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Performance Art and Sexual Assault

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Abstract

This paper creates an art historical lineage to Emma Sulkowicz's 2014 performance *Carry That Weight: Mattress Performance*. *Carry That Weight* and Sulkowicz follows in the footsteps of works of Suzanne Lacy, Ana Mendieta, and Karen Finley. While the works selected span more than forty years they employ similar tactics, such as the involvement of the audience, shock value, and community outreach. This paper contends that these artists used these tactics to publicize the private affront of sexual assault and by doing so, created socially activated art. The performances by Lacy, Mendieta, Finley, and Sulkowicz examine the power dynamics of sexual assault and its effect on communities and the female body. These works are representative of contemporary artists' engagement with feminist thought and activism. The changes in this movement will be assessed through the differences in these artists' approach to the same subject matter. This paper uses visual evidence as well as scripts and recorded audience responses to fully support these performances as socially minded works of art.

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Introduction

In September of 2014, a Columbia University student began regularly carrying her dormitory mattress around her university's campus. The mattress, a standard extra long twin, and the student, Emma Sulkowicz, a senior Visual Arts major, quickly gained notice at Columbia and beyond. The transportation of her mattress around campus serves as the basis for Sulkowicz's senior performance art thesis entitled *Mattress Performance: Carry That Weight.* The ongoing performance acts as a protest against the university's failure to respond to Sulkowicz's allegation of rape committed by a fellow student at the start of her sophomore year in her very own dormitory bed. "I will be carrying this dorm room mattress with me everywhere I go for as long as I attend the same school as my rapist. And the piece could potentially take a day or go on until I graduate," Sulkowicz explained in September 2014.[1]

New York magazine art critic Jerry Saltz declared Sulkowicz's performance to be the best art show of 2014. He described *Carry That Weight* as "born of many things, among them righteous indignation, messianic rage, and the drive for justice."[2] *New York Times* art critic and Saltz's wife, Roberta Smith, also praised Sulkowicz's performance, calling it "succinct and powerful" and Sulkowicz "messianic."[3] While Sulkowicz's performance has garnered significant praise from the art world, she still faces numerous critics, both online and in person, who debase her and her sexual assault claim, and question her performance's validity as art.

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[1] Emma Sulkowicz, "Carry That Weight", Youtube video, 1:35:37, posted by BrooklynMuseum, December 17, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OMXp3RLOVNg
[2] Jerry Saltz, "The 19 Best Art Shows of 2014", *New York* magazine, December 15, 2014.
[3] Roberta Smith, "In a Mattress, a Lever for Art and Political Protest", *The New York Times*, September 21, 2014.

Carry That Weight debuted in a cultural climate tense about the prevalence and veracity of sexual assault. As of March 2015, more than seventy institutions of higher education are under federal investigation for mishandling sexual violence cases.[4] The Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network reports, "1 out of every 6 American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime," which amounts to a staggering 17 million women in total.[5] The Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network defines sexual assault as the "a crime of power and control" that includes penetration of the victim's body (also known as rape), attempted rape, forcing a victim to perform sexual acts, and unwanted sexual touching.[6] RAINN cites a host of both mental and physical after effects of sexual assault, including depression, substance abuse, self-harm, flashbacks, post-traumatic stress disorder, disassociation, eating disorders, and pregnancy.[7] The normalization and acceptance of sexual violence, known as rape culture, pervades society at large and allows for the widespread victimization of women.

Emma Sulkowicz is only the most recent woman artist to use performance art as a powerful protest against the prevalence and injustice of sexual assault. The contemporary prevalence of sexual assault in the public sphere warrants an examination of Sulkowicz's precursors. Additionally, *Carry That Weight* has not been associated with or compared to earlier performance artists that used sexual assault as a topic. *Carry That Weight* is not the first performance of its kind. In her article on *Carry That Weight*, Roberta Smith aligned Sulkowicz's work with the art of Vito Acconci, Tehching Hsieh and Marina

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[4] "Campus Sexual Assault Statistics," *Kirsten Gillibrand,* accessed March 25, 2015, http://www.gillibrand.senate.gov/campus-sexual-assault-stats.
[5] "Who Are the Victims?" *Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network*, accessed March 25, 2015, https://www.rainn.org/get-information/statistics/sexual-assault-victims.
[6] "Sexual Assault" *Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network*, accessed May 4, 2015, https://www.rainn.org/get-information/types-of-sexual-assault/sexual-assault.
[7] "Effects of Sexual Assault" *Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network*, accessed May 4th, 2015. https://www.rainn.org/get-information/effects-of-sexual-assault

Abramovic. Like these artists, Sulkowicz has powerfully used her body in an act of performative endurance but the goal of her work harkens back to a different group of artists. This thesis will place Sulkowicz's performance in a lineage of other performances on sexual assault that predated *Carry That Weight*, from the early 1970s to the present day. *Ablutions* (1972) by Suzanne Lacy, *Untitled (Rape Scene)*/violence tableaux (1973) by Ana Mendieta, *Three Weeks in May* (1977) by Lacy (and her re-visitation of this piece in January 2012), *The Constant State of Desire* (1986) and *We Keep Our Victims Ready* (1990) by Karen Finley are seminal performance art pieces on sexual assault that engage with feminist thought and activism. Sulkowicz's *Carry That Weight* combines elements of all three women's earlier works. This paper will construct an art historical lineage to *Carry That Weight* that positions the works of Lacy, Mendieta, and Finley as vital precursors to Sulkowicz's performance. This lineage will begin in the 1970s, at the height of second wave feminism, and continue to present day third wave feminism. Like Lacy, Mendieta, and Finley, Sulkowicz utilizes audience participation, community organization, shock, and her body to publicize and protest sexual assault and challenge the inherent power dynamics of sexual assault. These elements are the foundation for *Carry That Weight* and with them these performances engage viewers in a socially active way. Roberta Smith considers the most striking aspect of Sulkowicz's performance to be, "the way it fluctuates between private and public, and solitary and participatory."[8] In their art these women seek to make private affronts public so that they may be addressed and atoned for by society. Through their performances these women implicate and challenge their audiences to recognize the horror and pervasiveness of sexual violence

[8] Smith, "In a Mattress."

Suzanne Lacy's performance pieces, *Ablutions* and the original *Three Weeks in May* laid a foundation for art as a protest against sexual assault. *Ablutions* was performed in 1972 and included taped testimonials by rape survivors and visceral artistic symbols such as blood and clay. *Three Weeks in May* followed five years later. While it used many elements of *Ablutions,* such as nude female bodies, it expanded to incorporate the entire community of Los Angeles. The very basis of *Three Weeks* was a large map of the city which Lacy used to track cases of sexual violence, an artistic device that would continue in 2012's *Three Weeks in January.*

Ana Mendieta's *Untitled (Rape Scene)* and violence tableaux came in the wake of the 1973 rape and murder of her fellow classmate, a student named Sara Ann Otten. In protest of this violent act, Mendieta created a highly realistic performance depicting Otten's death. Following the performance Mendieta left crime scene objects strewn around her college campus. Mendieta created a periphery of violence by expanding her performance space to remind her audience of the invasive and ubiquitous nature of violence against women.

Many of Karen Finley's performances treat issues of sexual violence, however *The Constant State of Desire* (1986) and *We Keep Our Victims Ready* (1990) are distinct from Finley's oeuvre both for their focus on sexual assault and for the reaction they prompt from audiences. Both performances are indicative of Finley's stream of consciousness style and her use of props to mimic assault. In *The Constant State of Desire* and *We Keep Our Victims Ready*, Finley deconstructs power relations with her use of shifting personas and perspectives.

The performances by Lacy, Mendieta, and Finley serve as foundations and points of comparison for Sulkowicz's *Carry That Weight*. While these works vary in style and execution, they are linked through the artists' desire to protest sexual violence by addressing its latent power dynamics, its effects on the female body, feminist responses to sexual assault, and its larger societal repercussions. Lacy's *Three Weeks* series, like Sulkowicz's *Carry That Weight*, actively addresses a particular community. All four women employ a level of shock value: bodily functions are mimicked, vulgarity is used, and the horror of sexual assault is viscerally conjured in these pieces. Another tactic that pervades each performance is the heightened role of the audience.

Audience

Karen Finley uses obscenities and vulgarity in her work to shock and challenge her audience while Suzanne Lacy makes highly collaborative art that attempts to unite a community. Ana Mendieta surprises her audience with her performance, and by doing so, makes them implicit in a highly realistic scene of sexual assault. Similarly, Emma Sulkowicz's piece is both a collaboration with her audience and a challenge- will onlookers help or ignore her? The publicizing of a private matter such as sexual assault places the audience in a tenuous position. Will the spectators embrace the performance or will the disturbing nature of the subject matter offend and alienate them?

The role of the audience in performance art about sexual assault is elusive at times, but continually important. Art historian Amelia Jones asserts performance art, and its inherent use of the human body, creates an "identificatory bond" between performer and audience.[9] While Jones applied this term to all categories of performance art, it is

[9] As explored in Amelia Jones, "Dis/playing The Phallus: Male Artists Perform Their Masculinities." *Art History* 17.4, 1994, 549.

particularly relevant to the performances studied in this thesis. The intimate nature of art about sexual assault illustrates how this bond can either facilitate or deny a sympathetic connection between the artists and audience.

Additionally the utilization of the audience by Lacy, Mendieta, Finley and Sulkowicz is indicative of a larger culture's implication in the performance. Art historian Claire Bishop writes that art which seeks to "ameliorate society" commonly engages viewers and transforms their passive role, "the audience, previously conceived as 'viewer' or 'beholder', is now re-positioned as a co-producer or participant."[10] By addressing and involving their audiences as participants, these artists are using their viewers as a stand in for a society that accommodates rape culture. The implication of their audience is often used to dismantle the power dynamics of sexual assault. Lacy, Mendieta, Finley and Sulkowicz represent sexual assault victims in their work and place an impetus on their audiences to react in some way.

In "'Normal Ills': On Embodiment, Victimization, and the Origins of Feminist Art" art historian Anna Chave examines art created by women that explores issues such as sexual assault, illness, and poverty and purports that these works are a type of social activism. Chave proposes that art, specifically feminist art, can function as social work that embodies awareness and ultimately chance. Feminists, Chave writes, use and have used visual culture as a discourse of social issues, and utilize the body as a politicized site to address them. The production of art that confronts social affronts is "socially minded, but also, and vitally, self-interested."[11] In "Normal Ills" Chave makes a claim that the

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[10] Claire Bishop, Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship (London, Verso, 2012), 2.
[11] Anna Chave, "'Normal Ills': On Embodiment, Victimization, and the Origins of Feminist Art," in *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*, ed. Lisa Saltman, et al. (Hanover, New Hamphsire, 2006), 147.

artistic representation of suffering can alleviate suffering on a personal and public level. Lacy, Mendieta, Finley, and Sulkowicz echo this sentiment and acknowledge that their performances are a platform with which they can protest and publicize the affront of sexual assault.

Similarly, in her book *Artificial Hells*, art historian Claire Bishop proposes that art can address social issues in a way similar to social work. Her parameters of "socially engaged" art intended to have a profound or altering effect on an audience or larger institution align with the goals of Sulkowicz and her predecessors' works.[12] Sulkowicz in particular wishes that *Carry That Weight* will result in Columbia University's expulsion of her assailant.

Bishop writes, "arts' 'social turn' not only designates an orientation towards concrete goals in art, but also the critical perception that these are more substantial, 'real' and important than artistic experiences."[13] The 'realness' of these artistic experiences is derived from the intimate subject matter (sexual assault), the active presence of the female performing body, and the emphasis of an audience role in all performances. Much like Chave, Bishop writes, "For one sector of artists, curators and critics, a good project appeases a superegoic injunction to ameliorate society; if social agencies have failed, then art is obliged to step in."[14] This proclamation, that art can function as a response to the failings of society, is visible in the works Lacy, Mendieta, Finley, and Sulkowicz, as they protest rape culture. This intent to better the failings of society is, as both Saltz and Smith write, messianic.

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[12] Bishop, 12.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Bishop, 275.

Both Chave and Bishop view socially engaged art as a process as essential as legislation but on a more personal, vital level. The selected performances are typically examined and valued as daring works of intimate art. Academic works such as Sharon Irish's book on Suzanne Lacy's works, *Suzanne Lacy: Spaces Between*, view her art as socially entrenched feminist art, but do not emphasize Lacy's role as a progenitor of this type of art, or compare her work to her successors, as this paper will. Other works like Catherine Schuler's essay on Karen Finley, "Spectator Response and Comprehension: The Problem of Karen Finley's '*Constant State of Desire,*'" address the spectatorship of art about sexual assault, but Schuler does not address Finley's work as socially active art. Most academic literature on Ana Mendieta primarily focuses on her earth works. Her *Untitled (Rape Scene)* and violence tableaux will be placed in conjunction with these other performances. In this paper these performances, grouped together for the first time, will be positioned as art that seeks to address and protest sexual assault through active audience participation, community organization, and shock.

Feminist and Contemporary Art

The performances selected for this thesis range from second wave feminist art of the 1970s to present day movements. Suzanne Lacy's work is strongly aligned with second wave feminism and several feminist art institutions. Accordingly, the goals of her pieces *Ablutions* and the *Three Weeks* series are extensions of the second wave feminist tradition of consciousness-raising through shared experiences. Additionally, Ana Mendieta and Emma Sulkowicz, their self-identification as feminists will be questioned and explored. Karen Finley's provocative performances will be examined as subversions away from more typical second-wave feminist aesthetics towards third wave tactics.

