Abstract:

In 1971, the artist Adrian Piper (b. 1948) devoted herself to studying Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* while undertaking a juice-and-water fast. “To anchor [her]self in the physical world,” she went to her mirror and took photographs of herself throughout the summer, calling this performance and the body of photographs she produced *Food for the Spirit*. Structured around a willful abstention from food, Piper’s performance shares basic similarities with anorexia nervosa, a complex psychological and physiological condition that was attracting increasing attention at the same time. This connection was made by at least one art critic shortly after the work’s public debut.

This paper reads Piper’s *Food for the Spirit* in relation to the growing body of medical, psychological, and popular writing about anorexia nervosa from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Rather than diagnosing Piper or her work as pathological, this paper considers Piper’s artwork, and contemporary discourses of anorexia nervosa, as parallel investigations of how the biological body interacts with the social and political world, and how the self understands, confirms, and controls its relationship to the body. Taken together, Piper’s project and the discursive body of the late 20th century American anorexic destabilize bounded conceptions of the body and its illnesses.