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Conference Theme: Outsides

Truth Inside, Truth Outside

I want to begin with a warning that I will talk about sexual violence. I will not go into the graphic details of my assault, but at one point I will mention one thing my attacker did. I will not focus on it; it will be a passing remark.

The incident happened in my dorm room. People may have seen us together outside the room, but only two people on earth saw what happened inside, and those two people were Jean-Paul Nungesser and me. By the time I felt ready to report my case, about 6 months later, the security camera footage from the building entrance had been deleted, I'd washed the DNA away, and my bruises had healed. Even if I'd had the footage, the DNA, and the bruises, there would have been no proof of rape. The footage would have proved that we'd entered the building, but it wouldn't have proved that we'd had sex. The DNA would have proved that we'd had sex, but it wouldn't have proved that the sex was unwanted. The bruises would have proved that the sex was rough, even painful, but I could have very well wanted rough, painful sex. Therefore, the bruises would not have proved that I'd been raped, either.

There are only two quantitative methods that are used to prove non-consent, and these are laboratory tests that detect traces of certain drugs and measure alcohol levels. If

a medical examination shows that the alleged victim had a high Blood Alcohol Content, or if there are traces of certain incapacitating drugs, then it can safely be assumed that the victim was incapable of giving conscious consent. Sounds easy, right? Well, even that is not proof of non-consent. My friend dated a woman who had once asked a man to roofie her in order to fulfill a sexual fantasy. In that case, she consented to being rendered unconscious. Try not to get confused. What I am saying is that there does not exist a scientific way to prove non-consent. I am also willing to argue that even a secret audio recording of the alleged victim saying, “No, stop, that hurts,” does not prove non-consent. What if the alleged victim had told the alleged perpetrator that they wanted to use a different word to signify the revocation of their consent? This is a common practice called “using a safe-word,” in which the sexual partners determine a word that is not typically used during sex, such as “apple,” to signify that either person wants to stop. This allows them to consensually “act out” sexual fantasies that may resemble rape. Either way, in my case, he didn’t drug me, I wasn’t intoxicated, and there were no secret recordings of what I said in my room. In my case, we couldn’t even try to use those factors as evidence or proof of what really happened.

Before we continue, I want to explore the meaning of consent. To give consent is to give permission for something to happen. If I give consent to that woman to glue strawberries to my ears, then I am giving her permission to glue strawberries to my ears. To “give consent to” someone has a slightly different meaning than “to consent” to something. To consent to do something means agreeing to do something. If that woman consents to my previous proposition, then she agrees to glue strawberries to my ears. We

will primarily focus on the first use of the word consent, in which it is a thing that can be given and revoked.

A discussion of consent necessitates a discussion of ownership. While I can give consent to that woman to glue strawberries to my ears, I cannot give consent to that woman to glue strawberries to that man's ears. That man's ears do not belong to me; they belong to him. I own my own ears, for they are a part of my body. My body always belongs to me—your body always belongs to you—these statements seem self-explanatory.

Rape is an interesting case study in this theory of body ownership. The most terrifying part of being raped was not the physical pain. It was the realization that I could not stop the pain from happening. I had lost control over my body. It was not an out-of-body-experience; it was the epitome of being trapped. For the first time I confronted the idea that I might not own my own body.

One time, a self-proclaimed anti-feminist wanted to play devil's advocate with me. He said, "Why should we care about rape?" This was before I'd dreamt of Mattress Performance, and I hadn't thought about rape as much as I've thought about it now. I suggested the he put himself in the shoes of a survivor and consider the physical pain he might feel if he were forced into a sexual act he didn't want. He said, "What's a little pain? All wounds heal; I'd get over it in time." "And emotional pain?" I asked. "I'd get over it!" he said.

Looking back, I would attribute his inability to sympathize to his naïve belief in the fallacy of body-ownership. Why should the momentary loss of control over his body

upset him, when he was bound to regain ownership immediately afterwards? I would argue that, in fact, survivors do not regain our bodies when the rape is over, for we realize that we never completely owned them in the first place. Rape haunts survivors because it shatters the myth of body ownership by exposing the vulnerability and penetrability of our bodies to everything that is external to us.