Roberta Smith writes of *Carry That Weight* possesses a "striking quality as art, which in turn contributes substantially to its effectiveness as protest."[15]Any analyses of these works would be incomplete without a discussion and history of performance art and its merits as a socially based, protest art. These works are inherently connected to a long established medium and are inextricably tied to feminist tenets- even the works of Mendieta and Finley, which subvert or challenge feminism, are still aligned with the movement by virtue of the topic of sexual assault.

Performance

In performance art a powerful platform to protest and inform on sexual assault has been crafted. The integral history of the medium links it to radical and transgressive movements, such as early feminist art. Indeed, in her text on the history of performance art, Roselee Goldberg writes that performance art became "accepted as a medium of artistic expression in its own right in the 1970s," which coincides the initial use of this medium with the early feminist art movement.[16] Perhaps performance art's history can be extended past even the 1970s. In an interview in *The Power of Feminist Art,* artists Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro go as far as to root performance art's heritage in the practice of "'speaking bitterness', a practice of modern Chinese culture" and also, "dramatic ceremonies performed by witches' covens at sacred sites."[17] Even with these possible ancient foundations for the medium, performance art is still viewed as a relatively modern practice. Goldberg roots contemporary performance art in Futurist works produced in the early 20th century. Subsequent art movements had their own forms

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[15] Smith, "In A Mattress."
[16] Roselee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1988), 7.
[17] Broude, Mary D. Garrard, and Judith K. Brodsky. *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*. (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1994),61.

of performance art. Dadaists in Zurich, Germany held cabaret performances. In 1924 Surrealists such as Erik Satie, Man Ray, and Marcel Duchamp created the ballet *Relache*. In the 1930's an art community at Black Mountain College organized interdisciplinary performances which participant Xanti Schawinksy identified as "visual theatre."[18] The 1960's saw a proliferation of experimental performing groups such as the Judson Dance Group and the Dancers' Workshop Company.[19]

Faith Wilding describes the onset of performance art practices in the 1970s as the utilization of a "non-traditional tool" of art,[20] additionally stating that, "performance and performative modes " were "still largely un-theorized at the time."[21] Wilding also purposes that the lack of theoretical work on performance art in the 1970s was an attractive quality to young feminist artists who used it as a medium. "Students and feminist artists still suffer from the invisibility of art made by women both in the past and contemporaneously," she writes, implying that performance art was exempted from this lack of inclusivity in art history because it lacked a concrete history to begin with.[22] Performance art's status as a relatively new medium, as discussed, freed female performance artists from comparison to established largely white and largely male artists. Unlike the long history of painting or sculpture, there were no great "masters" to stand as a point of comparison for young female artist.

Performance art is a largely object-less medium, without canvas or marble or any other typical "art material", and it demands an active or central performer. Indeed, the

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[18] Goldberg, 123.
[19] See Goldberg, *Performance Art*, chapter six, for further details on the history of the medium in the latter half of the 20th century.
[20] *The Power of Feminist Art,* 34.
[21] Ibid, 38.
[22] Ibid.

centrality of the artist/performer is what most strongly differentiates the medium. Goldberg writes that, "Unlike theatre, the performance is the artist, seldom a character like an actor, and the content rarely follows a traditional plot or narrative."[23] As Jones purports, it is the centrality and humanity of the artist that makes performance art a highly connective medium.[24] The centrality of the performer in performance art also echoes the elevation of women's experiences in feminism. Performance art offered women artists an opportunity to be highly present and inextricable from their own work.

The lack of an art object in performance art was revolutionary and required a heavily conceptual participation both for the artists and the viewer. Goldberg writes that performance art "insisted on an art of ideas over product, and on an art that could not be bought and sold- was in it its heyday and performance was often a demonstration, or an execution, of those ideas."[25] Much like the centrality of performance art, its emphasis on the body, readily lent itself to the feminist art movement of the 1970s. Again, the centrality of the artist in the medium allowed female artists to publicize and elevate their experiences as women. Sexual violence against women was at the forefront of these experiences. In *The Power of Feminist Art,* Wilding recognizes the emergence of sexual violence as a focus in feminist artwork. She writes, "At that time the feminist movement had barely begun a socio/political analysis of violence against women, and the need to create feminist support services for abused women was just beginning to be recognized."[26] She purposes that art about sexual violence offered a "cathartic effect"[27] for women, much like Chave asserts in "Normal Ills."

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[23] Goldberg, 8.
[24] Jones, 549.
[25] Goldberg, 7.
[26] *The Power of Feminist Art*, 38.
[27] Ibid.

In November 1978, one of the very first "Take Back the Night" rallies was held in San Francisco. The rally, described by Judith E. Stein, was a "mass ritual performance" against sexual assault that brought together over three thousand women, including Suzanne Lacy.[28] The women marched into the tenderloin district of San Francisco, chanting and bearing anti-sexual assault signs. Take Back the Night marches continue today as a feminist method to reclaim the night as a safe time for women.

Outside of a feminist context, other performance artists of the 1960s and 1970s commonly explored violence in their works. In 1964, the artist Yoko Ono performed a work called *Cut Piece* for the first time, which entailed audience members cutting clothing from Yoko's body with a pair of scissors. Beginning in the early 1970s, the artist Marina Abramovic's performance art also incorporated violent motifs. In *Rhythm 10* (1973) Abramovic played with knives before an audience, occasionally injuring herself. In *Rhythm 0*, Abramovic, much like Ono's *Cut Piece*, invited audiences to use a selection of objects on her body, ranging from a feather duster to a knife.[29] From its beginning as a popular medium, performance art, given the close proximity of the artist and audience, allowed for such extreme mediations on the nature of violence and spectatorship.

Other performance artists laid a foundation for participatory artwork. Before his 1959 performance *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* Allan Kaprow sent out invitations that declared to audiences, "you will become a part of the happenings; you will simultaneously experience them."[30] In his 1979 book *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Augusto

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[28] *The Power of Feminist Art*, 233.
[29] "Marina Abramovic on Rhythm 0 (1974)", Vimeo video, 03:07, posted by Marina Abramovic Institute, 2014, https://vimeo.com/71952791.
[30] Goldberg,128.

Boal theorized a revolutionary type of theater practice that would utilize audience participation, activating viewers to become "liberated spectators."[31]

Performance art additionally allowed female artists access to new art spaces and audiences, further freeing them to practice "work addressing their bodies, their sexuality, and their lives in images that were considered unacceptable to mainstream galleries and museums", as Judith Brodsky writes.[32] In keeping with this tradition of untraditional art spaces, the performances selected by Finley, Lacy, Sulkowicz, and Mendieta are enacted in apartments, college campuses, outdoors, in comedy clubs, and extended to media such as Twitter and blogs. Performance art has adapted to a variety of spaces. The unusualness of these locations as art spaces contributes to the heightened connection between the artist and their audience.

The performances discussed in this paper represent different subcategories of the medium. A few of the performances combine numerous categories at once. Mendieta, Lacy, and Finley's works strongly incorporated body art, which is defined by Goldberg as the use of the artists' "own person(s) as art material."[33] While the artist's body is a central part of all performance art, these artists used their own forms as canvases with which they imbue special meaning and reflect sexual violence against women. Mendieta, Lacy, and Finley all applied materials to their nude bodies in an effort to symbolize aggression against women's bodies. In *Carry That Weight*, Sulkowicz strikingly departs from this tradition. Although she performs fully clothed, her body is hugely central to her piece and continually changed as the work progresses.

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[31] Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, (New York: Theatre Communications Group,1985), 122.
[32] *The Power of Feminist Art*, 104.
[33] Goldberg, 153.

In addition to the use of the human body as a medium, performance art allowed for the use of time and space as a pretext of the artist's endurance. The extended length of Sulkowicz's performance, and its physical requirements, place her ongoing work in the realm of endurance art. This aligns her with performance artists like Linda Montano, or Tehching Hsieh, whom she cites as an influence[34] and whose works sometimes lasted a year (one performance continued for thirteen) and commonly featured a repetitive action of some sort.[35] Sulkowicz's *Carry That Weight* began in September of 2014, and may continue until her college graduation in May 2015. *Carry That Weight* is additionally very ritualistic in its execution given that Sulkowicz must perform repeatedly and under strict guidelines.

Finley's work, which is based off a script and performed on a stage with props, contains very theatrical elements. The loosely crafted scripts of *The Constant State of Desire* and *We Keep Our Victims Ready*, which Finley would often improvise off of during performance, reveal a likeness to other performance artists who used stream-of-consciousness monologues. Finley's monologues about sexual assault were coupled with props, body art, and audience participation.

The spontaneity of Mendieta's violence tableaux borrows from the performance art practice of "happenings." First coined by Kaprow, happenings were situational performances, often improvised, that hinged upon an active audience role.[36] Like Kaprow and other artists that performed happenings, Mendieta's *Untitled* (Rape Scene) strongly

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[34] Emma Sulkowicz, "Carry That Weight", Youtube video, 1:35:37, posted by BrooklynMuseum, December 17, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OMXp3RLOVNg.
[35] The thirteen year long performance, performed from 1986-1999, stipulated that Hsieh would produce art in this time but forbade him from showing his work publicly. *Tehching Hsieh*, accessed February 15, 2015, http://www.tehchinghsieh.com/.
[36] Goldberg, 130.

comments on the role of the audience. At its core, Mendieta's work relies on her audience's reaction to sexual attack.

All of the selected performances contain elements of autobiography, which Goldberg identifies as a category of performance art that is a "scrutiny of appearances and gestures, as well as the investigation of the fine edge between an artist's art and his or her life."[37] While Finley's two performances feature many different perspectives, and she has never explicitly stated that she herself has been sexually assaulted, the intimate and intricate details of her work conjure an autobiographical effect. Likewise, Lacy and Mendieta, who have never publicly discussed any instance of sexual assault in their lives, create art that borrows from real instances of gendered violence. Sulkowicz's piece is inherently autobiographical. *Carry That Weight* and Sulkowicz's sexual assault are so highly personal to her that she is reluctant to associate herself with any sort of anti-sexual assault bigger than her own experience.

Unlike an object of art that can exist potentially forever, performance art is ephemeral and can only be revisited through photographs, video, audio recordings, or memory. Lacy and Sulkowicz's work both contend with this passage of time in some manner. In *Three Weeks in May* and *Three Weeks in January*, Lacy uses a relatively small bracket of time as an example of the pervasiveness of sexual assault in one specific area. Sulkowicz created *Carry That Weight* with the knowledge that it could potentially last a day, but it has lasted nearly eight months. In her work time functions as a burden just like the mattress she carries. Mendieta staged her performance weeks after another student's death. Her work existed as an echo in time of someone else's assault.

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[37] Ibid, 172.

An element of risk is apparent in performance art that focuses on sexual assault. As performance art scholar Roselee Goldberg writes in her history of the medium, "performance has provided a presence for the artist in society. This presence, depending on the nature of the performance, can be esoteric, shamanistic, instructive, provocative, or entertaining."[38] In the performances selected for this paper, the presence of the artist is a difficult one to easily categorize. Finley, Lacy, Mendieta, and Sulkowicz take on many roles while addressing sexual assault. Lacy acts a community organizer as well as a collaborative producer in her *Three Weeks* series. Finley shifts from vocalizing the perspective of a victim of sexual assault to presenting herself as the assailant. Sulkowicz has taken to her college campus to protest her own rape, while Mendieta assumes the identity of murdered woman to publicize her rape and killing. All of these women use their role as an artist to protest sexual assault in some manner. It is the complexity of the artist's role in these works renders them vulnerable to criticism and threats. In both Finley and Sulkowicz's chapters the personal consequences of creating art about sexual assault will be emphasized.

Conclusion

The ephemeral nature of performance art often makes its study difficult. The following chapters will examine the works of each individual artist, using photographs of the performances, scripts, stage directions and audience responses. Suzanne Lacy's works, *Ablutions* and *Three Weeks in May,* will be discussed in chapter two as foundations for this type of performance, and *Three Weeks in January* as a contemporary update. Ana Mendieta's *Untitled (Rape Scene)* and violence tableaux from 1973 will be covered in chapter three and Karen Finley's works in chapter four. These three chapters

[38] Ibid, 8.

will lead up to the most contemporary piece, Sulkowicz's *Carry That Weight*. This paper aims to offer a comprehensive look at the commonalities and variations of performance art about sexual assault. The participatory designs of these works, and the artists' intentions to promote awareness of sexual assault, protest sexual assault, and examine the power structures that are inherent in its perpetration, will be viewed as an effort to create art with socially active consequences.

