The words “Application for Employment” appear at the top of this work but this is much more than a simple job application. You see the usual questions and fields: name and address, social security number, qualifications, experience, references. However, you also notice a graphite drawing of a large face that takes up much of the space in the center of the form. Like a kind of ghostly watermark, the figure—whose only visible features are its head and neck—looks straight ahead with an open mouth, as though about to speak.

The artist, Adrian Piper, has used a generic application form and rendering of a face on it to deftly contrast how applications are used to create a “portrait” of a person and their worth in relation to the topic of the form. (In this case, their suitability for some type of paid work.) The application asks numerous questions and yet—in looking at the face on the form—the answers will tell us very little about that person and their aspirations, values, preferences, or challenges. Indeed, Piper is particularly focused on the way in which a form that is supposedly objective (note the phrase “an equal opportunity employer” at the top of the page) still focuses on opportunities (educational, professional, etc.) from which people of color have historically been excluded.

Reflecting on this contrast of face and form, the work takes on an eerie quality—what could that person tell us about themselves if we could hear them speak? Although the drawing of the face is actually on top of the form, it seems to recede behind the lines and words that create a barrier between the viewer and this unknown person.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Find a form or application and share it with students. Discuss what the form asks about a person. What does the form actually assess? What is it attempting to assess? What is the form missing? How much can a form actually tell us about a human being? How can a form perpetuate bias and exclusion?

Pair students together and have them collaboratively work on a questionnaire limited to 10 questions that they can use with each other. Ask them to fill out their partner’s answers. Then, ask the students to draw facial portraits of their partners. Have the class discuss what the portraits may have that the questionnaires were unable to capture, and vice versa.

VISIT THE BMA AND SEE THIS WORK BY ADRIAN PIPER
Untitled, 1990
Adrian Piper (American, born 1948). Graphite on printed form. Framed (exterior): 21 1/2 × 16 1/2 in. (54.6 × 41.9 cm.)
Sheet: 279 × 215 mm. (11 × 8 7/16 in.). The Baltimore Museum of Art: Print & Drawing Society Fund, with proceeds derived from the 1993 Contemporary Print Fair, BMA 1993.62. © APRA Foundation Berlin