiar image of the non-European commoner is a starving African child.”⁸³ Like well-meaning photographers, well-meaning campaigns had a hand in disseminating these visuals. History and political science professor, Curtis Keim noted that agencies like Live Aid that raised funds for the famine in Ethiopia (1983-5) largely captured “‘the Third World’ in a state of utter destitution” and in so doing “nourishe[d] the complacency and narcissism of the West. Rather than producing human solidarity this kind of imagery tends to foster estrangement.”⁸⁴ In the 1980s, Oliver Harrington ridiculed westerners’ selfish motives for depicting strife in Africa with his drawing of two plump men sporting Safari gear (Fig.10). One smokes a cigar, while the other aims his camera toward a skeleton crouched over an empty bowl on the floor. The title, “Boy, this shot will drive’em wild with envy back home when our photo club has its autumn get-together” insinuates that the sight-seers are so preoccupied with their own aspirations that they do not even consider helping the shriveling African before them. Instead the men marvel at the subject’s destitution, peering down at the skeleton, but standing back at the same time. Although Turnley’s portrayal of is arguably more sensitive to the pain of his African sitter, this photograph projects a similar notion of distance.

The Somali mother further denotes alienation and alterity because her appearance combines (constructed) character traits of groups who signify otherness: women, non-whites, descendants of non-European heritage, and the poor in American media.

⁸³Catherine A Lutz and Jane L. Collins. *Reading National Geographic* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 105.

⁸⁴Curtis Keim, *Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind*, 2nd ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2009), 208.

These attributes and their negative connotations become more prominent when placed against Koons's photograph of a wealthy, white, Euro-American man. Piper's pairing of this ad, (which situates its models and audience as insiders) with Turnley's photograph (which frames the subjects as outsiders) is a comment on how *Times* readers are socially conditioned to identify with certain types of people (e.g. Koons) and disassociate themselves from others (e.g. Somalis). But if, as the FAIR editor put it, Western media tend to display Somalis as, "nameless extras in the shadows behind Western aid workers or disaster tourists," Piper's *Ur-Mutter* motif brings these and other marginalized people out of the dark.⁸⁵ The photomontage models how appropriative strategies can bring obscured positions to light by reorienting common depictions of experiences. Of all the figures in *Ur-Mutter* #8, the Somali woman is the biggest and the most fully visible. Although this adaptation does not downplay the woman's trying circumstances, Piper's addition of "Fight or die" proclaims her subject's self-assured determination. What, in Turnley's shot may have read as a downtrodden face is reimagined as an expression of defiance. Rather than concentrating on the boniness of the mother's arms, Piper shifts attention to the strength of this woman as she supports her child. The red phrase below her acts like a speech bubble, narrating the *Ur-Mutter*'s charge against the adjacent Koons image.⁸⁶

⁸⁵Naureckas, "Tragedy Made Simple."

⁸⁶Although Piper's silkscreen phrase is technically a minor alteration to Turnley's photograph, the addition likely redirects the audience's understanding of the entire photograph. Roland Barthes explained words' effect on visual perception, when he asserted that, "the text loads the image, burdening it with a culture, a moral, an imagination." Since text and image are distinct modes of representation, while decoding a captioned photograph, the interpreter moves from "one structure to the other," filling in the gap of signification with societally conditioned narratives. Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, "The Photographic Message," Ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill, 1977), 26.

The *Ur-Mutter* motif can be thought of as a device for articulating distinct subjectivities that avant-garde and broader cultural narratives often elide with representations that universalize white, male outlooks. Just a few years before Piper started the *Ur-Mutter* series, she explored repressed identities and overt stereotypes with *Vanilla Nightmares* (1986-1990), which takes racist illusions as its main subject. This series consists of twenty charcoal drawings of sexualized black men and women atop pages from *New York Times* (Fig.11).⁸⁷ Noticing how these bald, naked giants mingle with fashion, political, and sports items beneath them, Judith Wilson saw that these “apparitions telescope the lurid fantasies of centuries’ worth of racist demagogues and their all-too-wiling dupes.”⁸⁸ The figures parody white peoples’ supposed assumptions that their black counterparts are inherently carnal, savage, and dangerous, while their exaggerated bodies—swelling genitals and musculature—imply the absurdity of these anxieties.⁸⁹ Indeed, Piper explains the work as a way to “bring these stereotypical nightmares to the surface of the page and of consciousness...where we can identify, scrutinize, and finally manage them rationally.” Although I simplify interpretations of *Vanilla Nightmares* here, I do so to underscore its relationship to *Ur-Mutter* #8. Both series complicate the power of

⁸⁷ Andrea D. Barnwell and Kirsten P. Buick, “Continuing the Dialogue: A Portfolio of Works by African American Artists,” *Art Institute of Chicago Museums Studies* 24. 2 (1999), 185. 215.

⁸⁸ Judith Wilson, “In Memory of the News and of Our Selves: The Art of Adrian Piper,” *Third Text* 5, no. 16 (Autumn/Winter 1991), 57.

⁸⁹ Linda Hutcheon theorizes parody as “a form of imitation ... characterized by ironic inversion” by reworking its source’s codes it signals a repetition as well as a point of difference. Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 6.

white, male ideologies, by signaling that these belief-systems repress alternative perspectives out of fear that such perspectives are powerful and will taint American dominant culture and its art. However, whereas the figures of the earlier series appear as anonymous phantoms, the *Ur-Mutter* announces herself as a self-conscious, empathetic individual. After exhuming biased nightmares, it seems that Piper moved to the corresponding realities manifested by *Ur-Mutter* character, a wake up call of sorts.⁹⁰

In this respect, the *Ur-Mutter* motif has an affinity with a broader cultural crusade, which artist and critic Loraine O'Grady described as a project to "reclaim black female subjectivity so as to 'de-haunt' historic scripts and establish worldly agency."⁹¹ Previous civil rights and feminist movements contributed to this project, but by the late 1980s and early 1990s persisting resistance and new backlashes motivated many cultural workers to aggressively fight racism and sexism.⁹² Piper wrote about her own struggles with these obstacles as an African-American female artist. In articles such as "Five Other Features That Are A Dead Giveaway," she points to instances in which teachers and critics wrote off the ethical dilemmas that her work raises and instead attributed her propensity for confrontational approaches as an example of black anger and aggression.⁹³ Her publications and art imply the

⁹⁰This is not to say that the two series demonstrate a linear progression in Piper's work.

⁹¹Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," in *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action*, ed. Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer, and Arlene Raven (New York: Icon, 1994), 165.

⁹²Lutz and Collins, *Reading National Geographic*, 165.

⁹³ Piper discusses "the issue of [her] racial identity" and her forwardness about this identity to account for, what the artist perceives to be, her marginal status within "the

seriousness of prejudice by counteracting it with radical statements. In the case of Koons, she went as far as to say that *Banality*'s irresolute stance on the depravity of the artworld is "no more a genuinely distanced perspective than would be one that criticized child abuse by committing it..." Piper's interpretation comes across as extreme, but for her, the flippant and misogynistic persona that Koons imitates is so overbearing that it eclipses the finer points that scholars (Brian Wallis, John Caldwell, and Paul Wood to name a few) appreciate in his work.

For Piper, as for many others, subtle approaches to such formidable hurdles of inequality risk belittling them and, as a result, even reifying the constraints of the marginalized.⁹⁴ Audre Lorde's seminal speech, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" (1984) advocated a revolt against not only social discrimination, but also the practices that have sustained it. Lorde argued that by relying on the tools of patriarchy to unhinge it, one only reaffirms the master's (patriarchy's) authority to decide which strategies are viable. According to this logic, if the avant-gardes qualify as masters of twentieth-century art, the *Artforum* ad revitalizes their legacy by employing their tools. However, Piper locates the *Ur-Mutter* subject outside Koons's configuration and away from conventions of artistic disinterestedness. In this regard, the woman is a pioneering figure, encouraging

artworld." Piper, "The Joy of Marginality," in vol. 1 of *Out of Order, Out of Sight 1: Selected Writings in Meta-Art 1968-1992*, ed. Adrian Piper (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 234-4. Piper, "Five Other Features That Are A Dead Giveaway," in *Events: Fashion Moda, Taller Boricua, Artists Invite Artists* (New York: New Museum, 1981), 47.

⁹⁴Piper, "A Paradox of Conscience: Analytic Philosophy and the Ethics of Contemporary Art Practice," *New Art Examiner* 16, no. 8 (April 1989), 31.

viewers to see the possibilities of art beyond avant-garde traditions and beyond Koons's classroom where artists seem ineffectual and viewers interchangeable.