Survivors understand that bodies have no absolute integrity. Bodies are porous. Every one of my orifices is an opportunity to be penetrated, and because I have eyes and ears, it happens without my consent every day. This is contrary to what we like to believe, which is that what is inside our bodies is sacred and impervious to everything outside. Our faith in this boundary is linked to the feeling of free will. But, there are many examples that challenge this illusion, such as any of the things we do because we have been socially conditioned to do them; not because we want to.

For example, school taught me to please my superiors, who rewarded me when I listened in class and did as I was told. My eyes received the information of the good grade on the page. My ears heard the words, "Good job." My tongue tasted the candy. They taught me through my orifices.

Most of my teachers have been white and male. I wonder if I ever unconsciously treat white males as my superiors because of the way I have been trained to act since I was little. I have a hunch that I do. I never consented to that, but because I live in our society, I am socially conditioned to act like this.

"Triggers" are a more direct example of how rape forces its survivors to confront the ways in which we don't own our own bodies. In the context of rape and its aftermath,

a trigger is an event or thing that causes a person to feel either upset or physically disturbed. For example, if a survivor sees someone who looks like the person who raped them, they might panic and break into a sweat. Survivors aren't the only ones who can be triggered. For example, people who know survivors are often triggered by the same stimuli, such as seeing the survivors' attackers, or someone who resembles them, as well.

Triggered responses are not always emotional. They can be completely physical. For example, if a survivor was strangled during the attack, their throat might mysteriously start hurting when they hear the voice of their rapist. Only upon reflection will the survivor realize that their throat was hurting because they'd been triggered by their attacker. Triggers remind us of the porousness of our bodies by showing how audiovisual information can "make us do or feel things" without our consent, at any time of day, anywhere.

I don't want you to think that I'm saying that we don't own our bodies at all. What I want to show is that our sense of body ownership is fluid, and can be breached, eroded, or called into question in a variety of ways. I provide these examples to show that there are some times when we have more control, and some times when we have less.

Earlier, we thought about how people can only give consent for others to act upon things that they own. But if our bodies don't always belong to us, then how do we know when our consent is legitimate? A question at stake in many cases of intimate partner violence is: did she say "Yes" because she really meant it, or was she conditioned to say "Yes" in spite of herself? A victim may say, "Yes," to all sorts of violence, and really mean "Yes" with all their heart, but may later come to realize that the reason they had

said and felt “Yes” was because of a history of coercion within the relationship. An imbalanced power dynamic, such as seen in some boss/underling, teacher/student, or warden/prisoner relationships can, in some cases, also make consent impossible.

So, back to me and Paul. I say it was rape. Paul says it was all consensual. Who speaks the truth? As we saw, no action or exchange on earth can inherently constitute rape, for even enactments of rape involving date rape drugs can be consented to. An understanding of the social forces that determine body ownership and the power to give consent shows that the answer cannot be found by dissecting what happened inside the room that night. Determining whether I uttered the word, “Yes,” “No,” or “Maybe,” isn’t definitive, for even if we did possess the tools to rewind time and replay that moment, those words have zero significance on their own.

By now I hope it is clear that, when it comes to sexual violence, scientific proof is impossible. If we continue trying to “prove” that it exists and “prove” that it happened to so-and-so, we will never get anywhere, for as I’ve shown, words, actions, physical traces, and security footage are an incomplete indication of what “happened.” If we use “proof” as the basis of our arguments, we fight on the all-too-familiar home territory of the rape-denying opponent. We position ourselves right where they want us.

When I see people commenting online about my case or writing articles of their own, there is a trend. Those who believe me come up with reasons to believe me such as pattern-recognition, experience, statistical likelihood, intuitions about character, knowledge of society and the relative pervasiveness of certain types of biases. On the other hand, those who don’t believe me invoke the “proof” argument. “She has no

proof!” they’ll exclaim. “Here is proof that she is lying!” they’ll write, and then provide what they consider is cold, hard, evidence. It’s no coincidence that these people aspire to turn the study of sexual violence into a proof and fact-based science. Whether or not their proof is convincing, the attempt to use it in the first place is first and foremost a strategic move. In Michel Foucault’s opening lecture at the Collège de France in 1976, he used Marxism as an example of a theory that certain philosophers were treating as a science. Because his argument is structural, as I read this quote from his lecture, I will take the liberty of replacing his word, “Marxism,” with the words, “sexual violence evidence.”

