

# art journal

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**Andrea Bowers, *Eulogies to One and Another*, 2006**, 32 drawings, graphite on paper, ea. 30 1/4 x 22 in. (76.5 x 55.9 cm), installation view, *Nothing Is Neutral*, Gallery at REDCAT, Los Angeles (artwork © Andrea Bowers; photograph by Scott Grollier; provided by Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects)

At a time when art's typically embattled relationship to politics appears to have reached a certain reconciliation, if not friendship, drawing has enjoyed a particular resurgence. Indeed, in keeping with the more general "documentary turn" in recent art, drawing has rediscovered its original function of bringing the world into view.<sup>1</sup> From Andrea Bowers and Sam Durant's painstaking graphite re-creations of photographs of political protestors, through D-L Alvarez's

Claire Gilman

## Marking Politics: Drawing as Translation in Recent Art

obscured renditions of found images of Charles Manson and the Black Panthers, to Emily Prince's intimate pencil memorial to all the American soldiers who have died in Iraq, one senses a growing impulse to stake a physical claim, as if putting pencil to paper might counter the disconnect that constitutes our experience of politics and war today.<sup>2</sup>

It is no coincidence that many of these artists turn to moments that parallel the present while remaining fundamentally distinct: 1960s counterculture and the

anti-Vietnam War movement in particular, but also, in Bowers's case, 1980s anti-nuclear activism (movements remembered for their impassioned solidarity in pursuit of shared political and cultural goals). Paradoxically, given the current nostalgia for the tangible, physical coming-togetherness of 1960s activism and the hippie ethos, one of the prominent artistic strategies of that period was the refusal to make actual objects. "Dematerialization" became a favored way to avoid economic and political misappropriation, with the result that hands-on artistic production often found itself dismissed as taboo and retrograde. Today, however, in a society dominated by virtual relations, an aesthetics of immateriality no longer seems viable.<sup>3</sup> For example, despite the surfeit of free-floating information across cyberspace, fewer than ever in the industrialized West have any personal connection to the hard reality of the wars that their governments wage. The increasingly global yet still fragmented world seems both more and less immediate, making some kind of purchase on the "real" indispensable.<sup>4</sup>

It is here that drawing makes its reappearance, that age-old pictorial act that reaches out toward the world even as it reveals its physical origin, remaining, in this way, incapable of deception. It is, however, a very specific type of drawing that concerns me here—neither drawing as imaginative expression nor drawing as spontaneous process (both of which have served radical artistic practice at various moments in time), but rather drawing as a kind of rote translation. All of the artists I have mentioned engage in a parallel and strangely conservative procedure: they studiously re-create information originally received through other, more impersonal media. The medium of choice is typically photography, but not always. In her series *Eulogies to One and Another* (2006), for instance, Bowers carefully traced internet news reports concerning the deaths of the young American activist Marla Ruzicka and her Iraqi co-worker Faiz Ali Salim in Iraq in 2005. This is drawing reduced to its most basic application, a kind of anybody-can-do-it approach that suggests both an intense desire for access to the subject at hand and a peculiar impotence.

The latter is most evident in Alvarez's drawings, which re-create their source photos in shifting, gridded registers so that the resultant images hover between legibility and abstraction. It is not incidental that the artist's 2005 exhibition, *Rise*, focused on found photos of two organizations—the Manson family and the