Chapter 3

Critique from within and without: The *Ur-Mutter* Motif as a Gauge for Institutional Limitations

This final chapter investigates the limitations of American mainstream art institutions in the late 1980s as they pertain to *Ur-Mutter* #8's context and content. I first review concurrent literature on the widespread discrimination among art professional. Although these examinations facilitated a mounting campaign against elitist cultural frameworks, accounts of Piper's clashes with sexism and racism at the institutional level evidence the persistence of these dominant attitudes. In my introduction, I mentioned that due to Piper's identity as a female artist of African-American descent, who undermined traditional categories of sex and race in her work, art critics saw her professional success as a blow to mainstream art institutions' tendency to support dominant (i.e. masculine and white) perspectives. In this section, I conceive of Piper's *Ur-Mutter* motif as serving a similar function. In the photomontages from the *Ur-Mutter* and *Pretend* series, Piper's appropriated image of the Somali woman conveys different meanings as it is juxtaposed with different pictures. This character's changing positions appear to cast doubt upon the fixity of identity. To grasp how Piper stimulates this effect, I explore ways in which *Ur-Mutter* #5 and *Pretend* #2 connect discrimination to both the fear of otherness and the fear of the self as other. It seems that Piper poses the *Ur-Mutter* as an all-encompassing

mother who triggers anxieties about racial and cultural intermixing, but who also mediates these concerns by evoking the shared histories and conditions that unite humans. Piper's treatment of the *Ur-Mutter* subject as an archetypal figure may stem from German theories of the *urmutter* and more recent feminists' representations of female goddesses. However, after inspecting these possibilities, my chapter ends with a re-evaluation of *Ur-Mutter* #8's accessibility to a general public as well as the social implications of Piper's and Koons's artistic content. When examined through these various lens, the *Ur-Mutter* motif can be read as an image that both resisted and reflected the institutional limitations of art's political potency during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

I contend that the *Ur-Mutter* motif bolsters the argument that Piper mounted in her 1990 essay, "The Triple Negation of Colored Women Artists" in which she implored art institutions to integrate the perspectives of women and colored people whom art authorities often deemed special interest groups.⁹⁵ Studies on the exclusion of women and people of color in leading museums, galleries and art publications help convey the circumstances that may have motivated Piper's intervention. During this period, racism and sexism among leading art institutions became a significant topic of critical inquiry. In 1984, the Guerilla Girls, an activist group of anonymous female artists began their ongoing campaign when they plastered unauthorized posters throughout SoHo and picketed outside the Museum of Modern Art to broadcast the fact that of the 169 artists featured in the museum's new exhibition, *An International*

⁹⁵Adrian Piper, "The Triple Negation of Colored Women Artists." in Vol. 2 of *Out of Order, Out of Sight 2: Selected Writings in Art Criticism 1967-92*, ed. Adrian Piper (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 162-3, 166.

Survey of Painting and Sculpture, less than 10 percent were women, while 100 percent were white.⁹⁶ To further substantiate concerns about such discrimination, artist and curator Howardena Pindell surveyed reviews, articles, books, and temporary exhibitions from 1980-88 in New York, a hotbed of mainstream art activities at the time. The data she collected from seven leading museums indicated that works by non-European artists and/or of non-European descent accounted for less than five percent of works that these museums showed in their exhibitions.⁹⁷ Pindell drew on these alarming statistics along with interviews and other reports to argue that the custodians of New York's art scene (museums, galleries, auction houses, collectors, critics, and art magazines) operated as a closed circuit of trade that barred people of color.⁹⁸ Pindell proceeded to say that when it comes to art, these racial disparities "are couched in divisionary issues like 'quality' or taste or 'talent'..."⁹⁹ Critical discussion during the 1980s that implied the superiority of white artists' work marks the kind of discriminatory beliefs, which impeded artists of color.

⁹⁶Catherine Gourley, "Guerrilla Girls and Other Militant Females' March into the 1990s," *Ms. And the Material Girls: Perceptions from the 1970s through the 1990s*, (Minneapolis: Lerner Publishing Inc, 2008), 107.

⁹⁷The seven museums Pindell covered include: Brooklyn Museum, Guggenheim Museum, Metropolitan Museum, Museum of Modern Art, Whitney Museum of Modern Art, Queens Museum, and Snug Harbor Museum. Howardena Pindell, "Art World Racism: A Documentation," *New Art Examiner* 16 (March 1989), 32-36. Originally presented at Agencies of Survival conference at Hunter College, New York City, June 1987.

⁹⁸In addition to providing statistical evidence for her claims, Pindell analyzed governmental policies (e.g. the Internal Revenue Service's qualifications for artists) and what she called "art world rhetorical codes" (i.e. colorblind standards of artistic quality) that degraded and disenfranchised non-white and non-Western art professionals and their products. *Ibid.*, 17-18.

⁹⁹Failing quotes this statement from Pindell in her text, but does not include a corresponding citation. Patricia Failing, "Black Artists Today: A Case of Exclusion?" *Art News* (March 1989), 125.

According to Patricia Failing, discussion about quality revealed that codified standards of artistic excellence were bigoted (e.g. oblivious to less established and/or non-European standards) and that art professionals supposed black artists to be less versatile and less innovative than their white counterparts.¹⁰⁰ Writing in 1989, Failing took heart in “a growing professional self-consciousness [among curators as well as art scholars and dealers] about culturally induced perceptual predispositions,” which she understood to be “an issue raised with increasing frequency in debates evaluating art of other cultures and about the current status of black artists within the art establishment.”¹⁰¹ The emergence of such self-reflexive approaches to art fostered a discursive apparatus that could support the Piper’s work. Bearing in mind Piper’s African-American heritage and her art’s engagement with questions of racism, she was well situated to contribute to the mounting critiques of mainstream art networks for underrepresenting black artists.

Yet, Piper’s artistic endeavors and observations in her writings and interviews from these years seem to demonstrate the art establishment’s unreceptiveness to calls for social and cultural inclusiveness. Leslie King-Hammond, Dean of Graduate Studies at Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, and Lowery Sims, Associate Curator at the Metropolitan Museum were both associated with mainstream art

¹⁰⁰Ibid.,124.

¹⁰¹In her article, Failing mostly elaborates on conversations from an interdisciplinary conference, “The Poetics of Politics of Representation” centered on “how art and artifacts of various cultures –including American minority cultures—are represented in museums.” Ibid.,125-6.

networks in 1988 when they launched *Art as Verb*.¹⁰² This touring exhibition featured Piper and twelve other African-American artists whom the curators saw as forging dynamic ‘cultural identit[ies].’¹⁰³ Didactic material for *Art as Verb* explicitly stated the show’s objective to diversify cultural outlooks and reverse the disenfranchisement of people of color and women from the official art milieu in the United States. The catalog mentioned that the omission of these groups is “clear simply by noting their obvious absence from the critical and historical annals of literature regarding art and artists of this country.”¹⁰⁴ The show’s overtly political and emotive premise offended the initial Metropolitan Life Gallery sponsors, who censored some of the work including Piper’s and Howardena Pindell’s.¹⁰⁵ This reaction bolsters Piper’s claims that leading museums and galleries dismissed art that veered away from traditional white, male perspectives. In, “The Triple Negation of the Colored Woman Artist,” she tracked the prejudice that had kept motifs like the *Ur-Mutter* out of the mainstream by chronicling influential art commentators’ blatant rejections of colored and/or female artists as well as themes of gender and race in art

¹⁰²Pindell, “Covenant of Silence: De Facto Censorship in the Visual Arts,” *Third Text* 4., no. 11 (1990), 39.

¹⁰³Leslie King-Hammond and Lowery Stokes Sims, *Art as Verb: The Evolving Continuum: Installations, Performances and Videos by 13 Afro-American Artists* (Baltimore: Maryland Institute College of Art, 1988), ii.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, iv.

¹⁰⁵Pindell cites the sponsors’ official complained about Piper’s use of body fluids (e.g. urine, sweat, and blood) in her video piece “The Big Four-Oh.” That said, as critic Thom Donovan noted the artist’s allusions to women and ethnic minorities as ‘leftovers’ in society may have been the underlying impetus for Metropolitan Life’s censorship. Pindell, “Covenant of Silence,” 39. Thom Donovan, “My Remains: Poetry, Art, and the Emergence of the Subject,” *Poetry Magazine*, April 2, 2011 accessed February 10, 2012. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2011/04/my-remains-poetry-art-and-the-emergence-of-the-subject/>.

(quotes from Rosalind Krauss, Hilton Kramer, and Roberta Smith serve as examples).¹⁰⁶ This article tackles systematic inequities, while hinting at Piper's sensitivity to her own professional disadvantages as an African-American woman.

