

Educator's Guide

# RAPE NEW YORK

JANA LEO



9781558616813 • 192 pgs • \$15.95

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“In this harrowing and exhilarating narrative, Jana Leo blasts open all the comforting fictions that we take for truths. Raped in Harlem, she turns the tables on New York and instructs her own case, drawing in landlords, police, lawyers, therapists—the entire environment which conspires to normalize complex and singular experiences. A real eye-opener.”

—SYLVÈRE LOTRINGER, publisher of *Semiotext(e)*

“Absorbing, tender, insightful, terrifying, this book will change the way you think. In an extraordinary, eloquent refusal of the line between the personal and the public, it takes us from the slow-motion details of a traumatic violation to a multidimensional reflection on the institutions and spaces of contemporary life. Memoir becomes urban manifesto.”

—BEATRIZ COLOMINA, professor of architecture and founding director of the Program in Media and Modernity at Princeton University

## A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Readers,

When I was raped, beyond being confused, I was traumatized. I was removed from myself, and had no control over my emotions. I felt so small. I needed to understand how trauma works, the mechanisms of trauma. I wanted to know humiliation's role in the situation, the constitution of "rape," the changes in my habits and those in the internal experience of an assailant, and the formations of justifications for the act in his own mind. Once I could understand trauma, I would be able to identify why I was feeling this way and be in control. (Feeling in control is very important after being raped.)

I found no book describing the mechanism of trauma in relation to a narrative, so I wrote the book. The timeline of the rape was vivid in my head, second by second. Time slowed and expanded. I could go to every gesture, every action, and trace their consequences later in my everyday life. So I wrote this work.

And yes, being a philosopher, the writing arose somewhere between an existential novel and an essay on gentrification. But also, being an architect/artist/activist, I used my own case to criticize the rape mentality. I went as far as opening the records of my own rape to the public in a show. I mounted an exhibition called *Rape New York: An Open Archive*, at INVISIBLE-EXPORTS, a gallery here in New York. I allowed strangers to sift through my private and disturbing materials, while I remained on-site to answer any questions. The archive was meant to illuminate and educate, and I believe that it was extremely successful in this regard. I wanted to have a public discussion about rape while using no words.

Right now, I am on my way to publish *Rape New York: Affective and Legal Documents*. This is a visual version of *Rape New York*. Readers can look at documentation of a rape (photographs from my emergency visit to the hospital, police reports, crime-scene photographs, notes from my 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), and victims will be able to envision the prosecution processes as well as their own internal processes. The visual book also contains a series of art projects that I did for ten years on rape that help to make sense of the state of mind after a rape.

Sincerely,  
Jana Leo

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Madrid, Jana Leo is a philosopher and a conceptual artist-architect based in New York City. She holds a PhD and a BA in philosophy, both from the Universidad Autonoma de Madrid, as well as a MA in architecture from Princeton University. She completed her education with studies of photography, film, video, and theater.

She is the author of the books *Rape New York* (Feminist Press 2011), *I Condo New York* (with Simon Lund, Vitoria-Gasteiz City Hall 2009) and *El Viaje sin Distancia: Perversiones del Tiempo y el Espacio en la Cultura Contemporánea* (CENDEAC 2006; 2015 second edition). She is currently working on her forthcoming publications, *The Art Resort* and *Pet Prisoner*.

## SUPPLEMENTARY WORKS BY THE AUTHOR:

*Rape New York: Affective and Legal Documents* (forthcoming)

In the words of the author: “*Rape New York: Affective and Legal Documents* describes my experience of being house-held and raped in my apartment and chronicles the events of the ensuing six years.

Through my comments on the facts, the book examines and reflects on what I considered a culture of predation and its mecca, the city of New York.

Initially, I collected and dissected details to understand the crime and the emotional void I felt in my life, caused by this random act. The archive grew to include a series of autobiographical notes, drawings and writings that grasped, with precision, the effects of the assault. Even though I wasn't aware at the time of their value as evidence, the documents were used years later as legal proof. In the criminal procedure against the assailant I had to prove that it was rape. In the civil suit against the landlord, I had to prove his negligence and my emotional loss. These documents illustrated my state of mind; for this reason I refer to them as affective documents.