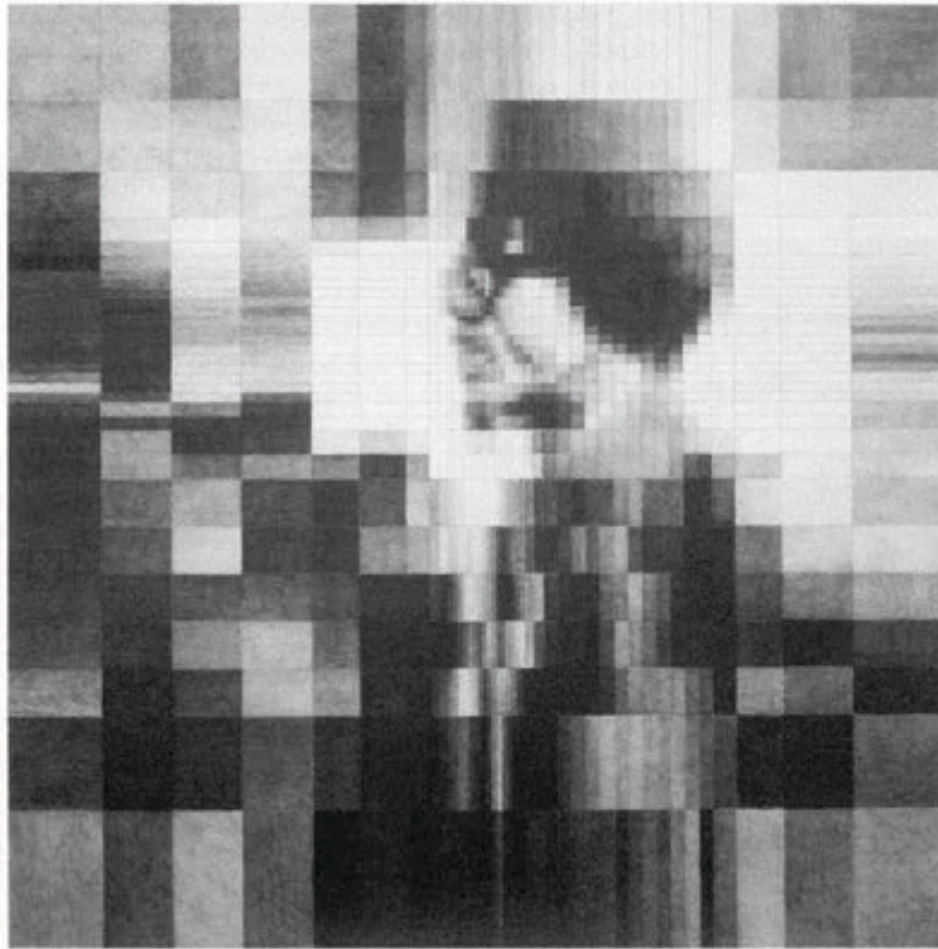
This paper originated as a talk given at Gary Garrels's contemporary drawing panel at the CAA 2009 Annual Conference in Los Angeles. Thanks very much to Gary for organizing the excellent panel and discussion.

1. The term comes from Mark Nash, "Experiments with Truth: The Documentary Turn," in *Experiments with Truth*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Fabric Workshop, 2004). The exhibition explored the dialogue among narrative, avant-garde, and documentary filmmaking with an eye to the creative ways in which recent film and video investigate historical "truth." Other exhibitions that have taken up art's increasing preoccupation with historical investigation, as well as the interplay between reality and fiction that underlies this effort, include *Documenta XI* in Kassel, Germany, in 2003; *Making History: Art and Documentary in Britain from 1929 to Now* at the Tate Liverpool in 2006; *Ahistoric Occasion: Artists Making History* at MASS MoCA in 2006–7; and *Reprocessing Reality: New Perspectives on Art and the Documentary* at the Château de Nyon, Switzerland, and P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, in 2005–6.

2. Many others could be mentioned here, including Fernando Bryce, Karl Haendel, and Serkan Ozkaya, to name a few.

3. For a useful discussion of these concepts, see Ara H. Merjian, "Diminishing Returns," *Modern Painters* 20, no. 3 (April 2008): 54–61.

4. For a detailed discussion of these issues, including the relationship between art's response to conflict today and in the 1960s, see *October* 123 (Winter 2008), special issue "In what ways have artists, academics, and cultural institutions responded to the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq?"



**D-L Alvarez, (t)here, 2005**, graphite on paper, 25½ x 25½ in. (64.8 x 64.1 cm) (artwork © D-L Alvarez; photograph provided by Derek Eller Gallery, New York)

5. Bowers, interviewed in *Between Artists: Andrea Bowers and Catherine Opie* (New York: A.R.T. Press, 2008), 45.

6. Exhibitions specifically engaged with reenactment include *History Will Repeat Itself*, at the KW Institute in Berlin, and *Life, Once More: Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art*, at Witte de With in Rotterdam. For more on reenactment in recent art, see Robert Blackson, "Once More . . . with Feeling: Reenactment in Contemporary Art and Culture," *Art Journal* 66, no. 1 (Spring 2007); and *Experience, Memory, Re-enactment*, ed. Anke Bangma, Steve Rushton, and Florian Wüst (Berlin: Piet Zwart Institute and Revolver Verlag, 2005).