Given the increasing awareness about art institutions' exclusive networks in the 1980s, the *Ur-Mutter* series, by a female artist, often called a black artist (although she rejected such racial labels) appropriating an image of a black woman, can be seen as representing an unwelcome presence in the galleries where the photomontage appeared.¹⁰⁷ The provenance and reception of Piper's *Ur-Mutter* series has not been thoroughly documented, but since 1989, many of its individual pieces have been displayed at respected art venues (e.g. Exit Art in SoHo, and abroad at Ikon Gallery, in Birmingham, England).¹⁰⁸ Currently the Los Angeles County Museum of Art owns *Ur-Mutter #4*, while *Ur-Mutter #5* is part of the Michael and Susan Hort

¹⁰⁶When "The Triple Negation" came out these well-known figures were all working in New York City: Smith was writing for *The New York Times*, Krauss was teaching at the City University of New York, and Kramer was reporting for *The New York Observer*. Also, Turnley's photograph debuted in *The New York Times* and one of Koons's *Banalities* exhibitions was in New York where Piper herself showed (for example with her solos at the Whitney Museum of American Art and John Weber Gallery this year). Yet as much as the contemporary art discourses that this paper examines were concentrated in the New York art scene (as Pindell's study as implies), they extended far beyond this setting. Piper, "The Triple Negation," 162, 173.

¹⁰⁷Although Piper alludes to her African-American heritage in her artwork, she has stated that "'black' and 'white' are among the terms my work critiques." Piper, "It's Not All Black and White," (Letters to the Editor), *The Village Voice* (June 9, 1987), 6 in Bowles, Adrian Piper, 1. Despite her objections to racial typecasting, art historians and critics have often described Piper as a black artist. Addressing this issue of racial labels, John P. Bowles shrewdly cautioned that to "uncritically cling to the idea that she is a black woman who can pass for white—is to refuse to apply the moral concerns that her work broaches to ourselves." Bowles, *Adrian Piper*, 1, 19.

¹⁰⁸ Brenson, Michael. "Adrian Piper's Head-On Confrontation of Racism." *New York Times*, October 26, 1990, C36. Bishton, Derek. "Fear of the Other: Adrian Piper at the Ikon." *Creative Camera* 5 (Feb/Mar 1992): 48-49.

Collection of the Brooklyn Museum.¹⁰⁹ As discussed in the previous chapter, the labels of the *Ur-Mutter* series indicate that before Piper used the photograph of the Somali woman in her artwork, this woman appeared as a documentary subject in the *New York Times*. This newspaper link casts the Somali woman's image as more an attempt at objective reportage than an aesthetic expression. Such allusions to this image's background may make the black female figure in *Ur-Mutter #8* seem removed from the realm of art, but the white male figure beside her appears to actively participate in this realm. Within the context of an ad for his notorious art exhibition, Koons comes across as both an artist and his own artistic subject. In this respect, *Ur-Mutter #8*'s two contrasting images mirror historical Western paradigms that esteem the role of white men in American art and undermine black women's involvement in it.

However, Piper's insertion of the *Ur-Mutter* where she is unwanted evinces this figure's relevance to mainstream art networks by discrediting the faulty logic that excludes her from these art circles. I hope to show that the *Ur-Mutter* motif reverses this faulty logic in that it emphasizes the permeability among different identity groups, while also rendering Turnley's depiction of an African mother as an icon. With the image of the Somali woman, Piper reveals the ways in which the discriminatory thinking of top curators, art writers, and art dealers is not based on their actual distance from the marginalized, but rather these art authorities' denial of

¹⁰⁹ "Adrian Piper. Ur Mutter #4: We don't want what you have." Los Angeles County Museum of Art, accessed December 8, 2011. <http://collectionsonline.lacma.org/mwebcgi/mweb.exe?request=record;id=110027;type=101>. "Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art: Feminist Base: Adrian Piper," Brooklyn Museum, accessed October 1, 2011. http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/gallery/adrian_piper.php?i=1308.

marginalized peoples' closeness and even inextricability from them. To this end, the artist constantly repositions the *Ur-Mutter* image through the works in the series, thereby metaphorically releasing this subject from narrow mindsets. Through unexpected juxtapositions and added text, the *Ur-Mutter* series experiments with the potential meanings of Turnley's photograph. As I will soon discuss, these montages conjure fears of miscegenation, blacks' presence in the United States, and what Piper calls, "racial self-hatred."¹¹⁰

Implicating viewers in her reconfigurations (see introduction), Piper tries to reveal the patronizing thoughts that Western viewers are trained to activate when faced with a photograph of an African woman. The artist explained that she likes to use the same image of a person "over and over again, with slightly different textual or contrasting visual content," to demonstrate the versatility and singularity of each individual as well as the inadequacy of stereotypes.¹¹¹ In this sense, the *Ur-Mutter* motif works to expose the inequalities and delusions that exoticize this Somali woman. Remarking on the overlooked perspectives that this sitter is meant to invoke, Piper has variously described her as a symbol of humanity's ancient roots in the archetypal African mother, a foil to Western gluttony, and the ultimate figure of oppression.¹¹² Piper's associations are notable because they do not posit the woman as an object of pity, but underscore her cultural importance for everyone and the

¹¹⁰Maurice Berger, "The Critique of Pure Racism: An Interview with Adrian Piper," in *Adrian Piper: A Retrospective*, ed. Maurice Berger (Issues in Cultural Theory 3. (Baltimore: Maryland Institute College of Art, 1988), 94-5.

¹¹¹*Ibid.*, 95-96.

¹¹²*Ibid.*, 94-5.

insecurities that prevent Westerners' from respecting her.

For instance, *Ur-Mutter* #5 addresses the inextricability of all groups as well as the related phobia of racial intermixing. Whereas the *New York Times* situated the Somali mother as a primitive specimen that invites sympathy, *Ur-Mutter* #5 challenges her remoteness from Euro-ethnic audiences, by debunking the illusion of cultural or racial purity (Fig. 12). This piece merges Turnley's photograph with another mother-son pair, but the models in this studio portrait look noticeably white, well groomed, and well fed in comparison to the *Ur-Mutter* image. At first, their wide-eyed smiles might be construed as obliviousness to the systematic injustices that favor them and sacrifice the Somalis to their left. Yet, their faces are transformed into masks of denial with text stenciled below the *Ur-Mutter* who reminds them, "We made you" to which the WASP mother and child reply, "I READ IT MY WAY." This script highlights mainstream America's repudiation of the colonial past that "made" it possible along with its members' renunciation of miscegenation, the interracial relations that "made" Americans. *Ur-Mutter* #5 then implies that such shame around these relations fuels the disregard for and disavowal of non-white individuals. Describing how this work contrasts "Third World hunger with First World smugness and excess" Judith Wilson presented the work as an example of "Piper's concern with class conflicts" on a global scale.¹¹³ As a symbol of such pervasive conflicts, the *Ur-Mutter* motif can be thought of a means for both gauging and redirecting social sentiments. She signals the impossibility of authentic whiteness, as well as peoples' discomfort with the complexity and fluidity of identity.

¹¹³Judith Wilson, "In Memory of the News and of Our Selves: The Art of Adrian Piper," *Third Text* 5, no. 16 (Autumn/Winter 1991), 61.

Through her changing and multiple contexts in Piper's work, the *Ur-Mutter* comes across as an omnipresent character. Highlighting the prevalence of this female being, *Ur-Mutter* #6 substitutes the photograph of the Somali subjects for one of a Vietnamese woman and her child (Fig.13). The variation seems to promote ideas about cultural differences and the maternal body as a common origin for humans from which all their differences stem. This piece is another reproduced photograph from the *New York Times* showing a Vietnamese refugee shielding her small son with a blanket amidst detritus. Like the Somali woman's picture, this shot of a protective mother in a presumably underdeveloped area draws on paradigms of human roots in nature and mother earth.¹¹⁴ These concepts play a part in German epistemologies dating back to at least the eighteenth century, when Immanuel Kant spoke of the *urmutter* as the common "womb of the Earth" from which "all variegated forms" arise.¹¹⁵ Peter Durno Murray stated that Nietzsche also employed the title when analyzing Greek mythology to denote "an amalgamation of various goddesses who represent nature, earth, and justice" and cultural regeneration.¹¹⁶ Building on these references, later psychoanalysts such as Carl Jung posited the *urmutter* as an

¹¹⁴Upon careful inspection, one may observe that *Ur-Mutter* #5, unlike *Ur-Mutter* #8, includes part of what is likely a sliver of the image's newspaper caption. The caption identifies the figures as a "Vietnamese woman refugee and her child seeking shelter from the hot sun in Thailand's Gulf of Siam..."

¹¹⁵August K. Weidmann, *The German Quest for Primal Origins in Art, Culture, and Politics 1900-1933: Die Flucht in Urzustände* vol. 16 of *Studies of German Thought and History* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), 13.

