

I Post, Therefore I Am: Individuality and Internet

by [Kai Tomizawa](#)

The piece from afar looks cold and matter-of-fact: a baby-blue shelf at eye level containing jars of dark substance, flanked by two framed documents. A conceptual piece, maybe? I walk closer, stroll the length of the shelf from left to right. Poised like heirlooms on a mantle are sixteen honey jars filled with dark curly hair, hair that gradually becomes more and more gray. Once I reach the very end of the shelf, I see a collection of fingernail clippings filling one and a half small jars. And is that . . . skin? Bits of dead skin among the clippings? I recoil and turn to the documents, framed sheets of letter paper.

The one to the left of the shelf is written formally, expressing the artist Adrian Piper's desire to donate her hair, fingernails, bits of skin, and finally – after she dies – her cremated remains to the MoMA. The document to the right of the shelf is written like a diary entry, sharing the many reasons why “1985 was a bad year.” It's so blatant, I think. So skin-crawlingly strange. Despite an initial feeling of discomfort, or maybe spurred on by it, I indulge in the strangeness. There's a formality to this piece – the framing, the arrangement of jars like relics – yet the words and items are daringly intimate. Adrian Piper's conceptual piece “What Will Become of Me” (1985-present) is the artist's self-representation in fragments, but we get the sense that she's holding something back, forcing us to craft a narrative she refuses to spell out herself.

In 1985, unless you were an artist, you probably didn't get the opportunity to put yourself on display for audience interpretation. Today, that's not the case. As Gia Tolentino illustrates in her article “The I in the Internet,” the act of putting yourself online for anyone to view has shifted from a pastime to an imperative. Over the last couple decades, digital experiences have overtaken and then surpassed how we viewed offline experiences, and now, Tolentino argues, the two are inextricable. This is Web 2.0, and we must catalog our existence digitally to feel whole. The Internet no longer reflects our offline reality and identity, but defines it. Further, we're incentivized monetarily to achieve online success through the polished portrayals of our lives. We see this in the rise of influencers who are known for their hashtag relatability. Tolentino references sociologist Irving Goffman's theory of the performed self in which he claims our every interaction is a performance for a different audience, and it's these performances that make up our identity. Tolentino argues that compounding every facet of our life online has warped our performances and thus our self-image. Our interactions are a mirage of

communication signaling our personal identity as a performance for no one and everyone at once.

This continuous piece in the MoMA, created by conceptual artist Adrian Piper and entitled "What Will Become of Me" (which she began in 1985 and still contributes hair and clippings to today) makes me think of the ways we try to catalog our existence, to assert our selfhood through an external record of our pain and trauma. Like many of our current online interactions, Piper's piece is self-referential. It also sits in that familiar intersection between public and personal, anonymous and hypervisible. And, in my opinion, it achieves the uniqueness we often seek when we represent ourselves online. I wonder, to what extent does cataloging our existence help assert our individuality?

In finding links between the article and the artwork, I recognize my impulse to view Piper's artwork through the lens of Web 2.0, to see something crudely personal on display to an audience and automatically treat it as an example of performed authenticity. But it would be a disservice, I realize, to shoehorn Piper's message into one that subscribes to the societal norms of today. In our search for "the dream of the better, truer self on the Internet" (Tolentino), we engage increasingly in contrived casualness: blurry Instagram photo dumps, being real, *oops my thumb slipped and I took this candid selfie*. It's like performing on a stage we pretend not to be on. I would argue that we aren't encouraged to create just a catalog of our existence, but to curate narratives and fit within fixed aestheticized personas. And though we're often told this is the height of personal freedom because we can control our image, the culture of false authenticity online is ultimately restrictive.

As someone who wants to make a career in art, I'm reminded how my digital identity affects my future. Online, I have to appeal to future audiences, collaborators, and investors along with my inner circle. I feel the need to post and interact regularly so that people don't forget I exist. I should put my work online and display my fun and popular personality because in showbiz, that matters. But I don't want to be *too* fun. As we were warned in our Tisch orientation, our success at this digital game has real-life effects. If you aren't already portraying the right image to future employers, a faculty member told us, lock it down.

But how does Piper assert her identity? Piper displays only what she wants to display. She chooses to represent her years through these artifacts and them alone. She allows us to view the bodily remnants we all shed, highlighting ubiquity but rejecting our approval. And she doesn't owe us anything more. I come back to that initial feeling of discomfort, when I first saw Adrian Piper's piece. Having grown up with what Tolentino would call Web 2.0, I too have judgments about what's appropriate for display, but I think Piper wants to make us uncomfortable. After all, discomfort holds power.

Works Cited

Piper, Adrian. *What Will Become of Me*. 1985, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Tolentino, Jia. "The I in the Internet." *CCCB LAB*, 19 Feb. 2020, <https://lab.cccb.org/en/the-i-in-the-internet/>.