Suzanne Lacy: Sexual Assault and Community Action

When asked in 2012 to assess the impact of *Three Weeks in May* (1977), and how its legacy shaped *Three Weeks in January,* Lacy responded, "Do you want me to say my piece is helping to end rape? If so, I can say, unqualifiedly, 'No.'"[39] Lacy is frank about the parameters of art as social work; "Artists are likely to say, 'My piece just had the biggest impact. It changed the world.' But if you really want to talk about social change, you've got to measure it in some way. I'm not sure it is the business of the artist to do that."[40] Suzanne Lacy can speak with authority on the impact of art on sexual assault. In her career (which spans four decades, from the 1970s to the present) Lacy has tackled sexual assault in several seminal performance art pieces. Although she is correct in saying her art has not eradicated sexual assault, it has provided a powerful artistic response to it. This chapter will cover three of Lacy's works, *Ablutions* (1972), *Three Weeks in May* (1977), and her reiteration of the latter piece, *Three Weeks in January* (2012). While *Ablutions,* a performance strongly rooted in second wave feminism and the feminist art movment*,* acted as a base for the *Three Weeks* series (and for most art on sexual assault), Lacy's performances rely on different tactics. *Three Weeks in May* and *Three Weeks in January* are calls to a community for action against sexual assault, while *Ablutions* functions as a mimicry of the act of rape intended to situate its viewers in the position of a sexual assault victim. While the *Three Weeks* series and *Ablutions* differ in their execution, their agenda is the same. Lacy may refrain from deeming her art "world changing," but the strategies she employed in her performances involved her audiences, both emotionally and formally, in an attempt to activate them against sexual assault.

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[39] Paul David Young, "The Suzanne Lacy Network", *Art in America*, June 1, 2012.
[40] Ibid.

In *The Power of Feminist Art*, Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard write,

> Women artists of the feminist generation differed from the women artists of the fifties and sixties most of all in the deliberate grounding of their art in their socialized experience as women and -the corollary of that position- in their acceptance of women's experience as different from men's but equally valid. In exposing for open consideration what had previously been hidden or ignored, they connected- for the first time, in a conscious way- the agendas of social politics and art. The key principle was consciousness-raising, defined by women's movement theorists as a method of using one's own experience as the most valid way of formulating political analysis.[41]

By the "feminist generation," Broude and Garrard refer to the 1970s, a period wherein the authors recognize a movement towards art created about women, for women, and by women. Lacy's career began in the 1970s, when an emphasis was placed on differentiating and elevating the female perspective and experience in art. The artists associated with the second wave feminist movement sought, as Broude and Garrard write, to use their "socialized experience as women" in their art. One such distinctly female (and therefore, distinctly ignored) experience in dire need of awareness was sexual violence and gendered violence.

Suzanne Lacy's work encapsulates the second wave feminist artistic movement to raise awareness of women's issues. Lacy began her prolific career in the 1970s. Initially a psychology major at Fresno State College, Lacy soon came under the influence of feminist artist Judy Chicago, which led her to transfer to the California Institute of the Arts.[42] Her involvement in the Women's Building, a second wave feminist performance venue and gallery in Los Angeles, heavily shaped Lacy's early career.

In *The Power of Feminist Art*, artist Faith Wilding recounts,

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[41] *The Power of Feminist Art*, 21.
[42] Jori Finkel, "'Three Weeks' of Rapes, 35 Years Later", *Los Angeles Times*, January 14, 2012. Accessed January 2, 2015.

> Right from the start, the issue of violence - particularly sexual violence- as experienced by women, emerged in our art work. At that time the feminist movement had barely begun a socio/political analysis of violence against women, and the need to create feminist support services for abused women was just beginning to be recognized.[43]

Lacy's first work about sexual assault was *Ablutions* (1972). Performed in her last year at the California Institute of Art, *Ablutions* also involved artists Judy Chicago, Sandra Orgel, and Aviva Rahmani. [44] Lacy would later describe *Ablutions* as the "first contemporary feminist artwork on rape,"[45] a sentiment later echoed by the feminist magazine *Heresies*: "*Ablutions* provided one of the first art vehicles for the portrayal of women's experiences of violences."[46] Indeed, *Ablutions* predated the first Take Back the Night event by several years.

On Lacy's artist website, the *Ablutions* performance is described as follows:

> This performance began with Lacy's exploration of rape through her early painting and sculpture and a book entitled "Rape Is." Tape recording women who had been raped, she and her collaborators created a sound track that was the relentless backdrop to a performance. As the performance began, the audience entered a large open artist studio. Three body-sized galvanized metal tubs on the concrete floor were each filled with a different substance--eggs, blood, and clay. Around the tubs broken eggshells, piles of rope and chain, and animal kidneys were strewn. The soundtrack played continuously, one woman after the other telling the intimate and explicit details of their rapes—information not part of public culture at that time. A nude woman was slowly bound from feet to scalp with gauze bandages while two others bathed in the tubs, first eggs, then blood, then clay. As each emerged from the final tub caked with clay cracked to reveal rivulets of blood, she was wrapped like a corpse in a sheet. Lacy nailed 50 beef kidneys to the wall, encasing the room like a spinal column surrounded by its organs. The performance ended with two women stringing rope over the set, until the performance stage was a spider web of entrapment. The voices on the tape droned on as if there was no escape from the brutalization, ending with the audio

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[43] Ibid, 38.
[44] Vivien Green Fryd, "Suzanne Lacy's Three Weeks In May: Feminist Activist Performance Art As "Expanded Public Pedagogy,"*NWSA Journal* 19.1 (2007), 32.
[45] Fuller, Diana Burgess., and Daniela Salvioni. *Art, Women, California 1950-2000: Parallels and Intersections*, (Berkeley: University of California, 2002), 300.
[46] *Heresies: On Women and Violence* 2.2 (1978), 81.

> tape stuck on a chilling note, repeating like a broken record: "I felt so helpless, all I could do was just lie there."[47]

The *Ablutions* performance utilized several different materials in order to symbolize the act of rape. Most shocking are the use of eggs, blood (a cow's), clay, and kidneys (also from an animal). [48] The naked performer is first bathed in eggs, and then the blood, and then the clay. The eggs and blood are clearly symbolic of the reproductive system and the violence of sexual assault, while the clay appears to act as a mask for these things. Through its cracks the blood can be seen as a reference the failure to heal after a traumatic event. The deliberate process of applying one material after another to the nude woman's body is a ritualistic reenactment of a rape, evident through the materials' similarity to bodily fluids. The kidneys, nailed to the walls of the performing space by Lacy, are purposed by in her book *Suzanne Lacy: Spaces Between* to represent "the fragility of life, among other ideas; these distinctly shaped organs make the difference between life and death."[49] The act of nailing an organ that represents, perhaps, fragility, to a wall, is an unmistakably violent act which further emphasizes the visceral imagery of *Ablutions*.

Another important element of *Ablutions* that places the audience of the performance as witnesses to a performed rape, are the recordings of rape survivors that were used by Lacy, Chicago, Orgel, and Rahmani. Irish writes that, "*Ablutions* thus expanded upon an individual woman's experience of rape by including the audience as listeners to testimonies and as witnesses of embodied female perspectives."[50] The

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[47] "Ablutions", Suzanne Lacy website, accessed January 4, 2014, http://www.suzannelacy.com/early-works/#/ablutions/.
[48] As identified by Sharon Irish, 32-33.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid, 35

recordings apply a disembodied narrative to the ongoing physical movements of the performers and additionally serve to contextualize their actions as an abstracted reenactment of sexual assault. This interplay between audio and visual reenactments of sexual assault heightened the authenticity of the performed assault.

While many aspects of *Ablutions* referred to the experience of sexual assault upon a female body, Irish proposes in *Spaces Between* that the performance also acted as a "healing ceremony."[51] The use of the eggs and blood treatments are followed by the wrapping of a performer in gauze- which creates a clear association with medical healing. The audience follows the performers of *Ablutions* through their initial assault to the beginning of their healing process. The sharing of personal affronts as a means for catharsis is a feminist act known as consciousness-raising that was used in both artistic and non-artistic contexts in the 1970s. The inclusivity of the audience in *Ablutions* to both a highly violent act, and then an intimate healing experience, is a reflection of the feminist ideologies prevalent in Lacy and her collaborators' work.

The visual effect of performing a violent act, stripped down to bare and visceral images, before an audience is an affront to the audience itself. The performers were made vulnerable through their nudity and hosted the violent process of the eggs and blood on their own forms. In her article, "Dis/playing the Phallus: Male Artists Perform Their Masculinities," Amelia Jones conjectures that performance art is unlike any other medium in its ability to incite empathy in an audience and achieves this through the use of the performer's body. She writes,

> When the interpreter actually experiences the body in performance rather than its representations, she/he faces a different type of identificatory bond with the performer: not a more 'essential' or more 'radical' one necessarily, but one

[51] Ibid.

> whose effects may well be more difficult to reorder or repress due to the temporal aspects of performance… and its immediate proximity of artist and interpreter- such that the two can potentially interact and respond to one another's reactions.[52]

This concept of an "identificatory bond" between an artist/performer and their audience is especially powerful when applied to performances about sexual assault. The process that the performers act out (the ordeal of sexual assault) and the healing are witnessed and therefore essentially experienced by the audience. Lacy and her fellow artists' actions in *Ablutions* make their spectators privy to a private act and burden them with its violence (the blood and the recordings particularly serve to do this). Indeed, as Claire Bishop proposes in *Artificial Hells*, when artists involve or implicate their audiences in their work, art with a "social turn" is created.[53] In *Ablutions* Lacy situated her audience as witnesses to an assault but then involved them in its aftermath of healing-- an indication, perhaps, that redemption and healing is a group effort.

Five years later, Lacy, no longer a college student but a fully working artist, returned to the topic of sexual assault in *Three Weeks in May*. *Three Weeks in May* combined elements of *Ablutions* with an expanded performance that utilized "installations, speeches by politicians, interviews with hotline activists, self-defense demonstrations, speak-outs, media articles and program."[54] While *Three Weeks in May*, staged at the Los Angeles City Hall, utilized a variety of media, it is most strongly remembered for its use of a twenty-five foot map of the city of Los Angeles. For three weeks Lacy used a large red stamp reading "rape" on the map to denote where a new rape, or assault, occurred. She would do this on a daily basis, using data provided by the

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[52] Jones, 549.
[53] Bishop, 2.
[54] Fryd, 28.

Los Angeles Police Department.[55] According to Vivien Green Fryd in "Ending the Silence", Lacy would also inscribe "fainter red markings that alluded to the estimate that there are nine unreported rapes for every one reported."[56] The map, like a victimized body in sexual assault, was altered through this process. By the end of the three weeks, the red markings obliterated parts of the city map.

Three Weeks was a much larger performance than *Ablutions* and contained many different pieces within it but its most memorable component is the map that represented the city of Los Angeles. *Three Weeks* came shortly after a declaration that L.A. was the "Rape Capitol of the Nation" by a Human Relations Committee on rape.[57] The central media used in *Three Weeks* was the map on which Lacy used her rape stamp, but a second map existed as a complement that indicated the location of "rape prevention and intervention agencies."[58]

The rape data collected by the Los Angeles Police Department was transferred by Lacy on to the map with a bold red stamp. Her use of relevant rape statistics, coupled with the aesthetic of a bright red stamp, presents a combination of artistic and logistic tactics. Lacy is quoted in *Heresies* as attributing this blend of methods to "a synthesis of my past education in psychology, my experiences in feminist organizing and my art-making. I was not personally satisfied with feminist organizing at the grass roots level or within the professional community, as both seemed to take energy without nourishing me."[59] The visual nature of mapping rapes, daily, in a ritualistic manner, created an

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[55] Ibid, 164.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Vivien Green Fryd,"Ending the Silence," in *Doin' It In Public*, ed. Meg Linton, et al. (Los Angeles: CA, 2011),163.
[58] *Heresies,* 84.
[59] Ibid, 81.

imposed map atop the map of the city. Of it Lacy said, "It's not a strategy -- more recognizing that people are moved by visually powerful phenomena. We have a spiritual or emotional connection to aesthetics that we aren't even aware of."[60] While visualizations like *Three Week's* map are now a part of everyday life (such as Google Earth and Yahoo maps), its implementation in 1977 forced its viewers to see the abundance of sexual assault in their community through a branding of metaphorical space. Lacy was again building an identificatory bond with the audience by spatially reminding them of the prevalence of sexual assault. The location of the map performance at City Hall signifies the accountability of this institution and the general public. By setting her performance at a location associated with law and public order, Lacy is promoting sexual assault as a public concern.

The two maps used in *Three Weeks in May* served different functions in the performance. The primary map documented acts of violence, while the second map provided steps towards healing or prevention. This duality in the performance harkens back to the split nature of *Ablutions*: the act of rape, and its aftermath. Lacy declared that the map itself, and the process of stamping "rape" on the map, serves to help women share "the reality of their experience." Lacy further explained that, "by exposing the facts of our rapes, the numbers of them, the events surrounding them, and the men who commit them, we begin to break down the myths that support the rape culture."[61] For those audiences members had not experienced sexual assault the maps in *Three Weeks in May* radically illustrated the reality of sexual assault in Los Angeles.

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[60] Finkel.
[61] Suzanne Lacy, ""Three Weeks in May": Speaking Out on Rape, a Political Art Piece," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* Spring 2.1 (1977), 67.

In *Three Weeks in May*, Lacy used what Fryd describes as "activist-aesthetic tools" to "inform and engage diverse audiences with issues relevant to their lives."[62] While the location of Los Angeles is obviously of importance to the performance, the incorporation of its community was also vital to Lacy's goals. The activist-aesthetic tools Lacy used were the participation of law enforcement and other officials in her performance. Lacy describes in *Heresies*, "members of the "community", such as "government employees and officials" being "instrumental in installing the maps as well as publicizing the piece." The City Attorney, the deputy mayor, and a rape hotline activist helped Lacy announce the start of *Three Weeks*, and a city councilwoman aided the installation of the maps.[63] Lacy writes that the cooperation of anti-sexual assault activist and local law-makers and law enforcement, led to "the dissemination of information beyond that possible for any one agency, individual, or artist."[64] The large collaboration between these groups legitimized the activist aspects of *Three Weeks*, fortifying the performance as a successful crossover of art and social change. They also appeared in profound contrast to the other bodies present in the performance, such as naked female performers. Three Week's marriage of art with law enforcement and community outreach suggests that all three are solutions for the epidemic of sexual assault.

