

Carrying the Weight of Public Survivorship in the Pre-#MeToo Era: The “Willful” Victim/Survivor and the Performance Art of Emma Sulkowicz

Emma Maguire

To cite this article: Emma Maguire (2025) Carrying the Weight of Public Survivorship in the Pre-#MeToo Era: The “Willful” Victim/Survivor and the Performance Art of Emma Sulkowicz, a/b: Auto/Biography Studies, 40:3, 549-572, DOI: [10.1080/08989575.2025.2562626](https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2025.2562626)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2025.2562626>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 25 Nov 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 178



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Carrying the Weight of Public Survivorship in the Pre-#MeToo Era: The “Willful” Victim/Survivor and the Performance Art of Emma Sulkowicz

Emma Maguire 

James Cook University

ABSTRACT

This article examines performance artist Emma Sulkowicz’s work as autobiographical practice and protest and reads it in conjunction with the media mobilization of her testimony to investigate the conditions of public survivorship, drawing on Sarah Ahmed to propose the willful victim/survivor.

KEYWORDS

MeToo; testimony; feminist activism; life narrative

In 2012, Columbia University student Emma Sulkowicz was raped in her dorm room by a fellow student. Several other Columbia students came forward with similar allegations about the same student, but a Columbia inquiry found the student not responsible. In response to her experience as a complainant, Sulkowicz, an art major, conceived of a performance artwork for her final thesis in 2014–2015. Wherever she went on the Columbia campus, she would carry a Columbia issue dorm mattress on her back, just like the one she was raped on. She would not ask for help but would leave it up to fellow students to choose to help her carry the mattress. She would carry the mattress for as long as she had to attend the same school as her rapist (she would end up carrying the mattress on stage at her graduation in May 2015). The artwork was called *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight) (2014–2015)*.

Sulkowicz did not anticipate causing a stir beyond the Columbia community (The Institute of Art and Ideas 2023a), but around the country, campus rape was becoming a hot topic of discussion. There had been a steady stream of news coverage about the prevalence of campus sexual assault, and a national discussion about the use of Title IX¹ to fight campus rape was becoming increasingly heated, seeing a sharp upturn from

CONTACT Emma Maguire  emma.maguire@jcu.edu.au  Humanities, Arts & Social Sciences, James Cook University, Townsville, QLD, Australia

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

2009 onwards and between 2012 and 2014 (Reynolds 2022, 2). In 2013, activists Annie Clark and Andrea Pino launched their campaign End Rape on Campus, attracting media attention and touring the country to help victims lodge Title IX complaints. A documentary *The Hunting Ground*, written and directed by Kirby Dick, premiered in January 2015, featuring Clark and Pino's stories, along with the stories of dozens of other victims of campus sexual assault. Media venues like *Vox*, *Mamamia*, *The Guardian*, *The New Yorker*, and *Slate* began publishing articles on the topic, and the stories of victims became hot media commodities. A common thread in these exposé articles was that universities were not only failing to act against perpetrators but were also manipulating victims into staying quiet to protect their corporate brand. In January of 2014, the Obama administration launched the Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault. Conservatives and Republicans pushed back, claiming figures about the prevalence of assault were inflated, raising concerns about false accusations, suggesting victims who make their claims public may be doing so for publicity (Balko 2015), and reframing media attention on victims as a sign that women gain privilege and power by declaring themselves to be victims of sexual assault (Will 2014). Amid this heightened attention, an image of Sulkowicz carrying her mattress was quickly picked up by news media. She became a rallying symbol for the left and an object of vitriol for the right in a starkly polarized political debate.

This article examines three of Sulkowicz's artworks from this period. *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)* (Figure 1) was conducted from September 2014 to May 2015 as part of Sulkowicz's senior thesis at Columbia University. The work was a response to Columbia's failure to indict Paul Nungesser, the student Sulkowicz says raped her, and it overtly embodied an argument: that the burden of sexual assault is carried by victims. The way images of Sulkowicz—taken by media photographers documenting a news story rather than by Sulkowicz herself—proliferated in digital networks is notable because this artwork is so firmly *embodied* and physical. In the performance piece, Sulkowicz is not represented by a digital avatar or mediated image, she is present in her body. I return to this incongruity below, and argue that the work, in its insistence on the importance of the physical, the place-based, and the local, demonstrates a willful resistance to viral economies and logics of digital self-branding that were rapidly becoming the norm in 2014.

Ceci N'est Pas Un Viol ("This is not a rape") (2015, Figure 2) is a digital performance piece consisting of a website hosting an eight-minute video, an introductory text addressed to the viewer, and an open comments section that anyone could contribute to. The video, which presents as security camera footage of a dorm room, depicts Sulkowicz and an anonymous man engaged in rough sex that transforms into anal rape.²

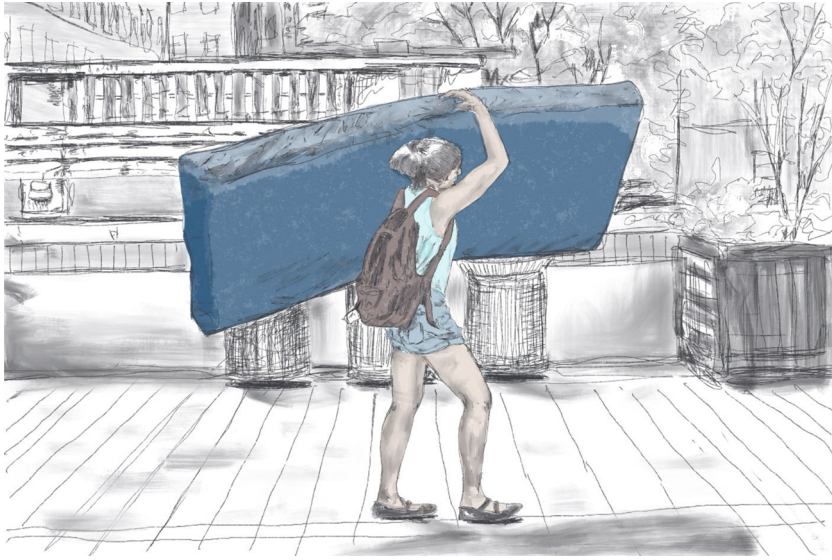


Figure 1. Digital sketch of Sulkowicz carrying her mattress on the Columbia grounds during *Mattress Performance* (*Carry That Weight*). Sketch drawn by Emma Maguire from a reference photograph taken by Andrew Burton.



Figure 2. Digital sketch of the video element of *Ceci N'est Pas Un Viol*. Two figures, one of them Sulkowicz, the other a male figure with his face blurred, act out a scene in a dormitory room under the surveillance of four cameras. This 8-min-long video was uploaded to a website and framed by Sulkowicz's artist statement and a space for viewers to leave comments. Sketch drawn by Emma Maguire from a reference image appearing in the *Cut* (Schweigershausen 2015).

The comments section was reported to be quickly filled with derogatory, threatening, misogynistic and racist comments.³ The piece addresses the role of a witness in sexual assault, an audience in determining what is

or is not rape, an element of social commentary that Sulkowicz experienced by becoming “the face” of campaigns against campus rape, and the complex interplay of public/private in sexual assault, including the viewer’s potential complicity and voyeurism. It also highlights the limits of digital spaces for facilitating discussion around sexual violence.

