

ANDREA BOWERS: SELF- DETERMINATION

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As I entered the gallery on the day before the opening of Andrea Bowers's new solo exhibition at Kaufmann Repetto, my eyes fell on a small and beautiful photorealist drawing of a smiling woman with butterfly wings on her back. The image contrasted with the one on the invitation of the show, depicting a fierce woman wearing a vest made of bullets. The more I looked at the works in the show, the more I noticed that same contrast between moments of fury and moments of joy: a large sculpture made of barbed wire was hanging next to a huge painted monarch butterfly with the slogan "Migration is beautiful" stenciled on it; a black-and-white cartoon depicting police brutality hung next to a wall covered with bright and colorful posters reading "Dream!", "Equality", "Stop The Hate". "The show is mainly about the relationship between different strategies, different tones, different approaches to the same issues," Andrea Bowers herself suddenly said, as she walked towards me. I turned my voice recorder on.

NICOLA RICCIARDI Can you elaborate on that?

ANDREA BOWERS Well, the thought that different generations belonging to the same movements are using such different strategies, and slogans, and languages is profoundly interesting to me.

NR What are you referring to by "same movements"?

AB Most of my shows start with a political campaign that I'm involved with. Much of the archival material included in this show comes from my participation in several local activist movements, such as the immigrant justice, DREAM Act, and "Fight for 15" campaigns. I've been designing a lot of the graphics for these operations, and funnily enough, now when I take a picture of, say, a protest in Los Angeles, some of my own graphics often pop up.

NR And how do you feel about that?

AB I like it a lot! Because it is literally a cancellation of the separation between art as representation and me as an activist. It shows how clearly art can be involved in activism. That's one of the things I try to prove with my practice: that art and the activist movement are intrinsically connected.

NR And how they are connected?

AB I'm always asking myself, "what can I do as an artist?" If you take this giant wall work, it was a matter of recovering an under-recorded part of history – that of Carlos Montes, one of the founders of the Brown Berets, who has dedicated his life to human rights and the anti-war movement. Something I really feel close to.

NR How did you get involved in his campaign?

AB I met Carlos through several talks and projects I did in the past. Then I interviewed him in 2012, just after the FBI raided his home – where he was then arrested and charged with six felonies for a student action that took place around forty years earlier. He told me the neglected history of the Brown Beret movement, and I found it su-

per-interesting. Then we talked about all the newspapers, all the photographs from his early campaigns. I immediately asked him if any of that material was scanned or on the internet and he said no. I had to do something, so I spent weeks scanning all that raw material so I could give it back to him in digital form. Now, when you Google his name, much of that material is finally popping up.

NR I can see how activism and art are connected in this case. But do you believe that every form of art is political?

AB I think it is obvious: art is insanely political. Even abstract expressionism has always served a really specific political agenda. Nothing is neutral.

NR And what about the other way around: do you think politics is an art?

AB Well, I think that the most successful political campaigns are the ones with great graphics. It's funny, because I teach in a program that is mainly about socially engaged works, and one of the things I often hear the other teachers in the faculty telling their students is "if they ask you to make a political poster, don't do it" – while I'm always saying "do it, do it!"

NR And why is that?

AB The way activist movements work is pretty simple: you come in and ask what you can do. Not everybody is a front-line activist, not everybody wants to chain themselves to a tree; a movement needs the media people as well, needs people that bring in the food, that raise funds or design the posters and slogans. Political campaigns, activist campaigns—they all need a slogan. You know: "Je suis Charlie." It's not just words, there's a graphic and a font. Political slogans are like poetry, in a way. Take *Radical Hospitality*. Or many of the slogans from the "Dream Act" campaigns that I've included in this show. They are all so positive: "Don't be afraid to dream", "Dare to dream", "Dream, Rise, Organize"... They go beyond any particular movement. Many of the questions I keep asking myself are inevitably tied to the aesthetic of politics. And as I said earlier, art cannot be removed from politics, or activism.

NR Can I ask you how you feel about the term "activist artist"?

AB At first I felt uncomfortable with that title, but only until I got arrested, in January 2011. [Bowers was arrested along with four other activists while participating in a tree-sitting protest in the city of Arcadia, on the outskirts of Los Angeles]. And I feel even more comfortable with the title after the Frieze campaign in 2013 [when labor union representatives opposed Frieze New York's use of exclusively non-union labor, which allows them to pay their workers \$15–18 an hour, compared to union wages of roughly \$75/hour].

NR Right, I remember the "Don't Frieze Out New York Workers" poster you displayed in the Kaufmann Repetto booth. And I also remember people criticizing the fact that you were taking a stand against the fair while showing your work within it. What was your reaction to that?

AB I remember that I found out about the union issue two days before the opening of the fair. So I called the Teamsters Union Joint, where Bernadette Kelly [who was running the campaign at Frieze at the time] answered. The first thing I said to her was "I have to pull my work out of there!" and she said: "we are a labor organization, we want

people to make a living, we want people to make money, we want people to have equality: you have to sell the work, that's what we promote, you are an art worker!"

NR That was probably the first time the movement felt they had a voice "on the inside."

AB Correct. And I think that that was crucial to the strategy of the campaign. Just by hanging a couple of posters in the booth the cause finally got a lot of media attention. But it was very tricky too, because on the other hand I didn't want to hurt the people that were showing my work. We are talking about three female dealers that work mostly with women: Francesca Kaufmann, Chiara Repetto and Susanne Vielmetter. And keep in mind that it's only 30% women in the art world! No matter how much one disliked these fairs, if because of my actions these women don't get in, I would feel horrible. We need their voices!