In addition to the maps, *Three Weeks in May* featured numerous performances. Fryd writes of the creation of "private, women-only rituals as well as public art performances on the street", in addition to "radio programs and workshops on rape and its prevention" and "self defense classes and speak-outs."[65] Lacy also invited other

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[62] Fryd, 23.
[63] *Heresies*, 82.
[64] Ibid.

[65] Fryd, 64.

women artists to contribute to *Three Weeks in May,* without confining them to any specific set of guidelines on their artistic approach to sexual assault. A performance conceived by Lacy, entitled "She Who Would Fly", was borrowed from the earlier *Ablutions*. The piece featured audio recordingss of rape survivors describing their assaults, as well as a "flayed lamb's carcass with white-feathered wings" and four nude performed covered in red paint and perched on a landing above the set. As Fryd writes, "Visitors became participants in the performance as they read about rapes and were observed by the women above them."[66] Much like Ablutions, "She Who Would Fly" used visceral images and audio recordings to recreate the physical and visual experience of sexual assault.

With the numerous events and performances within *Three Weeks in May*, Lacy organized a comprehensive response to the rape epidemic in Los Angeles, one that addressed it visually and socially. Lacy identifies her goals for *Three Weeks in May* as such, "What is being exposed here is the myth that women want to be raped. What is being shown is that men genuinely see the subject of rape in a manner diametrically opposed to the way that women see it."[67] With *Three Weeks* she wished to "to provide information about women's (sic) experiences, invite an exchange with its audience on the issues raised, and ultimately transform culture."[68] To change how people "saw" rape, Lacy used performances to publicize the multitudes of rape in Los Angeles during those three weeks in May.

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[66] Fryd, 67.
[67] Lacy, 67.
[68] Lacy, 70.

In January of 2012, Lacy restaged the *Three Weeks* performance in Los Angeles. Since her initial performance thirty-five years before, the stigma surrounding sexual assault victims changed, although the severity of sexual assault cases persisted. Lacy addresses this change in *Frieze* magazine:

> In the 1970s, rape wasn't talked about by anyone and the social agenda in *Three Weeks in May* was to address personal and political silences. Things are now very different on that score, but the one thing that hasn't changed is the shame felt by women. This is surprising: the fact that women still feel somehow guilty for their own victimization.[69]

The restaging of *Three Weeks* was grounded in addressing this guilt. Much like the original performance, *Three Weeks in January* consisted of protests, seminars, and performances such as *Storying Rape: Shame Ends Here*. Three in January featured an update of the rape map (now located in front of the Los Angeles Police Department). While Lacy does note a slight change in public awareness of sexual assault, perhaps the biggest alteration *Three Weeks in January* saw was an intensified incorporation of contemporary technology into its performances. The original *Three Weeks in May* was highly conscious of media; Lacy used press conferences, television networks, and other outlets to boost awareness of the performance. *Three Weeks in January* used social media, such as Twitter and the blogosphere, to widen its audience. The updated use of social media and other internet outlets in *Three Weeks in January* expanded its performing space and its audience far past its predecessor, much as it does in *Carry That Weight*. "Storying Rape: End the Shame" is a filmed "performative conversation" held at the Los Angeles City Hall.[70] "Storying Rape", as Lacy's website describes it, "explores

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[69] Jennifer Higgie, "Answers and Questions", *Frieze Magazine*, September, 2012.
[70] "Three Weeks in January", Suzanne Lacy website, accessed January 4, 2014, http://www.suzannelacy.com/recent-works/#/three-weeks-in-january/.

current and alternative narratives on rape in an effort to abate the crime" and "communicated to audiences via an assembly of bloggers using various social media platforms.[71]" Online viewers of "Storying Rape" were encouraged to use Twitter as a way to join the performance's sense of commonality.[72] Much like the original map of *Three Weeks in May*, the use of Twitter and other internet applications created a spatial commentary on the prevalence of sexual assault.

Despite Lacy's incorporation of new social media into *Three Weeks in January*, she still used "'old school' face-to-face strategies" to make the performance effective.[73] Much like *Three Weeks in May*, Lacy worked closely with public officials and law enforcement. Members of the Los Angeles Police Department were invited to stamp the map of the city and give speeches.[74]

> In *Suzanne Lacy: Spaces Between* Sharon Irish writes of *Ablutions*:
>
> While the physical body was the starting point for Lacy's art, her interest in the outreaching self also meant that the literal and metaphorical spaces between bodies, or networks, mattered for the aesthetic meanings of her work. She sought to give visual form not only to embodied female experiences but also to the relationships among experiences. Lacy was intrigued with how people's interconnections might be represented and what transpired between a representation and those enacting it.[75]

Irish's observation of Lacy's interest in physical space and visual forms applied to female experiences (such as sexual assault) resounds with both versions of *Three Weeks* as well. However in the more recent *Three Weeks in January* the nude female form is absent, a reflection of the contemporary feminist movement away from a narrow, physically centered representation of gender. The maps and presence of female bodies in both

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[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Higgie.
[74] "Three Weeks in January by Suzanne Lacy", Youtube video, 1:34, posted by Pacific Standard Time.
[75] Irish, 41.

pieces, as well as the use of the social media in *Three Weeks in January*, allow Lacy to provoke a multi-layered awareness of sexual assault.

Lacy's works about sexual assault use two different strategies in order to convey the trauma and of sexual assault to an audience. In *Ablutions*, Lacy and others situated the audience as witnesses to a reenacted sexual assault and healing process. The intimacy of both these acts fostered a bond of empathy between the performers and audience. In her *Three Weeks* series, Lacy maximized her connection to the audience through her maps and community programs. By incorporating the more visceral elements of *Ablutions* with a more methodical, and data based performance, Lacy re-crafted her goals – and used her art to illuminate the prevalence of sexual assault in a specific area. Her audience was extended beyond the spectators of the performance to an entire community.

The focus of *Ablutions* lay in the act of rape itself, while the strength of the two *Three Weeks* performances was derived from their creation of community awareness. The change of tactics indicates a desire to use multiple outlets to address sexual assault. A level of accountability is extended with Lacy's performances, which act as both art and activism. *Ablutions* and the *Three Weeks* series both attempt to heal a community while also making it culpable. Suzanne Lacy's performance art on sexual assault laid a foundation for all sexual assault based art that followed. Lacy's focus on community organization and the deliberate publicizing of sexual assault are evident in Emma Sulkowicz's *Carry That Weight*. Staged two years after *Three Weeks in January*, Emma Sulkowicz's *Carry That Weight* confirms Lacy's statement that while the nature of rape culture has shifted, it is still prevalent, and still addressed through art.

Ana Mendieta: Audience As Witness

On April 29, 1973 *The Sunday Times* of Iowa ran a small story on the murder of a University of Iowa student. Sara Ann Otten, a twenty-year old nursing student, "was found in a Rinow Residence Hall dormitory by another student" raped and strangulated.[76] Several weeks after Otten's death, Ana Mendieta, a graduate student at the University, staged *Untitled (Rape Scene)* (1973) for her classmates. Playing Otten herself, Mendieta created a nearly exact recreation of her fellow student's brutal demise that was based on the newspaper's description of the murder. The performance was a part of Mendieta's "violence tableaux," a title first coined by art historian Julia P. Herzberg. Other parts of the tableaux, known as *Alley Pieces,* were left in public places that thematically accompanied *Rape* Scene as remnants of a bloody struggle. Both the objects and *Untitled (Rape Scene)* were unannounced and with them Mendieta effectively broke down the established parameters of a performance by creating a realistic scene that closely mimicked the site and victim's body of a violent sexual assault. The shock of these surprise performances situated their audiences as real witnesses to sexual violence, making them implicit participants in the scene and its periphery.

Anna Chave writes in "Normal Ills" that, "For women of color and not, for women artists, for women art historians: to make ourselves see affronts and to find ways to address them, is to be not socially minded but also, vitally, self-interested."[77] Mendieta identified her violence tableaux as art with a social bent, "I started doing performances as well as placing objects and installations in public places in order to bring attention to this

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[76] "Paper Says Murder Investigation Muffed." *The Sunday Times* 29, Apr. 1973. Web accessed May 4, 2015 through Google database.
[77] Chave, 147.

crime and all sexual violence."[78] She explains that she gave up painting because as an art form "it wasn't real enough."[79] Her paintings "were not real enough for what I wanted the image to convey- and by real I mean I wanted my images to have power."[80] With her violence tableaux Mendieta seized upon the harsh visuals of sexual assault and created a "real" scene imbued with power to transform her unsuspecting classmates into active participants that bore witness to the violent scene. This chapter will examine how Mendieta's performance subverted known parameters for audience participation as well as her career long focus on the female form. Both *Untitled (Rape Scene)* and Mendieta's "earth works" are indicative of an interest in gendered representations that reflect power structures, such as ethnicity, as actual and metaphorical dynamics of sexual assault.

Ana Mendieta was born in Havana, Cuba in 1948 to a "socially and politically distinguished" family.[81] Her father was initially a member of Fidel Castro's new Cuban government, but as Castro's regime grew more extreme Ignacio Mendieta was ultimately blacklisted. Ana and her sister relocated to the United States through the Operation Pedro Pan in 1961. Olga M. Viso writes in "The Memory of History" that the "relocation to Iowa was difficult for the sisters. They felt isolated and abandoned. The geographic remoteness and frigid climate came as a shock, as did the discrimination they suffered as foreigners in an area unaccustomed to Latin culture."[82] This sense of isolation or alien-ness that Mendieta experienced so early on in her life would resound throughout most of

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[78] Quoted in Kaira M. Cabanas, "Pain of Cuba, Body I am." *Women's Art Journal* 20.1 (1999), 12.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Olga M. Viso, *Ana Mendieta -: Sculpture and Performance, 1972 – 1985 (*Washington, DC: Hirshhorn, 2002), 36.
[82] Ibid, 39.

her artwork. Mendieta would explore the identity of being an "other" through artwork about nationality and gender.

Mendieta's artistic career is viewed as political, perhaps because of how difficult it is to extract her work from her early life in Cuba – a connection she herself encouraged. In her Master's Thesis, Mendieta declared, "In my work I am, in a sense, reliving my heritage."[83] Many of Mendieta's interviews and artist statements from her career reflect on Cuba and her childhood spent there. Several art historians, Viso included, have perceived a quest for identity and a contemplative look on origins in Mendieta's later works, such as her *Silueta* series. In addition to a theme of a spiritual homeland, much of the main body of work that Mendieta produced during her active years as an artist explored, as Jane Blocker writes in *Where is Ana Mendieta?: Identity, Performativity, and Exile*, "the troubling nothingness of the feminine."[84] The *Silueta* series, which Mendieta is most famously known for, is a collection of photographs depicting the arrangement of different natural materials intended to appear as a universal female form. Ned Rifkin describes the oeuvre of Mendieta as "art made from, with, and of the body."[85] Throughout the many media that Mendieta explored during her career, a constant fascination with the female form prevailed in her work. Mendieta explored it through photography, sculpture, and performance.

Despite the political nature of much of Mendieta's work, and the obvious association of her work's focus on female bodies, Mendieta was reluctant to associate herself with the second wave feminist art movement of the 1970s. Jane Blocker writes

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[83] Ana Mendieta (Master's Thesis, University of Iowa, 1977). Ana Mendieta Papers, quoted in Viso, 36.
[84] Jane Blocker and Ana Mendieta, *Where Is Ana Mendieta?: Identity, Performativity, and Exile*. (Durham: Duke UP, 1999),7.
[85] *Ana Mendieta: Earth Body*, 11.

that Mendieta was highly critical of what she referred to as "white feminism" and "the interests in the body, goddess culture, and the earth maintained by her white colleagues."[86] Lucy Lippard was the first critic to align Mendieta with the feminist art movement. In October of 1975 an article by Lippard on Mendieta's work was published in *Ms. Magazine*; a second followed in *Art and America* in May of 1976.[87] However, Mendieta's violence tableaux predated Lippard's articles and Mendieta's later involvement with feminist magazine *Heresies* and A.I.R, a non-profit all-female gallery.

Mendieta's violence tableaux came only a year after Lacy's *Ablutions*, and while both performances dealt with sexual assault and were performed in the context of a school, Lacy's closely aligned itself with the feminist art movement of the time. As noted earlier, Mendieta did identify her performance as a protest "to bring attention to this crime and all sexual violence."[88] Her effort to publicize Otten's death on the very campus she was murdered on is akin to the taped testimonials played throughout *Ablutions*.