¹¹⁶Peter Durno Murray, *Nietzsche's Affirmative Morality: A Revaluation Based in the Dionysian World* (Berlin and New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1999) 26, 34.

archetype that manifests humans' unconscious yearning for wholeness.¹¹⁷ Bearing in mind that Piper completed a doctoral dissertation on Kant's model of rationality, a topic on which she became a specialist, it is possible that these German theories informed her *Ur-Mutter* series.¹¹⁸ While on the one hand, the mothers in the photographs appear at the fringes of society, the care they offer their children might harken back to German ideas about human nature (e.g. the maternal figure as embodying love, justice, regeneration, and totality etc.), a nature that transcends man-made boundaries. Yet more than illustrating a class of theories, it seems that in synthesizing various systems of knowledge (e.g. recent news coverage and long-running German theories of epistemology and ontology) and visuals (e.g. pictures of individuals from Africa, America, and Asia) Piper's motif accentuates the fundamental interdependency among people.

Even as the *Ur-Mutter* figure presumably surpasses categories in *Ur-Mutter* #8, this character's portrayal as a defiant and archetypal matriarch suggests that she contests patriarchal regimes, which subordinate women. In the 1970, artists combatted such subordination through goddess imagery. During this decade, second-wave feminism and new feminist scholarship galvanized the popular reclamation of pre-patriarchal emblems and accounts of female authorities.¹¹⁹ The resulting

¹¹⁷Paul Bishop, *The Dionysian Self: C.G. Jung's Reception of Friedrich Nietzsche* (Berlin and New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1995), 1.

¹¹⁸While Mercer wrote about Piper's expertise in Kant philosophy, it is my hypothesis that the *Ur-Mutter* series may relate to this academic concentration. Kobena Mercer, *Exiles, Diasporas & Strangers* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008), 147.

¹¹⁹Gloria Feman Orenstain, "Recovering Her Story: Feminist Artists Reclaim the Great Goddess," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 176.

proliferation of maternal goddess iconography laid the groundwork for later artistic expressions of female strength like those seen in Piper's photomontages, Nancy Spero's five panel collage, *The Goddess Nut II* (1990) and Renée Cox's *Yo Mama* photographic series (1992-3) (Fig. 14, 15). By gesturing toward mythological sources, feminist precedents, and contemporary power dynamics, *Ur-Mutter # 8* can be situated within critiques on sexism from the 1970s that continued well into the early 1990s.

Piper expanded on this interrogation of man-made categories (gender, nationality, gender, etc.) in her 1990 *Pretend* series, which also features the *Ur-Mutter* motif. She introduced this project as "dealing largely with the degradation and coercive penal supervision of a quarter of the black male population in the U.S."¹²⁰ In this series, reproduced photographs of police brutality, anonymous black men, and activists such as Martin Luther King convey the dangerous risks that marginalized groups must take for basic civil rights. Piper superimposes the line: "Pretend not to know what you know" over each piece in the series (Fig. 16). This mantra in conjunction with the other pictures, and a reoccurring drawing of three monkeys who, as the saying goes, hear no evil, see no evil, and speak no evil, suggests that inaction and feigned ignorance rather than naiveté preserves imbalances of social power. In the case of this series, the pretending may entail willfully forgetting a past of racial violence and passively accepting continued racial antagonisms in order to depoliticize the present. The fact that the *Ur-Mutter* portraits of the American, Somali, and Vietnamese women compose *Pretend #2* implies the subjects' parts in a historical and

¹²⁰Berger, "The Critique of Pure Racism," 96.

on-going struggle for equality (Fig. 17). In this arrangement, the public spheres that isolate these mothers from one another suddenly appear permeable. Even as these women inhabit different contexts and separate pictorial spaces, their images resonate. Together, it is as if their photographs disrupt fictional divisions (cultural, ethnic, geographic socio-economic etc.) and false claims of democracy that elide persistent inequities. For Jean Fisher, encountering *Pretend* may cause the viewer to reflect upon his or her biased thinking and systems, by prompting “a transformation of consciousness that would begin to recognize the nonequivalence between self and the subject in discourse, and hence the possibility of reconfiguring the relations among selves.”¹²¹ That is, this series, like much of Piper’s output, guides viewers to confront the inadequacy of ideologies that they depend on to construct their own identities.

Piper calls this type of self-critical reflection an experience of “the indexical present,” which I find instrumental for understanding the artists’ ambitions for *Ur-Mutter #8* as well as the work’s institutional limitations. According to Piper, the indexical present gives rise to a self-conscious and instantaneous act of perception as well as an awareness of the contextual circumstances that affect this action. John P. Bowles remarked that this experience allows the viewer to apprehend his or her existence “in collaboration with peoples, objects, and things,” in a way that allows one to perceive the self as an indexical trace on the world and world’s reciprocal imprint on the self.¹²²

Piper’s use of Turnley’s photograph in *Ur-Mutter #8* points toward such

¹²¹ Jean Fisher, “The Breath between Words,” in Berger, *Adrian Piper: A Retrospective*, 41.

¹²² John P. Bowles, *Adrian Piper: Race, Gender, and Embodiment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 161.

mutual exchanges; in this photomontage, Turnley's shot implores viewers to consider their self-perceptions in relation to the Somali sitter, while her image influences audiences' notions of and interactions with real Somali people. Piper counters any inclinations to justify, trivialize, or ignore the *Ur-Mutter* subject's plight by incorporating Koons's ad, which unveils the egotism of these precise responses to exploited individuals.¹²³ As I explained in chapter one, the *Artforum* picture's arrangement in *Ur-Mutter* #8 gives the impression that Koons turns his back on the woman to his right. This composition calls attention to Koons selfishness; he looks unwilling to acknowledge the struggling Somali mother, but eager to ironically mock power imbalances. In this sense, Piper's work frames Koons as closing himself off from experiencing "the indexical present" or any similar kind of open and honest exchange.

With her *Ur-Mutter* artworks, Piper taps into familiar moral dilemmas of privilege, discrimination, and socioeconomic inequities with familiar visuals drawn from mass-produced periodicals. On the one hand, the fact that she combines these widespread references with academic frameworks (e.g. phenomenology such as her theories of indexical present, critiques of the avant-garde, and possibly Kantian

¹²³Piper has explicitly written about her various strategies for countering viewers' defensive reactions to provocative artwork: *Art for the Art-World Surface Pattern* was one of the first of a series of works I did that attempted to confront this 'depoliticizing' or neutralizing effect of the aesthetic stance in contemporary art on the issues raised by minority and other politically concerned artists. My intention is to bombard the viewer with political information concerning various catastrophes and situations around the world, and simultaneously to block recourse to the 'aestheticizing' response, by incorporating it satirically onto the work itself.... Ideally, I wanted thereby to force the viewer to register the political information directly and immediately...." Piper, "Art for the Art-World Surface Pattern," in Vol. 1 of *Out of Order, Out of Sight 1, Selected Writings in Meta-Art 1968-1992*, ed. Adrian Piper (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 167.

philosophy) bolster my interpretation of the *Ur-Mutter* motif as a device with which Piper meant to engage a broad range of viewers. The 1990 catalogue *Pretend*, positions *Ur-Mutter* artworks this way by including recent series that include the motif along with Mary Anne Staniszewski's essay, "Race Against Time," which stresses Piper's hope to catalyze a shift in the politics of public life through her art.¹²⁴ Moreover, Piper's conversation with Maurice Berger suggests that she was partially drawn to Turnley's photograph for its potential to attract a diverse audience. In this interview, she stated her interest in exposing both the "universality and singularity" of this shot and reinforced what she took to be its wide appeal by calling the photograph "a unique image of universal meaning."¹²⁵ However, if Piper did target the *Ur-Mutter* series to the general public as well as a more educated crowd, she may have overrated this work's reach.

Piper's comments on the scope of her art and publications indicate that she has not always been cognizant of the institutional and intellectual parameters of her own practice. Bowles posed similar questions in terms of the artist's earlier work with the following observation: "Piper wrote in January 1973 that she wanted to address a broad audience with her writings, one 'not immediately in touch with the most recent developments of contemporary art of the last ten years.'"¹²⁶ Yet, as Bowles noted, "It seems highly unlikely that such an audience would ever have read

¹²⁴Mary Anne Staniszewski, "Race against Time," in *Pretend*, ed., Adrian Piper and Mary Anne Staniszewski (New York: Colorstone Printing, Inc., 1990).

¹²⁵Berger, "The Critique of Pure Racism," 94-95.

¹²⁶Adrian Piper, *Talking to Myself: The Ongoing Autobiography of an Art Object/ Entretien avec-moi-meme: L'Autobiographie évolutive d'un objet d'art*, trans. Martine d'Argembeau and Fernand Spillmaeckers (Hamburg: MTL, 1974), 5 in Bowles, *Adrian Piper*, 287.

her texts, let alone encountered them in the course of their daily lives.”¹²⁷ The same might be said of Piper’s *Ur-Mutter* series, which my research indicates stayed mostly within the domains of well-off spectators: progressive art spaces and publications.¹²⁸ On occasion, the artist has contradicted her statements about aiming for a broad audience and instead made a strong case for catering to a selective viewership.