Black Panther Party—whose utopian ideals were unrealized or tragically betrayed. Bowers's drawings of 1980s antinuclear activists and Durant's light-box drawings based on photographs of 1960s rallies are more manifestly nostalgic in spirit. Bowers has stated that she chooses subjects that resonate with her personally, and it would be hard to mistake her admiration for the women activists she typically depicts. "I'm not afraid of the term 'propaganda' and there's no attempt at neutrality in my work," she has explained. "I want to make work that is conceptually driven and I take a political and activist position. These issues often divide people, so I use aesthetics as an entry point for viewers so they don't automatically react against the content. Instead, the aesthetics kind of seduce people into being willing to . . . sit with it."<sup>5</sup>

It is useful to consider Alvarez, Bowers, and Durant's process within the context of a more general preoccupation with reenactment in contemporary art. Several recent exhibitions have taken reenactment as their theme, focusing on video and performance pieces like Jeremy Deller's *The Battle at Orgreave*, which restaged a famous 1980s British miners' strike, or Mark Tribe's ongoing *Port Huron Project*, which reenacts famous radical speeches from the 1960s and 1970s in the locations in which they were first presented.<sup>6</sup> According to the curators, projects like these perform our desire to work through the past since, unlike simulation,



**Andrea Bowers, Women's Pentagon Action, 1981, detail of Woven Web around Pentagon, 2003, graphite on paper, 8 x 10 in. (20.3 x 25.4 cm).** Collection of Gaby and Wilhelm Schürmann, Germany (artwork © Andrea Bowers; photograph by Jens Ziehe, provided by Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects)

**Andrea Bowers, Diabloblockade, Diablo Nuclear Power Plant, Abalone Alliance, 1981, 2003, graphite on paper, 8 x 10 in. (20.3 x 25.4 cm).** Collection of Gaby and Wilhelm Schürmann, Germany (artwork © Andrea Bowers; photograph by Jens Ziehe, provided by Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects)

they do not simply record events, but attempt to comprehend them via human actors. As Sven Lütticken, curator of the recent show *Life, Once More: Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art* at Witte de With in Rotterdam, puts it, "For hardcore reenactors, the active experience, the experience of acting . . . is everything."<sup>7</sup> Reenactment is in this sense a productive, empathetic model of repetition. Performances like Deller's and Tribe's do not aim to restore the past so much as to allow us to physically work through its relationship to our own moment.

As a medium that retains evidence of its physical process, drawing would seem to lend itself to this kind of working-through. Indeed, Bowers's stated approach appears to fulfill the curator Inke Arns's pronouncement that "artistic re-enactments do not ask the naive question about what really happened . . . they ask what the images we see might mean concretely to us, if we were to experience these situations personally."<sup>8</sup> According to this logic, Bowers and her peers come to understand the past's sustained relevance by remaking it. But I would argue that their procedure is both more and less involved with the past than Arns's account allows. The painstaking translation of photographs is high on effort but not necessarily on imagination, begging the question of why spend the time at all? Is the exercise merely an homage to bygone ideals or, in Alvarez's case, a pessimistic testament to the impossibility of reclaiming an already defunct history? Or is there perhaps some value in the time spent, as if careful attention to other people's actions is itself a form of commitment, one that might redefine the nature of political expression and art's role in it?

It is not incidental that Bowers's early work in this style foregrounds the role physical labor plays in political protest. Her 2003 Berlin exhibition *Magical Politics* focused on a group of nonviolent, feminist movements that arose in the 1980s and that, according to the writer Barbara Epstein, were among the first to move activist strategies into the realm of the aesthetic.<sup>9</sup> For example, during a famous 1980 protest at the Pentagon, women activists strung yarn webs across the building's doors to protest nuclear power and the military-industrial complex. Bowers paid homage to this gesture with a floor-to-ceiling blanket, a kind of soft blockade woven like a chain-link fence and stitched with a spider web

7. Sven Lütticken, "An Arena in Which to Reenact," in *Life, Once More: Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art* ed. Lütticken (Rotterdam: Witte de With, DAP/Distributed Art Publishers, 2005), 37.

8. Inke Arns, "History Will Repeat Itself," in *History Will Repeat Itself: Strategies of Re-enactment in Contemporary (Media) Art and Performance*, exh. cat., ed. Inke Arns and Gabriele Horn (Dortmund: Hartware MedienKunstVerein; Berlin: KVV Institute for Contemporary Art, 2007), 43.