In *Untitled* (*Rape Scene*), Mendieta's friends and professors were invited to her to apartment and upon their arrival, as Herzberg describes in "Ana Mendieta's Iowa Years 1970-1980", found "Mendieta stripped nude from the waist down with her upper body motionless and tied down over a table. Her body was bloodied; dish shards were scattered about the floor; a hanger was left near the table in the middle of the room; cigarette butts were in the ashtrays; and there was a blood in the toilet bowl."[89] Mendieta assembled her

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[86] Blocker,19.
[87] These first two articles were "Transformation Art," *Ms. Magazine* (October 1975), 33-39 and "The Pains and Pleasure of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art," *Art in America* (May-June 1976), 73-81. Both essays are published in Lucy Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art*, (New York: Dutton, 1976).
[88] "Pain of Cuba, Body I am.", 12.
[89] Quoted in *Ana Mendieta- Earth Body*, 152.

scene in the same manner a stage would be dressed for performance. Around this time Mendieta was also leaving objects that thematically accompanied her performance in public places. Outside of her apartment she left "small groupings of blood, bones, and discarded jeans." [90] Mendieta later extended her violence tableaux to a small farmhouse where "she rearranged some found mattresses, scattered debris over them, and the spattered red paint around, making a setting that implied a brutal struggle between a woman and her attacker."[91] On a separate occasion in the summer of 1973, Mendieta left a bloodied and torn mattress in an empty farmhouse. A classmate of Mendieta's later found this piece and believed he discovered a crime scene.[92]

The most defining element of *Untitled* (*Rape Scene*), the farmhouse scene, and the periphery of symbolic objects illustrate Mendieta's use of surprise. Her audience was not initially aware of their role as an audience- they approached the scene in her apartment as friends and colleagues. They were not entering a gallery, but a domestic space. They had been called upon unaware that they were visiting Ana as performer (assuming the role of Otten), and not Ana, their friend. Through her surprise performance Mendieta was testing her audience's reactions and transforming them into witnesses of sexual assault.

The objects that Mendieta left around campus, including the bloodied jeans and bones, perhaps never even had an audience. There was no indication that these objects were contrived pieces of a performance. Herzberg writes that, "Mendieta was disappointed that she never saw anyone react to the *Alley Pieces*, nor did she learn if anyone called the police."[93] Mendieta's reaction indicates that she wished the objects to

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[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid, 156.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Herzberg, 152.

be interpreted as real remnants of a violent struggle and responded to as such. Her desire to create "real" art is evident here.

This element of surprise to the *Rape Scene* and *Alley Pieces* relies largely on their location. Mendieta transformed the University campus from a site that contained a violent act to a site that was responding to the violent act. The unconfined nature of the violence tableaux allowed Mendieta to artistically simulate a real event while also transforming a real space into an artistic one. Much like the function of the maps in *Three Weeks in May* and *Three Weeks in January*, physical space is used in Mendieta's violence tableaux to publicize and familiarize the far reaching effects of violent acts to an audience. Both women forced their audiences to address sexual assault in specific communities.

While both Lacy and Mendieta used the nude female form as a site of sexual violence, Mendieta cast herself in the role of a sexual assault victim. In *Untitled* (*Rape Scene*) she embodies the character of a rape and murder victim, and not just any faceless, everywoman victim of violence – but a specific person, Sara Ann Otten. Mendieta's physical role in the performance functions on two levels. Firstly, inhabiting the character of a real sexual assault victim lends a preciseness, an actual face, to an endemic of violence against women. While Lacy's *Ablutions* and *Three Weeks* series sought to draw attention to the multitude of women who are sexually assaulted, Mendieta chose a specific violent act to bolster activism. She was unlike Otten in some pronounced ways. Mendieta was a woman of color and an art student but she took up the slain girl's identity in a performance that focused on what the two woman had in common: their gender identities. Secondly, on an artistic level Mendieta has made her own nude body the

subject of the performance. Jane Blocker compares this use of her body to the artist Frank Popper:

> From her earliest days at a student at the University of Iowa to the time of her death, Mendieta followed the fundamental directives of 1970s art making as summarized by Popper: to eliminate the object, to subvert the artist's authority, and to involve the viewer more actively. She adapted and synthesized the artistic trends of the decade- conceptualism, body art, performance, installations, and earth art – to animate the territorial boundaries between artist and audience, male and female, body and spirit. By repeatedly turning her own body into an art object, Mendieta took part in the 1970s trend in which the artist's physical self became both image and medium.[94]

Compared to Lacy, who as Sharon Irish points out, "was never willing to assume the role of a victim and risk that victimization being normalized",[95] Mendieta takes on both the role of a victim of a violent scene and the activist artist who can protest the violence.

Mendieta's role as sexual assault victim, and its almost spontaneous deliverance in an unconventional (domestic instead of artistic) space dismantles the known parameters of performance and creates what Claire Bishop describes in *Artificial Hells* as a 'situation', and Mendieta as its 'producer'. Bishop writes that the latter half of the twentieth century saw a reevaluation of the social role of the artist: "the artist is conceived less as an individual producer of discrete objects than as a collaborator and producer of situations… while the audience, previously conceived as a 'viewer' or 'beholder', is no repositioned as a co-producer or participant."[96] In *Ablutions* and parts of the *Three Weeks* Lacy confronted her audience with intimate and painful scenarios in an attempt to connect them with the victims of sexual assault. The role of Mendieta's audience was altered. As Bishop writes, their were elevated from witnesses to

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[94] Blocker, 10.
[95] Irish, 35.
[96] Bishop, 19.

participants in a highly realistic but contrived performance. The concept of this socially activated viewer of art aligns itself with the identificatory bond previously described in the chapter on Suzanne Lacy. As Amelia Jones proposed, performance art, and its inherent use of the artist's body, inspires a bond between performer and viewer because of the proximity and temporality of the bodies present.

Untitled (*Rape Scene*), however, did not immediately present itself as a performance to its audience. Mendieta sought to present the scene of Otten's death as closely to how it was reported. Without the parameters commonly associated with performance art, *Untitled* (*Rape Scene*) could be interpreted as a real scene, and the result of this is real fear and horror. The peripheral objects Mendieta left around her campus were not presented as art objects. It is unknown if they ever held viewers, but given that they provided no designation as art pieces, they would conceivably be interpreted by viewers as real objects. Perhaps Mendieta was not seeking an audience at all but real, active respondents.

Throughout her career, Mendieta's work explored representations of gender. A comparison of the violence tableaux with the larger body of her work, such as the *Silueta* series presents an intriguing relationship. Blocker writes, "Mendieta's work, like that of other feminist performance artists, interrogated the ideology of gender and the female body as a field of masculine control" and that, "the female body remains the most consistent feature of Mendieta's oeuvre."[97] For her M.A. thesis project, Mendieta covered her face in a male friend's facial hair in order to simulate a beard.[98] In her *Silueta* series, she photographed an iconic and recognizably female form in outdoor locations,

[97] Blocker, 11-12.
[98] Ibid.

sometimes alight with fire or assembled out of mud or tree branches. Closely tied to Mendieta's examination of the female form and condition is an emphasis in her work on her identity as an immigrant and a woman of color.

While not as explicit as her interest in gender, Mendieta's resistance to colonialism is evident in works like her *Silueta* entitled *La Venus Negra* (the black Venus), which she supplemented with a translation of the La Venus Negra Cuban folktale for *Heresies*. The tale features a young woman who resists Spaniard colonists.[99] Colonialism has often been academically examined in gendered terms as a process akin to sexual assault.[100] Given her background as a Cuban woman who was transplanted to the United States as a child, Mendieta's dual interests in colonialism and gender reflect a cross section of power dynamics.

Like Sara Ann Otten, Mendieta's own violent death in 1985, believed by her social and artistic circle to be caused by her husband Carl Andre, is commemorated through art and protest.[101] Andre's inclusion in a 1992 show at the Guggenheim incited "a picket line of about 500 feminist protesters, many of them carrying banners that read: 'Where is Ana Mendieta?'"[102] More than twenty years after her death, protests are still waged in her name. At a retrospective of Andre's work at the Dia Art Foundation chicken

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[99] Blocker, 115.

[100] In the "Rhetoric of English India" Sara Suleri writes that the trope of colonialism being equivalent to rape is due to the "stereotype of a precultural and female geography." The imperialistic domination of countries is metaphorically likened to rape. Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1992, 16-17.

[101] On September 8, 1985, Mendieta fell to her death out of her apartment window in Greenwich Village in New York City. Her husband, sculptor Carl Andre, was initially arrested and charged for Mendieta's death. A New York Times article from 1985 details, "District Attorney Robert M. Morgenthau of Manhattan said a passer-by had heard screams that were 'consistent with someone being thrown out the window.' There were signs of a struggle in the apartment and scratches on the suspect's face, the prosecutor added." Andre revealed that Ana and he were fighting at the time of her death but maintains that she committed suicide.
Staff writer, "Sculptor in Village Reindicted In the 1985 Death of His Wife", *New York Times*, September 23, 1986.

[102] Sean O'Hagan, "Ana Mendieta: Death of an Artist Foretold in Blood", *The Guardian*, 21 September 2013.

blood and guts were spilled on the sidewalk, a reference to Mendieta's death and a material she worked with in *Untitled (Rape Scene)*.[103]

Mendieta went beyond the normal boundaries of performance to dramatically protest the death of another young woman. By forgoing traditional performance practices she held her audience accountable as participants in a frightening "real" murder scene. Her *Alley Pieces* extended the crime scene performance on to campus, creating chilling reminders of Otten's death. With this commentary on space, Mendieta, like Lacy, transformed a site that contained violence into a site that responds to violence. Emma Sulkowicz's *Carry That Weight* transforms her university's campus in a similar way by creating witnesses to an event. The shocking level of authenticity of *Untitled (Rape Scene)* caused its viewers to experience the performance as a real scene of sexual violence, therefore, becoming active participants in Mendieta's work.

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[103] Sarah Cascone, "Protesters Bloody the Sidewalk Over Dia's Carl Andre Show." *Artnet News,* 21 May 2014.

Karen Finley: Representations of Power and Gender Violence

In a dialogue with Richard Schechner in 1988, Karen Finley identified her main artistic goal, "I think I stir people to be responsible for what's going on in their own personal lives, in their one-to-one relationships, interweaving this into the whole society's corruption. That's very disturbing."[104] In an effort to make her audience culpable for "society's corruption" Finley has tackled a host of controversial topics, including sexual assault. More than a decade after Suzanne Lacy and Ana Mendieta's performances, Finley used sexual assault to reflect upon power dynamics and gender in *The Constant State of Desire* and *We Keep Our Victims Read*y. Finley uses shifting personas to act as both assailants and their victims. Finley's presentation of her own body and the various identities she assumes during *The Constant State of Desire* and *We Keep Our Victims Ready* are outrageous, vulgar, and powerful. The intensity of Finley's performance and her wild personas and stage tactics often alienate her audience, as investigated by Maria T. Pramaggiore and Catherine Schuler. This chapter will explore Finley's transgressive stage presence that resulted in a strained relationship with her audience. Finley wished for her art to operate as a "kind of psychic problem-solving, at the cultural level."[105] Like Lacy and Mendieta before her, she intended her performances on sexual assault to "stir people to be responsible" for unbalanced gender dynamics and power structures. However, Finley employs a set of tactics noticeably different from the second wave efforts of Lacy and Mendieta.

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[104] Karen Finley, "Karen Finley: A Constant State of Becoming: An Interview," interview by Richard Schechner, *The Drama Review* 32.1,(1988), 153

[105] Karen Finley, *A Different Kind of Intimacy: The Collected Writings of Karen Finley* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 2000),79.

The provocative nature of *We Keep Our Victims Ready* resulted in Finley's loss of a grant from the NEA. Likewise, audience reactions to the intimate and visceral *The Constant State of Desire* are recorded as largely negative. Ultimately works like *The Constant State of Desire* and *We Keep Our Victims Ready* provide audiences with too many contradictory images to stir people in the way Finley intended. However, Finley's engagement with both her own performing body and with her audience reflect a power to represent herself, her body, and sexual assault on her own terms. In *The Constant State of Desire* and *We Keep Our Victims Ready,* Finley holds the power to be self destructive to her own body in performance, reclaiming it as wholly her own and not an object of rape culture.

Finley was born in Chicago in 1956. She received her MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute. She began performing after the death of her father in 1979, an event that would be continually referenced in her work.[106] In her memoir *A Different Kind of Intimacy*, Finley describes an early interest in performance artists like Yoko Ono and Charlotte Moormon, who used their bodies in innovative ways, and a desire to continue in their tradition. "These were the people I looked to as mentors and masters."[107]

Finley's career is famous for her provocative use of props, language, and her own nude body. During a 1981 performance in Germany Finley's stage partner of the time, Brian Routh, brought a bowl full of Finley's diarrhea on stage and consumed it before the audience.[108] Finley is also known for smearing her naked body with canned yams during a performance. Her onstage antics are paired with deep critiques of capitalism, sexuality,

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[106] C. Carr, *On Edge: Performance At The End of the Twentieth Century*. (Wesleyan University Press, Hanover, NH, 1993), 121
[107] Finley, *A Different Kind of Intimacy: The Collected Writings of Karen Finley*, 78.
[108] Ibid, 2.

gender, the art world, and family dynamics. At the root of all the taboo topics Finley addresses in her performance is a fascination with power dynamics.

Finley's artistic interest in power dynamics occasionally resonated in her own life. The provocative and sometimes violent nature of Finley's work led her to several clashes with authorities and her critics, both conservative and liberal alike. Police intervened in several of Finley's performances.[109] In her memoir, Finley describes the negative reception she found in 1986 when traveling to England for a performance. She was accused of "promotion of buggery" and "committing indecent acts in proximity to the Queen." She was also threatened with deportation.[110] In 1990, Finley applied for a grant from the National Endowment of the Arts. She was partially judged on her performance of *We Keep Our Victims Ready* and based off this piece, was "recommended for approval."[111] News of Finley possibly receiving the grant agitated conservative columnists, who in turn petitioned the chairman of the NEA, John Frohnmeyer, to veto numerous who qualified artists for the grant. Finley's grant, along with three other artists', was effectively nullified. Finley and the other artists would later sue the NEA.[112] In the art world Finley's name would forever be synonymous with anti-censorship furthering the controversial nature of her work.

