

# Performance Art Piece Raises Awareness of Sexual Assault

By Elizabeth Zhou

Partygoers passing through the Chromatic social house last Saturday night may have been met by a surprising sight: four individuals, in varying states of undress, standing by the entryway with purple handprints painted over their abdomens and cardboard signs in their hands. Student bodyguards stood beside them, handing out informational slips, interacting with passersby and making sure that the performers remained untouched.

“Not asking for it,” the first sign in the lineup read.

“Still not asking for it,” the next two read.

And finally: “Sexual assault leaves a mark.”

This was the fifth public installation of the art activism group Stares on Stairs. The main organizers of the movement are Chi Chi Chang '18 Elizabeth Dunn '18, Katie Mayopoulos '18, Morgan Grady-Benson '18 and Nell Sather '19. Their activism is open to anyone who is interested in the cause, and each performance thus far has been composed by a slightly different group of 12-15 individuals.

“It feels different every place we perform,” Sather said. “Chromatic felt very intense for a lot of reasons: the close physical proximity, the level of drunkenness, the noise and a much wider and larger audience than before.”

The idea for a radical campaign for sexual assault awareness was launched in “Radical Humanity: Performance and Social Activism,” a 2016 J-Term course taught by visiting filmmaker, choreographer and activist Tiffany Rhynard. Since then, the group has evolved and expanded into the public consciousness, implementing their first three installations in the stairwells of the Atwater suites, a notorious party scene on campus. Each performer stood on a platform, as two students serving as bodyguards stood on either side of them.

Meanwhile, the fourth performance took place in the hallway outside Kenyon Arena Center before the BØRNS concert a few weeks ago. Signs for alternative routes were present at all venues, alerting passersby of the upcoming scene and allowing them to avoid it as they wished.

The potential to cause unintentional harm to viewers, particularly to survivors or people who may be triggered by the performance, is an issue that the group continues to navigate. As a statement on their blog articulates, “We recognize that performance art activism should be disruptive, and discomfort is a natural and intended reaction to something challenging the status quo. However, we also want to be careful not to harm the people we are trying to advocate for. [...] We are continuing to think of ways that we can evolve the installation to prepare for the potential impact it could have on survivors.”

Because alcohol consumption, party spaces and rape culture are so intimately connected, the purpose of bringing the movement to various areas on campus is to make sexual assault visible in places beyond neutral discussion venues. The group acknowledges the importance of extending the conversation beyond a self-selected audience.



The activism group Stares on Stairs performs in party spaces on campus.

“People who are motivated by the cause will show up to certain things,” Dunn said. “But there’s a pretty large group of people who actively avoid these conversations, not because they don’t have the time but because they don’t want to.”

However, Dunn also acknowledged the intensely sensitive nature of the topic for many individuals on campus.

“Of course, we understand if your own personal experiences have been negative or you don’t have the mental energy. That’s understandable for us, and that’s always been very difficult for us, because we don’t want to trigger people or make people really uncomfortable,” they said. “But at the same time, there’s a different kind of discomfort on this campus that just leads to silencing. That’s something we’ve been trying to address – that culture of silence, pretending that this isn’t an issue.”

Student responses to this radical activism have varied widely. Negative feedback has stemmed largely from male-identifying individuals, with such reactions as, “F\*\*k you guys,” “Why are you targeting us?” “I’ve never sexually assaulted anyone!” “Get out, we’re just trying to have fun!” “I’m gay, so I could never sexually assault anyone!” “Bitch!” and “This isn’t art. Have you seen the Sistine Chapel? That’s art.” One of the most disturbing comments was, “She thinks sexual assault is a problem? I’ll sexually assault her.”

During one of the Atwater installations, a group of men carrying solo cups stood in line with their backs to one of the performers, forming a human wall.

“The goal was to block us from view, to limit our power, to say, ‘You’re not welcome here,’” Grady-Benson said.

