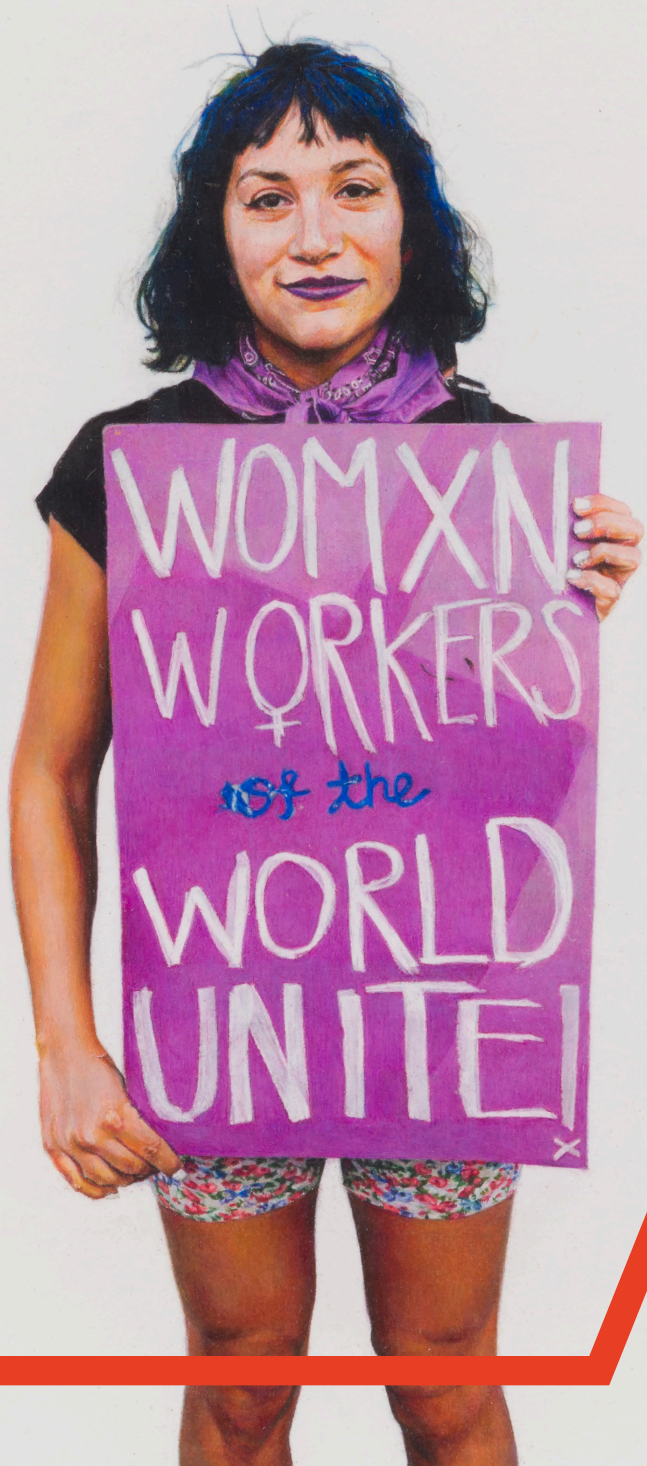


**C/A/C**  
Contemporary  
Arts Center



**ANDREA  
BOWERS**



In the face of political crisis and mounting civil unrest, many artists, curators and critics have wrestled with the difficult question whether art can truly make a difference. Does art amplify the cause and motivate necessary action, or is it more prone to slip into the role of inadvertent anesthesia – flattening real world concerns into aesthetics, objects and commodity? Moreover, does the very content and urgency of politically-intentioned work dissipate when positioned inside a gallery context, or when hung upon a collector's wall? Such questions have lingered for generations without adequate resolution. In a March 2016 article directed towards Andrea Bowers and her activist-inspired work at a private NYC gallery, writer, curator and co-founder of *Filthy Dreams* (a blog analyzing art and culture through a queer lens) Emily Colluci pointedly mused, "With this increasing attention given to activism in commercial and non-profit art spaces, the question must be asked: are these ephemeral materials and activist artworks exhibited for their power to open conversation and foster dialogue? Or are they just fetish objects for these artistic venues?" She goes on to query the goal of such work "when sales are required," echoing curator Ciara Ennis' scrutiny of the pervasive "late capitalist culture" within which artistic and curatorial practice are entrenched today, and for which artists largely rely upon to "survive, produce and disseminate their work." This system was inherently too compromised for the activist art collective Gran Fury who in the 1980s, famously declared "Art is not Enough" and refused to exhibit their work in a gallery.