9. In putting together this exhibition, Bowers was strongly influenced by Barbara Epstein, *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution: Nonviolent Direct Action in the 1970s and 1980s* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), which, among other things, tells the story of "magical politics," the loosely defined feminist, activist movement Bowers takes as her subject.

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pattern. The exhibition also included three drawings after photographs. *Women's Pentagon Action* replicates a photograph of the women seated beneath their handiwork. Pressed up against the tangled web, which fills the foreground, it is as if this material object—the spider web—encompasses the women's action or serves as the vehicle through which it can be read. A similar idea governs related drawings depicting women activists blockading the Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant in California and protesting at the Seneca Army Depot in upstate New York. In both cases, Bowers highlights the physical alliance of the participants. In the first image, the women subvert through bodily imitation, linking arms to simulate the chain-link fence that guards the power plant. In the second, a cropped image of two women mounting a chain-link fence reveals the incidental solidarity of bodies in motion. The women are manifestly different in build, hairstyle, clothing, and more, but they come together in shared behavior.

Although Bowers's captions tell us what is going on, precise content is almost beside the point. Consider a slightly later series of drawings of people engaged in acts of nonviolent protest. Cropped and isolated on the white page, these figures look like graceful, dancing forms. It is not so much that Bowers ignores content—in fact, the *Magical Politics* exhibition featured a scrapbook displaying newspaper clippings alongside the artist's source photos—as that she carefully sets it aside, subordinating it to the physical application to the situation at hand. Similarly, when the nonviolent protest drawings debuted they were accompanied by a split-screen video of dancers taking a six-hour training course in nonviolent civil disobedience. On one screen, in color and sound, two organizers teach the dancers the history of nonviolent direct action and its techniques. On the other screen, the students apply their lessons in a series of physical moves; the resulting black-and-white film reads as a performance of sorts as the dancers move in and out of formation. Bowers here presents two different modes of learning: one traditional, the other a kind of experimental instruction through bodily imitation. Not insignificantly, the first video shows the dancers restless and unable to concentrate, whereas the second shows them wholly absorbed in their task.

Still, absorption does not necessarily equal comprehension. Certainly, there is no indication that the dancers have now embraced the protest agenda of those whom they emulate. What is evident is that they display a passion that approximates that of their instructors, albeit now in and through their own field of expertise. The same could be said of Bowers's drawn gesture. Yes, Bowers pays homage to a specific group of people at an identifiable moment in time, but she makes no effort to explain or reevaluate her protagonists either in and of themselves or in relation to her own life. Instead, what distinguishes Bowers's drawings from her source photos above all is that the drawings do not vanish before their subjects. Rather, they stand their ground as a kind of parallel action, equivalent to but also separate from the subject at hand.

It is this same rejection of semantic transparency that motivates Durant's light-box drawings. For this series, Durant appropriated texts from hand-written signs pictured in photographs of demonstrations throughout the United States during the 1960s. Isolated, redrawn, and illuminated in brightly colored light boxes, the references are both opaque and oddly familiar. Much like Bowers, Durant does not so much exorcise content as displace it, pairing the light boxes with drawings or posters made after the original photographs. "Tell it like it is!" derives from a placard carried by a man on the 1965 Selma to Montgomery march in Alabama; "Like, man, I'm tired (of waiting)" is from a sign held dur-

ing the 1963 March on Washington. Divorced from their original contexts, such phrases are universally resonant without manifest political allusion. Alternatively, "See you in Chicago in August" makes little sense outside its reference to the 1968 Chicago Democratic National Convention, while "Justice," in an untitled drawing, requires no background information.

By deliberately pairing familiar with more oblique phrases, Durant strips away specific meaning, locating significance in the very act of expression. Many of the phrases Durant selects are appeals: "Tell it like it is!"; "Like, man, I'm tired of waiting"; "Meet me in Chicago." From within the crowd, Durant isolates the individual gesture and memorializes it by physically re-creating it. The spoken word is authoritative and immediate, whereas the written word requires a more patient form of investment, something Durant replicates via his own hand. That effort is evident in *Strike (Index)*, 2004, in which a girl breaks out of the crowd and kneels down to complete a sign. And it is particularly palpable in an untitled work of 2002, which features a young man staring fixedly out at the viewer while holding up the word "Justice." It is the man's silence that makes this image so powerful, as if merely speaking the words were not enough. Instead, he has taken the time to make something, to literally craft his appeal however humble its presentation.