Self-Portrait (Coagula 2016, Figure 3) is an installation performance piece that was exhibited from February to March 2016 at a small art gallery in Los Angeles. The gallery space was set up with four small podiums. Sulkowicz stands on one of them, ready to be approached by visitors. On another podium stands “Emmatron,” a life-sized replica of Sulkowicz, which she created using 3D printing. In front of Emmatron is a tablet that lists questions for which Emmatron has pre-recorded answers—these are framed in the press release about the piece as “questions that the artist is no longer willing to answer” (Coagula Curatorial 2016). They represent the repetitive questions Sulkowicz was asked by reporters during the media coverage of *Mattress Performance*, and the answers she developed to deploy during media encounters. Visitors were invited to talk with the real-life Sulkowicz as she stood on the podium in the gallery, but if they asked her “questions that objectify or fetishize her,” Sulkowicz would direct them to Emmatron instead. The press release for the art piece described it as “a live investigation of identity as performance.”



Figure 3. Digital sketch of Emmatron (left) and Sulkowicz (right) during *Self Portrait*. Sketch drawn by Emma Maguire from a reference photograph by Coagula Curatorial.

In taking up Sulkowicz's art from the period 2014–2016, I examine how she uses the medium of performance to mediate her experiences of victim/survivorship. Scholars from a range of disciplines who have engaged with her artwork highlight its political, place-based, affective, and embodied nature.⁴ These rich and productive analyses elucidate how Sulkowicz troubles and shows the interconnectedness of agency, politics, practices of witnessing and looking, the body, space and place, and affect. My analysis builds on these framings to examine specifically the autobiographical and media aspects of Sulkowicz's work. I look here at how her embodied autobiographical art practice plays with and interrogates victim/survivor identity, truth/veracity, witnessing, and the reflexive mediation of lived experience. Sulkowicz uses strategies of self-presentation and performance to create what I call the willful⁵ victim/survivor—a subject informed by Sara Ahmed's work on willfulness. I explore how Sulkowicz creates this subject position, and I argue that the willful victim/survivor plays a key part in forging a path for #MeToo in the years immediately preceding the hash tag moment. Sulkowicz uses embodiment, speaking back, and strategies of autobiographical play to demonstrate willfulness in public in ways that resist and make visible the traps of public victim/survivorship. I argue that in constructing the willful victim/survivor through performance art she brought to the surface and demonstrated the tensions and modes of *being in public* for victim/survivors that broke ground necessary for the #MeToo hashtag to take hold.

While #MeToo has been credited with creating a new space within media culture at large for women to come forward about sexual violence and be believed (Gilmore 2023, 5), coming forward as a survivor was (and remains) fraught with risk. When a claim is made public, survivors lose control of their story and their identity, making it a destabilizing and disempowering process, ineffectuality of Columbia's process for adjudicating sexual assault on campus. After all, Sulkowicz's performance arose from the fact that she (and others) could not find justice through Columbia's ineffectual process for adjudicating sexual assault on campus. Drawing attention to what happens when a victim/survivor becomes a public figure, Sulkowicz shows us that the victim/survivor becomes a media object and, at least in the space of the networked media economy, loses some capacity to act or be recognized as a subject. She is subjected to an outpouring of public interpretations of her identity and her story. Managing public criticism is a structural and discursive aspect of public survivorship thrust upon victim/survivors. Media and political forces function as coaxers (Smith and Watson 2010) by requiring that victim/survivors self-present in specific ways. Sulkowicz uses willfulness to resist such coaxing and to make the pressures of public

victim/survivorship visible in the public arena, implicating media practices and modes of audienceship.

“It’s Safer to Be Quiet:” The Risks of the Public Victim/Survivor

In an anonymous piece titled “I Am Not A ‘Pretty Little Liar,” published in *Jezebel* in May 2015, a person identifying herself as one of the other complainants against Sulkowicz’s rapist, explained why she chose to keep her identity private even amid media pressure to do otherwise:

... it’s safer to be quiet. The reason I’m writing this anonymously is because of what happens to people like Emma, who speak out. Their names are plastered on disgusting posters on their graduation day. They’re inundated with violent threats and graphic comments every time they log into their email and check their Facebook. They’re forever associated with something that happened to them; not their achievements or accomplishments or talents (Anonymous 2015, para. 15).

The “disgusting posters” the author refers to appeared in the area surrounding Columbia on the morning of Sulkowicz’s graduation ceremony, and were intended, it seems, to intimidate and antagonize her. They featured a photograph of Sulkowicz holding her mattress, which was taken for the cover of *New York Magazine*. However, the poster creators had overwritten the image with the text “PRETTY LITTLE LIAR” and “EMMA SULKOWICZ, COLUMBIA #RAPEHOAX.”⁶ These slogans are a stark example of witness tainting, a practice conceptualized by Leigh Gilmore to describe how “women’s witness is discredited by a host of means meant to *taint* it: to contaminate by doubt, stigmatize through association with gender and race, and dishonor through shame, such that not only the testimony but the person herself is smeared” (Gilmore 2017, 2, emphasis in original). A media image shows Columbia students in sky-blue graduation robes and mortar boards walking past the posters, signature markers of New York City around them (See Bigelow 2015; “#Fakerape” 2015; Tsjeng 2015): cracked pavement, yellow stoplights and yellow cabs, splashes of greenery against tall brick and concrete buildings. It is shocking to imagine that Sulkowicz had to walk past these posters on the way to her graduation ceremony, and that many of her fellow students would have seen them, too. For the attendees of the ceremony, the posters and their smearing phrases, “rape hoax and liar” thus framed Sulkowicz’s resistant act of hauling the mattress across the graduation stage.

The anonymous *Jezebel* author draws attention to the riskiness of publicly claiming victim/survivor status. She points to the kind of attacks victim/survivors are vulnerable to: public shaming, accusations of lying, threats, and harassment—all of which are exemplified in the posters

depicting Sulkowicz. The author also highlights the risk of rape attaching itself permanently to the identity of the victim, as she worries that in coming out publicly victim/survivors are “forever associated with something that happened to them; not their achievements or accomplishments or talents” (Anonymous 2015, para. 15). Pointing to the stickiness of public victim/survivorship, the author reflects directly on the power of audiences to “associate” the victim/survivor “with” an event they did not have agency over and did not choose to take part in. This event, enacted upon the victim/survivor, obscures “achievements, accomplishments or talents”—in other words, the parts of life which the victim/survivor *has* chosen to pursue or express as markers of selfhood. Here, the status as a victim/survivor eclipses other self-narratives, and this problem is worsened by public scrutiny. In publicity around sexual assault cases from the mid-2010s, young, feminine victim/survivors became highly visible in the same ways Sulkowicz was, thrust into the public arena where meanings and debates became attached to them, and public commentary constructed narratives about who they were and what happened to them.⁷ Particularly for young women and female-presenting victim/survivors, being thrust into the spotlight, or even stepping into it willingly, is a complex process in which the subject risks control over her identity and story.

