

Visualising justice: Teaching sexual violence and law through engagement with artwork

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Abstract

Nikki Godden-Rasul (as a legal scholar), Tina Sikka (as an arts and cultures scholar) and Jayne Jackson (an independent empowerment photographer, activist and PhD researcher) reflect on the use of Jackson's photographic artwork *Asking For It*, which challenges sexual violence victim blaming, in a Law and Gender LLB module. In particular, they explore the role art plays in students' learning, and its potential to challenge the supposed objectivity, neutrality and disembodied rationality of law, by bringing visual culture and emotions into the frame.

Introduction

Nikki Godden-Rasul (as a legal scholar), Tina Sikka (as an arts and cultures scholar) and Jayne Jackson (an independent empowerment photographer, activist and PhD researcher) began conversations in 2022, sparked by Jackson's photographic exhibition *Asking For It*. Her work aims to create opinion change towards victim-blaming in cases of sexual violence. We wanted to explore how art, specifically photography, can be a pedagogical tool to enhance students' learning and understanding of sexual violence and law.

As law and art are typically placed in opposition to each other, bringing them together can challenge misplaced assumptions about the nature of law and legal approaches to social and political problems. Where law is associated with written rules, discipline, rationality and disembodied reasoning, art is associated with imagination, creativity, subjectivity and emotion (Douzinas and Nead, 1999). This limited approach to law means that, as Pierre Schlag has said, 'to be really good at "doing law", one has to have serious blind spots and a stunningly selective sense of curiosity' (Schlag, 1998, p. 140). To address these blind spots, art and imagery are becoming more widely used in legal scholarship (Mulcahy, 2017). In the last 15 years, the 'visual turn' in criminology has

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explored how ‘the story of crime’ is imagined, constructed and ‘framed’ within modern society, reflecting the ‘ascendant position of the image/visual in contemporary culture’ (Wheeldon, 2021). An established historical link already exists between the evocative power of documentary photography and the provocation of legal change. Lewis Hine’s haunting images exposing child labour back in the early 20th century were successfully used to pressure the United States Congress towards abolishing child labour. There is also a wealth of feminist artwork which, Nancy Princenthal says, fosters an emotional grammar to confront systemic bias and victim-blaming, pushing beyond the limitations of linguistic and conceptual horizons (Princenthal, 2019, p. 12).

In legal education, feminist artwork could be used to reframe sexual violence and law, bringing new ways of seeing and understanding the harms and possibilities for justice. In addition, it could offer a way to explore emotional entanglements with law and social harms in the classroom. Indeed, Emma Jones (2018) highlights how central emotions are to law, legal education and legal practice, even though much of legal education remains wedded to objectivity, neutrality and disembodied rationality. We aimed to explore these possibilities by integrating a visit to Jackson’s exhibition *Asking For It* with an autoethnographic component in an undergraduate LLB Law and Gender module. In this piece, we reflect on our experience of bringing different educational methods into the law school, contributing to the ongoing conversations about art, law and emotions (for example, see Raj, 2023; Jones, 2018; Maharg and Maughan, 2011).

Law, art and sexual violence

Feminist artists are often drawn to using their artwork as a personal and political tool to explore the harms, meanings, and impacts of sexual violence (Princenthal, 2019). By highlighting the contradiction between the ‘truth’ of the photographic image and the purported ‘truth’ of the law, feminist artwork—employing the language of law—could be used to challenge the subjective, often gendered, biases underpinning both mediums. As feminist research and activism have shown, one cause of the problematic social and legal responses to sexual violence is myths and misconceptions about when, where and between whom sexual violence takes place (Smith, 2018). These myths are underpinned by structural power hierarchies and rest on gender, racialised and other stereotypes. They feed assumptions that men actively seek sex and can rely on women’s coy cues in their choice of dress and behaviours, such as flirting, drinking or not saying no, placing blame for their assault on survivors (End Violence Against Women, 2018). These myths permeate judicial reasoning and legal processes (Kennedy, 2018). Contemporary artworks have addressed rape myths, including Suzanne Lacy’s *Three Weeks in May* (2011), Katherine Cambareri’s, *Well, What Were You Wearing?* (2016), Ruth Maxwell’s exhibition, *Not Consent* (2018) and Emma Sulkowicz’s, ‘mattress

girl' (2015). As such, academic research has begun to analyse the impact of art, indicating that it can be used to educate members of society about the nature of sexual violence as part of prevention work, and to challenge commonly held stereotypes about sexual violence victims and perpetrators, and myths about the causes of sexual violence (Doherty, 2020; Carline and Gunby, 2023).