Here is what he said:

We should be asking...ourselves about the aspiration to power that is inherent in the claim to being a science... “What types of knowledge are you trying to disqualify when you say that you are a science?”...And I would say: “When I see you trying to prove that proof of sexual violence is a science, to tell the truth, I do not really see you trying to demonstrate once and for all that sexual violence has a rational structure and that its propositions are therefore the products of verification procedures. I see you, first and foremost, doing something different. I see you connecting to [your] discourse, and I see you assigning to those who speak that discourse the power-effects that the West has, ever since the Middle Ages, ascribed to a science and reserved for those who speak a scientific discourse. (Foucault 10)

What does Foucault mean by this? First of all, that when a person claims that their theory is a science, or when they claim that their theory is based on facts, proof, and evidence, they simultaneously disqualify other types of knowledge that either *aren't* based on these things, or are based on a *different type* of facts, proof, and evidence. Foucault argues that this is a way for people to claim Western scientific power for their own discourse. So, when people demand proof in order to determine whether an act of sexual violence occurred, ask yourself why they might want to frame this thing as a science. Remember, earlier, we talked about how there does not exist a way to *prove* that sexual violence occurred. No bruises, no DNA, no security footage, no medical records, no words, and no actions will prove conclusive either way. If we try to prove every case of sexual violence scientifically, whose side of the argument are we inevitably going to land on? The alleged perpetrator or the alleged victim? A victim says "I was raped," and the policeman says, "We can't prove it, so there's nothing we can do." A perpetrator says, "She's lying," and the policeman says, "We can't prove anything she said anyways."

So, the study of sexual violence as a science is a claim to power. And power, as Foucault says in that same lecture, "is essentially that which represses. Power is that which represses nature, instincts, a class, or individuals...if power is indeed the implementation and deployment of a relationship of force...shouldn't we be analyzing it first and foremost in terms of conflict, confrontation, and war?...Power is war, the continuation of war by other means" (15). When we treat sexual violence as a science, ask yourselves which party stands to be repressed in the power dynamic. If we continue to treat these issues as scientific, we allow this war to continue.

It's time we end the question "How can we prove whether Emma consented that night?" Let's change the question to, "Did Emma have the power to give consent that night?" The new question takes into account the fact that power comes from context, and that power is derived from history.

Let's say that I wanted the violence enacted upon my body to end. Did I have the power to end it? I was nineteen years old, a woman of mixed race: of my four grandparents, one is Chinese, one is Japanese, and two were Jewish holocaust survivors. Let's say that Paul wanted to enact violence upon my body. Did he have the power to do it without my consent? Paul was German, from Berlin, male, either 20 or 21 years old, and a member of the varsity rowing team. Was it possible for me to own my body in this context? Was it possible for me to give consent?

This is different from asking whether I was physically able to fight him off. In the hearing for my case, Paul said that there is no way he could have forced me into sexual acts, because I was a fencer at the time, and I had strong legs. If he had attacked me against my will, I could have kicked him off. He's right: I did have strong legs, and I probably could have kicked him off had I struggled enough. But given the context of the situation, can you see how my social conditioning and fear might have stopped me from fighting back with all my might? If someone's hands are around your throat, why would you antagonize them? One tighter squeeze and you're dead. This is not about the physical strength of my legs, because the kind of power Paul exerted in this relationship caused me to freeze rather than fight. This kind of power can zap one of all their physical strength. This is about historical power. This is about context.

When you go home tonight, if you feel compelled to weigh the various contextual factors that might have played into the power dynamic, be conscious of which ones you include and which ones you exclude. Is race more important than socioeconomic status? Does it matter that I'd had sex with him before? You may come across some factors that might not weigh in my favor. But remember, it's not a science.

Okay, so what does this have to do with art? First of all, art is a terrible didactic tool. As a neurotic aside, whenever I use a word longer than, like, four letters, I look it up in the dictionary to make sure I'm using it correctly. When I looked up the word "didactic," the example phrase they gave was, "the reforming, didactic function of art." So, I guess this is one case in which I will not adhere to the dictionary's use. When I use the word didactic I mean it in this sense: something is didactic when it is intended to teach or explain. The word didactic also has moral connotations, in that the lesson being taught often has moral value.