According to critic Jo-Ann Lewis:

Piper openly admits she has targeted a very specific, very sophisticated audience: ‘people who have the leisure and resources to attend art exhibitions, and the leisure and resources to effect change without any real risks or physical danger to themselves.’¹²⁹

This is not to say that Piper’s involvement with privileged demographics renders her work ineffectual. Instead, I include these remarks because in arguing that Piper intends her art, and the *Ur-Mutter* motif in particular, to be a tool for sparking political change, I feel obliged to acknowledge the potential limitations and liabilities of this tool.

¹²⁷Bowles does not single Piper out when making this remark, but rather frames her impractical expectations for a broader readership “a failure common to artists’ book projects of the period.” Ibid.

¹²⁸As briefly noted in the beginning of this chapter, in the late 1980s and 1990s, The *Ur-Mutter* series showed at a few cutting-edge galleries such as Exit Art in SoHo, Ikon in Birmingham, Manchester, Bradford, and Cambridge UK as well as The John Weber Gallery in SoHo. Additionally, university museums such as the Wexner Center for Arts of Ohio State University and the Baltimore Fine Arts Gallery of University of Maryland displayed this work. Although I have not been able to locate thorough discussions on this series, the most substantial references are in the gallery and museum catalogues from the exhibitions held at the places listed above. Brenson, Michael. “Adrian Piper’s Head-On Confrontation of Racism.” *New York Times*, October 26, 1990, C36. Bishton, Derek. “Fear of the Other: Adrian Piper at the Ikon.” *Creative Camera* 5 (Feb/Mar 1992): 48-49. Ann Bremner, *Will/Power: New Works by Papo Colo Jimmie Durham David Hammons Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds, Adrian Piper, Aminah Brenda, Lynn Robinson* (Columbus: Wexner Center for Arts, 1993), 57. Berger, “The Critique,” 94-97.

¹²⁹Jo-Ann Lewis, “Images that Get under the Skin: Artist Adrian Piper, Fighting Racism with 3 Exhibits,” *The Washington Post*, June 22, 1991, G5.

Many scholars have cited the period when the *Ur-Mutter* series debuted as a notably precarious moment for art activism. Reviewing the heated controversies over the role of art in the late 1980s and early 1990s, art historians like Wendy Steiner may have overgeneralized the situation by pointing to the mutual resentment between art experts and the public.¹³⁰ Instead, as the several discourses surrounding *Ur-Mutter* #8 imply, multiple ideological and sociological factors influenced Americans' different notions about art at the time. Attuned to the complexity of the debates about art, Edward Said aligned the perceived separation of cultural experts from the realm of the American public and politics with Reagan era ideologies. In his opinion, the atomization of labor and disciplines had been underway since the second half of the twentieth-century, but became ever more inhibiting during Reagan's presidency (1981-1989). As a consequence, Said explained, art and humanities acquired a reputation for being peripheral and self-contained fields that were ill equipped to deal with outside matters.¹³¹

Working against this predicament, Piper and Koons championed art's relevance to popular culture and popular politics, albeit in strikingly different terms, but it seems their approaches did not fully escape art's elitist connotations at the time. As far as available exhibition records indicate, the *Ur-Mutter* series remained within cutting-edge art spaces and academic settings (see footnote 128). Aside from the notes about this work in the catalogues and reviews that accompanied these

¹³⁰Wendy Steiner, *The Scandal of Pleasure: Art in the Age of Fundamentalism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 8.

¹³¹Edward Said, "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed., Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983), 135-153.

exhibitions, allusions to the series occasionally surfaces in scholarly publications specifically on Piper or contested cultural identities, but receives no recognition in art historical survey texts.¹³² Because Piper's *Ur-Mutter* #8 may not have had contact with people outside art centers and academia or may not have provided profound insights for those unacquainted with the artistic and intellectual traditions that it references, the photomontage could be seen as somewhat esoteric. Arguably, Koons's work more successfully frustrated highbrow art rhetoric and harnessed a populist message by embracing the fashions of commercial culture. Nevertheless, this success resulted from his art's endorsement of privileged perspectives. Consequently, in the *Artforum* ad, Koons's ironic maneuvers distract from greater systematic disparities and re-inscribe them by only showing the perspectives of dominant culture. As *Ur-Mutter* #8 insinuates, Koons's handling of popular vernaculars and artistic traditions troubles the positions of the privileged (e.g. *Artforum* initiates, white males, and Westerners), but does so at the expense of other groups via a refusal to acknowledge their views.

Piper sets up the *Artforum* ad as a relatively one-sided critique, but she does not join it with the *Ur-Mutter* photograph to create a binary. Instead, this comparison hints at the many ways that society compartmentalizes art from politics and how people from all walks of life insulate themselves from otherness. With this chapter, I

¹³²In the two-volume anthology of Piper's art and art essays there is no discussion of the *Ur-Mutter* series, this series only surfaces as a reproduction of *Ur-Mutter* #2 in the second volume. Beyond publications about Piper, books on contested cultural identities in art such as González's *Subject to Display* and O'Brian's, *Reimaging America* mention the series in passing. Adrian Piper, *Order, Out of Sight 2: Selected Writings in Art Criticism 1967-92*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 159. Jennifer A. González, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2008) Mark O'Brian, *Reimaging America: The Arts of Social Change* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1990), 287, 294-295.

have explored how art institutions' fortify social stratification and how various aspects of *Ur-Mutter #8* can be seen as invalidating, but also internalizing these partitions. By picturing the Somali mother' image within discursive frameworks that previously excluded this woman, Piper might evidence her own reliance on these frameworks even as her appropriation upsets them. Yet, the immersive conditions and subversive edge of Piper's work compiles with Abigail Solomon-Godeau's notion of a critical practice that is "predicated on its ability to sustain critique from within the heart of the system it seeks to put in question."¹³³ The *Ur-Mutter* motif does not provide a solution to the exclusionary practices depicted in Koons's *Artforum* ad, but rather implores viewers to question these practices. Additionally, Piper's use of Turnley's photograph presents unresolved tensions for her audience to contemplate. In *Ur-Mutter #8*, this image's implication in discriminatory art constructs demonstrates the unavoidability of biases in art, but at the same time, Piper's appropriation appears to give authority and visibility to previously overlooked identity groups.

¹³³Solomon-Godeau's definition of a critical practice derives from her interpretation of Walter Benjamin's definition. She wrote "Benjamin's rhetorical question of 1938 is still germane: 'Rather than ask, "What is the *attitude* of a work to the relations of production of its time?" I should like to ask, "What is its *position* in them?" The relevance of this question is that it underscores the need for critical practices to establish a contestatory space in which the *form* of utterance or address speaks to otherwise unrecognised, or passively accepted, meanings, values and beliefs which cultural production normally reproduces and legitimizes." This line of reasoning guides my analysis here. Abigail Solomon Godeau, "Living with Contradictions: Critical Practices in the Age of Supply-Side Aesthetics," *Screen* (Summer 1987), 19.

Conclusion

Ur-Mutter #8 not only underscores the issues of exploitation that Koons's *Artforum* ad already signals, it also scrutinizes the anxieties that belie these unjust power relations: mainly the fear of racial, gender, and cultural equality. I have inferred that this resistance to inequality undergirds the supremacist attitude that Koons's ad ironically, but defensively expresses (chapter one); the related suppression of non-white, male subjectivities by avant-garde traditions (chapter two), and institutional sexism and racism among leading American art professionals during the late 1980s and early 1990s (chapter three). Arguing that, "Racism (like sexism) is primarily a visual pathology.... [And] Art is primarily a visual medium," Piper points out that "political art would seem to have the potential for furnishing a forceful antidote to racism. It is worth investigating ...why political art in general has been charged with impotence..."¹³⁴ This paper has argued that *Ur-Mutter #8* launches one such investigation. With the photomontage, Piper explores ideological investments in art's impotence. In effect, the piece frames Koon's exhibition ad as an example of how American art institutions at the time were only willing to back artists whose work reaffirmed hegemonic cultural values and the privileged identities they bolstered.

¹³⁴ Adrian Piper, "Goodbye to Easy Listening," in *Pretend*, ed., Adrian Piper and Mary Anne Staniszewski (New York: Colorstone Printing, Inc., 1990), 3.

My first chapter posits that in Koons's ad the artist poses a wealthy, white, Western, masculine persona in a way that both complicates such hegemonic dispositions and legitimizes them. When Piper, an artist known for her interrogations of political inequities, reproduces his ad, Koons's ironic handling of art's implication in the discriminatory facets of consumer culture looks like an attempt to make light of political conflicts. Because his picture conveys a morally ambivalent or even haughty attitude toward power dynamics, when it is seen beside an image that references disadvantaged people's extreme hardships and their dignified protest against oppression, it can be read as expressing the perspective of an apathetic oppressor. Expanding on this interpretation, my first chapter relates the *Ur-Mutter* image and the *Artforum* ad to discourses concerning racism, sexism, and classism in the 1980s. The next chapter connects Koons's and Piper's treatment of these issues with the artists' representational strategies. Whereas critics and scholars conceived of Koons as part of dominant avant-garde narratives, Piper self-consciously situated her practice in opposition to what she presents as the patriarchal and Eurocentric undercurrents of the avant-garde. With Turnley's photograph of a Somali woman, Piper's photomontage invokes constructs of social differences and anxieties about otherness that the artistic dialogues in which the *Artforum* ad participates have historically elided. My final chapter meditates on stereotypes of otherness and mechanisms of other-ing as perpetuated by leading art establishments, while examining how the *Ur-Mutter* motif exposes these tensions.