And yet while art and its typical habitats can undoubtedly be beguiling, the identification, inspiration and motivation such works can engender can also resonate beyond other vehicles of political agency. The same way art is employed in the service of propaganda and revolution – seeing statues erected and toppled to signal a shift in regime – is the same quality that can spark action and emotion. Some overtly political art swings the pendulum too far the other way, "prioritizing its message above its visual impact," which, for critic Carey Dunne, "risks feeling preachy or gimmicky, socially conscious but aesthetically flaccid." For her and many others, the work of Ohio-born, Los Angeles-based Andrea Bowers evades binaries to find a rare synergy between art and activism – cultivating hybrid projects where, "the underlying political message seems to only be strengthened by her technical virtuosity." Rather than simply raising questions, she turns those questions, doubts and skepticism about art + politics into the fodder for reflexive work that is, for Ben Davis of *Artnet*, "much more discomfiting and tricky to get a handle on, but also much more interesting."

To foster a shared platform for both to prosper, Bowers collaborates with activists and advocacy



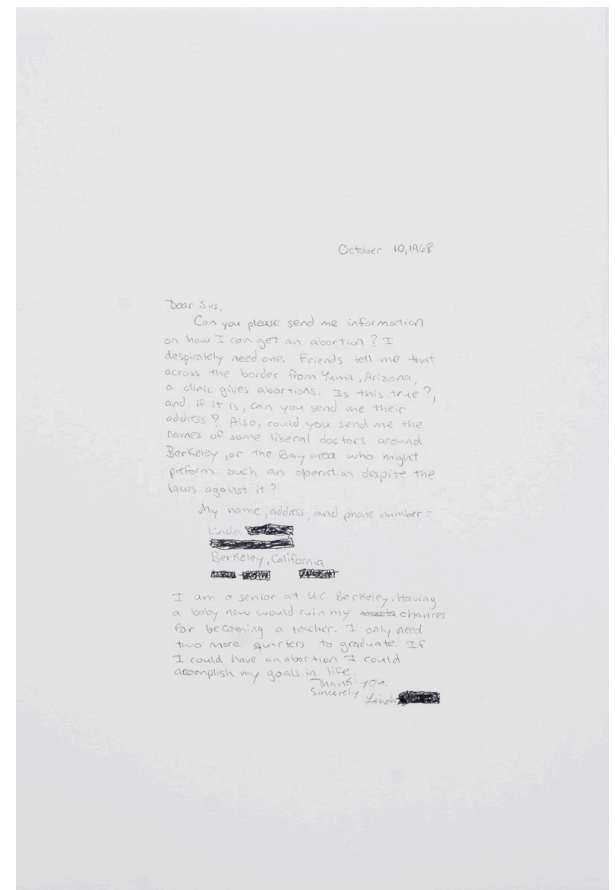
groups in the development of most of her projects. In so doing, writer and curator Patricia Maloney highlights how Bowers' activities, "reflect the fluidity between art and activism...as well as her belief that art can bear witness to the individual gestures and commitments that collectively enact social change." Blurring the long-debated dichotomy, Maloney rightfully observes how "[her] work about activism becomes a form of activism itself" – going beyond partnership to make art and politics inseparable. Speaking to the generative quality of this exchange, Bowers explains, "I am an artist and I use my skills to support the issues I am passionate about. Art and activism are collaborative methodologies for me. My art should be in the service of social justice." Such conviction began early for her, growing up in blue collar, conservative-leaning Ohio, "in a very working class community where everybody was in a union" and both her parents worked for car factories. Bowers was also a burgeoning feminist in an unsympathetic environment, cheerleading for the football team at the same time she began striving to

Opposite top: *Les Répondeuses*, 2014. Courtesy of the Artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, NY.

Opposite bottom: Andrea Bowers and Ada Tinnell, *Trans Liberation: Beauty in the Street (Johanna Saavedra)*, 2016. Courtesy of the Artists and Andrew Kreps Gallery, NY.

Top: *Work Table with Feminist Political Graphics*, 2016. Courtesy of the Artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, NY.