Why do I say that art is a terrible didactic tool? The first example that comes to mind is a photo I saw in the Garry Winogrand exhibit at the Met over the summer. Winogrand was a photographer who was big in the late 60s and 70s. The collection went on tour to Paris but just closed last month, so I have no idea how you will ever find this photo. So, please try to picture it with me; I tried to find an image of it online to no avail, so I sketched a drawing for visual aid.



The photo is of a car in profile, with one man in the driver's seat. When we talk about photographs, we don't just talk about the content, but we talk about the position of the camera in relation to the thing being photographed. The camera is on the outside of the car, at window-height, near the front passenger seat, looking in, through the side. We see the man in the driver's seat making a face like this. He's screaming his head off, and the photo is just blurry enough to suggest that the car is moving. This man must be headed towards some sort of terror. Perhaps Winogrand caught this photo seconds before a terrible crash.

Or at least that's what I thought the first two times I looked at the photo. But the third time I looked at the photo, on a quieter day at the Met when I could stand there and inspect it further, I realized that I had constructed that entire narrative. That driver was yawning. The blur might have been caused by a low shutter speed and any slight move of Winogrand's hand as he pressed the shutter button.

Photography makes a great example, because the camera is a tool that literally severs the image from its context. When a photographer captures an image, he frames it. One of the principal functions of a frame is to exclude. It creates an inside, but in creating an inside, it creates an outside. The frame presents us this much information, and excludes that much information. We see everything within the rectangle, but lose sight of everything outside the rectangle. In the example of the car photograph, the frame excludes everything, from the tree that might have been next to the car, to the stoplight that might have been in front of the car. It excludes time and motion. We'll never know how fast that car was moving, because it's just one snapshot. It's one split second cut out from an infinite amount of time.

Photographers make images that crop and sever context. They force you to focus on every little detail inside the frame and construct a narrative based on what you can see. They urge you to ignore the context for the photograph and even posit your own context, like I did when I imagined the car crash. Compare this to what I talked about earlier, in terms of investigating a case of sexual violence. I talked about how the more we obsess over the mechanics of what happened inside the room, the more we lose sight of what the context made possible. Photographs ask us to do everything that I have railed against for the first 15 minutes of this speech. But the reason I love this particular photograph is that it admits to its own inability to provide context. Remember the position of the camera: outside the car, peering in at the man in the driver's seat. It shows us one millisecond of a man experiencing something in a car. The function of the photo frame that encloses him is echoed in the content of the image. The photo frames him, and he is also framed by the

literal “frame of the car.” He is interior to two different spaces, the flat space framed by the photograph, and the three-dimensional “real space” of the car in “real life” when the photo was taken.

Winogrand is a smart guy—he knows that to some people the man will be yawning and that to some people the man will be screaming. He knows that once he has removed the context, one can debate what’s “really happening inside the photograph” or what “really happened inside the car.” (Sound familiar?) The windows are closed, so even Winogrand probably didn’t have the clearest picture of what was going on inside that car. Note how the truth of our “visual picture” is actually informed by audio information: sound-based “evidence” that we’ll never recover. As much as we try to inspect the visual contents of the car and the photograph, we may never arrive at a conclusion as to whether the man was screaming or yawning. We’ll never figure out what really happened inside the car.

Think of how different the photograph would be if Winogrand had taken the photo from that front passenger seat. We would have critical information that we do not have the way things currently stand. From the outside, a moving car looks blurry. From the inside of a moving car, the outside looks blurry. If Winogrand had taken the photo of the man sitting next to him and the car was moving, the man would be in sharp relief, but the background would be blurry. This would have told us that the car was moving. If both man and background were in sharp relief, then we would know that the car was still, or moving very slowly. If he had been inside the car, his camera lens would have inevitably captured some of the outside image. Being inside the car would give us the information

about the outside world that would ultimately inform us about what's happening inside the car. If the car frame mirrors the picture frame, then really, this photograph is not just about Winogrand looking inside the car, but is also about each of us viewers looking inside the photograph. Think of how different our view would be if we'd been there, on that sidewalk when the photo was taken.

