

So Many Stares: looking back at our first installation

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None of us totally knew what to expect when we gathered for our first installation the night of February 3rd. We had spent weeks preparing, but how were we to know what we would actually face once we were outside of our intimate meetings and dance studio rehearsals? Things were planned to a T except for all that we could not control—the interactions and reactions we would meet in the Atwater stairwell. We knew rationally what to do. We had practiced our performance mode, we had yelled at each other, jeered at each other, complimented each other, done everything we could to prepare ourselves for any possibility. Now it was like a dice game, which of the thousands of possible reactions would we get?

The energy was nervous but excited. I felt like I was about to jump out of my skin. This project though brand new already felt personal and important. I am a survivor, but I knew I was there to make a statement that was bigger than myself. I didn't really know whether to scream or dance or cry. I got undressed right away when we got to the meeting place. To me that wasn't the hard part. These are people that I know and trust, I was not scared of my bareness in front of them. I knew it would be different later. We went through our planned routine: distinguish who would bodyguard who, and center ourselves with eye contact and body scans. We gathered our signs and walked out the door towards the music.

When we entered Atwater there was immediately a stir. The performers stripped off their coats, displaying bare skin and body paint and people turned and stared. It was a strange feeling climbing the stairs in my underwear all the way to the top. I could see groups of people gathering outside looking in at us through the windows. People coming down the stairs were shocked, clinging to the railing to let the naked women through. It's interesting how in some settings my nearly naked body is interpreted as an invitation while in others the sight of it is taboo, frightening. We lined up on the landings. I stood on the largest landing right outside the door to the suite having the party. Our choice of placement was not an attack on the people in that suite, but just due to the fact that it was the only party happening on a Wednesday.

The reactions we received were mixed to say the least. Here's a list of some common negative comments:

“Fuck you guys”

“Why are you targeting us?”

“I’ve never sexually assaulted anyone!”

“These are good people, they’d never do that!”

“I’m gay so I could never sexually assault anyone!”

“Get out, we’re just trying to have fun!”

“Bitch!”

“This isn’t art. Have you seen the Sistine Chapel? That’s art”

One of the most offensive comments I got was “She thinks sexual assault is a problem? I’ll sexually assault her.” It is hard to hear violence so pointedly stated. At one point a large group of men carrying solo cups built a wall in front of me, blocking any view of me from passerby on the stairs. They stood in line, backs to me acting as if I did not exist. I have a hard time believing this was accidental. In addition to my own experiences, other performers got similar comments.

One of the most poignant was just the stares. Even without words, so much was portrayed through the eyes. The message was very clear—we were not welcome.

Despite some of the aggression that we encountered, I felt consistently connected to the other activists in the performance. I knew that they were there for me no matter what just as much as I was there for them. We also heard some incredibly encouraging comments from observers:

“Thank you so much for doing this”

“This is so important”

“You are all so brave”

“I can’t believe nobody has done anything like this before”

“As a survivor, this really speaks to me”

“How can I get involved?”

I left the action feeling shaken yet invigorated, and these feelings return every time we repeat the installation. I feel power in bringing the comments that people say behind closed doors out in the open. These beliefs exist in our community, and I am not surprised. The work is to point to a larger problem and maybe make people realize just how much we are all enmeshed in a culture that promotes violence. I feel validated in our efforts as I hear the encouragement of some of our audience members. We are doing this for the sake of the survivors and those who can yet be protected. We are doing this for all the people who can be taught the affect of their actions, who can be forced to see that sexual assault is done to a person, not just a body. It is not just a story

on a page or a distant figure in some place far away, but something tangible and deeply impacting this community. While we do this for others, I must remind myself that it is also ok to do this for me. I have been wounded, but I still have power. My body has been taken from me, but I can take it back and use it in the face of a culture that violated me. I stand in the stairs to honor myself and to honor everyone that passes through. This is hard, vulnerable and scary, but it continues to be worth it.