Photographic artwork like Jackson's *Asking for It* challenges these myths by visualising the absurdities of victim-blaming narratives. It deploys a contradiction between the authenticity of what appear to be historical mugshot-style photographs, but are in-fact entirely new constructed images captioned with supposed "crimes" such as "wore red" or "swiped right". It is a deliberate play with the supposed "truth" of the image. *Asking For It* is particularly disruptive of objective and rational notions of law because the deliberate simplicity of these captions lays bare the implicit biases encoded in legal and social responses to sexual violence. It leverages the universal impact of imagery to address systemic inequalities by disrupting cognitive biases shaped by visual cues (Banaji and Greenwald, 2013). This is similar to Ruth Maxwell's *Not Consent* (2018), which sought to reframe discussions around sexual autonomy and blame. Including photographic artwork on sexual violence in a law course could be an effective way of teaching students about sexual violence and rape myths, as well as encouraging them to think differently about law and law's response to sexual violence. It could be used to challenge law students' sometimes overly-legal way of looking at problems as disconnected from subjectivity and emotion. Indeed, art is connected to affects (Carline and Gunby, 2023) and 'visual images amplify emotion beyond the usual efficacy of text' (Wagner and Sherwin, 2014, p. xxxiii).

However, the goal of *Asking For It* was never limited to 'education'. It aimed to achieve catalytic validity in a deeper way (Bogre, 2011) by encouraging readers to actively challenge what they saw. Catalytic validity is a concept from qualitative research that refers to the transformative potential of an inquiry—how research not only generates knowledge but also inspires change and action. The images were not documenting reality. They were crafted as constructs to reveal a hidden truth and provoke change through evoking an empathetic emotion. Readers are provoked to question and reflect on each rape myth, presented as a "crime". *Asking For It* goes beyond increasing awareness of victim blaming, by stimulating a deeper emotional engagement with the victims and driving action to do something about it, thus creating 'catalytic validity'. This is enhanced by interactive provocation features, such as creating their own 'mugshot' with a supportive slogan to share on social media or providing details for donations or volunteer opportunities for supporting specialist charities. The creation of the work was supported by psychological research on social normative change, in collaboration with Dr Peter Hills, Bournemouth University and a specialist rape charity. Rigorous research and focus group testing ensured an effective empathic response, alongside a carefully

planned audience experience. A historic timeline of authentic-looking mugshots, paired with written information and interactive tools, guided viewers through a journey of discovery. Catalytic validity was enhanced by information about bystander intervention strategies and ways to take action, and measured by capturing evidence of opinion change.

What we did: Integrating engagement with a photographic exhibition into teaching sexual violence and law

On the optional undergraduate Law and Gender module at Newcastle University Law School (with a cohort of 115) we timetabled a guest lecture by the photographer Jayne Jackson and a visit to her exhibition *Asking For It* at Shieldfield Art Works.¹ To support students' engagement with the exhibition, we asked them to write an autoethnographic reflection of their experience viewing the collection. As a method and practice, autoethnography combines ethnographic observations with autobiographical reflections to centre lived experience as a valid and meaningful site of knowledge production. Traditionally, it involves focusing on bodily knowledge, narrativity, storytelling, description, and reflexivity using diary entries, voice notes, sketches, and other forms of documentation. In addition to being 'evocative, emotive, intimate, and vulnerable' (Ramalho-de-Oliveira, 2020; also see Denshire, 2014; Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011), autoethnographies draw on 'narrative as a source of empowerment and a form of resistance to counter the domination and authority of canonical discourses' (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 749). Indeed, the autoethnographic method is a feature of significant feminist, critical race and queer scholarship (for example, see Williams, 1992).