Winogrand's photograph urges the viewer to question the power of vision. It reminds us that all information on earth is packaged and framed for consumption, and that there is no way to see the "full picture" from where we stand. This is the fate of viewership. We are destined to be on the outside, trying to understand experiences that we did not experience, trying to make meaning with what little information we have. The photograph is about the limits of communication. On one level it's about the speculations that one might conjure when looking at it, but I think the more nuanced reading finds that it's about how so many possibilities can coexist in the same frame. It's about the mystery of not-knowing. When I say that art is a terrible didactic tool, this is what I mean. Art presents the viewer with a hand-picked selection of visual information. It will include some information at the expense of all the other information on earth. Art will never give us the full picture, and it will certainly never teach us the truth.

Ultimately, you might think, the only one who understands the totality of the experience is the man inside the car. He's the one in the driver's seat. He's the one who can think back and remember whether or not he was able to control the car he was steering. He knows what happened.

Well, not really. It's never that simple. In a 1991 essay titled *The Evidence of Experience*, Joan W. Scott examines the vision of a person experiencing something—the vision of the person interior to the experience. The jumping-off point of her essay is a passage from Samuel Delany's autobiographical work from 1988 titled *The Motion of Light in Water*. She discusses the passage in which Delany, a gay, black, male science fiction writer, recounts his first visit to the St. Marks bathhouse in 1963. To him, it was his first experience seeing a “mass of naked male bodies, spread wall to wall.” This visual experience was important to him because it challenged the widely-believed notion that homosexuals were “isolated perverts.” Seeing the bodies massed together gave him a new “sense of political power.” He writes:

What this experience said was that there was a population—not of individual homosexuals...not of hundreds, not of thousands, but rather of millions of gay men, and that history had, actively and already, created for us whole galleries of institutions, good and bad, to accommodate our sex.

Note how the visual experience transforms the population of “individual homosexuals” to “millions of gay men.” Not only does it unify the group as a powerful force (for there's strength in numbers) but it also changes the tone of their identifier, which was at one point even a slur, to a term he could be proud of. Scott writes about Delany's experience:

The blue lights [of the bathhouse] illuminate a scene he has participated in before (in darkened trucks parked along the docks under the West Side

Highway, in men's rooms in subway stations), but understood only in a fragmented way.

Delany writes, "No one ever got to see its whole." Delany wants to communicate the experience of seeing this scene to show the power of visibility to break the silence surrounding taboo practices. In fact, one of the aims of his book is to document the unwritten experience and history of this marginalized group of people. One of the basic principles of his project is that, as Scott puts it, "seeing is the origin of knowing."

However, at the end of Scott's essay, she returns to this statement and posits a new, more nuanced way of reading Delany's experience. This new reading is influenced by Karen Swann, whose quote will appear in the passage I'm about to read. She writes:

Another kind of reading...sees this event not as the discovery of truth,...but as the substitution of one interpretation for another. Delany presents this substitution as a conversion experience, a clarifying moment, after which he sees (that is, understands) differently. But there is all the difference between subjective perceptual clarity and transparent vision; one does not necessarily follow from the other...

I want to stop here briefly and explain what she means. She says that his vision hasn't necessarily shown him the 'truth,' but it has given him a new perceptual clarity, or a new way of understanding his identity. There is a difference between truth and interpretation.

He does not apprehend the truth, but rather forms a new interpretation of what he is seeing. To continue:

Moreover, as Swann has pointed out, “the properties of the medium through which the visible appears—here, the dim blue light, whose distorting, refracting qualities produce a wavering of the visible”—make any claim to unmediated transparency impossible. Instead, the wavering light permits a vision beyond the visible, a vision that contains the fantastic projections...that are the basis for political identification. (794)

So what does this mean? Delany is a participant in this room, fully immersed in the experience, but his ability to see is imperfect. He sees the room through a dim blue light that distorts the image. The light acts as a screen that separates Delany from the thing before him by one slight degree. It’s the difference between the thing itself and the visual representation of it. What I mean by that is, for example, I have this water here, and we can all agree that it’s water. But, there is no way to visually apprehend the totality of the water all at once. I look at it, but from every angle I will only see a different representation of it. This is water from the front. This is water from the bottom. I’ll never have the full picture in my eyes all at once.