In recovering handwritten signs of protest, Durant rescues, as it were, this more personal form of expression from the apparent neutrality of the photographic document. By isolating the written phrase and revealing its location secondarily via the accompanying pencil sketch, he shifts the focus from content to context and back again, thereby exposing the specific motivation behind political action. Something similar happens in Bowers's *Eulogies to One and Another*, in which redrawing articles from the internet serves less to criticize contemporary media culture than to foreground its human impulse. Bowers's project includes two separate wall grids composed of multiple eulogies enlarged and executed in a reverse method, with the text left white and the backgrounds shaded a soft, graphite gray. One grid transposes the articles and accompanying photographs verbatim. The other grid preserves only the references to Ruzicka's Iraqi co-worker. These panels are notably devoid of incident, with only a few scattered lines dispersed within otherwise monochrome gray fields. Bowers's intervention quietly unmasks the bias implicit in news coverage that concentrates on the pretty, young American to the exclusion of her foreign counterpart but, in doing so, it does not undermine the sentiment expressed therein. The eulogies are heartfelt, and the fact that they are one-sided underscores their status as stories, that is, as personally motivated forms of expression.

Fundamental to the work of Bowers and her peers is the absence of necessary expertise. Copying is a skill children practice, one that does not require extensive schooling or expensive equipment. Moreover, the artists often speak about their work with a manifest humility. Prince has declared of her seemingly Herculean undertaking: "It is my own eyes and my hand tracing out some very slight acquaintance with what's occurring. As an investigation it is little, and it is incomplete."<sup>10</sup> Prince is upfront about the fact that her installation, which arranges the soldiers' portraits in a sparse, maplike formation according to their state of origin, cannot encapsulate the tragedy that is war-torn Iraq. The work's deliberately cumbersome title provides full disclosure: *American Servicemen and Women Who Have Died in Iraq and Afghanistan (but not Including the Wounded, nor the Iraqis nor the Afghans)*. Crude, sketchy, and small in scale, like the snapshots on which

they're based, Prince's drawings are hardly virtuoso performances, but they are all the more effective for that.