Bottom: *Wall of Letters: Necessary Reminders from the Past for a Future of Choice #18*, 2006. Collection of Sara M. and Michelle Vance Waddell.





establish equality and respect in a culture “where young men were allowed to do whatever they want to women.” After moving to California in her 20s, playing in an all-girl band and conducting radical performances while going to art school, the posters, picket signs, agitprop and ephemera she designed for activist organizations became a fundamental part of her identity. In her current practice she confirms, “I always see myself as an activist,” and part of a “huge network of people working together on the same cause.” In the 2012 project, *Labor is Entitled to All It Creates*, she “used aesthetics as a tool for organizing” – populating a LA gallery space with fliers and brochures from local workers right organizations, binding all of these materials into a handmade book, and hosting flier-making parties throughout the exhibition. Later that year she collaborated with the Student Action for Refugees (STAR) group in Liverpool to create visibility for their “City of Sanctuary” campaign – designing materials and donating her artist fee for an effort that would eventually lead to motions being passed by the city for the improved treatment of asylum seekers. As an outsider working in and through the inside, Bowers thereby recalibrates

not only the beliefs that have divided art and politics, but the very definitions each of them uses to integrate some, and exclude others.

On the so-called “inside” of the gallery world, Bowers wrestles with the inherent contradiction of a luxury market, implicit exclusion and a global fair system that that gives visibility to political artists even as its practices undermine her values. For her part, Bowers confronts the challenges without ceding to the pitfalls – acknowledging that “negotiating the capitalist matrix is always difficult and affects an artist’s autonomy. My most challenging artistic decisions are the ethical ones.” Facing the reality that she has had been rejected, excluded and at times, blacklisted for her political stance (“There is much polite shunning in the art world,” she explains), Bowers has shaped her practice into an evolving form of diplomacy. Engaging multi-faceted negotiations with a multitude of parties to present work that is poignant (without being preachy or didactic), she, for curator Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy, “participates in cause-driven efforts...as part of an expanded practice that encompasses and makes use of her artistic skills and cultural agency.” Striving to push her practice off the wall, while deconstructing the culture of the “artificially tranquil white box gallery environment,” Bowers has regularly co-mingled her constituencies – using her openings to congregate activists and politically disenfranchised individuals with art world regulars. She explains, “I find comrades in both worlds. The art world is a bigger mouthpiece for me. It’s a way to historicize people’s actions. The funny thing is the art world always seems concerned whether politics and activism fit in, but activism sees artists as integral parts of their movements.” Finding inspiration and precedence in the Black Panther movement, she regularly cites their Minister of Culture Emory Douglas who declared, “Politics and art go hand-in-hand. Politics



is the engine and art is part of that engine...Every revolutionary movement that I’ve known of has some type of revolutionary art.”

To address the transactional concerns of critics like Emily Colluci, who asks if the art world is, “fetishizing activism for its own ego, profit and perceived progressiveness,” Bowers regularly donates a portion of her sales back to the respective organizations with which she has allied (i.e. Planned Parenthood). In other instances like the continually morphing *TRANSFORMer* project (produced in collaboration with Olga Koumoundouros), she mobilizes an itinerant installation that connects with local partners to repurpose found objects into sculptures, conduct roadside performances, distribute information, and offer a site to make and sell activist T-shirts (with the sales going back to the respective groups). When the nomadic project stopped in front of her NYC gallery in 2013, Bowers very publicly sold silk-screened editions for “garage sale” prices as part of an exchange with local *TRANSFORMer* organizations. At a 2011 stop in Florida, as “an officially sanctioned part of Art Basel,” this project provided, as the collective authors of Wikipedia argue, “a fascinating counterpoint to the aura of excess that often pervades the Miami fairs...[hinting] at a model by which the art world might contribute to positive social change without co-opting activism or transforming its message into just another stream of precious and saleable objects.”

For those who believe only a social, “de-materialized” practice can escape the trappings of the voracious art market, Bowers counters, “I believe that representations have power and can be effective.” In pieces that revive female-centric workers rights graphics, Bowers employs the same values of labor, technique and craftsmanship to establish a bridge with the fundamental principles of the working class. By demonstrating time-intensive



Opposite top: *City of Sanctuary*, 2012. Courtesy of the Artist and the 2012 Liverpool Biennial.

Opposite bottom: *Roundtable Discussion* [installation view], 2016. Courtesy of the Artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, NY.