So, there is no unmediated transparency in this bathhouse. There is no way to see the entire gay community as a whole all at once. While he may not physically be able to see its totality, it is this wavering blue light that permits him to understand it. What does she mean by vision beyond the visible? When Delany says that he saw millions of gay

men, he didn't actually see millions of gay men. He felt them. He was moved to identify himself as a part of this stronger, prouder group, because the distortion of the blue light gave him room to interpret—not find truth, but *interpret* what he saw. His fantastic projections of millions of gay men are the basis for his new political identification. So, the medium of distortion gave him vision beyond the visible. In no way did it reflect some sort of immovable truth. It produced something greater: knowledge of the self. Delany's experience suggests that seeing is not the origin of knowing. Rather, seeing is the origin of interpretation, and interpretation is the origin of knowing. We all interpret, no matter whether we experience something first, second, or third-hand.

I want to relate what was just said back to my experience of sexual violence. Inside the blue-lit bathhouse, the dim light enabled Delany to have vision beyond the visible. When I was raped, all the lights were off. The only light in the room came from the streetlights through the window. I couldn't really see what was happening. My memory of that night is dark, but whenever I think back to that night, I feel like Paul was smiling. That's vision beyond the visible.

If truth is scientific and based on proof, facts, and evidence, then art cannot access truth. But if art is a conduit for vision beyond the visible, then perhaps art accesses a different type of truth. Perhaps there's more than the truth.

There are a few widely circulated and simplistic readings of my current performance art piece, *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)*. These are the ones

that I both advertised and believed in when it first began. Only after having lived with the piece for seven months do I now read it in a new light.

The most private moments of our lives take place in bed. There, we are the most vulnerable. The bed is where we rest, tell secrets to our friends on sleepovers, get naked, lose our virginity, and cry to ourselves before we fall asleep. When we're too depressed, we can't get out of bed in the morning. We feel our most intimate feelings in bed, for we feel comfortable there. The bedroom is a sacred place, and the bed is the most sacred part of it. To be raped in your own bed is to have that place desecrated. The rapist shatters any sense of comfort and makes it fraught. My bed is a site haunted by trauma.

In the way that the bed is the most sacred part of the bedroom, the mattress is the most sacred part of the bed. We shop for it. We purchase a frame to cradle it. We wrap and dress it with sheets and blankets. It's like the meat of an oyster or the yolk of an egg. When I was raped, I had just moved into my dorm and had not yet put sheets on my bed. I was raped right on the mattress. So, I took the broken heart of my bedroom and brought it outdoors, for everyone to see.

One common reading of my piece frames my act as a valiant struggle against oppression. According to this reading, when Paul raped me, he did it behind the closed doors of my dark bedroom, where the trauma would remain shut, invisible, and silent. When I reported my case to the Columbia administration, the deans and even the president of the school silenced me by denying me due process and allowing Paul to repeatedly delay my hearing. They literally told me that I couldn't talk to anyone and that I couldn't tell the panelists my full story. These villains, the henchmen of systemic and

institutionalized oppression, tried to hold me down and lock the truth away, but in this reading, I fought and fought till I burst through my chains and bore the truth for the world to see. I liberated myself from the bonds of oppression through protest. This reading depends on the idea that visibility shatters silence and that silence is oppression. It assumes that I have both the agency to fight, and also the ability to apprehend the truth. It assumes that I have a goal: that I'm fighting for the end of violence and for the truth to be known.

There are two gaps in this reading that I want to point out. First of all, when people assume that I'm bringing the truth of what happened to light, they project their own idea of the truth onto me. Almost everyone on both sides of the debate is guilty of this. On the one hand are the people who say that I'm a lying psychopath doing it for attention. According to their truth, I *am lying*, for their truth is based only on scientific evidence and that's the one thing I'll never be able to provide. Nor will any rape survivor be able to provide this type of proof. On the other hand, people who support me *believe* me, for I'm just *telling the truth*. I say he raped me and my word is true. Do I sound like someone else you know?

If you're thinking about Jesus Christ, then we're on the same page. Christ's word was the Word and the Word was gospel. You either believed him or you didn't and if you believed him and his miracles then you were Right. Right, meaning correct and moral. People believe me because they're supposed to believe survivors, it's the Right thing to do. Why would survivors lie, when all the cards are stacked against them? Just believe!

