

Arendt's Unbearable Loneliness: Adrian Piper's The Probable Trust Registry

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In 2015, American artist Adrian Piper won the coveted Golden Lion (best in show) award at the Venice Biennale for her participatory artwork *The Probable Trust Registry* (Figures 1 & 2). This paper is an investigation of *The Probable Trust Registry* and how it overlaps with Hannah Arendt's ideas of political isolation and loneliness. The questions being asked are: Can *The Probable Trust Registry* act as a "politically coherent" way to gauge loneliness—the human condition that Arendt believed led to the destruction of democracy and the development of totalitarianism?¹ Does the creation, implementation, and reception of a participatory work of art tell us something about the state of our political climate and possibly indicate a moment of impending crisis?

Piper is an especially appropriate artist to evaluate because of the fluidity between her creative practice and her educational background. Piper was an integral player in the conceptual and performance art movements in New York City in the 1970s.² She embarked on a series of performances that tested the limits of what constitutes a work of art, where a work of art should be shown, and who should be involved with the work itself. She also received her PhD in philosophy from Harvard University, studying under John Rawls.

Piper simultaneously acts as artist and scholar moving within a political schema. This is demonstrated in her body of work that includes performances,

performance documentation (photographs, posters, and other visuals) and writings (manifestos and analyses). Because of the variety of her source material, Piper is the perfect example in which to study the relationship between performance art and political action.

This paper is divided into four parts. Part one clarifies Arendt's definitions of loneliness and isolation. Part two describes *The Probable Trust Registry* as a work of art. Part three discusses *The Probable Trust Registry* using Arendt's framework. Part four includes concluding remarks.

I

In the final section of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt says:

what prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness ... has become an everyday experience of the ever growing masses of our century.³

Loneliness is an important idea to Arendt because it indicates a failure in the basic way a person, as a “political animal,” functions in the world, which she sees as plurality. Arendt, like Aristotle and others, believes that we are ultimately people in and of the world, not people who think within the barriers of their minds. The world, she asserts, must be preserved so that “Men, not man” can gather together.⁴

Plurality, then, is the basic condition of our political world, and it is comprised of diverse individuals who think and act. Thinking and acting are inter-related. A person considers her world in solitude (thinks), participates in the world through words and deeds (acts), and then retreats back into solitude (thinks) in order to reconsider and reconcile what she has experienced in the world.⁵ The movement between the solitude of thinking and the publicity of acting is what protects and challenges the individual thoughts that are needed to support public life.

But the cycle of thinking and acting can deteriorate. Arendt believes that when we no longer find the thoughts of other people important we retreat into isolation, where our own company is the only place we find meaning. Further, and more despairing, when we no longer take interest in ourselves and our own thoughts, when we cease to think, we become lonely. She says,

“What makes loneliness so unbearable is the loss of one’s own self which can be realized in solitude, but confirmed in its identity only by the trustworthy companion of my equals.”⁶

Arendt uses the same adjective “unbearable” seven years later when describing loneliness in *The Human Condition*. She says, “loneliness is so contradictory to the human condition of plurality that it is simply unbearable

for any length of time.”⁷ Arendt reminds us that if we are “political animals,” then we crave the companionship of others where we can assert ourselves as both similar and distinct.⁸ When we are lonely, we engage with the world thoughtlessly, without regard to our self or other, and act without the need to reflect upon its consequences. When we are surrounded by other lonely people, the outcome can be irrational and unpredictable. Arendt concludes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that a contagion of isolation and loneliness directly impacted the growth of totalitarianism in Europe in the beginning of the 20th century.

In what ways can Arendt’s analysis serve 21st century politics with its resurgence of nationalism? Arendt would want us to look for signs of isolation and loneliness before they lead us into political disaster. This can be accomplished through discussions around participatory art but Arendt might be wary. She had a very traditional point of view surrounding the work of art. She believed that art was an object—a product of *homo faber*. Though it could be meaningful, the work of art did not constitute political action.⁹ What is interesting, however, is that as Arendt was teaching at the New School before her death in 1975, a new generation of artists was emerging in her very neighborhood. Performance art, formally constituted by artists in Downtown Manhattan in the 1970s, began to reevaluate the ways in which art manifested itself as a combination of object, process, action, and material.¹⁰ It divorced itself from institutionalized art spaces and took to the streets. It spoke to individual experiences, communities, politics, and the body. This form of art as non-object might have intrigued Arendt as a political possibility. It is here that Adrian Piper’s *The Probable Trust Registry* will serve as an example to consider.

II

The Probable Trust Registry was originally shown in Elizabeth Dee Gallery in 2014 and was later exhibited at the “All the World’s Futures” pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale where it won the Golden Lion.