The loss of control over one’s public self is at the core of Sulkowicz’s performance art from this period. In these works, Sulkowicz’s body and identity are deployed in order to comment on the experience of being at the center of mediated public discussions that dehumanize victim/survivors, reducing them to media objects that are “fair game” for anyone willing to join the conversation. However, while Sulkowicz’s performance is a creative and agentic work, the risks of speaking out in relation to sexual abuse and violence—particularly for young women, particularly in the context of the college campus—are not necessarily alleviated. The tension that this performance explores is precisely how the topic of sexual assault is transformed by its remediation as media spectacle. In 2023, Sulkowicz spoke about the impact of becoming a public victim/survivor:

Overnight I became the figurehead of the incipient movement to end sexual assault on college campuses worldwide. I was featured on the covers of the *New York Times* and *New York* magazine. I received a standing ovation led by Gloria Steinem. I was a guest at President Obama’s State of the Union speech. I was trolled. I got death threats. I was reviled by individuals on both ends of the political spectrum. One article written by a journalist named Cathy Young, was particularly destructive. Cathy worked with Paul [Nungesser] to splice our Facebook messages and make it look like I’d said, quote “fuck me in the ass.” In reality I’d said something like, “I have to wake up early in the morning. Fuck me in the ass,” in the way someone might say, “Shoot me in the head,” without actually wanting to be murdered. The fact that a full-grown adult felt compelled to manipulate the

truth and cause a stupid twenty-one-year-old like myself so much suffering seemed like proof that the political right in my country was both petty and malicious. Meanwhile, the left showered me with praise and awards which increasingly aligned me and obliged me to champion my party's social causes. My frustration with Columbia and with the police became a rejection of all institutions. My anger at Paul grew into a hatred of all men. I began to reject the gender binary itself—by 2016 I identified as trans. While I fully support individuals who need other pronouns to support their gender identity I personally no longer need them myself. By the time the #MeToo movement gained widespread popularity in 2017 I was under so much media-fueled scrutiny that *I hardly recognized myself*. Art, the place where I had once felt free to experiment, play, and express my ambition had become a straitjacket. I was having repeated panic attacks (The Institute of Art and Ideas 2023b, my emphasis).

This narration highlights the effects that becoming a media object had on Sulkowicz: she became estranged from herself, felt pressure to perform her identity and political ideas in a prescribed way and, under pressure from both sides of a political debate, lost the freedom to create artwork without scrutiny. The available contexts for self-presentation are shaped by power, which impacts the kinds of agency open to victim/survivors in the context of #MeToo. Sulkowicz uses artistic strategies of embodiment to intervene in and exert agency on the experience of being mediatized in the course of claiming a victim/survivor identity. Consequently, her art practice is a useful case study for thinking about the artist's body as both instigating and interrogating practices of bearing witness and for considering autobiographical speaking as imperative to public testimony as a media process.

In cases of sexual assault that become media controversies, a struggle between two parties (often the victim/survivor and the accused) emerges where a cultural norm or taboo has been breached. Both parties attempt to pin the norm violation on one another. For the victim/survivor, the norm violation is the initial sexual assault. Accused parties who protest their innocence publicly sometimes bring into play a perceived norm violation in the victim/survivor, which transfers victim status to the accused. Through controversy, those involved in an initial event or situation (here, victim/survivors, perpetrators, and universities) are thrust into the public spotlight in an oppositional relationship where it is implied that one side must emerge as the victor. I picture this as a boxing match, one where the boxers are cyborgs (Haraway 2006). They are entities in their own right but also consist of animatronic parts remotely controlled by various cultural forces and entities—external groups to throw punches in a cultural debate over an issue use them in various ways. In this boxing ring, the players' stories and identities are recontextualized through their representativeness or proximity to elements of a particular issue or set of issues and mediated by technologies and affects. Because of these

cyborgian elements of media controversy, once the players step into the ring, they do not have full control over the poses they strike, the punches they throw, or the way they are positioned in the ring. Much of Sulkowicz's art demonstrates an attempt to stand at once inside the ring and outside of it—or perhaps to bring the audience into the ring with her. These attempts suggest an understanding that she can exert only partial control over her cyborg avatar. She speaks about this experience: “in becoming the figurehead of this budding political movement, I lost a lot of freedom. Not only was I receiving hatred from the right in my country but I was receiving awards and praise from the left. So I was getting more and more radicalized and feeling like if I didn't please everyone and piss off the right people then I was a bad person. And artmaking under that amount of scrutiny... I didn't feel like I could ‘play’ any more” (The Institute of Art and Ideas 2023a, 15:14). Here, Sulkowicz's identity was taken up by two distinct affective publics with conflicting structures of feeling (Papacharissi 2016). Her art pieces, especially *Ceci Nest Pas Un Viol* and *Self Portrait*, are attempts to speak to the experience of both having one's image possessed by affective publics and the lack of agency that this situation can inflict on the victim/survivor subject whose ability to tell their own story and make their own meaning from their experiences is thus limited.

Each of the works examined here engages with and illustrates a set of concerns around public survivorship; they speak specifically to the intersections of media, selfhood, and agency during the mid-2010s. The period from 2014 to 2016, marked by an intense public discussion about sexual assault and consent, would ultimately lead to the global emergence of #MeToo. In 2014–2016, “campus rape” occupied a significant space in such discussion; for instance, the *Harvard Law Review* articulates the mounting public interest in campus sexual assault as “reaching a flashpoint” (Rosenfeld 2015, 359) in 2015. Sulkowicz's art and the discourse surrounding it reveal some of the pressures that acted upon self-presentation of victim/survivors at this important time. In the lead-up to #MeToo, public victim/survivors became increasingly weighted with the burden of cultural discussion about sexual assault. Sulkowicz's performance art reveals some of the contradictions, pressures, and discourses at work on such bodies, and, I argue, in her refusal of such conditions, her work can be described as a performance of “willfulness” in the sense proposed by Sara Ahmed.

The Willful Victim/Survivor

In her book, *Willful Subjects*, Ahmed frames willfulness as a charge pinned on disobedient, wayward, or unmoving subjects. To explain this concept she refers to the Grimm tale of the willful child who even in