If we go down this route, then the mattress is my pain made manifest, my cross to bear. From the depths of my suffering I was transformed and gifted with an all-seeing vision, the kind that you just have to believe. My transformation invested me with both the power and responsibility to share my gospel.

So here are the two most common standards of truth that people project onto my artwork. One, a truth based on science, the other, a truth based on belief. What's my truth? Well, first of all, it's certainly not scientific, for all of the reasons I described earlier. I'll never be able to prove that he raped me. Second of all, I despise the truth based on faith-like belief because when people engage in their "believing me" and "believing in me" they are objectifying me. They see me as a Christ-like saint who will heal them. I'm not exaggerating. To these people I'm not merely human; I'm a healing object. Well-meaning people on the street will touch me reverently as I walk by with the mattress. They don't realize that they have just violated my body with their hands. Others come up to me at the bar and tell me how I've changed their lives. They recount the story of their rape, and what their mother said, and how they had to leave home. They cry as they purge themselves in my presence, and I'm sitting there holding a beer, reliving my own rape and feeling trapped. No one ever gives me trigger warnings. Pretty much everyone knows that these stories are painful to hear, but no one considers that I, Emma Sulkowicz, the person, might feel pain when I listen. This is because I have the all-seeing vision of the truth. I'm impervious. I'm Christ, a healer.

There is another way that people objectify me that is closely related to what I just described. I lack a word for it, so I'll call it the "believe us because we're with her"

exploitation of truth. In this use of my body and image, I am reduced to a young woman's tear-streaked face that makes a great photo next to a news article, or a life-sized doll that might dutifully stand next to a public figure and cry on command. I am fungible.

So this is the first problem with the reading of my art piece as protest against oppression. In saying that I'm exposing the truth, the viewer paradoxically superimposes their own truth on top of my truth, and once again silences me.

The second problem with this reading of my art is that it falls prey to the myth of body-ownership. Remember, the notion of my "fight against oppression" hinges on the belief in my agency and the idea that I'm fighting for a goal that I'm capable of winning. The reason I'm averse to this reading is because it is so vastly at odds with how I experience my life. Just so we're clear on this, if we say that a person has agency, we mean that they are able to act in the way they want to act, and that is certainly not the case for me. I reported my case to the University not because I wanted to, but because I realized that there was no way that I could not. How could I sit around silently while my peers were in danger of being raped by Paul? When I came up with the idea for *Mattress Performance*, I didn't make the piece because I wanted to--I mean, who in their right mind *wants* to carry around a mattress for nine months and not be rewarded with, at least, something like a newborn baby??!--but I made the piece because the piece had to be made. I had no choice. I remember on that first day, I felt as if I were being guided by a force that was larger than myself. I did not feel as if I had agency. And since day one, I have lived a life with so little agency that I often forget who I am. Everything I say has become political. If a foundation wants to give me an award, I have to accept it. To not

accept it and spend a morning sleeping in and maybe even hanging out with my friends is a huge political slap in the face. I have to be in all these places, talking to these people, saying these things and giving these opinions about everything that happens because everything I do or don't say is a political statement.

The people who believe that I have agency tend to be the ones who think I'm doing this art piece for attention, because if I have agency, I must be getting attention because I wanted it. Everyone who really knows me knows that I get super anxious whenever I receive any attention, and that I dread being in social situations and talking to people. To believe that I have agency is to believe that I have the power to get what I want. In reality, I am asked to do things, and I have no choice but to do them. In truth, I am embedded in our society, and I care too much about all of you--both here and in the abstract--to have any agency of my own.

Recently I felt particularly out of control, when I came up with the idea for my next art piece. I was in turmoil because of how much destructiveness this next piece would entail, yet I simply have to make it. When I tried to express how upset I was about the situation to a friend, he turned to me and said, "But, Emma, you know you have a choice. you don't have to make the art piece. It's crazy to say you don't have any control over that."

It all comes back to my truth versus the truth that everyone wants to impose on me. I know what I know, but there's no going back to the night in question. There's no proving what I can and can't control. My art, *my* truth is that I've been carved out and left

an empty frame. At this point, it's out of my hands, and my truth is what you make of me.

I have nothing else to give. I yield to you.