At first blush, *The Probable Trust Registry* appears to be an office space. When entering the exhibit, you encounter a reception area with three desks where volunteers wait to give you a sheet of paper with what Piper calls the “rules of the game.” You are asked to consider these rules and, if agreed upon, sign a declaration of values promising to uphold them moving forward. These items are: I will always be too expensive to buy; I will always mean what I say; and I will always do what I say I am going to do.¹¹

If you are willing, your declaration is collected and combined with other declarations into a book. This collection forms a public document that affirms a new consensus between other participants of the work who were, before then,

just a disparate group of people. The book is given to the APRA Foundation Berlin and will be confidentially held for 100 years. Each signatory is given a copy of the book to remind them of their commitment to themselves and others.¹²

III

In his introduction to *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, Robert Storr states that, “Piper casts the artist as an agent of social change” but can we consider the participation and reception of *The Probable Trust Registry* as indicative of political isolation and/or loneliness?¹³

Here we will use Arendt’s framework. If loneliness is determined by the deterioration of plurality because of the absence of thinking and acting, and we want to know if the work of art can indicate political isolation and/or loneliness, then one way to evaluate the work of art is through these questions: First, does *The Probable Trust Registry* exist within plurality? Second, does the work cause the participant to engage in thinking? Third, does the work cause the participant to engage in action? If *The Probable Trust Registry* can positively answer these questions, then it seems reasonable to at least consider the work of art as a barometer of political mood.

The Venice Biennale is an example of plurality both in terms of its visitors and participants. The Biennale is comprised of three components: pavilions hosted by individual countries with native artists, a pavilion curated to include international artists, and events that support the overall exhibition theme. At the 2017 show, the Biennale saw some 615,000 visitors and included 86 host countries, a diverse cross-section of our global community.¹⁴ *The Probable Trust Registry* was included in “All the World’s Future,” the international exhibition, framing it as a project whose concept transcended the scope of a specific, national pavilion.¹⁵

Also, *The Probable Trust Registry* asked individual participants to engage in what Arendt would consider thinking. Through engaging in the rules of the game (I will always be too expensive to buy; I will always mean what I say; and I will always do what I say I am going to do), Piper asks us to reflect upon our own orientation in the world.

As Chloe Bass remarks in her review of *The Probable Trust Registry* in *Hyperallergic*,

If we really choose to remember and live by them [declarations], we’ll be questioning the relationship between our actions and their veracity at nearly all times. We can only learn more through participation, the kind that ultimately resides between us and ourselves.¹⁶

This moment of reflection is as important to Piper as it is with Arendt. Whether you can adhere to the rules must be questioned, and you must be honest with yourself about your ability to do so.

Finally, *The Probable Trust Registry* asks individual participants to act in the world with others by not only agreeing or disagreeing with the statements (through thinking) but acting upon those thoughts through our commitment or non-commitment to the final document.

In a critical view of *The Probable Trust Registry*, *Guardian* writer Adrian Searle says:

At one of the sleek corporate desks I sign a contract. I could have made a personal declaration that “I will always be too expensive to buy,” but that was clearly a no-no.¹⁷

Searle's comment may be sardonic, but he is an example of thinking in solitude and acting as a consequence of thinking. Through this work, Searle knows he cannot fully comply with the agreement so he does not.

IV

In Elizabeth Dee Gallery's press release on *The Probable Trust Registry* she writes, “engagement with Piper's interactive installation offers the possibility to assess one's own philosophical obligations and to reevaluate complicit relationships to others.”¹⁸

The Probable Trust Registry, as a work of art, asks us to participate alongside global citizens, think about our commitment to the world, and then act upon those thoughts by signing or not signing the declaration, positively meeting our earlier criteria. But *The Probable Trust Registry* responds even more directly to Arendt's concerns about isolation and loneliness because, in considering Piper's agreement, it asks us: do you feel isolated? Do you, can you, should you be thoughtfully participating in the world around you? The overwhelmingly positive reception of *The Probable Trust Registry* at the Venice Biennale demonstrates that this work speaks to our political situation. It reveals that we want to participate in a shared work of art where our thoughts about personal responsibility, political action, and community are considered publically alongside others.

Political interaction has changed dramatically since *The Origins of Totalitarianism*'s publication. Because of this, we must reconsider how to identify isolation and loneliness so its momentum does not lead to political crisis, but linking performance art to Arendt's work is complicated. First, there is little scholarship on Arendt and aesthetics because the “work of art” is not at the core of her political inquiry. She talks about the work of art in *The*

Human Condition and engages with literature and poetry in *Reflections on Literature and Culture* but topics like these are underrepresented when compared to others she wrote on revolution and violence.¹⁹ Second, because performance art is a relatively new genre, critical studies on its relationship with traditional political theory are virtually non-existent. So, when looking at the intersection of Arendt, aesthetics, and performance art, there is quite a lot of work to be done from both a political and art historical perspective. Cecilia Sjoholm and Kimberly Curtis have both written texts on Arendt and aesthetics but neither specifically discuss performance.²⁰ It can be argued that the structure of performance and its engagement with others through words and deeds in public space requires a different type of analysis than the current one focused on the work of art as object. Performance seems to emerge more as political action than the work of art.