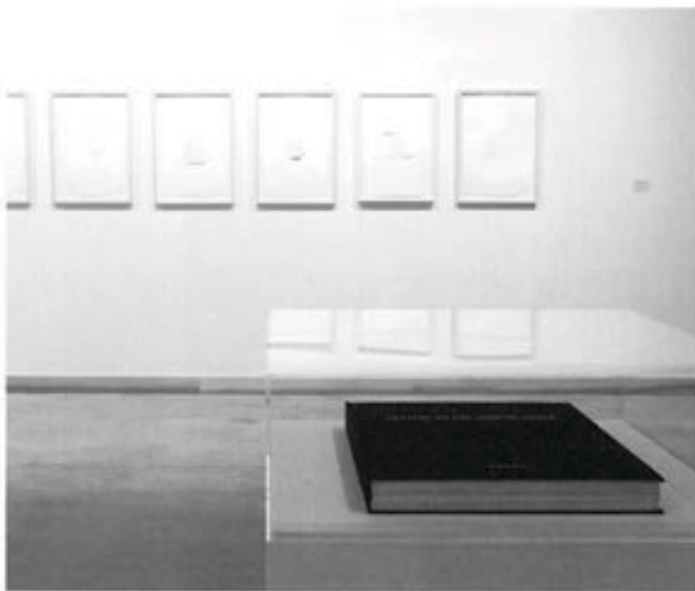
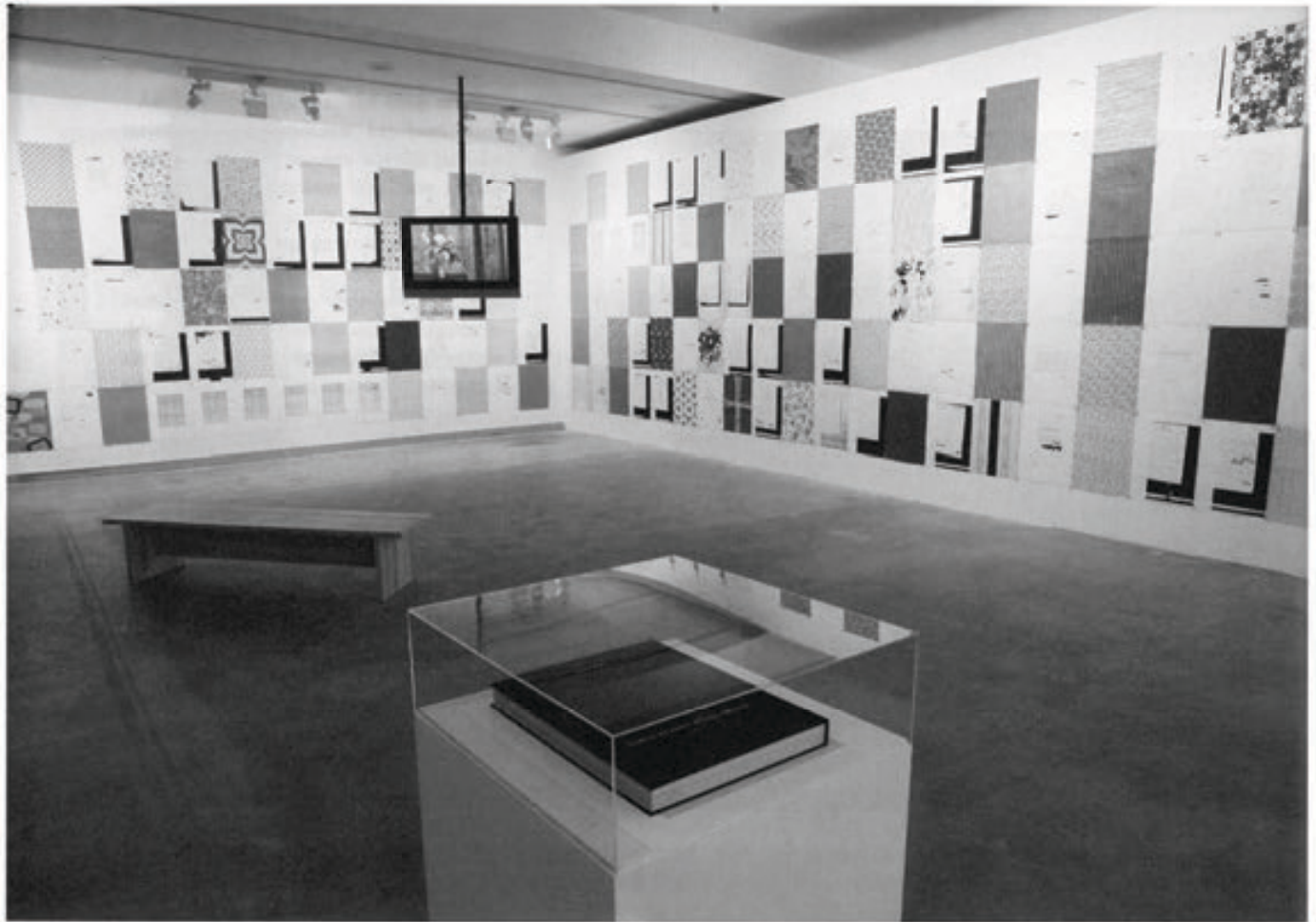
In a related vein, Durant has explained that he chose the light-box form because it was familiar. Partly, his deliberate inversion—inserting political slogans in a place typically reserved for commercial advertising—is a way of challenging consumer passivity. But more than this, Durant deliberately eschews elitism, working with a form that is inviting in its everydayness and that he hopes will encourage viewers to consider the relevance of the original phrases to circumstances today. Durant calls his pencil drawings indexes—again invoking the material equivalence between his gesture and the original—and the entire project *Twelve Signs: Transposed and Illuminated (with Virious Indexes)*. The phrases are, quite simply, transposed and rendered visible, that is, not judged or analyzed, but simply revealed as such. Finally, Bowers has explained that her decision to draw from photographs emerged from a desire to be more respectful of her subjects, as if copying would place her on their level. "I decided that my labor and care in rendering might elicit a more empathetic reading. . . . I wanted my work to recognize that I was part of the system I was addressing."<sup>14</sup>

Put another way, Bowers's work promotes a kind of equality that approximates the political emancipation her projects describe. This is nowhere more evident than in the large-scale 2006 installation *Letters to an Army of Three*. The work's ostensible subject is a group of three women who worked as abortion-rights activists in the San Francisco Bay Area from 1964 to 1973, prior to the decision in *Roe v. Wade*. Most notably, the group put together a list of safe doctors for distribution across the country. Bowers's installation focuses on letters sent to the group requesting help and includes: a double wall papered with photocopies of letters interspersed with decorative wallpaper panels; a video in which nonprofessional actors read the letters; a scrapbook of photocopies of the letters separated by wallpaper inserts; and framed drawings by Bowers of the letters and wallpaper squares, the former titled *Wall of Letters: Necessary Reminders from the Past for a Future of Choice*. The drawings of the letters are near-exact replicas of the originals, complete with crossings-out, just as the wallpaper drawings appear almost indistinguishable from the actual panels.