death would not obey the rules, but instead her body displays an animated arm raised up from the grave in refusal of the rules of life and death: “all at once, her arm came out again, and stretched upwards, and when they had put it in and spread fresh earth over it, it was all to no purpose, for the arm always came out again” (Ahmed 2014, 1). Eventually, the child’s mother is called; she beats the arm with a rod, and it submits. Ahmed offers this tale to illustrate the feminist concept of willfulness: a refusal to submit that is frowned upon by the powers that be. She explains willfulness as “a diagnosis of the failure to comply with those whose authority is given” (Ahmed 2014, 1) that is used to describe wrongful expressions of will “as faults of character” (Ahmed 2014, 4). Through this weaponized charge of willfulness, structural problems are misdiagnosed as problems of willful others, and “individuals become the cause of problems deemed their own” (Ahmed 2014, 7). She adds that willfulness can be actively claimed as a style of politics. In claiming willfulness, subjects engage in disobedience (Ahmed 2014, 133–137). A disobedient subject judges those in authority to be illegitimate rulers and sees the rulers as themselves exerting a disciplining and productive will on a set of people and circumstances (those in the story who try to keep the child’s arm from springing up), usually through the power of institutions (the mother who beats the arm into submission). Ahmed argues that willfulness as a political style claimed by disobedient subjects asserts itself “as audacity, as standing against, and as creativity” (Ahmed 2014, 134). For Ahmed (2014, 168), claiming willfulness is an agentic act where the subject “affirms willfulness or [finds] in willfulness ‘something’ affirmative,” resisting it as a diagnosis and instead “translating an experience into a maxim: a sense of being in charge of what you are charged with.” Importantly, the charge itself, she notes, “can be a connection: a way of relating to others similarly charged” (Ahmed 2014, 168). By embracing willful tactics and ways of being, subjects embrace or accept what it means to go up against a dominant and authoritative will. Willfulness runs parallel to Ahmed’s feminist killjoys, whom she describes as “willful women, unwilling to get along, unwilling to preserve an idea of happiness” (Ahmed 2014, 2). In tracking the concept of willfulness and how it attaches to or is taken up by subjects both fictional and historical, Ahmed offers a way to understand how resistance and subjectivity are discursive and embodied.

Sulkowicz’s artwork adopts strategies of willfulness, constructing a willful subject, specifically that of the willful victim/survivor. Willful victim/survivors in the public domain have come before and after Sulkowicz—figures such as Anita Hill, Kathryn Harrison, Paula Jones, Margo Fragoso, Virginie Despentes, and more recently, Christine Blasey Ford, E. Jean Carroll, Grace Tame, and Brittany Higgins.⁸ But Sulkowicz, along with others who appeared in the public domain during the period of the

mid-2010s, when the conversation about campus rape was heightened, can be understood as a precursor, contributing to the development and circulation of the figure of the willful victim/survivor, a figure that I argue is integral to #MeToo.

Reading Sulkowicz's works from this period immediately preceding #MeToo illuminates specific qualities of and tensions around the willful victim/survivor at that time. As an identity that is socio-historically constructed through discursive and material practices of self-inscription and mediation, it circulates in publics where ideas related to victim/survivorship are located and in process. The willful victim/survivor is a counter-figure who in its opposition to authority is often culturally designated as willful or disobedient, and sometimes in response adopts this charge into her/their/his politics or performance.⁹ As Ahmed says, to claim a willful identity or stance is to claim the very idea "that has historically been used as a technique for dismissal" (Ahmed 2014, 133) and to "accept and mobilize this charge" (Ahmed 2014, 134). Willful figures recognize the attempt at dismissal and, through varying strategies, re-present it as a refusal to *be part* or *take part* (Ahmed 2014, 133). In many ways, the willful victim/survivor can be understood as a mode of exercising agency within a system and culture where agency to articulate one's own identity and position (let alone the ability to influence such systems and cultures to deliver justice) is severely limited. Qualities of the willful victim/survivor include an oppositional stance, disobedience, refusal, obstinacy, insistence, and tenacity in coming up against or challenging authority, standing against injustice, and turning the charge of willfulness back onto the authority to demonstrate that the authority is the one exerting will. I am particularly interested in willful victim/survivors who appear in the public domain because they leave traces that we can access and interpret. In attending to Sulkowicz's performative constructions of the willful victim/survivor, I am convinced that she and other public victim/survivors in this era broke ground necessary for the rapid public uptake of #MeToo.

Emma Sulkowicz's Willful Work

Mattress Performance, in its insistence and visibility, exhibits willfulness. Universities are racialized institutions where whiteness is privileged (Ahmed 2021), and this intersectionality is importantly at play in Sulkowicz's art and the media discourse that unfolded around it. Described by Megan Shea as "a femme, gender-fluid performance artist and visual artist of Japanese-Chinese-Jewish descent" (Shea 2023), Sulkowicz uses *Mattress Performance* to resist through the willful tactics of embodiment, visibility, and endurance the institutional demands made on her as a rape victim and a person of color. Specifically, she refuses to "counter the

willfulness charge” which institutions often impose on people of color (Ahmed 2014, 148). Ahmed explains:

People of color in being welcomed are treated as guests, as temporary residents in someone else’s home. People of color are welcomed *on condition* they integrate into organizational culture. In order to meet these conditions, you have to counter the willfulness charge. ... Some forms of difference become legible as willfulness, as if you are only different because you are insistent (on being different). (148, emphasis in original)

In her refusal to integrate, her insistence on standing out by standing up through *Mattress Performance*, Sulkowicz leans into and takes up willfulness. *Mattress Performance* makes Sulkowicz stand out—it is difficult not to stand out when you are carrying a fifty-pound object that is larger than you are. *Mattress Performance* does not fade away or shrink back from the institutional gaze. It does not want to assimilate or integrate, but rather to grate at the institution. Relatedly, performance studies scholar Vivian L. Huang notes that this work can be understood in a context of Asian women’s performance artwork that refuses dominant readings of Asian women as silent, submissive, and sexualized (Huang 2022). In its endurance aspect, too, *Mattress Performance* is insistent. The piece draws attention to Sulkowicz’s body as it labors to carry the mattress.

Importantly, this willful public labor has the effect of strengthening the body, working against associations of victimhood with weakness or vulnerability. Long Chu (2017) articulates a common criticism of students bringing affect into the public sphere as part of political protest. Such criticism, Long Chu says, implies that students are wrong to make the structural personal, because “where [previous] generation[s] critiqued the system and fought the power, today’s students just complain about having their feelings hurt” (Long Chu 2017, 302). Such criticism, as Long Chu argues in her analysis of *Mattress Performance*, misses the point of affective engagement with political structures. This is an important element of the willful victim/survivor who insists on putting the pain, strain, and blame of sexual violence back where it belongs: with the perpetrator and the structures that support sexual violence. This transfer of responsibility and its attendant effects requires strength, a reality that the embodied struggle of *Mattress Performance* illustrates. As Long Chu observes, “the most literal interpretation of *Mattress Piece* [sic] is that whatever trauma is, it’s *not* unbearable” (Long Chu 2017, 309).