The Constant State of Desire and *We Keep Our Victims Ready* were performed in art venues such as Lincoln Center's Serious Fun Festival and PS 122. No recordings of these performances exist for public viewing. However, scripts of Finley's performances are available to study. To analyze these two performances their scripts will be examined

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[109] Carr, 127.
[110] Finley, *A Different Kind of Intimacy: The Collected Writings of Karen Finley*, 40.
[111] Ibid, 100.
[112] Finley details this entire experience in the chapter "Politics" of *A Different Kind of Intimacy: The Collected Writings of Karen Finley.*

as the preeminent authority on the performances. When available, stage directions and descriptions of the performances, provided by Finley or a scholar, will be used to embellish Finley's scripts. The lack of video or audio recordings for these performances heightens the importance of their scripts and the audience reaction to the performances as evidence of their provocative nature.

Violence and sex, and their co-mingling, are the predominant themes of *The Constant State of Desire* and *We Keep Our Victims Ready*. In her work Finley explores sexualities that are devoid of sexiness. She uses sexuality, and the many taboos surrounding it, to comment on other relationships. "(W)e're really scared of our own sexuality which is no longer a sexuality of love but a sexuality of violence," she explains in her dialogue with Schechner, indicating that she views her work to operate on a level of psychoanalysis.[113] This differentiation allows Finley to approach subjects like rape and incest as (often violent) expressions of power, and not intimate sexual acts. Finley once explained, "I feel disappointed that I am seen as a performer who uses sex exclusively. I use sex, but I deal more with taboos. My performances aren't sexy because I'm not getting sexually turned on by them. It's all energy."[114] Finley's differentiation of sexual acts versus erotic acts is sometimes muddled, but she ultimately presents sexual assault as grotesque.

To realize these power dynamics upon a stage, Finley uses shifting personas in her performances. In *The Constant State of Desire*, Finley inhabits a large range of roles. In "Strangling Baby Birds", Finley describes a woman seeking medical help: "This

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[113] Karen Finley, interview by Richard Schechner, *The Drama Review*, 32.1, 1988.
[114] Linda Montano, *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties: Sex, Food, Money/Fame,* (Berkeley: University of California, 2000), 55.

dream was considered very important to the doctors. For in the past she had dreams of tortures, rapes and beatings where no sounds would come out at all. She'd open her mouth and move her lips but no sound would come out at all."[115] In "Father in All of Us", she takes on the persona of a young girl and describes being molested by her father. In "Two Stories", Finley tells the story of a woman 'Joanne' who was "forced to perform fellatio at gunpoint in front of her own children and pets."[116] In "Abuse", Finley takes on the persona of a man whose wife says to him, after a violent episode of intercourse, "It's better to feel abuse than nothing at all."[117]

In these vignettes of *The Constant State of Desire*, Finley shifts from abuser to abused. She performs both the part of the young girl who is molested atop her refrigerator and men who assault their wives, or mothers. Finley shifts from victim to victimizer in the same performance. Through this exploration of power dynamics, she is strongly commenting on the power of representation. Unlike Mendieta, who cast herself as a victim of sexual assault, and Lacy, who pointedly refrained from assuming any identity other than protestor, Finley explores both sides of assault. As Pramaggiore notes, this is an act of protest: "Finley's work strikes at the core of the patriarchal culture: the power to represent the other."[118] Finley's representation of herself as a male aggressor is unlike any of the other performances selected in this paper, but is a powerful act of subversion.

We Keep Our Victims Ready also utilizes a large cast of characters. "St. Valentine's Massacre" references the sexual abuse of children ("I abused my children sexually because I didn't want you to expect too much out of life. I ridiculed you, I

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[115] Finley, *Shock Treatment*, 3.
[116] Ibid., 12.
[117] Ibid, 23.
[118] Maria Pramaggiore,"Resisting/Performing/Femininity: Words, Flesh, and Feminism in Karen Finley's "The Constant State of Desire"", *Theatre Journal* 44.3 (1992),71.

belittled you because I love you."[119]) from the perspective of a paternal figure. In "We Are the Oven", which details a long list of violent sexual attacks made against a young woman, Finley speaks as a collective, beleaguered "we" and repeats the refrain, "we keep our victims ready". "Why Can't This Veal Calf Walk?" most explicitly concerns itself with sexual assault from the perspective of a sexually assaulted woman. Finley details the violent attacks themselves ("Raped by an uncle at age eight", "After I was raped by my doctor", "Mr. Policeman said, "If you don't suck me I'll blow your brains out") as well as their responses ("You say I got what I deserved", "Everyone says I deserved it"). [120]

Throughout "Why Can't This Veal Calf Walk?" men are described by their roles: father, uncle, policeman, doctor, date. Male presence invades "Why Can't This Veal Calf Walk?" and Finley summarizes the actions of this lineup as,

> authority man whom I trusted and respected visited me in my own bed, broke into my own house, lived with me, on my own street in my own car, looked at me, grabbed me, mangled and hurt me, slapped me and pushed me, touched my privacy, destroyed my feminine instinct, entered and took my hurt and screams and bruises, new colors on my skin…[121]

With this list of violent acts, Finley emphasizes the gendered power dynamics of sexual assault, even going so far as to lump all of the mentioned men together as "authority man."

Maria Pramaggiore writes that, "Finley's work explicitly confronts the degradation she associates with being a woman in patriarchal capitalist culture. The often sadistic fantasies she enacts on stage re-present the horror of male violence and play out equally violent revenge scenarios."[122] As previously mentioned, Finley's use of the male

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[119] Finley, *Shock Treatment*, 118.
[120] Ibid, 128-132.
[121] Ibid, 131-132.

[122] Pramaggiore, 270.

perspective in in *We Keep Our Victims Ready* and *The Constant State of Desire* radically differentiates her from Lacy and Mendieta's work and adds another dimension to art about sexual assault. Finley does not however, grant the male personas she inhabits a great deal of dignity or sympathy. They are rapists and pedophiles devoid of morals but full of lust and their actions are condemned in grotesque terms. While her female characters are often actively obscene as well, they are never the aggressor.[123] Despite this, Schur notes that, "Finley does not attempt to assume a "realistic" male persona. Indeed, never during the course of *the Constant State* does she transform herself physically or vocally into the series of readily distinguishable characters that are suggested by the printed text."[124] This observation is an important complement to the performance text. Finley's refusal to render her male characters realistically once more indicates her power over the representation of sexual aggressors in her work.

In both *We Keep Our Victims Ready* and *The Constant State of Desire*, Finley is the sole performer, and her body is perhaps the most transgressive character of all. *The Constant State of Desire* begins with a section entitled "Strangling Baby Birds". The stage directions for this portion of the performance are described by Finley as follows:

> Easter baskets and stuffed animals sit on a table. Take off clothes. Put colored unboiled eggs from basket and animals in one large clear plastic bag. Smash contents till contents are yellow. Put mixture on body using soaked animals as applicators. Sprinkle glitter and confetti on body and wrap self in paper garlands as boas.[125]

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[123] When Finley's female characters do act out their actions are out of revenge fantasies or pain. A character in *The Constant State of Desire* strangles baby birds. In "Enter Entrepreneur" Finley describes cutting off the testicles of Wall Street stock traders. *Shock Treatment*, 9.
[124] Catherine Schuler, "Spectator Response and Comprehension: The Problem of Karen Finley's "Constant State of Desire"", *The Drama Review (1988-)* 34.1 (1990), 137.
[125] Karen Finley, *Shock Treatment,* 139

Like her predecessor Suzanne Lacy, Finley applies an array of materials to the nude body to highlight the affront of assault. In "Spectator Response and Comprehension: The Problem of Karen Finley's Constant State of Desire", Catherine Schuler notes that for this part of the performance, Finley is also dressed in a "dowdy yellow dress" to match the predominant theme of yellow in the set design.[126] The use of egg yolks and stuffed animals seem to be indicative tokens of femininity, but Finley's destructive use of these props (and the subsequent use of glitter and confetti) conveys both a disinterest in a prototypical type of femininity and a re-vamping of it in a more extreme form. Schechner theorizes that the eggs are representative of male womb envy.[127] By combining the eggs and glitter, and then applying them to her own body, Finley is deliberating imbuing her own naked female form with special meaning as a place of subversion. Like Lacy, she has made the nude female body a site of sexual violence.

In *A Different Kind of Intimacy*, Finley reflects on the gang rape of a young African American girl who provided inspiration for *We Keep Our Victims Ready*.[128] The young girl was raped by a group of white police officers and found "covered in human excrement."[129] The human excrement found covering the young woman, Tawana Brawley, provided Finley with the main source of imagery for *We Keep Our Victims Ready*:

> In the piece that grew out of this, I smeared my body with chocolate, because, as I said in the piece, I'm a woman, and women are usually treated like shit. Then I

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[126] Schuler, 133.
[127] Schechner, 156.
[128] A *New York Times* article from 1987 describes the 15 year old Tawana Brawley found " curled in a fetal position inside a plastic bag behind an apartment house in Wappingers Falls." The article reported that Brawley was badly beaten, with racial slurs and feces "smeared across her body". Brawly claimed that she was beaten by six white men, one of whom wore a police uniform. Six months after her alleged rape and beating, Brawley's story was found to be a hoax.
Michael Winerip, "Revisiting a Rape Scandal That Would Have Been Monstrous if True", *The New York Times*, June 3, 2013.
[129] Finley, *A Different Kind of Intimacy*, 83.

> covered myself with red candy hearts- because, "after a woman is treated like shit, she becomes more loveable." After the hearts, I covered myself with bean sprouts, which smelled like semen and looked like semen- because, after a woman is treated like shit, and loved for it, she is jacked off on. Then I spread tinsel all over my body, like a Cher dress- because, no matter how badly a woman has been treated, she'll still get it together to dress for a dinner.[130]

The application of materials to Finley's body to mimic abuse is again reminiscent of Lacy's *Ablutions*. In *We Keep Our Victims Ready*, Finley is explicit about each material's meanings- chocolate to represent the degradation of women, hearts and tinsel to represent an accepted presentation of femininity, and bean sprouts as a stand in for semen. In *Ablutions* women applied blood and clay to other women but Finley applies chocolate and other materials to herself in a disturbing contrast. The agency Finley exhibits over her own body is destructive but within her control. Pramaggiore writes that Finley's description of sexually charged, obscene acts is overshadowed by her own use of her body:

> She dares to suggest that a woman's voice and body – a tissue through which male violence painfully passes- are powerful tools she can use to unravel the ideologies that justify masculine privilege. Finley commits upon her own body the brutalization she finds in culture. She appropriates the power of her body and language, turning that force inward in an apparently self-destructive manner, a powerful but problematic means of communicating the pain of female oppression.[131]

In her performances, Finley demeans her own body in a manner that suggests a disdain for traditional femininity and the male gaze. As Pramaggiore writes, "she radically overexposes an unpleasant, unfeminine female body."[132]

Finley's highly sexual brutalization of her own body, paired with her shifting representations of abusers and their abused, resulted in largely negative reactions to her

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[130] Ibid, 84.
[131] Pramaggiore, 284.
[132] Ibid, 273.

work from both male and female audience members. It is important to note that unlike Mendieta's performance, Finley's audience members willingly entered an artistic space to see her work. Jill Dolan writes, "the shock value in Finley's work foregrounds cultural constructions in a negative, brutal way that eventually forces spectators to look away."[133] An article from 1989 describes both the audience reaction to Finley's work, and her response to it:

> Men in the audience have dropped their pants, called her a whore, thrown lit cigarettes on the stage. "In our society, sex is still equated with violence and strong language expresses that. That's what I vent in my work. But people are really stigmatized by these words - they have peculiar sacred energies around them. They act as an emotional lightning rod; the words will affect people different ways." [134]

Schuler, in her article, "Spectator Response and Comprehension: The Problem of Karen Finley's "*Constant State of Desire*"" primarily addresses audience response to Finley's work. She observes that, "male reaction is often overt and aggressive."[135] Similarly, Jill Dolan notes in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, that men, "often throw lit cigarettes" at Finley.[136]

A negative male response to Finley's work is clearly derived from Finley's representation of men in her work. As previously described, Finley takes on the role of a man to portray an aggressor or abuser. She does so, as Schuler noted, without even believably transforming her voice or body to imitate a man (perhaps this non-commitment to the role is offensive to men). Finley also actively subverts the male gaze in her works. With the application of unsightly materials to her nude female form she is

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[133] Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic,* (MI: UMI Research, 1988), 67.
[134] Ann Kolson, "The Wild Ways of Karen Finley. Her Art is Her 'Calling'. Some Call it Obscene", *Philly.com*, 20 January 1980, http://articles.philly.com/1989-01-20/news/26124543_1_michael-overn-constant-state-finley-lives.
[135] Schuler, 132.
[136] Dolan, 66.

inviting men to view her body as an object and then punishing them for doing so. Dolan writes that Finley's abuse of her own body is defiant of men viewing her "as the object of their desire, thereby mocking their sexuality."[137] In creating art about sexual assault, that concurrently mocks the aggressive nature and sexuality of heterosexual men, Finley is boldly striking back at patriarchal abuse of women.

