

THE BURDEN

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"Sleep is for the weak."

Many MIT students have often been either witness to or subject to sleep deprivation due to the rigorous demands of the MIT lifestyle. The phrase, "sleep is for the weak," is a common adage that can be heard around campus, regularly echoing from the mouths of weary students like a matter-of-fact mantra. This saying doesn't necessarily represent an actual belief, but the sentiment behind it conveys a well-understood aspect of life and a familiar state of mind at the Institute.

For this project, I have created a wearable mattress as a physical representation of my mental state after a sleepless night of "tooling" (working), "punting" (slacking), partying, or some combination of the above. In general, someone will notice that I've pulled an all-nighter if they try to converse with me, or in extreme circumstances, one can tell just by looking at me. The mattress is a visual extension of this state, one which cannot be ignored by anyone within viewing distance.

The body extension is comprised of a discarded standard-issue "Institute Mattress" from Bourdon's Institutional Sales, Inc., which I modified by strategically cutting holes in (through which I ran bed sheets) and then safety-pinning a pillow to it. The mattress was otherwise bare. After I made these modifications, I put on pajamas and slippers, tied the bed sheets tightly around my torso, mounting the mattress to my back, and proceeded to carry it around with me for a day. My intent was to create a dismal image of a "prisoner of sleep," turning the usual warm, inviting embrace of bed sheets into a restraining hold, chaining me to my burden, my paradoxical "punishment."

As I traveled from class to class, people would look at me strangely, sometimes doing double-takes, sometimes chuckling, and cars would slow down when I was walking outside. Occasionally, the bold or more curious would ask me why I was doing this. My response to such questions would be to pass out various flyers that I created (see file: SLEEP.pdf), which included phrases, ideas, and quotes (sometimes modified) about sleep, dreaming, weariness, overwork, and elements that were otherwise related to the idea of the piece but didn't explicitly answer their question. I would also respond with comments such as "I'll never have to sleep again," "It makes me stronger," "I've had this on my back since I first came to MIT -- you've got one, too," or similar improvisations.

The mattress was heavy, but the message became even heavier when I realized that the sight of me, bearing this large object on my back, my arms hanging from the carrying straps above my head, provoked a very Christ-like imagery. This was not intentional, though drawing such an extreme parallel is not unexpected, if not unavoidable. I prefer to liken my burden to that of Atlas, a Titan of Greek mythology who was made to bear the heavens on his back. Even for a Titan, his burden was considerable. Indeed, the Institute's burden of work, paired with the mortal body's burden of needing sleep, is comparable, bearing in mind that MIT students are merely human (for the most part).