Sulkowicz carried the mattress for eighteen months. She notes that her body changed during the course of the project and that this labor made her “sore” (Van Syckle 2014) and, by the end of it, “ripped” (Shea 2023). This transformation is attended to in Shea’s article, where she points to the endurance aspect of *Mattress Performance* and the importance of

“labor and the physical effects on Sulkowicz’s body” (Shea 2023), which are not conveyed through the archival images and short videos that capture the performance. Shea describes the important distinction between durational art, which features a sustained and persistent performance, and endurance art, focused on suffering; according to performance scholar Adrian Heathfield, endurance art can be thought of as art which features “the body *in extremis*...it assumes the experience of pain as a primary focus” (Heathfield cited in Shea 2023). In a footnote, Shea notes that in a personal interview Sulkowicz “also admitted to me that they were ‘ripped’ by the end of the performance” (Shea 2023). Shea does not further attend to this aspect, but it is notable how it documents the embodied transformation inherent within the piece, implicating concepts of pain and physical strain and the relationship between trauma, transformation, and strength. The colloquial term “ripped” is a somewhat masculinized turn of phrase emerging from gym culture. To be “ripped” refers to the way a body becomes visibly muscled through lifting weights. But to think of trauma and its original Greek etymology as a renting, wounding or tearing open, is to lend “ripped” another additional meaning here. The painful physical act of carrying the mattress externalizes and makes concrete the metaphor of the ineffable “weight” of sexual violence that burdens victims. In thinking of this externalization as transformative, I emphasize it as making public the pain of survivorship/victimhood that is strength-building rather than only the burden itself. It is not only bearing the pain that makes a victim strong, but bringing violence and its affects into public view here literally takes muscle. Even so, the gym culture platitude of “no pain, no gain” reminds us that to get “ripped” one must suffer painfully. The concept of rippedness, asserted offhandedly in *Mattress Performance*, brings to light the complex entanglements in victimhood of pain, suffering, endurance, strength, and embodiment. The art piece changed the form of Sulkowicz’s body and, potentially, how it felt to live in that body. This willful work demonstrates the willful victim/survivor as requiring and acquiring strength, working against associations of vulnerability and weakness. I do not want to imply that victims do not also experience vulnerability when moving their testimony to public spaces (to the contrary). However, the willful victim/survivor constructed by Sulkowicz complexifies and expands victimhood to demonstrate *the requirement* of strength to bring testimony of sexual violence to the public. Because of the entrenched prejudice in institutions and patriarchal society, our systems and societies *unfairly* require great strength from victims.

The autobiographical is central to this project of embodied artwork and willfulness. In considering the utility of performance in telling traumatic stories, Diana Taylor explains that embodied performance

“holds the tales of the survivors, their gestures, the traumatic flashbacks, repeats, and hallucinations—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral and invalid forms of knowledge and evidence” (Taylor 2003, 193). As such, autobiographical performance here presents an alternative form of evidence of and knowledge about what it is to endure sexual violence and its aftermath. The foregrounding of her own body in works from this period demonstrate, Sulkowicz’s insistence that this kind of knowledge and evidence matters—and it matters that these works (*Mattress Performance* and *Self Portrait*) are “in person” and in place.

Another way in which Sulkowicz’s art is willful is its insistence on the physical, material, and proximal in an era when digital virality was becoming a cultural norm. Lynn C. Miller and Jacqueline Taylor open their edited volume on women’s autobiography and performance: “When autobiography is performed, the immediate confrontation of the live body and voice with the live spectator creates a singular event in time and place” (Miller and Taylor 2003, 3). For Miller and Taylor, such “immediate confrontation” holds the potential to bring about “social and political consequences” because “creating an autobiographical narrative reconstitutes the self, the audience, and surrounding cultural contexts. It makes sense of the self, gives each part a voice and a body” (Miller and Taylor 2003, 3). Miller and Taylor’s observation, made in 2003, holds all the more significance for in-person autobiographical performance unfolding amidst the boom of digital self-mediation during the mid 2010s. Both *Mattress Performance* and the *Self Portrait* (the 2016 piece featuring Emmatron) demonstrate a tension between embodied and non-virtual space, and a resistance to digital economies marked by norms of viral attention and self-branding that suggest a beautiful willfulness. Both pieces are firmly embodied, taking up physical space in the non-virtual world. They rely on physical proximity to draw others into the performance: *Mattress Performance* situates viewers as witnesses to Sulkowicz’s struggle and offers them the opportunity to assist while *Self Portrait* opens a limited space for real-time, in-person conversation. These modes of audience positioning and integration rely on the concrete, physical space and place, temporal immediacy, and the in-placed-ness and ephemerality of an interaction between people who find themselves in the same place at the same time. Such qualities are elevated in Sulkowicz’s art from this period in a way that sublimates or distances norms of digital sociality and culture that were becoming ubiquitous at the time. This is particularly significant given that digital media and news media—common sites for the circulation of victim/survivor testimony—are fraught channels for victim/survivors.

Karina Eileraas Karakuş describes how *Ceci N’est Pas Un Viol* and *Self Portrait* both display “modes of resistance to the privileged cultural

registers and ‘traps’ of visibility, recognition, and desire” (Karakuş 2018, 372), associated with the digital and the viral. My previous work (Maguire 2018) has explored such “traps” for girls and young women, for whom self-mediation in digital economies always requires some negotiation of their right to take up digital space, as well as burdening them with the necessity to navigate these economies’ desire for and simultaneous repudiation of young, feminine automedial subjects. Against such fraught dynamics, Sulkowicz’s works offer “obscurity and inscrutability as preferred avenues of knowledge and self-fashioning,” which resist the “hegemonic discourse of virality” at work in digital economies (Karakuş 2018, 369). Karakuş explains that Sulkowicz, by constructing “uninviting” work that gives varying access to the artist, “destabilizes the mode of looking central to our ‘attention economy’” (Karakuş 2018, 317). It is perhaps ironic then that images of Sulkowicz carrying her mattress became viral and were found at the center of conversations about campus rape. But her resistance to digital and viral economies as channels for her testimony is willful because it highlights media environments as harmful and risky spaces for victim/survivors. Her pieces that came after *Mattress Performance*, namely *Ceci N’est Pas Un Viol* and *Self Portrait*, incorporate a critique of the power dynamics at play when victim/survivors are mediatized. Sulkowicz has articulated this explicitly in an interview, confirming that *Ceci N’est*¹⁰ makes “a statement about social media and the way things go viral,” explaining the media buzz was “terrifying” and that her “new relationship to the media” inspired her to make *Ceci N’est* (Munro 2015).

Ceci N’est addresses the role of audiences in judging and understanding experiences of sexual violation that happen in private, and in receiving and assessing victim testimony. This digital video performance, in which Sulkowicz and an anonymous partner perform a sequence of acts mirroring Sulkowicz’s experience of being raped, is framed by instructions not to view the video as a rape and creates a space for viewers to comment on what they have watched. The instructions read:

Trigger Warning: The following text contains allusions to rape. Everything that takes place in the following video is consensual but may resemble rape. It is not a reenactment but may seem like one. If at any point you are triggered or upset, please proceed with caution and/or exit this website. However, I do not mean to be prescriptive, for many people find pleasure in feeling upset.

Ceci N’est Pas Un Viol is not about one night in August, 2012. It’s about your decisions, starting now. It’s only a reenactment if you disregard my words. It’s about you, not him.

Do not watch this video if your motives would upset me, my desires are unclear to you, or my nuances are indecipherable.

You might be wondering why I've made myself this vulnerable. Look—I want to change the world, and that begins with you, seeing yourself. If you watch this video without my consent, then I hope you reflect on your reasons for objectifying me and participating in my rape, for, in that case, you were the one who couldn't resist the urge to make *Ceci N'est Pas Un Viol* about what you wanted to make it about: rape.

Please, don't participate in my rape. Watch kindly (Sulkowicz 2015).