In her article Catherine Schuler speculates that a negative male response to Finley's work may indicate that female audience members respond in a positive light. But a survey Schuler conducted after one of Finley's performances reveals that female responses to Finley's work also are largely confused or negative. Schuler writes that many women understood Finley's violent description of male acts as a call to arms against men.[138] Finley's depiction of a young man who has sex with his mother in *The Constant State of Desire* provided for audience members "evidence that she is anti-male."[139] It is unclear from Schuler's survey if female audience members are also offended by Finley's presentation of her male characters as abusers.

Based on the results of Schuler's survey and other descriptions of audience response to Finley's work, it is evident that performances such as *We Keep Our Victims Ready* and *The Constant State of Desire* do not facilitate an identificatory bond with the audience. Like Mendieta, Finley purposefully shocks her audience but her radical use of her own body, paired with her presentation of sexual assault and male aggressiveness, seemingly alienates her audience instead of situating them closely to assault. Given the intimate nature of art on sexual assault, and its potential to act as socially activated art

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[137] Ibid, 67.
[138] Schuler, 135.
[139] Ibid, 137.

that fosters consciousness of gendered violence, Finley's failure to explicitly connect with her audience indicates a failure to promote awareness of sexual assault.

Feminist responses to Finley's work have also been mixed. Dolan views her refusal to pander to the male gaze as an empowering subversion of the pornography industry and the patriarchy, but also notes that Finley "breaks from cultural feminist performance art traditions that evade issues of sexuality and power" and is clearly not working on behalf of a "global feminism."[140] Maria Pramaggiore also lauds Finley's positioning of her performing body as a subject, rather than an object- a highly feminist act. However, like Dolan, Pramaggiore is sure to point out that, "Finley's performances are not feminist models for transforming power relations; Finley reverses, exaggerates and embodies abusive power."[141] Finley's own relationship to feminism is just as complex as her critic's view of her work. Carr writes that Finley identifies herself as a feminist but acknowledges that Finley's reaction to other feminist art is often negative.[142] The frequency with which Finley brings up female degradation in her work indicates that she is very much a feminist, despite the questionable presentation of her work and its audience response.[143]

Schuler writes that Finley is "quite content with her present situation and received a great deal of pleasure from her work."[144] Finley identifies her goals as an artist as an effort to "transform" her pain into "compassion" a statement that does not seem to extend to public perception of her work.[145] She also stated that she believes transgressive art, or

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[140] Dolan, 167.
[141] Pramaggiore, 290.
[142] Carr, 129.
[143] Finley says to Richard Schechner, "Female oppression is everyday, it's the anchor I have to society." (154) She also says that the "feminine way" has been "oppressed" because "male energy is so scared of it."
[144] Schuler,138.
[145] Finley, *A Different Kind of Intimacy*, 67.

any "transgressive act" is "a kind of psychic problem-solving, at the cultural level… It offers catharsis that healing is possible."[146] Her work, for all its violent and intimate content, may serve as a catharsis for herself, but it fails to provide the same effect for her audience.

In "Normal Ills" Anna Chave proposes that art that tackles social issues is a vital, cathartic endeavor for artists. Similarly, Claire Bishop proposes in "Artificial Hells" that socially engaged art possesses a potential to change social institutions. Finley's art functions only on the level that Chave describes. It is cathartic for herself, as she states numerous times. But based off of audience responses to her work, it is evident that works such as *The Constant State of Desire* and *We Keep Our Victims Ready* do not stir a great deal of sympathy or even understanding from her audience.

Finley's failure to connect with her audience does not translate to an overall failure in an artistic or socially active sense. In her works about sexual assault Finley maintains control over her own body and the representation of assailants. She derives satisfaction and healing from her work. Emma Sulkowicz similarly derives healing from her performance, at the cost of alienating and provoking some of her audience. Although performances such as *We Keep Our Victims Ready* and *The Constant State of Desire* disturb and provoke audiences, Finley's art is produced in an effort to transform pain into compassionate art.

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[146] Ibid.

Emma Sulkowicz: the Protest of a Powerful Victim

In *Artificial Hells*, Claire Bishop writes, "if social agencies have failed, then art is obliged to step in."[147] Columbia University failed Emma Sulkowicz by allowing her rapist to go unpunished. Sulkowicz's work *Carry That Weight* (2014*)* is the most recent performance to protest sexual assault and in it a culmination of the performances of Sulkowicz's predecessors can be found. The twenty two year old Sulkowicz deals with criticism both online and in person, much like Karen Finley faced intense responses from her audiences. Her performance protests a sexual assault (her own) on a college campus just as Ana Mendieta's *Untitled (Rape Scene)* did in 1973. *Carry That Weight's* involvement with on campus rape prevention groups and its highly localized dynamic speak to a lasting feminist foundation created by the work of Suzanne Lacy. Sulkowicz's piece also builds upon a tradition of specific tactics used in performance art about sexual assault while also departing from her predecessor's use of the female body. *Carry That Weight* uses a heightened importance of audiences, community organization and outreach, and the use of shock. Expansive and participatory in design, *Carry That Weight* targets not only Columbia University, but rape culture at large.

At the beginning of her sophomore year at Columbia University, a fellow student raped Emma Sulkowicz in her dormitory bed. Sulkowicz filed a report through the University, which she claims was largely ignored, then postponed, and then ultimately botched by the administration.[148] She then attempted to file a report through the special victims unit of the NYPD, but it came to no fruition. In April of 2014, Sulkowicz and 23

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[147] Bishop, 275.
[148] For the most recent update on this report, see Ariel Kaminer, "Accusers and the Acussed, Crossing Paths at Columbia University," *The New York Times,* Dec. 21, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/22/nyregion/accusers-and-the-accused-crossing-paths-at-columbia.html?_r=0.

other students filed a Title IX complaint against Columbia University, claiming the school mishandled sexual assault cases. All criminal charges against her alleged rapist were subsequently dropped[149] (but a no contact order exists that prohibits Sulkowicz and her assailant from interacting).[150]

Before her foray into performance art, Sulkowicz described herself as a multi-media artist who experimented with photography, sculpture, and painting. Although she cites *Carry That Weight* as her first true artistic endeavor ("I became an artist with this piece…"[151]), Sulkowicz describes her previous works in school as explorations of rage and violence against women. Her sculptures, interestingly, are explained as embodiments of "violence as a formal configuration."[152] "The verbs that you would use to describe the process that I used to make the sculptures that I was making were all very violent words," Sulkowicz says. Despite this early interest in gendered power relations, Sulkowicz acknowledges a shift in artistic vision that occurred after her rape. "Art is made out of necessity," she explains in a dialogue with Roberta Smith at the Brooklyn Museum. "Pre-this summer, art to me was fulfilling an assignment for a class… now I look at that and think, that's not art."[153] Sulkowicz's rape became an artistic call to arms that inspired her beyond college assignments.

Sulkowicz cites her interactions with the special victims unit as the beginning of artistic response to her rape. She recorded her interactions with the police officers, who repeatedly questioned her credibility, or used inappropriate language to discuss her rape

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149 Katie Van Syckle, "The Columbia Student Carrying a Mattress Everywhere Says Reporters Are Triggering Rape Memories." *The Cut*, *New York* magazine, September 4, 2014. Accessed January 24, 2015.
150 Ibid.
151 Emma Sulkowicz, "Carry That Weight", Youtube video, 1:35:37, posted by BrooklynMuseum, December 17, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OMXp3RLOVNg
152 Ibid.
153 Ibid.

("So he got a little weird that night.").[154] These audio recordings would not be utilized until the summer of 2014, which Sulkowicz spent at the Yale University Norfolk Residency in Connecticut. It was at this residency that her *Mattress Performance* was initially conceptualized, albeit in a very different form. At Norfolk, Sulkowicz attached the audio to a video that she made of herself dismantling a bed. "The idea of me moving a bed out of a room got stuck in my head," Sulkowicz explains.[155] Sulkowicz's peers at the residency told her that her location of this performance was not altogether relevant to her rape. This critique inspired her to carry the mattress at the location of her assault, Columbia University.

Carry That Weight retained some components of Sulkowicz's original work at Norfolk. Most importantly it would keep the mattress- a clear symbol of the rape Sulkowicz experienced. Despite the difficulty of carrying a bulky mattress, Sulkowicz resists any sort of contraption that will help her carry it. Friends suggested that she roll it up, add wheels, or use a sling to carry it. But Sulkowicz resists this because any alteration to the mattress would "fetishize" it.[156] She explains that *Carry That Weight* is about her struggle to carry the mattress (and on another level, force the University to acknowledge her rape), "To me the piece is about an honest struggle with the mattress and not coming up with tricks to make it easier."[157] If the mattress were to be altered in any way, it would change from the artistic symbol that Sulkowicz decreed it to be to a prop. Other than occasionally covering the mattress with a case to protect it from the rain, she has left it unaltered.[158]

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[154] Ibid.
[155] Ibid.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Ibid.
[158] Ibid.

At her studio on campus, Sulkowicz delineated her "Rules of Engagement" for *Carry That Weight.* These rules act as parameters for her performance. They stipulate that she must carry the mattress everywhere she goes on Columbia's campus until her rapist is expelled or until she graduates. Sulkowicz may not ask for aid when she carries the mattress, but she can accept help. Those that help Sulkowicz carry her mattress are "entering the space of performance" at their own discretion.[159] When she goes off campus, she leaves the mattress in her dorm or studio. Three weeks after the start of the performance, Sulkowicz began a diary that would document unseen aspects of the performance that only she experiences. The "Mattress Diary", Sulkowicz says, "gives an account of the more private things that are happening."[160] Sulkowicz views this documentation as a now integral part of the performance, and plans to eventually make it public.[161]

From the beginning of her performance Sulkowicz made her goals for *Carry That Weight* apparent. As protest art, *Carry That Weight* publicizes a sexual assault that was unaddressed by authority figures. One of Sulkowicz's "Rules of Engagement" stipulates that she must carry the mattress until her rapist is expelled or she graduates, indicating that the performance is also a method of applying pressure on Columbia to expel Sulkowicz's rapist.

Carry That Weight also functions outside of pure retribution. Sulkowicz's impetus to create this piece echoes Anna C. Chave's parameters for art that is created out of necessity and is "socially minded, but also, and vitally, self-interested."[162] On a personal

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[159] Emma Sulkowicz, *Carry That Weight: Rules of Engagement*, Columbia University Senior Studios .
[160] "Carry That Weight", Youtube video.
[161] Ibid.
[162] Bishop, 2.

level, Sulkowicz describes her performance "as better than therapy,"[163] but she also acknowledges that it is addressing issues larger than her own assault.[164] *Carry That Weight* is a highly localized protest against an institution and a rape culture and in these arenas Sulkowicz is not standing alone. "I'm never really doing it myself," she admits, "The world needs this now."[165] Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard defined art during the second wave movement as "a method of using one's own experience as the most valid way of formulating political analysis."[166] These statements by Sulkowicz connect her performance to second wave feminist traditions of art that seek to elevate the experiences of women.

In comparison with Lacy, who cooperated with authority figures in both *Three Weeks* iterations, Sulkowicz's interactions with the police and Columbia University officials have largely been negative. Sulkowicz was driven to create *Carry that Weight* because of a feeling of helplessness against her rapist, law enforcement, and her school. Despite its roots in a feeling of powerlessness, her performance is a display of protest, one that also requires a feat of physical strength. Sulkowicz's piece is a response to her own powerlessness but through powerful and defiant means. This contrast is acknowledged by Sulkowicz:

> I've been thinking about the power thing a lot lately because I think that on the meta level of my piece there's this really strange dialectic going on because I'm powerless because the school has done these things to me, my rapist has done these things to me, the police have treated me like crap. And ultimately I'm forced to- if I want this education, to continue to go to school with my rapist. At the same time, because of this piece… all of public safety at my school had to have an emergency meeting where they told them, 'You're going to get fired if you

[163] "Carry That Weight", Youtube video.
[164] Ibid.
[165] Ibid.
[166] *The Power of Feminist Art*, 21.

> don't pick up Emma at the shuttle stop.'... I'm powerless and powerful at the same time.[167]

At the end of this statement, Sulkowicz clarifies that while performing, her "pure emotional feeling is powerlessness." This dichotomy of power vs. powerlessness aligns *Carry That Weight* with other performance art pieces about sexual assault. The power dynamic of the abuser and abused is found in the works of Suzanne Lacy, Ana Mendieta, and Karen Finley, for the abuse of power is inextricable from the topic of sexual assault. In *Carry That Weight*, Sulkowicz is powerfully reacting to her own assault. While the imagery of her piece (the mattress) does evoke the act of the actual assault, Sulkowicz is literally shouldering its burden. She is actively pursuing, through her art, a channel through which her rapist and the school that failed her can be held accountable. But as she acknowledges, she still feels powerless in her struggle to be recognized. According to Sulkowicz, Columbia University's public safety were given special instructions to pick her up with a shuttle bus, but she also concedes that the shuttle bus commonly ignores her presence. Her celebrity and the amount of awareness she has generated place her in a position of power, but ultimately she has still not achieved the goal of her performance. While Chave purposes that socially engaged art can act as a sort of catharsis, Sulkowicz bluntly states that she is "angrier with (her rapist)" than she's ever been because of her performance.[168] For Sulkowicz, *Carry That Weight* simultaneously acts as empowering art that is "better than therapy" and has earned her artistic exposure, and art that continually makes her struggle.