This piece is multifaceted, and I do not intend to address all its components here. But its very complexity is part of the point. For in providing not only the original letters but also her carefully rendered drawings, as well as the vocalized appeals, Bowers forces us to consider, alongside what is said, how it is said and by whom. Like Durant, Bowers highlights the individual within the collective. What was once private becomes public as we learn about the young mother who cannot afford to lose her job should her boss find out she is pregnant, or about the woman desperately seeking assistance for her pregnant, mentally ill daughter. In the process, Bowers provides her own kind of testimony. There are several entry points into the piece because, it would seem, there are different ways of testifying and of paying attention. Each method is unique in its capacity for expression (the spoken word elicits different responses than the written word, for example), but the methods are fundamentally equal. Pairing her drawings with the photocopies is, moreover, the ultimate act of humility. Like Durant's light-box transfers, the drawn letters are not inventions. They are just "necessary reminders," nothing more and nothing less.

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action is still possible. If we are unsure what to do, what is still true is that we can do. It is this capacity that Bowers, Durant, Alvarez, and Prince preserve.

Shortly after I began working on this essay, Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Demonstration Drawings* were exhibited at the Drawing Center in New York. I was unfamiliar with this series prior to the show and was pleased by its relevance to my argument. For the series, Tiravanija has been commissioning Thai artists, the majority of them his former students, to create pencil sketches after photographs of protests published in the *International Herald Tribune*. The project has been ongoing since 2002, although all of the works in the Drawing Center show were completed during the last few years. Rendered without the photographs' published captions, the drawings are difficult to place; their subjects range from organized demonstrations to seething mob riots, and represent a vast array of political, economic, and cultural agendas. A felt aspiration for global change is evident, one similar to that which I have attributed to the other artists I have discussed. These drawings do not dwell in the past, however, but instead appear to envision a possible present in which the still-inchoate energy they contain is harnessed and the collective struggle they depict resolved.

But the drawings also present certain questions, which is why I've decided to leave them for the end. Rather than committing himself to a bygone moment of collective action, like Bowers and Durant—a solitary gesture that necessarily preserves the distance between past and present—Tiravanija presents a kind of mass movement in its own right. Is his action intended to re-create the image of brotherhood envisioned in the drawings, and, if so, isn't this vision violated by his assumption of a dictatorial role (a common problem, not incidentally, within countercultural movements generally)? Moreover, since the drawings are exhibited under Tiravanija's name, what does it mean to ask this time and labor of someone else, and of one's former students, no less? If drawing as translation is an egalitarian gesture—a way of matching commitment with commitment—to demand someone else's involvement would seem to violate its very foundation. In other words, Tiravanija's enforced collectivism necessarily preserves hierarchy, while simultaneously failing to guarantee that genuine interest is generated.

Yet, perhaps Tiravanija's project avoids these pitfalls by the very nature of the project assigned. Perhaps Tiravanija is playing the role of Rancière's emancipated educator, requiring his ex-pupils to consider for a moment the world around them—much like Bowers does of her viewers—without dictating what they think about what they see. Which is again to promote a different kind of community, one that privileges collective effort over achieved results, where witnessing is itself a kind of acting and in which, by extension, the actors are simply people like us.

Claire Gilman (PhD, Columbia University) has been curator at the Drawing Center, New York, since July 2010. She recently curated *The Storyteller* (with Margaret Sundell), a traveling exhibition organized and circulated by iCI (Salina Art Center, Kansas; Sheila C. Johnson Design Center, Parsons; Art Gallery of Ontario; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, 2009–10). Gilman has taught art history and critical theory at Columbia University; the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College; the Corcoran College for Art and Design; and MoMA. Her writing has appeared in *coo.reviews*, *Documents*, *Frieze*, and *October*.