NR Do you think that the Frieze campaign was successful?

AB At first I thought there was no potential for actual change, and that it would take radical patience to see any change at all. But honestly I think that things have already changed. And I mean, positively! Unionizing the fair: that was shocking! And now there's a domino effect: now you see all the art schools in LA unionizing. I never thought I would see that. Part-time faculty make about the same wage as a bar waiter/waitress – it's hard to make a living. And for me it's almost immoral: I'm teaching at a school where if my students were to graduate and get my job they would never be able to pay off their student debt.

(Andrea Bowers interviewed by
Nicola Ricciardi)

THE DARKNET – FROM MEMES TO ONIONLAND.

AN EXPLORATION

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What is the darknet? There seem to be a lot of opinions and legends surrounding this question, with sensationalist mass media articles on the drug trade and contract killers, ultra-detailed tech talk and definition wars among geeks and hackers, and the urge for safe communication among political activists.

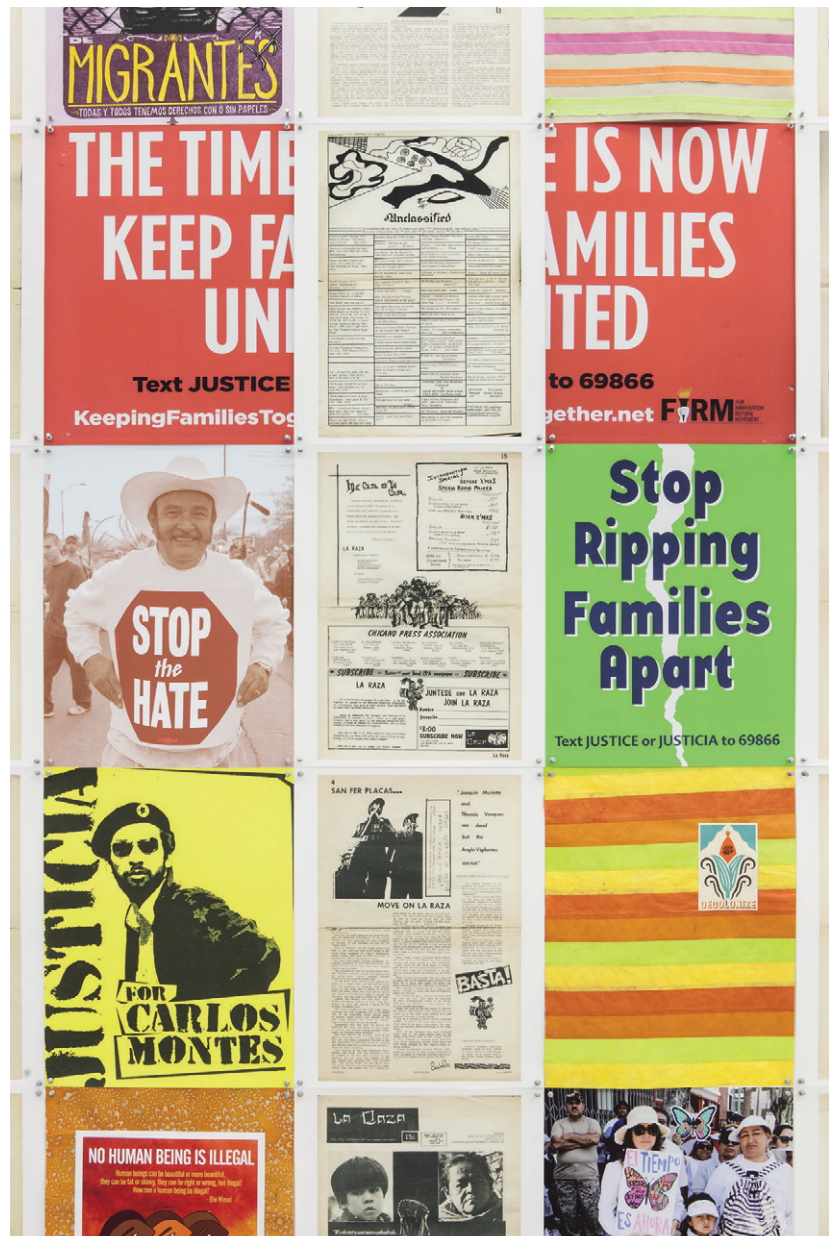
The exhibition "The Darknet – From Memes to Onionland: An Exploration" at Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen managed to make the complex and myth-riddled topic accessible without oversimplification, based on a broad definition of the darknet as the underground culture of the internet. It contained works by a dozens of artists and material from amateur culture as well as workshops, a library, and computer stations with access to (part of) the darknet. The journey "From Memes to Onionland" starts with art historian Valentina Tanni's archive of memes containing references to art history. Memes often originate in online communities like 4chan, part of a hardcore web culture infamous not only for its slang, juvenile humor and interest in gore and porn, but also its ties to the Anonymous movement, as well as outbursts of violence, as in the recent Gamergate incidents. It's certainly a place within the surface web that looks dark to



2. Pierre Bismuth, *Most Wanted Men – Dan Flavin*, 2006.
Courtesy: the artist and Jan Mot, Brussels



2. "Pierre Bismuth. Der Kurator, der Anwalt und der Psychoanalytiker",
installation view, Kunsthalle Wien,
2015. Photo: Stephan Wyckoff



3. Andrea Bowers, "Self-determination", installation view, kaufmann repetto, Milan, 2015.
Courtesy: the artist and kaufmann repetto, Milan/New York. Photo credit: Andrea Rossetti