As previously noted, Roberta Smith considers the most striking aspect of

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[167] "Carry That Weight", Youtube video.
[168] Ibid.

Sulkowicz's performance to be, "the way it fluctuates between private and public, and solitary and participatory," an analysis that resounds with all of the works selected in this paper.[169] Sulkowicz's piece hinges upon the participation, or lack thereof, performed by her audience. A website, www.carryingtheweighttogether.com, was created by Columbia students in an effort to support Sulkowicz and organize events to raise awareness. Much like her predecessors, Sulkowicz's performance hinges upon the reaction and inclusion of her audience. In an interview only several days in to the performance, Sulkowicz says she often has help, and that she "rarely walks far without someone lending a hand."[170]

As of her dialogue with Roberta Smith in December 2014, Sulkowicz is increasingly aware of how fellow students and passerbys will respond to her performance. "I get treated differently when I'm with the mattress," she says, after describing the many smiles and thumbs-up she receives in elevators or while walking to class.[171] There are those who are so eager (or forceful) in their intent to aid her that they knock her off balance. If a photographer is present, hardly anyone will help her, fearing perhaps disrupting something important. A fellow Columbia student observed the effect of the mattress's presence on campus as a divisive symbol, "Basically, if you're not helping her, you're a rapist."[172] With this observation the alignment of Sulkowicz's participants with social justice, and those who chose not to help (for whatever reason) with injustice, becomes clear. The audience of Sulkowicz's performance is socially activated in some manner no matter their level of involvement in *Carry That Weight.*

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[169] Smith, "Mattress as a Lever."
[170] "Carry That Weight", Youtube video.
[171] Ibid.

[172] Chantal M., interview by author, November 13, 2014.

Sulkowicz also acknowledges a decline in those who are willing to help her. She theorizes that months of carrying the mattress

have made her appear stronger and more adept, "I've gotten a lot better at carrying it now."[173] Perhaps Sulkowicz's appearance around campus has perhaps become old news, or her built up capability of carrying the mattress now conflicts with her image of a powerless victim. Sulkowicz's body in *Carry That Weight* differs greatly from second wave feminist aesthetics and Lacy, Finley, and Mendieta for this reason. In *Carry That Weight* Sulkowicz never appears nude, as her predecessors did. She traverses through Columbia's campus, mattress in tow, dressed in her normal everyday clothes. Her clothed body represents the normalcy of rape but also reflects a shift in feminist tactics away from using the female body as a symbol of gender and a frequent site of rape. *Carry That Weight* uses the mattress as a symbol of rape rather than Sulkowicz's body.

Although *Carry That Weight* was born out of a transgression against Sulkowicz, during her performance, participants occasionally commit transgressions against her. Since September, at least two men and one woman reached out and touched her "like I'm a saint."[174] When participants touch the mattress without notifying Sulkowicz, they often do more harm than good. Sulkowicz is stymied by participants' lack of communication. "This is the language of consent," she said to Roberta Smith, "they need to communicate with me before they jump in and help."[175] *Carry That Weight*, through its participatory nature, bolsters an activist commentary on how and when to aid someone.

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[173] "Carry That Weight", Youtube video.
[174] Ibid.
[175] Ibid.

A proliferation of protests continue to spring up around *Carry That Weight* and they reach beyond Columbia's campus. The website www.carryingtheweighttogether.com, promotes events that supplement Sulkowicz's performance. On October 29th 2014, nearly two months into Sulkowicz's performance, protests all across the world were organized in solidarity through the website. The Carry The Weight Together organization describes this day as follows,

> On October 29, students across the country are taking collective action to support survivors of sexual and domestic violence on college campuses. We are encouraging students, staff, and faculty of colleges to carry a mattress on campus that day as a tangible way to show their support for survivors and for ending sexual violence and rape culture. This national day of action is inspired by the activism and art of Emma Sulkowicz at Columbia University and led by Columbia student activists. We aim to raise awareness about the prevalence of sexual and domestic violence, advocate for better campus policies, and challenge rape culture.[176]

According to Sulkowicz, over 130 schools in five countries participated in this "National Day of Action". In an article on Columbia University's observation of the National Day of Action, Vanessa Grigoriadis describes a gathering of feminist and LGBTQ organizations that railed against the administration's conduct regarding sexual assaults. Sexual assault survivors, she writes, "talked about their experiences, as observers and a scrum of media bore witness."[177] These events were inspired by Sulkowicz's performances, and although *Carry That Weight* can stand on its own as art, Sulkowicz's participation in these events further establishes her work as socially active. The spread of a mattress as a symbol of protest in regards to sexual assault further increases the parameters of *Carry That Weight*.

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[176] http://www.carryingtheweighttogether.com/ , accessed on January 21, 2015.
[177] Vanessa Grigoriadis, "How to Start a Revolution: Emma Sulkowicz, Who Will Not Put Her Mattress Down Until Her Alleged Rapist is Expelled, is its New Public Face." *New York Magazine,* September 22, 2014.

Social media has also allowed for so many others to take up Sulkowicz's cause. Like Lacy's *Three Weeks in January*, platforms such as Facebook and other websites have allowed for additional activist organizing to be created around art.

Although she has become the symbol of a movement, Sulkowicz is uncomfortable with assuming the role of a leader. "I think I've been framed as the leader of a movement and that I have a lot of control over this movement… but really, the way I see it… I'm just a person making an art piece that seems to be an appropriate symbol for a movement," Sulkowicz said at the Brooklyn Museum.[178] Sulkowicz's identity as a sexual assault victim is perhaps what makes her an easily made figurehead for the anti-sexual assault movement. She promotes the work of activist students at Columbia and credits them with the publicity gained by *Carry That Weight* and other sexual assault awareness events. Despite her reluctance to be viewed as a leader, Sulkowicz is strongly identified with the anti-sexual assault movement. Her image, mattress included, appeared on a September 2014 issue of *New York* magazine and countless other articles have since then covered her performance and the movement it represents. On January 20th, 2015, she was invited to the State of the Union as Senator Kristen Gillibrand's guest of honor. A fellow student in Sulkowicz's year compared her to the popular literary and film character, Katniss Everdeen of the Hunger Games saga. Everdeen is used in the series as a symbol to promote a rebellion. Like this fictional character, Sulkowicz's "image has been attached to a movement and you can see it everywhere. It's bigger than her, and not necessarily within her control, I think", said the Columbia student.[179] To an extent,

[178] "Carry That Weight", Youtube video.
[179] Chantal M.

Sulkowicz has been deified.[180] "The positive way people have treated me is really stressful as well," Sulkowicz said to Smith.[181]

The attention *Carry That Weight* entices is largely because of its participatory nature. Claire Bishop's proposition in *Artificial Hells*, that participatory art with a 'social turn' is created out of change in the role of the spectator (from viewer to active "co-producer") is directly applicable to Sulkowicz's performance.[182] Indeed, Sulkowicz's *Carry That Weight* hinges upon whether she carries the weight of the mattress (or her rape) alone or with aid. The performance is altered through the use of participants; the involvement of Sulkowicz's classmates, or strangers, strengthens the identificatory bond theorized by Amelia Jones to exist between performance artist and audience.

This connection between Sulkowicz and the public is elevated to another level with the inclusion of the internet in her performing space. The interaction of any other person with Sulkowicz, from a smile on the street to a harshly written article or threats posted online, is considered by Sulkowicz to be an expansion of *Carry That Weight*. [183] The bond Sulkowicz has created by carrying an intimate symbol of her rape has expanded to include those who interact with her in even the most remote manner. The widening of *Carry That Weight* bears an implication that everyone, from her fellow Columbia students to commenters on the internet, is deemed accountable in this performance and in the prevalence of sexual assault.

Recently, Sulkowicz's alleged rapist publicly responded to *Carry That Weight.* To *The Daily Beast* writer, Cathy Young, Paul Nungesser expressed that he views

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[180] Emma Sulkowicz, "Carry That Weight", Youtube video, 1:35:37, posted by BrooklynMuseum, December 17, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OMXp3RLOVNg
[181] Ibid.
[182] Bishop, 2.
[183] Carry That Weight", Youtube video.

Sulkowicz's performance as harassment. "It's explicitly designed to bully me into leaving the school—she has said so repeatedly. That is not art. If she was doing this for artistic self-expression, or exploration of her identity—all these are valid motives. Scaring another student into leaving university is not a valid motive."[184] Following this statement by Nungesser, Sulkowicz responded, "It is extremely upsetting that Paul would violate me again—this time, with the help of a reporter, Cathy Young."[185] Nungesser's reaction to Sulkowicz's performance, and the entirety of Cathy Young's article, promote Sulkowicz's performance as vendetta and Sulkowicz as a young woman in a position of power. Nungesser's reaction in particular emphasizes his continual role in the performance and his presence on the site of *Carry That Weight*. Karen Finley also received negative male responses to *The Constant State of Desire* and *We Keep Our Victims Ready*, works in which she too exhibited power over her own body and sexual assault.

While Sulkowicz has not explicitly cited previous female performance artists who tackled sexual assault in their work as inspiration for *Carry That Weight*, their influence is evident. Like Mendieta's violence tableaux, a protest of the rape and murder of student Sara Ann Otten, Sulkowicz's performance is highly localized and in reflection of the space it is performed in. Much like Suzanne Lacy's *Ablutions* and *Three Weeks* series, *Carry That Weight* is goal-oriented and associated with a timely protest movement. Connections between Karen Finley's work and Sulkowicz's performance are not

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[184] Cathy Young, "Columbia Student: I Didn't Rape Her", *The Daily Beast*, February 3, 2015, http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/02/03/columbia-student-i-didn-t-rape-her.html.
[185] Erin Gloria Ryan, "How to Make an Accused Rapist Look Good", *Jezebel*, February 6, 2015, http://jezebel.com/how-to-make-an-accused-rapist-look-good-1682583526.

immediately recognizable, but both artists explore power dynamics in their work in ways that confront and challenge them.

In *Carry That Weight*, Sulkowicz addresses not only the compliance of Columbia University in her assault, but a rape culture at large. *Carry That Weight* not only confronts the power dynamics of sexual assault, but incorporates them into the visuals of the performance: a young woman, struggling to carry a large burden, who can accept help, but is not allowed to ask for it.

Conclusion

Artist Dan Graham once asserted, "All artists are alike. They dream of doing something that's more social, more collaborative, and more real than art."[186] The works in this paper all seek this collaborative, social, and real design. They are connected through a common goal, to publicize and protest sexual assault. The first performance examined in this paper, *Ablutions* by Suzanne Lacy, and the last performance examined in this paper, *Mattress Performance: Carry That Weight* are separated by over forty years. And yet they, and the performances that came between them, share commonalities in their design as does the rape culture they seek to address.

Artist Faith Wilding writes in *The Power of Feminist Art* about the emergence of performance art as a venue to protest sexual violence, "At that time the feminist movement had barely begun a socio/political analysis of violence against women, and the need to create feminist support services for abused women was just beginning to be recognized."[187] Although Wilding is referring to the second wave feminist movement of the 1970s, her assessment of performance art as a "feminist support service" still resounds today in the work of Emma Sulkowicz. The works in this paper represent shifting tactics of the feminist art movement; from Lacy's community organizing to Finley's brash challenging of the representation of victims and perpetrators. The art historical lineage presented in this paper culminates in Emma Sulkowicz and *Carry That Weight*, modern examples of the continued relevancy of feminist art.

In addition to being connected through a shared goal, these works are linked through a similarity of tactics. The arsenal of a performance artist protesting sexual

[186] As quoted in Bishop, 1.
[187] *The Power of Feminist Art*, 38.

assault includes the involvement, and sometimes implication, of her audience, the use of shock and her own body (sometimes nude but always present), and community outreach. These tactics are used in conjunction to publicize sexual assault.

Suzanne Lacy poured blood and clay and eggs over her body in *Ablutions* in order to simulate the bodily horror of rape. Mendieta lay naked, prone, and also covered in blood to mimic the death of another woman. Karen Finley also employed her body to protest sexual assault, covering her body in chocolate while unleashing verbal diatribes. By carrying a mattress Emma Sulkowicz disrupts the normality of a university campus on a daily basis. The visceral shock of these bodies in performance signal a call to social action; the audience is dared to pay attention as a community to their cause.

In order to address the shock against convention that an act of rape illustrates, the artists studied in this thesis each involve their audience in an unconventional and shocking manner. In *Three Weeks* Lacy targeted the entire community of Los Angeles. *Untitled (Rape Scene)* was a complete and imaginably horrifying surprise to Mendieta's classmates while her staging of *Alley Pieces* avoided recognition and a conventional art audience in its entirety. Karen Finley wished to hold her audience responsible for abusive dynamics in their own lives. Sulkowicz takes her assault to the streets, inviting her university to assist her. These audiences are implicated as proxies for the rape culture.

The audiences held captive by the performances of Lacy, Mendieta, Finley, and Sulkowicz are also given the chance to redeem themselves. This redemption is perhaps most poignantly illustrated in Lacy and Sulkowicz's work. In *Ablutions* Lacy follows an intense recreation of rape with a "healing ceremony." Emma Sulkowicz, who carries her

mattress around campus as symbol of her unacknowledged rape, finally receives the aid and support she seeks when her classmates assist with her burden.

Performance art focusing on sexual assault acts as an alternative social venue for protest and healing. By involving their audiences and using their bodies, these women artists take assault to the streets, making a very private experience public.

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