The Probable Trust Registry lends itself to an analysis of performance and Arendtian politics, specifically, because we are certain that Piper saw herself as a political agent and that the work, itself, explicitly tackles questions that Arendt found important. *The Probable Trust Registry* could serve as a case study for further, broader investigations in participatory art's ability to instruct us on political attitudes that might go unnoticed and, ultimately, might emerge to be an alternate form of political action altogether.

FIGURES

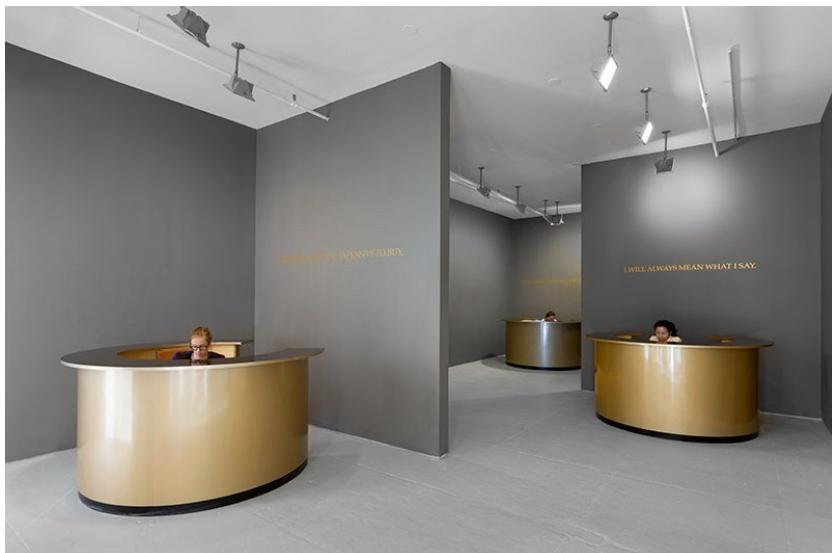


Fig. 1: Adrian Piper. *The Probable Trust Registry: The Rules of the Game #1-3*, 2013.

Photo credit: E. Frossard. Collection of the Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin. © APRA Foundation Berlin.



Fig. 2: Adrian Piper. *The Probable Trust Registry: The Rules of the Game #1-3*, 2013.
Photo credit: Emmtahn's Blog.

NOTES

1. Robert Storr, "Foreword," in *Out of Order, out of Sight. Volume I: Selected Writings in Meta-Art, 1968 - 1992* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996). Page xxiii.
2. Piper's work is included in seminal performance art historical texts like: RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, 3 ed. (New York, New York: Thames & Hudson, 2011). Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1997). Thomas McEvilley, *The Triumph of Anti-Art* (New York, New York: McPherson & Company, 2005).
3. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, New York: Harcourt, 1951). Page 478.
4. *The Human Condition* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1958). Page 7.
5. This statement is a synthesis of Arendt's idea of solitude in *The Human Condition* (page, 76), Arendt's exposition of action in *The Human Condition* (Book Chapter: Action), and her discussion of the space of appearances in *The Life of the Mind* (page 21).
6. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Page 477.

7. *The Human Condition*. Page 76.
8. *Ibid*. Page 175.
9. Arendt discusses the work of art as a product of *homo faber* in Section 23 of *The Human Condition*.
10. 10 Performance art, its definition and the impact that New York City artists made on the movements can be found in Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*.
11. Elizabeth Dee Gallery, “Exhibitions Adrian Piper: The Probable Trust Registry,” <http://now.elizabethdee.com/exhibitions-adrian-piper-the-probable-trust-registry/>.
12. *Ibid*.
13. Storr, “Foreword.” Page xvii.
14. La Biennale Venezia, <http://labiennale.or/la-biennale-di-venezia>.
15. It is important to note that the Venice Biennale has a long history. It began in 1895 with the intention of highlighting Italian artists. It was conceived by the Italian monarchy, was overseen by Mussolini and his fascist government, and is currently governed by an independent foundation in the hopes of connecting global, contemporary artists and organizations. The plurality that I discuss here is in the context of the current governance. “Venice Biennale,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venice_Biennale.
16. Chloe Bass, ““Adrian Piper Binds Us with Impossible Trust,” <http://hyperallergic.com/127622/adrian-piper-binds-us-with-impossible-trust/>.
17. Adrian Searle, “Venice Biennale: The World Is More Than Enough,” <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/11/venice-biennale-all-the-worlds-futures-review>.
18. Gallery, “Exhibitions Adrian Piper: The Probable Trust Registry.”
19. Hannah Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007). *On Revolution* (New York, New York: The Viking Press, 1963); *On Violence* (New York, New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1969).
20. Cecilia Sjoholm, *Doing Aesthetics with Arendt: How to See Things* (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). Kimberly Curtis, *Our Sense of the Real: Aesthetic Experience and Arendtian Politics* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1999).

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"Venice Biennale." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venice_Biennale.