Similarly, throughout this paper, I have tried to dissect the debates played out in the *Ur-Mutter* #8 to refocus them. I concentrate on those discourses that illuminate

how art's political impact and implications vary according to specific social circumstances and subjective positions. Art historians often align these considerations with work from the 1980s and many survey texts, like David Hopkins's *After Modern Art 1945-2000* put these discussions of identity under the rubric of a "postmodernism of resistance."¹³⁵ Although Piper and Koons each resisted mainstream commercial art networks by spotlighting their exclusive and elitist systems, critics have mostly refrained from comparing the two artists' philosophies or methods. In a sense, Piper invites this comparison through *Ur-Mutter #8*, but additional references to the encompassing series are few and far between, while hardly anyone seems to have taken note of this individual photomontage. For instance, the Adrian Piper Archives staff has been unable to locate text associated with it. In my research, I came across numerous accounts of Koons's *Banality* exhibition (reportedly a cause célèbre) and the *Art Magazine Ads* that accompanied it, but could only find two descriptions of *Ur-Mutter #8*. One is a sentence in a brief *New York Times* article and the second is an observation, which Laura Cottingham relegates to a footnote in her book *Seeing Through the Seventies: Essays on Feminism and Art*.¹³⁶ This is not for Piper's lack of accolades at the time. In 1990, Michael Brenson went as far as to say that she owned "the fall [art show] season in New York," Bruce Checefsky called her "one the most important critical performance/visual artists" and Jo-Ann Lewis talked about Piper

¹³⁵David Hopkins, *After Modern Art 1945-2000* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 211.

¹³⁶Michael Brenson, "Adrian Piper's Head-On Confrontation of Racism," *New York Times*, October 26, 1990, C36. Laura Cottingham, *Seeing through the Seventies: Essays on Feminism and Art (Critical Voices in Art, Theory and Culture)* (Reading: G&B Arts International, 2000), 70.

reaching the height of her career.¹³⁷ Then why, one might wonder, did a piece that enacts a face-off between two famous artists of that moment fall through the cracks?

Did supervisors of the books, catalogs, and exhibition spaces that presented Piper's work regard *Ur-Mutter #8* as a professional hazard and omit it? Was Piper strategic or cautious about showcasing the piece for same reason? Indeed, in the essay "A Paradox of Conscience," published the year of the *Ur-Mutter* series, she carefully avoided naming *Banality*, Koons, and the *Artforum* ad, but still managed to tear the exhibition, the artist, and the image to pieces (see my introduction).¹³⁸

Perhaps she glosses over these particulars to get at the larger ethical and social stakes of contemporary art that Koons broaches. Like Piper's article, a discussion on *Ur-Mutter #8* runs the risk of reducing the matter of art's political sway to one artist's distaste for another. Yet, the work appears to refuse the notion that Piper's encounter with Koons's ad exists as an isolated event. Instead *Ur-Mutter #8* helps viewers visualize how the *Artforum* picture touches individuals like the hypothetical Somali woman who will never see it, or know about artists like Koons and Piper. This photomontage also challenges viewers to inspect the conventions (pictorial and political) that cast certain subjects as remote, as removed, or as society's untouchables. If by raising such quandaries, *Ur-Mutter #8* alludes to art's capacity to both thwart and forge contact among people, then Koons's depiction of art's political feebleness seems a motion to prevent change by deriding those who mobilize art as a

¹³⁷Brenson, "Adrian," C36. Bruce Checefsky, "Ohio: Adrian Piper, The College of Wooster Museum of Art Wooster," *New Art Examiner* 18, no.4 (December 1990),45. Jo-Ann Lewis, "Images that Get under the Skin: Artist Adrian Piper, Fighting Racism with 3 Exhibits," *The Washington Post*, June 22, 1991, G5.

¹³⁸Adrian Piper, "A Paradox of Conscience: Analytic Philosophy and the Ethics of Contemporary Art Practice," *New Art Examiner* 16, no. 8 (April 1989), 27-31.

vehicle for progress. Piper matches the hyperbole of the *Artforum* ad, with a piercing photograph that she makes speak. This paper wrestles with the ideological circumstances that might explain why American audiences and reviewers were so quick to engage with Koons's extreme, self-disparaging vision, but reluctant to take up the self-consciousness and idealism of Piper's *Ur-Mutter* image.

IMAGES



Fig. 1: Adrian Piper, *Ur-Mutter # 8*, 1989, enlarged magazine photos with silkscreened text, 36 x 46 cm. Photocredit: Jeff Koons/ *Artforum*; Peter Turnley/Black Star. Image courtesy of Adrian Piper Research Archive.



Fig. 2: Jeff Koons, *Pink Panther*, 1988, porcelain. 104.1 x 52.1 x 48.2 cm. The Museum of Modern Art.



Fig. 3: Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being: I Embody Everything You Most Hate and Fear* 1975, oil crayon on black and white photograph, 18 x 26 cm. Image courtesy of Larry Qualls Archive.

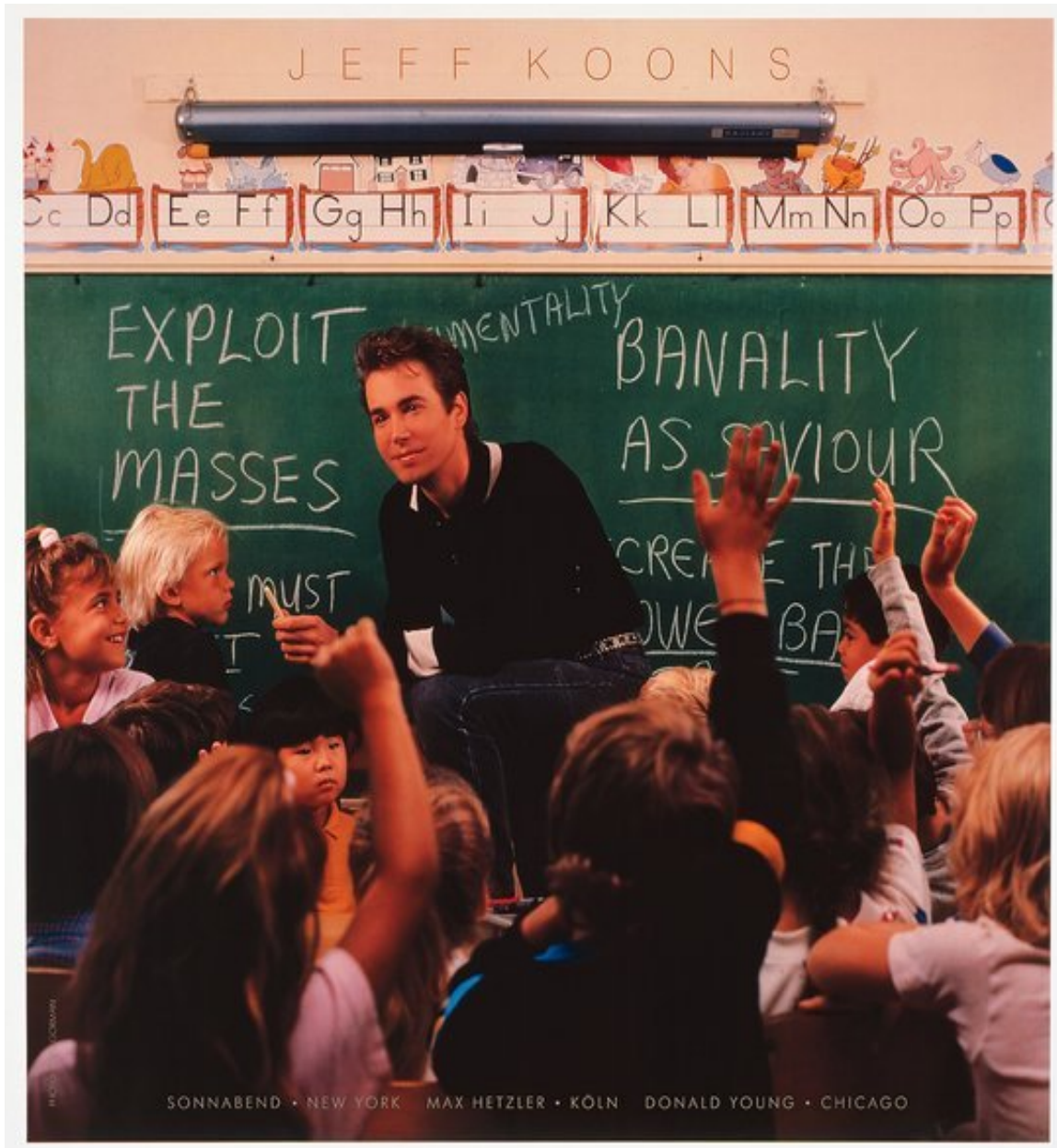


Fig. 4: Jeff Koons, *Artforum* ad in *Art Magazine Ads*, 1988-89, photograph. 90.2 x 69.9 cm. Image courtesy of Phillips de Pury & Company.