## FOR FURTHER READING

### BOOKS

**Low, Setha M., and Neil Smith.** *The Politics of Public Space*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

**Kern, Leslie.** *Sex and the Revitalized City: Gender, Condominium Development, and Urban Citizenship*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010.

**Hooks, Bell.** "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance." In *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Boston: South End Press, 1999.

### ESSAYS AND ARTICLES

**Adams, Michael H. 2016.** "The End of Black Harlem." *New York Times*, May 27.

**Story, Brett. 2016.** "The Prison in the City: Tracking the Neoliberal Life of the 'Million Dollar Block'." *Theoretical Criminology* (January 21), 1–20.

### ORGANIZATIONS AND INITIATIVES

#### **Justice Mapping Center**

<http://www.justicemapping.org/>

An organization that uses GIS to geographically map crime and social policy.

#### **Justice Atlas of Sentencing and Corrections**

<http://www.justiceatlas.org/>

A project of the Justice Mapping Center that specifically maps incarceration rates in the United States.

## NOTES ON AN EXCERPT

in transitory spaces such as entryways, staircases, elevators, basements, roofs, lobbies, corridors, and entrance halls. Rape occurs most often in places where a certain intimacy is possible. As defined in the "Take-Home Instructions for the Patient" I got at the St. Luke's Emergency Department, sexual assault (rape), is the "ultimate invasion of privacy" and often happens in private or semiprivate places. My assault occurred on the threshold between public and intimate space.

How are urban spaces constantly fluctuating between private and public?

think about the gendered aspects of the "domestic"

What is security?  
How is a space/place secured?  
For whom are we securing spaces

Rape is domestic. The house and the transitory spaces within buildings are regular places of attack but they do not appear to be the responsibility or fall under the jurisdiction of government forces, nor are they the clear responsibility of city departments. There is a building department code that provides strict fire protection, but no crime protection codes exist. The only regulations required by New York City Housing Preservation and Development are limited to doors, windows, locks, and gates, and are badly enforced. Looking at data from the US Bureau of Justice Statistics, I became aware that while serious crimes in general—homicide, robbery, and assault—have decreased, rape and burglary have remained stable for the last fifteen years. Burglary and rape are both crimes that occur in or around the home. The effort to secure buildings, tenants, and the home not only doesn't work practically but also isolates the victim. Energy could be better spent in making the potential intruder feel exposed, rather than safe in the anonymity of transitory spaces. Home is not a safe place. Its familiarity and the routines it produces

Why did Leo choose to use this word in the context of rape? "intimacy" bears connotations of previous acquaintance with a person

begs the question of which spaces are governed by which disciplinary structures

are these crimes gendered?

WORD CHOICE:  
How might this assertion differ if "house" was used instead of home

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Leo's use of nonchronological storytelling shape her memoir?
2. Why does Leo decide to explicitly describe her rape in this book and in her art? How does this affect your understanding of her experience, both during and after the crime?
3. How is Leo's choice to not name people in her book related to her engagement with notions of anonymity?
4. Leo asserts that people often assume that "local" means "safe." Is this an accurate assumption? What in this book disrupts the relationship between these ideas? (see: 50, 51, 52, 83, 89)
5. Think about places and spaces that you feel un/safe. How does the public, private, or transitory nature of these places and spaces inform your in/security?
6. Can spaces be gendered? What are some common instances of gendered spaces? (see: 49–51, 83–89)
7. What connections does Leo make between prison and the domestic home? Why does she draw out this relationship?
8. *Rape New York* discusses the ties between incarceration, urban development, and gentrification. Do you find this argument compelling? Why or why not?
9. What are the "Robocop Principles of Corruption" (44)? How are these principles elaborated and expanded throughout the book?
10. How can Leo's assessment of "rape as domestic" be applied to the college campus rape epidemic? Do you find her analysis relevant to your experiences as college students?

## THE FEMINIST PRESS

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