I am indebted to Stephanie R. Larson's excellent analysis of this artwork, which clarifies the piece's engagement of affect in asking an audience to affirmatively identify rape (Larson 2018). As Larson explains, despite the artist's instruction that the depicted experience is "not a rape," it in fact mobilizes embodied discomfort to facilitate a feeling of certainty for the viewer that they have indeed witnessed a rape; "as intensity builds, the video trains viewers to apprehend rape from the level of feeling" suggesting that although "the experience of rape is often managed through text" (e.g. written statements and laws about consent), "determining rape requires sensing and feeling" (Larson 2018, 138). This speaks to Diana Taylor's observation, cited above, that embodied performance is a kind of *evidence* that is alternative to the kinds of evidence contained in archives and reports. Thus, Larson argues, the piece aims to "[shatter] debilitating definitions of rape that plague" victims (Larson 2018, 138). This speaking back to authoritative paradigms of rape is willful in itself. Furthermore, the open comments component of the artwork points specifically to the media context in which Sulkowicz's testimony and identity ended up circulating.

By creating a space that drew in anonymous and public commentary, Sulkowicz incorporated the public reception of her rape claims into the performance, making visible the kind of vitriol and abuse that victim/survivors receive. Although there were supportive comments left by viewers, these sat among abusive and misogynistic comments.¹¹ One article gives a sense of the open comments section:

Explicit anti-Semitism, rape apology, crude objectification, harmful memes, poorly spelled insults dripping with misogyny and hatred—and the thread connecting it all: the belief that Sulkowicz is a self-promoter, the wrong kind of victim, not a "real" rape victim. Some rare safe-for-work examples: "Great porno Emma"; "Hitler was right about jews"; "Someone who was raped would be very unlikely to do this"; "i can ruin innocent guys lives too by lying about being brutally raped" (Seltzer 2015).

Another account supports this interpretation: "Over and over, Sulkowicz is called a liar, a fake, a nut-job, a whore. People laugh at her. They tell her that what she has made isn't art. They tell her that her rape wasn't real. They tell her to go back to the kitchen, to go home. They tell her

to shut up” (Rubin 2015). Seltzer observes that “All signs point to the likelihood that the artist was anticipating this virtual blowback, and the open comments section was part of her piece” (Seltzer 2015).

Gilmore (2017, 5) describes testimony as searching for an “adequate witness” to receive the testimony and thereby close the loop on the act of testifying. An adequate witness confirms the credibility of the person who testifies and affirms the contents of their testimony. *Ceci N'est* addresses, then, the *inadequate* witness and incorporates them into the art piece, thereby revealing both the mechanics of witness tainting as well as the complicity of digital media in facilitating harm to victim/survivors exposed to a stream of inadequate witnesses. As the anonymous *Jezebel* author observes, women who speak out about rape are “inundated with violent threats and graphic comments every time they log into their email and check their Facebook,” which can act as a deterrent to others who might consider coming forward (Anonymous 2015, para. 15). This inundation is not usually visible to the public, but Sulkowicz makes sure the hatred and graphic comments are made visible in *Ceci N'est*, giving these commenters a public audience and demonstrating the bullying and harassment survivors are subjected to when they become publicly identified. It is worth noting that Sulkowicz, in this piece, created a replica of exactly the kind of evidence that is rarely available to prove the claims of sexual assault victims: irrefutable video surveillance. Tapping into the ambiguities of this piece, we might understand this as a kind of wish—or act of recovery—of the victim/survivor, who is able, through art, to access proof that Columbian adjudicators or police would not have been able to deny. But Sulkowicz throws even this kind of irrefutable image into question, and importantly, we see that even with such damning footage, viewers still refuse to credit the victim/survivor’s testimony. Thus, this piece makes visible the persistence of inadequate witnesses and draws into question the possibility of persuasive evidence for sexual violence. The piece seems to address the kind of witness tainting and harassment exemplified by the “rape hoax” posters, which were meant to stir up shame and discredit Sulkowicz. *Ceci N'est* reproduces and addresses this dynamic using social media to make the commenters visible in ways the posters’ creators were not.

Similarly, *Self Portrait* aims the mediatization of victim/survivors, focusing on how mainstream media flattens their identities to transform them into a media object for public consumption. The audience was invited to engage in one-to-one conversations with Sulkowicz and to ask questions. If a question was on the “frequently asked” list, the audience member was redirected to Emmatron, which had a pre-prepared answer. In conceiving of this piece, Sulkowicz observes that, “there was a moment during *Mattress Performance* where I would get so many interview requests that

my phone would just die. Reporters all had the same set of questions to ask, and I was like, a robot would be really great at this job. So I made the robot” (StyleLikeU 2018). There is a fascinating tension here between object and subject that is explicitly connected to the enmeshed and intersectional way identity figures in public victim/survivorship.

In the aftermath of the media coverage of *Mattress Performance*, Sulkowicz asserted a shift to a nonbinary gender identity (Small 2018), at that time using both they/them and she/her pronouns.¹² In an interview, Sulkowicz reveals links between her thinking about the experience of being objectified (both through sexual assault and becoming a media figure) and seeing the self as a vehicle for exerting agency and navigating object/subject relations:

I became aware of my gender fluidity through the experience of receiving *The New York Times* with my photo on the front cover. This was an object dropped on my doorstep every morning of my childhood. I always saw the characters on its cover as flat or unreal. Seeing myself turned into an object in that way helped to recontextualize all the time I had been physically turned into an object through sexual assault and all the times that men had seen me as nothing more than a fleshlight, a sex doll, or a means-to-an-end. “They” evokes my slippage between man and woman, but it also evokes *the way that I see the slippage between human and object*. Sometimes that feeling of being objectified happens through acts of violence (Small 2018, my emphasis).

Sulkowicz describes the experience of being designated as an object and having her identity overwritten with meanings attached to that object. She names both the experience of sexual assault and the experience of being mediatized as processes through which her subjectivity has been overwritten - experiences to which her willful artwork responds. When Sulkowicz sees her own image on the front page of a newspaper, rendering her figure as “flat or unreal,” reduced to a “character,” she sees that her fullness and complexity have been shorn away, leaving only what is relevant to the news media context. Decisions about what to include in the news story are made by journalists and editors. In seeing herself transformed by mainstream media, Sulkowicz recognizes the objectifying function of mediatization, throwing into relief the power dynamics of mainstream media.

Self Portrait works against these power dynamics by moving the act of self-representation outside of media channels and placing two self-representations literally alongside one another: Emmatron represents the media object while Sulkowicz represents her embodied subjectivity. Emmatron is static, immobile, whereas Sulkowicz’s human body is animated. Conversations with Sulkowicz are unpredictable and might go in any direction, whereas conversations with Emmatron are narrowly focused,

repetitive, and reduced to a template of set questions and answers. Emmatron does not have the capacity to speak outside of the pre-programmed parameters, whereas Sulkowicz can ask questions back to her interlocutors. Emmatron cannot intervene in social interaction in any way, whereas Sulkowicz can engage visitors in conversation, direct them to Emmatron, and choose how to respond to them, exerting agency even while she is limited by the podium and the setup of the art piece. These contrasts in agency between Emmatron and Sulkowicz point to key limitations of public victim/survivorship.