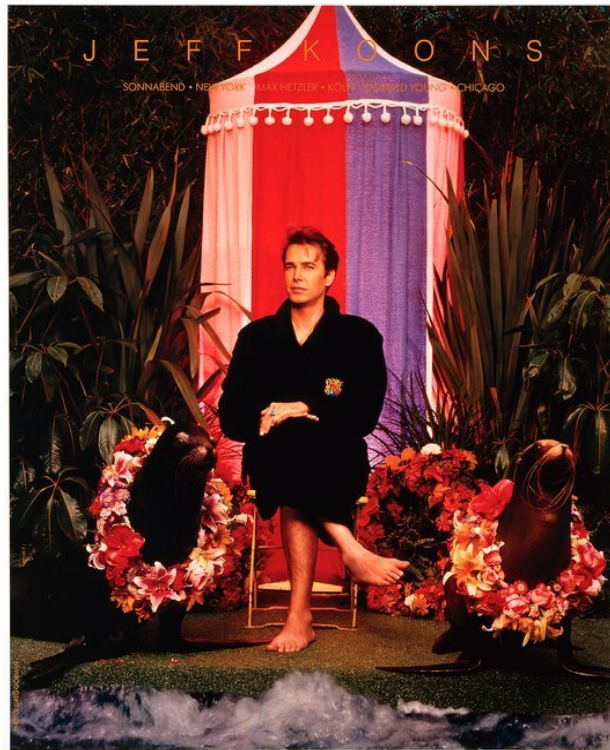


Fig. 5: Jeff Koons, *Art in America* ad in *Art Magazine Ads*, 1988-9, photograph. 90.2 x 69.9 cm. Image courtesy of Phillips de Pury & Company.



Fig. 6: Jeff Koons, *Flash Art* ad in *Art Magazine Ads*, 1988-89, photograph. Image courtesy of Phillips de Pury & Company.

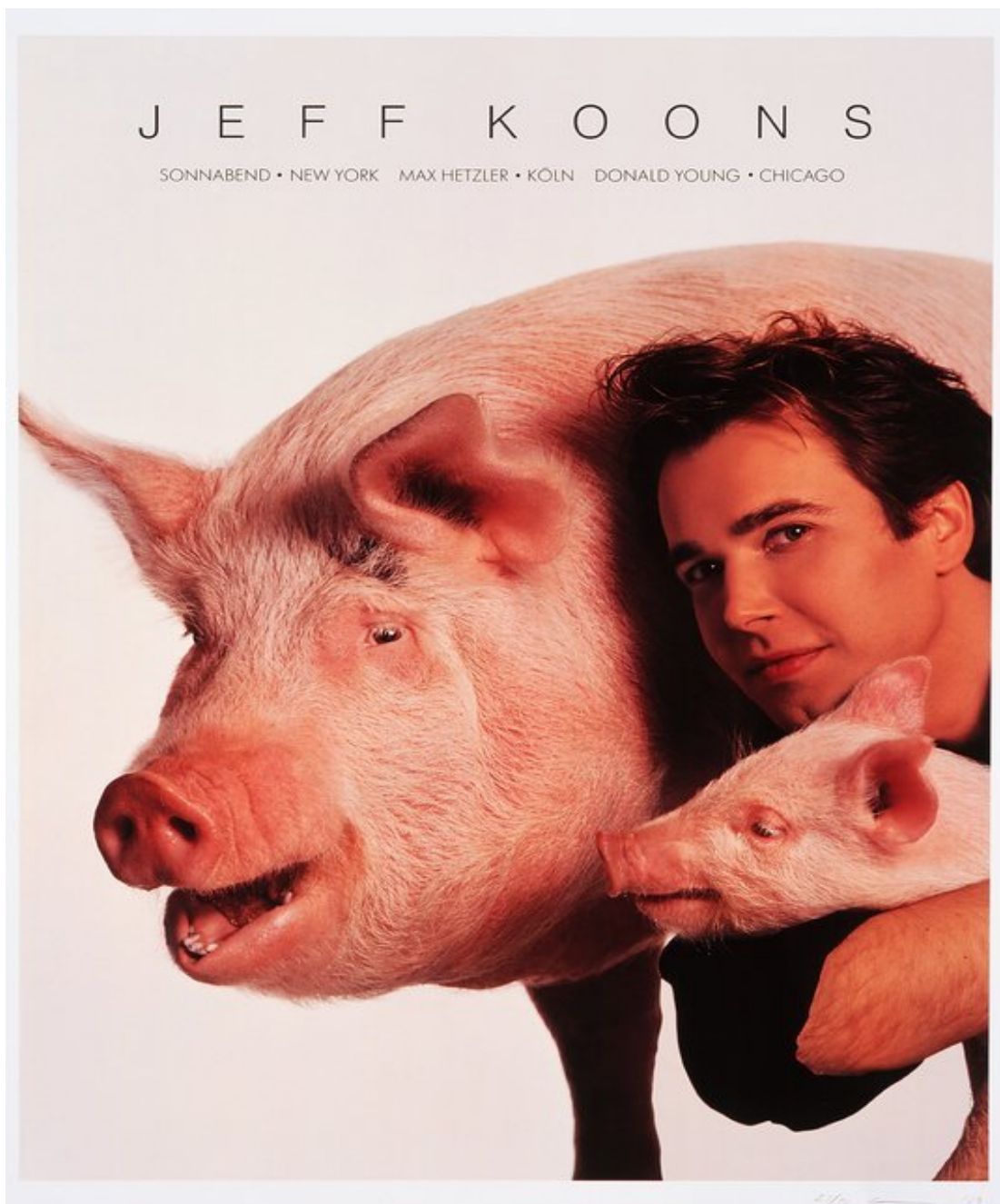


Fig. 7: Jeff Koons, *Flash Art* ad in *Art Magazine Ads*, 1988-89, photograph. Image courtesy of Phillips de Pury & Company.

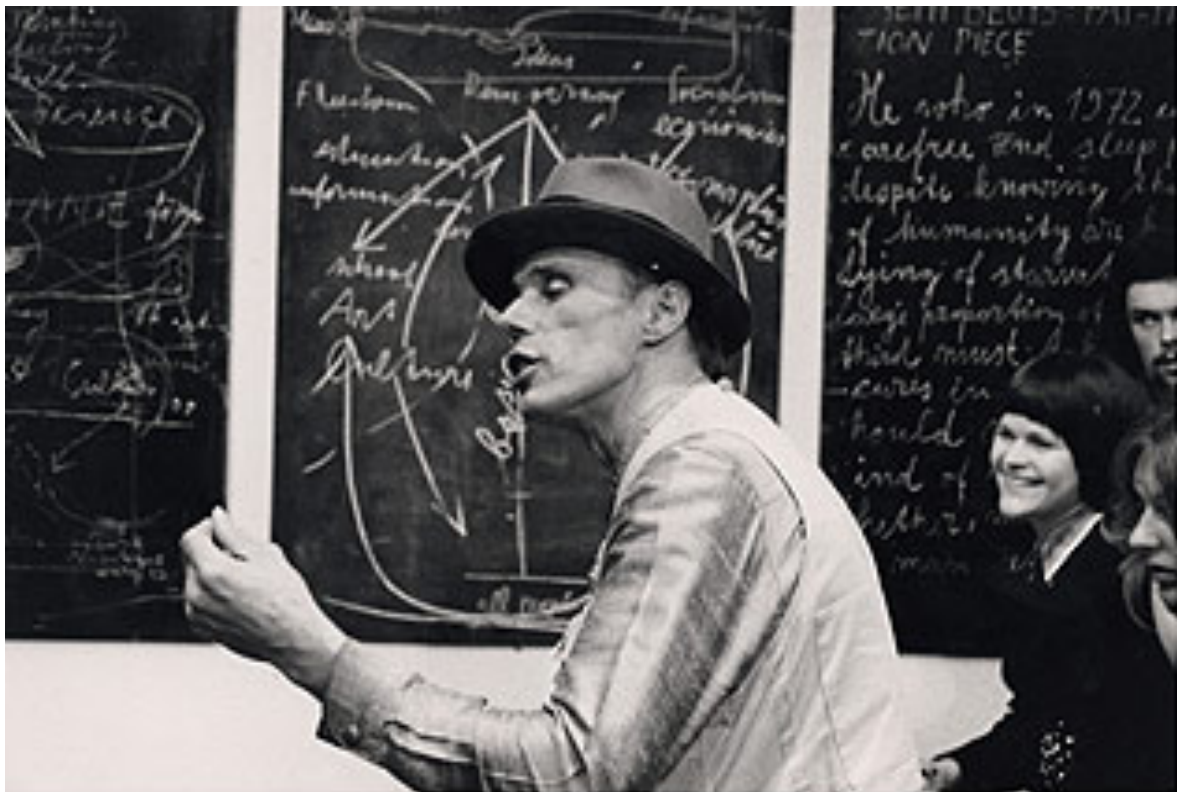


Fig. 8: Joseph Beuys's Action Piece, 1972, photograph of presentation held at the Tate Gallery on February 24 and March 23, 1972.