In legal education, autoethnographies have been used to invite students to think about the affect and emotionality of law and legislation with a focus on how it might assist in cases that involve experiences of gendered and racialised harm, trauma, and injustice. As Campbell argues, this requires being open to the idea that 'a narrative approach is valuable and appropriate for legal education research' (Campbell, 2020; also see Gregersen, 2022; Yau, 2020). This occurs by challenging the white, masculine, 'reason-centric' emphasis of contemporary and historical knowledge production in which emotion, care, and affect are gendered and seen as secondary or inferior (Åhäll, 2018).

¹ *Asking for it* was exhibited at three sites – Shieldfield Art Works, Newcastle City Library, and the Hatton Gallery on Newcastle University Campus over a four-week period, so there was plenty of time for students to visit or revisit if they missed the timetabled slot. The exhibition costs were covered by funding from the Newcastle University Faculty of Humanities and Social Science Research Institutes: the Institute for Creative Arts Practice, the Humanities Research Institute, and the Institute for Social Science.

For our purposes, this meant thinking about how evocative images that invite reflection on the systems, structures, and experiences of sexual violence might work to cultivate an ‘emotional grammar’ in ways that drove home the importance of emotions in legal pedagogy – particularly when this involves responding to ‘institutional responses to address...injustices [borne of] harmful social, legal, and political arrangements’ (Raj, 2023, p. 195). The project also aligns with Michelle Bogre’s (2011) argument that ‘the act of witnessing becomes an act of activism’, which we hoped would translate into rich reflections. This approach invited students to connect their emotional responses to broader issues of justice, accountability, and the intersectionality of power relations, as emphasized by scholars like Åhäll (2018).

The topic of sexual violence can be confronting and difficult for some students, especially those who may have experienced or been witness to acts of gendered violence. Although ‘the affective and embodied are already aspects of all pedagogical encounters’ in higher education (Beard, Clegg, and Smith, 2007, p. 236), as we were encouraging students to think about their own reactions to the subject and their knowledge of it outside of more academic learning spaces, we ensured that there was appropriate support available. Representatives from Rape Crisis Tyneside and Northumberland attended the exhibition alongside the students, as points of contact for immediate support should this need arise, as well as providing general information and materials about ongoing available support. Information about the university support services and relevant contacts was also provided, and the module leader was available for conversations with students throughout the module.

A lecture on autoethnography was delivered by Tina Sikka in advance of the visit to the exhibition, accompanied by examples and readings. The students were asked to record – via written or audio-recorded notes – their experience of the exhibition and told they could be descriptive, use storytelling, poetry or any other form of writing. We gave them a prompt asking them:

to reflect on your experiences of the exhibit as you move through it in terms of notions of justice, accountability, power, gender, and race, or any other social relations and identities such as class or sexuality. ...We also want you to consider how the images make you feel viscerally, why, and how they are significant to you.

We noted that we were not asking students to reflect on or write about personal experiences of violence, but that they could think about what they ‘know’ about sexual violence from aspects of culture and social life. The exhibition visit came before they had covered topics on sexual violence in the module. The idea was that when they had covered the academic work on these topics, they could reflect on their autoethnography and explore in a different light their own thoughts, reactions and

knowledge about sexual violence, law and justice. There were opportunities for students to discuss and ask questions about how to use autoethnographies alongside academic scholarship, without the need to discuss the content of the autoethnographies if students did not want to. The module was examined by a 24-hour take-home exam, with the requirement to answer three out of six questions. For one of the questions, students were directed that they should draw on their autoethnography in their answer.