A key aspect of Sulkowicz's willful self-presentation in the art works constructing a victim/survivor identity is the function of flipping the charge of willfulness back on the systems and institutions that have levelled this charge at her (and other victim/survivors), highlighting how institutional processes as well as processes of mediatization curtail victim/survivor agency and present victim/survivors as the problem. *Mattress Performance* aims Columbia, *Ceci N'Est* at social and networked mediatization of victim/survivor narratives, and *Self Portrait* at mainstream media. I now turn to consider Sulkowicz's contribution to public discourse about sexual assault in the years immediately prior to #MeToo.

"I Want to Change the World, and That Begins with You, Seeing Yourself" (Sulkowicz 2015): Sulkowicz's Contribution to the Public Victim/Survivor

Victim/survivors—whether they become known within a small town, a local context, or a global stage—become visible *as* victim/survivors. The victim/survivor identity marks them out as a person who is forced to carry a good deal of baggage they did not create, desire, or ask for, but for which they are forced to become responsible. This is not a fair set of circumstances. We must recognize the significant burden victim/survivors take up when they assume their identity in public.

In 2014–2016, when a conversation about campus rape in the United States raged and became global news, Sulkowicz responded willfully to both the institution that failed her and to the media channels that commodified her image and her art. She contributed to an increasing recognition that the burden carried by victim/survivors was not fairly distributed and the existing channels for seeking justice for sexual violence were not functional. Long Chu describes *Mattress Performance* as "an *instruction manual* for getting a handle on a collapsed event's affective weight" (Long Chu 2017, 310, my emphasis). Sulkowicz's art contributed to a feminist education that informed how #MeToo unfolded. With each case of public victim/survivorship, the broader feminist movement

took on the learnings offered by victim/survivors as well as the public reception of their stories.

Gilmore describes the effect of #MeToo as creating “a fracturing of doubt and discrediting” (Gilmore 2023, 19) and “an openness to the complexities and reality of the survivor experience” (Gilmore 2023, 33). We can see these elements in Sulkowicz’s art: the resistance to procedural failure to find rapists responsible, the illumination of voyeuristic and vitriolic public audiences that victim/survivors must negotiate, and the insistence on representing herself beyond the mold of the media object. The historical context Sulkowicz speaks to was characterized by what Gilmore calls “a systemic refusal to listen” (Gilmore 2023, 59). In her deployment of a willful victim/survivor subjectivity, Sulkowicz refuses the refusal to listen. Gilmore argues that #MeToo “disrupted the routine minimization of sexual violence” (Gilmore 2023, 8) through narrative activism, and Sulkowicz is a precursor to this disruption. She was part of a swell of action and commentary on the minimization of sexual violence in the context of campus rape and became visible as a key figure in this action. Importantly, as a public victim/survivor she took up the charge of willfulness in a way I am tempted to characterize as inspiring for her refusal to be named by institutions or traded as a media commodity. Sulkowicz intervened in dominant narratives about the culpability and utility of rape survivors through her use of performance art, in which she used her own body and public image to resist and complicate the way public victim/survivors are dehumanized, reduced, and robbed of agency.

Notes

1. Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 is a federal civil rights law in the United States that prohibits sex-based discrimination in education programs receiving federal financial assistance. The law requires educational institutions to address and prevent sexual harassment and assault, including campus rape.
2. The semantics of this piece are complex, and although the piece plays with what it “is” (see below), for the sake of clarity I would describe what is captured in this film as a re-enactment of Sulkowicz’s rape. It is not actual footage of the rape but might appear as such to some viewers.
3. As the site is no longer active, I am not able to access the comments left in this section of the artwork, so I rely on contemporaneous accounts by those who did view the comments: See Munro (2015), Rubin (2015), Seltzer (2015), and Weiss (2015).
4. Long Chu (2017, 312) argues that *Mattress Performance* and *Ceci N’est Pas Un Viol* attend to “blue” affects that result when a subject’s injury or injustice is not recognized adequately, a phenomenon she describes as “living in the shadow of an event” when an event fails to materialize in publicly recognizable terms. Larson (2018) uses Jenell Johnson’s framework of

visceral publics to conceptualize Sulkowicz's art as visceral counterpublicity: a mode of public engagement and embodied resistance that mobilizes affective responses and bodily intensity. Bork Petersen (2022) figures *Mattress Performance* as a site-specific work explicitly *about* place that enacts a bodily estrangement of space, engaging a "utopian 'no'" to expose "an experiential difference between Columbia as the respectable institution in which minds are educated to pursue 'the good life' and Sulkowicz's experience of Columbia as a place of physical vulnerability" and institutional failure. Shea (2023) uses an intersectional framework to argue that *Mattress Performance* reveals the way Columbia's nonperformative policies "cement perennial victimhood" that make it especially difficult for racial and gender minorities to exercise agency in articulating their experience. Karakuş (2018) reads *Ceci N'est Pas Un Viol* as a strategically uninviting artwork that resists contemporary patterns of legibility through virality and self-branding on social and digital media.

5. My use of willfulness comes from Ahmed's work, and after Ahmed, I note that the American spelling of the word is preferable because, as she remarks, "it allows us to see the 'will' in 'willful'" (2014, 205, note 1).
6. See image included in Tsjeng (2015).
7. Prominent examples include Daisy Coleman, Paige Parkhurst, Delaney Henderson, Audrie Pott, and, later, Chanel Miller. Miller, who was raped by Brock Turner in 2015 and whose anonymous victim impact statement circulated in 2016, made the decision to protect her identity until 2019 – notably after #MeToo.
8. Thanks to Kylie Cardell for suggesting several of these figures.
9. Designation can take varying forms. Sometimes it is explicit, through public naming as willful, sometimes it is implicitly understood, as in when women adopt defiance as a presentation strategy because we have witnessed other more acquiescent approaches fail. Thus, we understand that the style we have chosen is charged with willfulness or disobedience in advance of the public performance of that style.
10. In this section where I refer to the artwork repeatedly, I use the shortened title *Ceci N'est*.
11. As the site is no longer active, I am not able to access the comments left in this section of the artwork so I am relying on contemporaneous accounts by those who did view the comments: See Munro (2015), Rubin (2015), Seltzer (2015), and Weiss (2015).
12. I use she/her pronouns to refer to Sulkowicz in this article. I have taken my cue from Sulkowicz's current biography on her website (Sulkowicz 2024) which uses she/her pronouns exclusively.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Dr Emma Maguire is a Lecturer in English and Writing at James Cook University. She researches gender, life narrative, media, and sexual trauma narratives. She is

a member of the Life Narrative Lab, a steering committee member for the International Auto/Biography Association Asia-Pacific, and Deputy Editor for Life Writing. Emma has published life narrative research in *Biography*, *Prose Studies*, *Life Writing*, *a|b: Auto|Biography Studies*, and the *European Journal of Life Writing*.

Funding

This work was supported by College of Arts, Society and Education, James Cook University.