Fig. 10: Oliver Harrington, *“Boy, this shot will drive ’em wild with envy back home when our photo club has its autumn get-together,”* 198-?, cartoon.

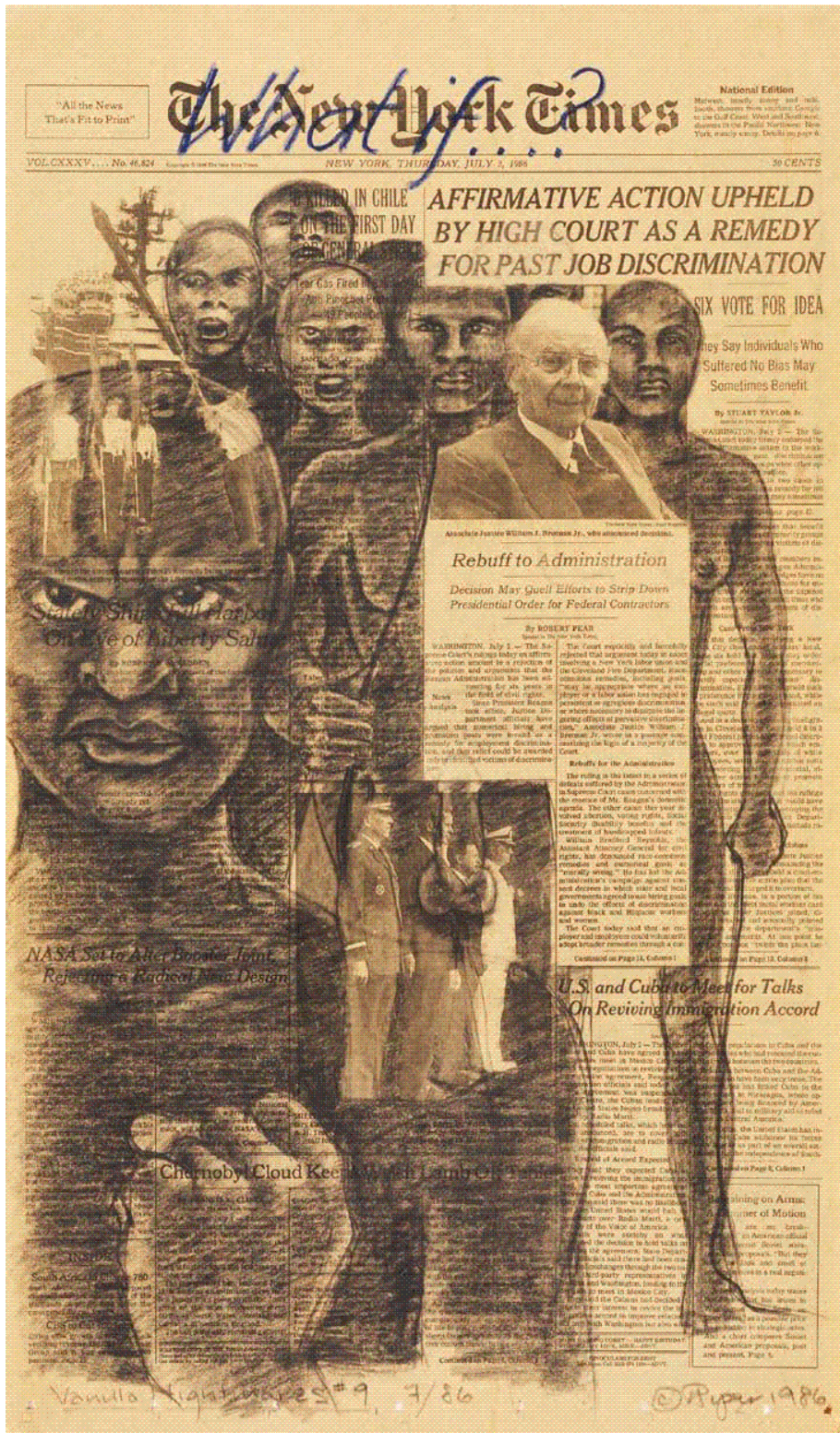


Fig. 11: Adrian Piper, *Vanilla Nightmares* #9, 1986, charcoal and oil crayon on *New York Times* page, 56 x 35 cm.

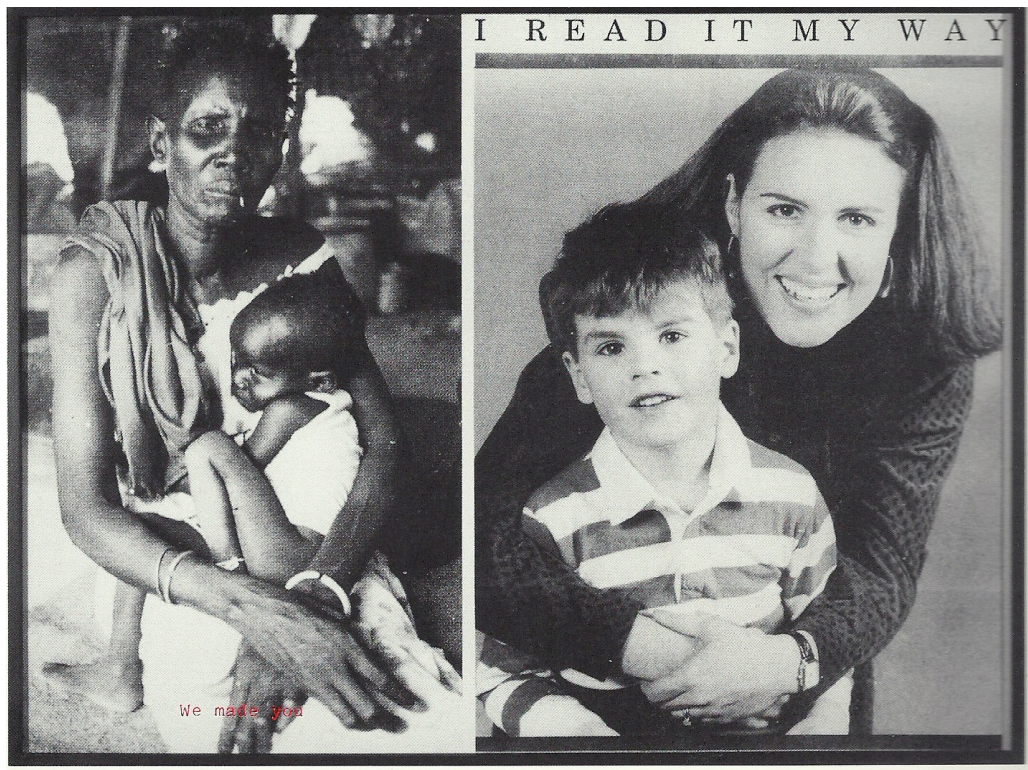


Fig. 12: Adrian Piper, *Ur-Mutter* #5, 1989, enlarged magazine photos with silkscreened text. Photocredit: Peter Turnley/Black Star; Larry Barnes/ *New York Times*.



Fig. 13: Adrian Piper, *Ur-Mutter* # 6, 1989, enlarged magazine photos with silkscreened text. Photocredit: Peter Turnley/Black Star.



Fig. 14: Nancy Spero, *The Goddess Nut II*, 1990, handprinted and paper collage on paper five panels, overall 213 x 274 cm.



Fig. 15: Renée Cox, *Yo Mama*, 1993, black –and- white photograph, 213 x 122 cm.



Fig. 16: Adrian Piper, *Pretend #1*, 1990, seven enlarged newspaper photographs with silkscreened texts, one enlarged photo of pencil drawing on paper.
 Photocredit: Gerald Mart Martineau/ *The Washington Post*.



Fig. 17: Adrian Piper, *Pretend* #2. 1990, newspaper photographs with silkscreened texts, 109 x 53 cm, 109 x 86cm, 109 x 77 1/2cm. Photocredit: Peter Turnley/Black Star; Larry Barnes/ *New York Times*. Image courtesy of University of California, San Diego.

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