Top: *Anonymous Woman (Steubenville Rape Case Trail, Steubenville, OH, March 14, 2013)*, 2015. Courtesy of the Artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.

Bottom: Andrea Bowers and Olga Koumoundouros, *TRANSFORMer* [installation view], 2013. Courtesy of the Artists and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.

We are not asking for a right to the streets, we are taking them; we are not asking for advertisements that do not objectify women, we're destroying the commercial mechanisms that objectify women; we are not appealing to male power for an end to rape, but threatening: "If you touch me, I will fucking kill you."

For once, the mechanisms that create and maintain identities of womanhood are refused, and our desires are our own, our bodies are our own, and our violence is our own.  
Some Crazy Bitches

skill in drawings of all sizes, she marries the industry of art-making and activism into one – forging an implicit bond of mutual respect and dedication. The grueling process of hand-copying figures from photographs has personal significance for Bowers too, establishing a tactile dialogue with her source images/sisters-in-arms, and cultivating investment that “can have an impact on the way a viewer interprets the content of an artwork.” In concert with work employing ribbons, textiles, cardboard and other humble materials, Bowers also champions craft and storytelling as a way to honor women’s work of the past, build allegiances and cultivate inclusion. There is thus an underlying humility in her work that disarms a no less fervent political stance; as she explains, “I think one of our powers as artists is to make images that reach out to people. That’s what we do – we make images, right? So you have to do the most with what art does best.” In an ongoing series of drawings that range from the intimate to the monumental, Bowers openly grapples with the challenges of aesthetics and ornament when translating political causes into, and through imagery. With stencils, decorative paper and spray paint she creates florid fields where activist slogans coil and strike like vipers, announcing ideals like, “A commonwealth is when wealth is common,” “When we’re screwed we multiply,” and, “We are not asking for a right to the streets, we are taking them...” Like a wolf in sheep’s clothing, Bowers electrifies these words via anomaly – acknowledging the irony of the beautified context while complicating its DNA.

would be plenty. Undertaken collectively, it would be all we needed.”

In so doing, Bowers characterizes her overarching intent as one to “modify thought”, which includes her own. Preferring to meet people, work collaboratively and activate theory and history through a social rather than academic lens, she explains, “Why I do what I do is the opportunity to question my own prejudices or misconceptions and to be more open-minded. That’s a really beautiful thing about being around activists who are pushing boundaries, questioning the way our society behaves, and asking for a better world.” The beginning of all politics, good or bad, and the primary battleground for change will always be the human mind. In her work Bowers strives to refresh the ways, “we have been trained to look and interpret meaning...[encouraging] the viewer...to reconsider ideas they might have a tendency to make assumptions about.” Rather than lament the limitations of art, her work exploits its capacity to translate reflection into a revolution of consciousness. Bowers’ evocations of the past and present are thus, for Kalb, “a generative process rather than a repetition compulsion” – building platforms, “to stand in for that which is and produce that which is becoming.”

- SM 2017



Is the work of Andrea Bowers enough? The aforementioned critic Emily Colluci has one more challenge for her: “Naturally art can be activism and vice versa, but,” in an era where some trans communities argue that visibility is also not enough, “what happens when the tropes of activism, as well as its figures, become a sellable commodity?” Marlene McCarty of Gran Fury also remains skeptical of a contemporary art world she sees as “mute,” “elite, monied and rarified,” but locates redemption and possibility in work that “can speak back,” and “be active.” In terms of artists living their politically-driven practices, Bowers can be seen in league with artists such as Tania Bruguera, Dread Scott and Regina Jose Galindo, even as she works diligently to shift the model of “radicality” away from connotations of extremism. Acknowledging that few activists can know the long-term efficacy of their actions, she invests in a form of paradigm realignment that, for author and Professor Peter Kalb, has the aspiration “to re-imagine society.” Eschewing expectations of single-handedly changing the world, Bowers instead subscribes to the more modest, but potentially more transformative words of fellow artist Adrian Piper, who argues, “To change an opinion, or an attitude, or to modify a kneejerk response, or to catalyze an ongoing process of personal transformation



Opposite top: Crazy Bitches [detail], 2016. Courtesy of the Artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, NY.

Opposite bottom: *Écoute ma voix et nous sauverons le monde! / Listen to My Voice and We Will Save the World!*, 2014. Courtesy of the Artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, NY.

Above: *Political Poetry - Gagosian Recycled* (Walker and Currin), 2011. Courtesy of the Artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.

## CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER

### ANDREA BOWERS

#### ***Womxn Workers of the World Unite!***

Curated by Steven Matijcio  
February 10 – June 18, 2017

#### ***Generously supported by***

1919 Investment Counsel,  
Sara M. & Michelle Vance Waddell,  
ArtsWave Corporate Partner: PNC Bank

**Andrea Bowers** (b.1965) holds a BFA degree from Bowling Green State University, Ohio and an MFA degree from the California Institute of the Arts. Recent solo exhibitions include *In Situ 1- Andrea Bowers*, Espace Culturel Louis Vuitton, Paris, 2014 and *#sweetjane*, Pomona and Pitzer College Museum of Art, Claremont, 2014. Her work is held in the collections of The Hammer Museum of Art, MoMA, The Whitney Museum of American Art, The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Center, among others. This is her first solo exhibition in Ohio.

### LIST OF WORKS

Following works courtesy of the Artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York:

- *Écoute ma voix et nous sauverons le monde! / Listen to my Voice and We will Save the World!*, 2014. Marker on found cardboard.
- *Les Répondeuses / The Responders*, 2014. Marker on found cardboard.
- *The New Social Order - Work For All - Art For All*, 2016. Marker on found cardboard.
- *Crazy Bitches*, 2016. Colored pencil on paper.
- Andrea Bowers (in collaboration with Ada Tinnell), *Trans Liberation: Ni Una Mas, Not One More (Jennicet Gutierrez)*, 2016. Archival pigment print.
- Andrea Bowers (in collaboration with Ada Tinnell), *Trans Liberation: Beauty in the Street (Johanna Saavedra)*, 2016. Archival pigment print.
- *Roundtable Discussion*, 2016. Single Channel HD Video Projection on Ribbons [30:00].
- *Work Table with Feminist Political Graphics*, 2016. Digital prints, cardboard and table.
- *Girlfriends (May Day March, Los Angeles, 2011)*, 2011. Graphite on paper.
- *Woman With Straw Hat and Feminist Fist Tattoo*

*(May Day March, Los Angeles, 2011)*, 2011. Colored pencil on paper.

Following works courtesy of the Artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, NY and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects:

- Andrea Bowers (in collaboration with Ada Tinnell), *Trans Liberation: Building a Movement (Cece McDonald)*, 2016. Archival pigment print.

Following works courtesy of the Artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects:

- *Anonymous Woman (Steubenville Rape Case Trial, Steubenville, OH, March 14, 2013)*, 2015. Graphite on paper.
- *Rape Wrong (Anonymous Protest, Jefferson County Court House, Steubenville, OH, February 1, 2013)*, 2015. Colored pencil on paper.
- *Womxn Workers of the World Unite! (May Day March 2015, Los Angeles, California)*, 2016. Colored pencil on paper.
- *Political Poetry - Gagosian Recycled (Walker and Currin)*, 2011. Graphite on invitation card.
- *Political Poetry - Gagosian Recycled (Picasso and Rosenberg)*, 2011. Graphite on invitation card.
- *Political Poetry - Gagosian Recycled (Serra and Rosenberg)*, 2011. Graphite on invitation card.
- *Wall of Letters: Necessary Reminders from the Past for a Future of Choice #20*, 2006. Pencil on paper.
- *Wall of Letters: Necessary Reminders from the Past for a Future of Choice #21*, 2006. Pencil on paper.

Private Collections:

- *For My Transgender Sisters (May Day March, Los Angeles, 2012)*, 2012. Colored pencil on paper. Collection of Phil Mercado-Quinn and Todd Quinn.
- *Girlfriends (May Day March, Los Angeles, 2011)*, 2011. Graphite on paper. Collection of Ray Ellen Yarkin & Allan Yarkin.
- *Wall of Letters: Necessary Reminders from the Past for a Future of Choice #18*, 2006. Pencil on paper. Collection of Sara M. and Michelle Vance Waddell.
- *Woman With Straw Hat and Feminist Fist Tattoo (May Day March, Los Angeles, 2011)*, 2011. Colored pencil on paper. Collection of Martin and Rebecca Eisenberg.

*All works pictured in this brochure are by Andrea Bowers unless otherwise noted.*

Cover: *Womxn Workers of the World Unite! (May Day March 2015, Los Angeles, California)* [detail], 2016. Courtesy of the Artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.

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