ORCID

Emma Maguire  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7292-5948>

References

- Ahmed, Sara. 2014. *Willful Subjects*. Durham, UK: Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, Sara. 2021. *Complaint!* Durham, UK: Duke University Press.
- Anonymous. 2015. "I Am Not A 'Pretty Little Liar.'" *Jezebel*, May 21. <https://www.jezebel.com/i-am-not-a-pretty-little-liar-1705996719>.
- Balko, Radley. 2015. "Why Do High-Profile Campus Rape Stories Keep Falling Apart?" *Washington Post*, June 2. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-watch/wp/2015/06/02/why-do-high-profile-campus-rape-stories-keep-falling-apart/>.
- Bigelow, William. 2015. "Fake Rape' Campaign Ridicules 'Mattress Girl' Emma Sulkowicz." *Breitbart*, May 20. <https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2015/05/20/fakerape-campaign-ridicules-mattress-girl-hoaxer/>.
- Bork Petersen, Franziska. 2022. "Bodily Estrangements of Space." In *Body Utopianism: Prosthetic Being Between Enhancement and Estrangement*, edited by Franziska Bork Petersen. Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-97486-2_8.
- Coagula Curatorial. 2016. "EMMA SULKOWICZ—'Self Portrait': February 27 – April 3, 2016." *Artsy*. <https://www.artsy.net/show/coagula-curatorial-emma-sulkowicz-self-portrait>.
- "#Fakerape Posters Target Columbia University Student." 2015. *Al Jazeera*, May 20. <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/the-stream/2015/5/20/fakerape-posters-target-columbia-university-student>.
- Gilmore, Leigh. 2017. *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Gilmore, Leigh. 2023. *The #MeToo Effect: What Happens When We Believe Women*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Haraway, Donna. 2006. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late 20th Century." In *The International Handbook of Virtual Learning Environments*, edited by Weiss, Joel, Jason Nolan, Jeremy Hunsinger, and Peter Trifonas, 117–158. Dordrecht: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-3803-7_41.

- Huang, Vivian L. 2022. *Surface Relations: Queer Forms of Asian American Inscrutability*. Durham, UK: Duke University Press.
- Karakuş, Karina Eileraas. 2018. "The Ugly, the Uninvited, and the Unseen in the Work of Sia and Emma Sulkowicz." In *On the Politics of Ugliness*, edited by Sara Rodrigues and Ela Przybylo. Cham: Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76783-3>.
- Larson, Stephanie R. 2018. "Everything inside Me Was Silenced': (Re)Defining Rape through Visceral Counterpublicity." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 104 (2): 123–144. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2018.1447141>.
- Long Chu, Andrea. 2017. "Study in Blue: Trauma, Affect, Event." *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 27 (3): 301–315. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2017.1365440>.
- Maguire, Emma. 2018. *Girls, Autobiography, Media: Gender and Self-Mediation in Digital Economies*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Miller, Lynn C., and Jacqueline Taylor. 2003. "Introduction." In *Voices Made Flesh: Performing Women's Autobiography*, edited by Lynn C. Miller and Jacqueline Taylor, 3–14. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Munro, Cait. 2015. "Emma Sulkowicz on Her New Video." *Artnet*, June 4. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/emma-sulkowicz-interview-305268>.
- Papacharissi, Zizi. 2016. "Affective Publics and Structures of Storytelling: Sentiment, Events and Mediality." *Information, Communication & Society* 19 (3): 307–324. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1109697>.
- Reynolds, Celene. 2022. "The Diffusion of Federal Title IX Complaints throughout U.S. Colleges and Universities, 1994–2014." *Social Science Research* 108: 102781. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2022.102781>.
- Rosenfeld, Diane L. 2015. "Uncomfortable Conversations: Confronting the Reality of Target Rape." *Harvard Law Review* 128 (8): 359–380. <https://harvardlawreview.org/forum/vol-128/uncomfortable-conversations-confronting-the-reality-of-target-rape-on-campus/>.
- Rubin, Hannah. 2015. "This Is Not About Emma Sulkowicz's Rape—It Is About You." *The Forward*, June 9. <https://forward.com/life/309709/this-is-not-about-t-my-rape-it-is-about-you/>.
- Schweigershausen, Emma. 2015. "Emma Sulkowicz Made a Film Addressing Rape." *The Cut*, June 5. <https://www.thecut.com/2015/06/emma-sulkowicz-made-a-film-addressing-rape.html>.
- Seltzer, Sarah. 2015. "Vile Comments Are the Most Important Part of Emma Sulkowicz's Graphic New Video." *Flavorwire*, June 9. <https://www.flavorwire.com/522030/vile-comments-are-the-most-important-part-of-emma-sulkowicz-graphic-new-video>.
- Shea, Megan. 2023. "Resisting Nonperformativity: Emma Sulkowicz's Challenges to Victimhood." *Theatre Journal* 75 (1): 19–39. doi:10.1353/tj.2023.a899354.
- Small, Zachary. 2018. "Queer Identity in the MeToo Movement: A Conversation with Emma Sulkowicz." *Hyperallergic*, August 31. <http://hyperallergic.com/458257/conversation-with-emma-sulkowicz/>.
- Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. 2010. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- StyleLikeU. 2018. "Survivor Emma Sulkowicz Reclaims Their Body and Steps into Their True Colors." *YouTube*, August 24 7 mins 12sec. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BvVpD9oHN1o>.

- Sulkowicz, Emma. 2024. "About." *Emma Sulkowicz*. Accessed October 3, 2024. <http://www.emmasulkowicz.com/about>.
- Sulkowicz, Emma. 2014–2015. *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)*. Performance Artwork. New York: Columbia University.
- Sulkowicz, Emma. 2015. "Ceci N'est Pas Un Viol." Website. <http://www.cecinestpasunviol.com/>.
- Sulkowicz, Emma. 2016. *Self Portrait*. Performance Artwork. Los Angeles: Coagula Curatorial.
- Taylor, Diana. 2003. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham, UK: Duke University Press.
- The Institute of Art and Ideas. 2023a. "The Importance of Bad Art | Emma Sulkowicz Full Interview." *YouTube*, October 4 24 min., 29 sec. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RPA_ADatO0s.
- The Institute of Art and Ideas. 2023b. "What Activism Teaches Us about the World | Emma Sulkowicz." *YouTube*, April 25 10 min., 54 sec. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5abVTurtY1g>.
- Tsjeng, Zing. 2015. "#FakeRape Posters Call Columbia Student 'Pretty Little Liar.'" *Dazed*, May 21. <https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/24810/1/fakerape-posters-call-columbia-student-pretty-little-liar>.
- Van Syckle, Katie. 2014. "The Columbia Student Carrying a Mattress Everywhere Says Reporters Are Triggering Rape Memories." *The Cut*, September 4. <https://www.thecut.com/2014/09/columbia-emma-sulkowicz-mattress-rape-performance-interview.html>.
- Weiss, Suzannah. 2015. "Cyberattacks on Sulkowicz's Art Miss the Point." *Bustle*, June 9. <https://www.bustle.com/articles/88974-emma-sulkowicz-cesi-nest-pas-un-viol-site-was-temporarily-disabled-by-cyberattacks-but-her-opponents>.
- Will, George F. 2014. "Colleges Become the Victims of Progressivism." *Washington Post*, June 7. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/george-will-college-become-the-victims-of-progressivism/2014/06/06/e90e73b4-eb50-11e3-9f5c-9075d5508f0a_story.html.