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## [Reading, Writing, and Jana Leo's Rape New York](#)

June 24, 2009 · [Print This Article](#)



This week, Jana Leo's [Rape New York](#), subtitled *An Open Archive*, went on view at Invisible Exports in New York City. The exhibition consists of boxes of photographs, documents, transcripts and other material relating to the artists' rape seven years ago.

The gallery's press release describes the project as follows:

The documents assembled here, seven years in the making, accompany the release of (Leo's) book RAPE NEW YORK. The archive consists of photographs from her emergency visit to the hospital, police reports, crime scene photographs, notes from her therapist, as well as records from the civil suit and other assorted items and documents related to the rape and the legal case that followed, none of which can be reproduced, or even reviewed without the victims's consent. The documents are kept in organized boxes to be retrieved by the archivist, not displayed on the gallery walls. The archive is not presented to the visitor; instead, each guest must fully identify oneself (photo ID is required), and request materials from the archivist. This way, the visitor takes responsibility for what's requested, making private again what was made public by Leo's—the latest revolution in a cycle of public and private that began with the rape itself.

The outlines of Leo's project recalls that of a number of 1970's era feminist works dealing with traumatic exposure—Yoko Ono's [Cut Piece](#) (link is to a video of the performance) and 1968 film [Rape](#) come foremost to mind—but the heart of Leo's piece seems to lie within the viewer's decision to take responsibility, in a public way, for looking at material that is private in the deepest sense of the word. Does the artist's complicity in the exposure negate its voyeuristic qualities? Does the decision to study Leo's rape archives signal compassion, curiosity, or cruelty on the part of individual viewers? Perhaps, a bit of all three.



Yoko Ono, Cut Piece, performance



Yoko Ono, Rape (still from film)

Lately I've been mulling over a bunch of questions that essentially revolve around blogging and personal responsibility. Yesterday I came across mention of Leo's show in a brief blurb on [one of the art news blogs](#). I initially decided not to reblog the item, because there was only minimal information about the show itself. It felt sensationalistic, somehow, to just shoot the item out there once again without providing any further context. As coincidence would have it, this morning I randomly came across [Caitlin Roper's lengthy and fascinating interview with Jana Leo on Bomb's blog](#), which contains a few reproductions of images and documents from the archive. Roper's piece, I think, provides enough background context to give Leo's project meaning even to those who can't see the show in person.

To be honest, I feel somewhat relieved that I don't live in New York and therefore don't have to decide whether or not I want to visit Leo's show and read her archives. I have an easy out, this time. But I did have to make the decision about whether and how I should write about it, particularly in the zippily superficial context of a blog post. So in that sense, I am still a participant in Leo's project, still accountable for my decision to engage it from a distance in the manner that I have.

Here's a last, chilling postscript. Eva Rhodes (nee Eva Majlata), the unnamed woman who was the subject of Ono's aforementioned film *Rape*, [was bludgeoned to death in 2007](#) by one of her employees, set on fire, and buried not far from an animal sanctuary she had established in Hungary. Sukhdev Sandhu writes movingly about Rhodes' death, and Ono's film, [here](#).



Written by [Claudine IsÃ©](#)

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Claudine IsÃ© has worked in the field of contemporary art as a writer and curator for the past decade, and currently serves as the Editor of the Art21 Blog. Claudine regularly writes for Artforum.com and Chicago magazine, and has also worked as an art critic for the Los Angeles Times. Before moving to Chicago in 2008, she worked at the Wexner Center in Columbus, OH as associate curator of exhibitions, and at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles as assistant curator of contemporary art, where she curated a number of Hammer Projects. She has Ph.D. in Film, Literature and Culture from the University of Southern California.

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## 2 Responses to "Reading, Writing, and Jana Leo's Rape New York"

1. 

[Alicia Eler](#) Says:  
[June 25th, 2009 at 9:55 am](#)

Claudine, I'm interested in this idea you have to write about a very emotional, experiential show that you won't react to in-person. This quote sums it up: "So in that sense, I am still a participant in Leo's project, still accountable for my decision to engage it from a distance in the manner that I have."

It makes me think about people who see crime or something happen on the street, but don't react to it. In that sense, they are passive viewers who are actually allowing such activities to happen.

Jana's project is very much about the active viewer, one who participates in the project. So by blogging about the show without seeing it, your contribution as a passive viewer actually proves damaging to the entire concept of this experiential piece.

What do you think? Or maybe the question we should ask is this: how can one attempt to experience this piece without physically experiencing it?

2. 

*Claudine Ise Says:*

[June 25th, 2009 at 4:24 pm](#)

Alicia, I think your observation is a sharp one – the decision to blog about Leo's project without the opportunity to see it in person is problematic and I am accountable for that. For me, the ability to point readers to the Bomb piece, which contains an interview with Leo and background discussion of the project, was the tipping point, if you will, in deciding to write about it here. But that doesn't entirely erase the suspect nature of posting on it, I agree. I might have crossed the line into sensationalist territory by blogging from a distance about a show that, as you've pointed out, demands participation on the part of viewers, and I'm basically o.k. with that because the choice for me as I saw it was, cross that line or don't mention the piece at all here. Maybe there are some readers who will be going to NY while the show is up who will now know about the show and will go experience it. I also think Leo's project here to \*some\* degree works on a conceptual level, but doesn't come fully into fruition until the viewer hands over their i.d.

There is a book that's been published in conjunction with this project which, being portable and presumably available to those outside New York, further reframes the parameters of Leo's project again. So another answer to your question, 'how can one attempt to experience this piece without physically experiencing it' has a relatively simple answer – buy the book and read it cover to cover. So I think I shall do that next. Thank you so much for your comment and please follow up if anything I've said isn't making sense, I find writing clearly into these comment boxes difficult.

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