Reflections

We planned to collect data from the students to better understand the use of photographic artwork as a method of teaching about sexual violence and law.² The students were asked if they would anonymously submit their autoethnographies to us for this purpose; however, only one student out of 115 was willing. We know many students completed the autoethnography as they talked about it in class and some of them used it in the exam. So, instead, we asked for students to participate in focus groups led by a paid postgraduate student researcher not associated with the module, and participants would receive a £15 voucher to recognise their time. Three students attended a focus group. As such, we could not collect significant data, though we do have insights from these participants and anecdotal evidence from informal discussions with others. We believe that reasons for the lack of engagement in the research project are that they are a relatively over-researched and over-surveyed group; the outcomes would only directly benefit future students; the students were uncomfortable with doing the autoethnography; and, as final year students, they are particularly time pressured with regard to their assessments and competing demands of applications for internships, work experience and jobs, as well as engaging in paid part-time work.

All the students we spoke to were very positive about the exhibition trip and said that they wanted more of these types of group activities in other modules, and that it was a great way to build community in the Law School. The students in the focus group all emphasised that different methods and assessments are needed throughout the law degree, but they felt that doing something they perceived as radically different in a stage three module was a risk they did not want to take. Indeed, most questions and discussions around the exhibition focused on how to answer the exam question 'correctly'.

² The project was granted ethical approval by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee at Newcastle University, UK, 10 October 2023.

On reflection, and in light of our students' feedback, it might have been helpful to have introduced autoethnography earlier in the semester, with more detail (accompanied by a reading list or toolkit), and as part of a wider discussion of how it fits within the wider corpus of traditional legal practices and perspectives. A key concern expressed by the students was that they were doing something very different from what they had done in any other law module and they worried they might get it wrong. Autoethnographic assignments often invite nervousness amongst students since it sits uneasily with what one might consider 'good academic practice' – i.e. rational, empirical, and objective forms of knowledge production, practices that remove the 'I' entirely. As such, developing students' confidence with a workshop that engaged more fully with the politics of knowledge production and included an exercise or two aimed at developing the ethnographic skills of reflective praxis, engaged reflexivity, and a critique of power (particularly as it relates to the intersection of sexual violence and visual creative practice) might have helped the students to engage more fully with the project. We were not sure that the 24-hour exam was the best way to assess the students' understandings and analysis of sexual violence, informed by the exhibition, and would consider integrating this into a coursework assessment instead. We would suggest that an autoethnography should always be optional, given that it is a more personal piece of writing on a sensitive subject.

Conclusion

Reflecting on our use of *Asking For It* in the Law and Gender module, we conclude that there is great potential for artwork to be a valuable pedagogic tool in law courses as it can open up questions about the relationships between law, knowledge and emotions. This is particularly important given the move towards transactional pedagogy and the marketisation of higher education set within conditions of neoliberal austerity (Balan, 2023). In law, as in other disciplines, this has resulted in the elision of embodied knowledge, which is critical in understanding sexual violence in ways that are nuanced, trauma-informed, and care-centred. We feel that the reticence on the part of the students to engage in this project is, at least in part, a product of these neoliberalising structures and norms. This is a trend we need to challenge. To do so, there needs to be greater attention to the politics of knowledge production and emotional entanglements with law throughout law degrees, brought out through different learning and assessment methods (Jones, 2018). Doing so would also better situate and enhance the potential effectiveness of bringing art into conversation with law. Students would be better able to manage different forms of assessment and sit with and reflect on discomfort and any emotional reactions to their subjects of study. We hope this project

and our reflections play a part in the ongoing conversations about law and art, and emotions and legal pedagogy, and contribute to bringing together these conversations.

Exhibition and workshops update

The *Asking for It* series will be exhibited at The National Justice Museum, Nottingham (29 March – 13 July 2025), featuring interactive creative writing provocations. In collaboration with Boxstowe Women's Project, a further initiative included three online workshops and one in-person interactive session, blending writing and activism. Facilitated by Jayne Jackson (photographer and activist) and Leanne Moden (poet and workshop facilitator), participants used the images as inspiration and explored historical letters sent to Beatrice Pace, reflecting on justice, resilience, and public support for survivors. Contributions will be displayed in the exhibition alongside opportunities for further public contribution. A virtual reality (VR) version will also be available for academic provocation. For more information: [National Justice Museum – What's On](#).

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