

Concerns from A Dangerous Professor
May 13, 2017

As part of Sexual Assault Awareness month in April, I co-facilitated workshops for student supporters and survivors of sexual assault to participate in the Monument Quilt Project at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where I am currently a part time lecturer. My motivation for bringing this project to SAIC was to provide space for collective healing; to bring awareness to the prevalence of sexual assault and to give students a place to speak openly about their experiences. As educators we are legally required under Title IX to report any mention of assault. The safe space, thusly, protects the victim from fearing further investigation or the denigration of any publicity.

The action of Emma Sulkowicz carrying the mattress she was raped on around the Columbia College campus for the entire 2014-15 school year cites her as an effective activist and the act as a well-executed work of endurance performance art. She refused to put it down until her would be rapist was to be expelled from campus.

According to the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Networks 2015 Campus Sexual Violence statistics, 11.2% of all students experience the most horrific form of rape or sexual assault through physical force, violence, or incapacitation with women ages 18-24 being three times more likely. This figure rises to 21% in TGQN communities, which makes up a large part of our student body at SAIC. This means that about two students in each one of my classes has or will experience this form of extreme trauma which often manifests itself in their art and academic practices. They need a voice.

In designated workshops, each participating student constructed their own quilt square illustrating the specifics of their story which provided for opportunity for open discussion and collective healing. The works will be displayed on the Washington DC Mall in Spring '18 along with approximately 6,000 other squares, which represent the number of sexual assaults reported in the US each week. The objective of this project is to expand the dominant public narrative by telling many stories instead of one. This highly public venue will hopefully effect policy change.

This project was proposed to the Office of Student Affairs in July 2016 and received approval and administrative and financial support. A portion of this proposal included exhibiting the quilt squares in the windows of the first floor Neiman Center facing outward to the street; however, one week before the installation date, the Office of Student Affairs decided the work had to face inward, keeping it from public view. Those who participated were not included in the conversation about this change, nor did we approve. We felt that the project's inherent mission was to provide public awareness; therefore, the orientation of the quilt squares toward the street. This left all the project participants questioning the motivation for the reversal of the work's orientation.

Part of my effort as an artist and educator is to be a critical agent to society. Many artists and intellectuals have historically functioned as revolutionary bodies, constantly questioning the ways in which society evolves and bringing awareness to the power structures we exist within. The disappointment by participating students, my co-facilitator and myself of how these relevant, bold and necessary expressions of our student body have been censored has led to rich conversations in the classroom about the role of the institution and our respective positions within it. We are left now to ask ourselves questions that aim to articulate these positions and

configure new ways to seek visibility and expansion in our efforts as change makers. The school has done an extraordinary job of fostering a culture of protection and advocacy for the students from within but did it miss an opportunity to be an example of what should be happening on every other college campus by making the prevalence of sexual assault a public conversation? Is that even their responsibility? Does the public face of SAIC accurately represent its student body and have the voices of student sexual assault victims been further silenced? Who is the school protecting and who do they have a duty to protect? How effective can art be in changing a dominant narrative when it is presented exclusively to its own community that can be difficult to access in the first place?

Monument Quilt Project runs May 1 to 31, SAIC Sharp Building, Leroy Neiman Center floors 1 & 2, 37 S. Wabash Avenue. More info at <https://themonumentquilt.org>.

Statistics taken from Rape, Assault & Incest National Network
<https://www.rainn.org/statistics/campus-sexual-violence>