Amid the annoyance, denial and hostility of passersby, an informal – and alarming – body of research is emerging.

“We’re getting people to say things to us that they’re thinking or saying behind closed doors, and we’re trying to make that public,” Grady-Benson explained.

Despite the negativity, there has also been an outpouring of support from other observers. Comments have included “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” and “How can I get involved?”

In a process filled with political strife, some individuals have expressed discomfort with the radical nature of the movement. As such, participation in Stares on Stairs has shifted throughout the past few months.

“We really want to emphasize that everyone has agency in this project,” Grady-Benson stated. “There is no shame or judgment if this is not for you.”

“I never want to push people on that, because I think an individual is the best person to evaluate the level of risk that they are ready to accept,” Dunn added. “But it’s sort of a tradeoff, because in order to get something accomplished, you do have to put yourself out there in some kind of a way and take a risk. I wish that people who are able to – mentally healthy enough and in a good enough place – would open themselves up to that risk. There’s a difference between ‘I don’t want to be triggered’ or ‘I’ve had a really bad week so I can’t do this right now’ and ‘I’m nervous about what people will think if they realize that I am involved in this kind of radical action.’”

Each role in the performance comes with its own set of difficulties. The performer, half-naked and marked by handprints, must stand silently as they become the subject of stares, some hostile, some curious and some at an indiscernible point in between.

“It’s really informed my experience to be a performer and not speak to people. There’s so much I want to speak to people as they’re walking by,” Sather said.

“It’s not that we are silent,” Chang said. “I would say that our body is the message.”

Meanwhile, the bodyguards must be attuned to the mood of the space as partygoers – most of them intoxicated – stream past them, occasionally interacting with the performance.

“People have said the craziest things, like, ‘I’m an art history major. This isn’t art,’” Sather said. “You have to evaluate – is this something I should engage in, or simply something to remark on later?”

“Perhaps we bother some people by bringing such a serious topic to party spaces that are meant to be overflowing with good music, laughing and dancing,” Mayopoulos said. “But the truth is, I’d much rather receive a charged comment from a partier who doesn’t want to engage with our performance because it ruins the good vibes of their partying than not do this performance and see the number of sexual assaults increase.”

The group performs in short stretches, reconvening every 10 minutes or so to check where everyone is at emotionally, physically and mentally. As a show of solidarity, they stay as a group and leave as a group, with the entire performance lasting from one to two hours. Afterward, people may go their separate ways to rest, or debrief if there is something pressing to address. The group always offers an open discussion to the campus a couple of days after the event, but so far, no one beyond the immediate circle of participants has shown up.

“Getting people to care on campus is really hard for any activist movement,” Grady-Benson explained. “It’s easy for people to either say ‘fuck you’ or ‘love you’ and not really care the next day.”

“If you care about this issue, maybe you don’t have to come to our event, but do you want to write something? Do you want to help us make posters or art? There are a lot of ways to support our group besides physically participating in protest,” Dunn said.

In spite of all the barriers that Stares on Stairs has encountered – from administrative hesitation to student apathy to outright aggression – these activists are determined to awaken the dialogue on sexual assault, to shift the culture of victim-blaming that has ravaged colleges across the nation. As one exhausting and informative semester draws to a close, they are already brainstorming ways to expand their mission, from posting photographs to bringing the movement to other campuses to diversifying the group to include more genders and sexual identities. All the while, however, these students acknowledge the limitations and risks inherent in their work.

“This is not a finished thing. We don’t have a formula. There’s still a lot of room for growth. This is not just high risk for ourselves, but for our community, and we want to recognize that us doing a disruptive action can have a harmful impact, even if that’s not our intention, particularly on survivors of sexual assault,” Chang said. “Continuing to be in conversation with MiddSafe advocates and other people not in the group has been really important. We are learning each time. This is by no means the right way. It’s just us trying to do the work as intentionally and mindfully as possible.”

Visit [go/stares](#) or [go/stairs](#) to learn more about their mission.