



Adrian Piper, *Everything* #8, 2006. Mixed media installation for the Copenhagen Kunsthall: vitrine with glass, mirrors and stenciled text on pedestal. Vitrine: 78 3/4 x 46 x 32 5/8 in (200 x 117 x 83 cm). Courtesy of Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation, Berlin

Adrian Piper

Four school blackboards stand side-by-side along a wall. On each of them, a sentence handwritten in chalk twenty-five times: "Everything will be taken away." My first reaction: distance. Strangely enough, when I first read the phrase I at once heard it and spoke it silently in my head, yet still it gave me a sense of remoteness. Was it the future tense that caused this distance? The passive voice? The vagueness of "everything"? Who was trying to speak to me?

Then, the vague sensation of being confronted with code, which prompted me to try to decipher it. Should I take the blackboard and its writings literally? These blackboards are not the neutral objects they pretend to be. They are not mere black rectangles, but saturated with memories of school. And the repeated sentence, identical in its words, but not in its uneven handwritten form: It reminded me of punishment. Repeat twenty-five times, "I will not read under the table in class." (Something I remember vividly: artfully reading under the table, but, if called upon, always answering the teacher's question correctly.) Learning by repetition, rules and restraint.

But the sentence itself does not belong in this category of punishment. It is neither an order nor a request, but it isn't a promise or a prophecy, either. What it states will occur, without question; however, what this will entail is an extremely individual affair, different for each reader. These individual reactions are densely interwoven with collective imaginations. What is taken away can result in gain or loss, catastrophe or rescue, restraint or freedom.

With its repeated, abstracted form, the sentence approximates an object—a floating object. Like a piece of driftwood, it can take many directions. It does not address anybody; it states a future event as factual. Does its repetition make it stronger or weaker? And does its rigid framing take away its ephemeral aspect? The effect of undefined direction is stronger when it is said or sung, that is, when the sentence appears in a fleeting medium. But Piper's arrangement of the phrase is anything but fleeting, except for the impermanence of its medium, chalk on slate, meant to be wiped out to make room for the next instruction. Floating and remoteness come together, bound by the solidity and framing of the blackboards and the structure of repetition.

The viewer conceives what might comprise "everything": promise, menace, solace, or fear. A New York spectator might react through the memory and possible future of a whole range of gains, losses, perils, crises, storms, from many realms, two of which are fed by greed—the financial and the political. So in the end *Everything will be taken away* #21 might imply a challenge: How can we say good-bye to an empire and gain by it?

— Susanne Von Falkenhausen



