ANDREA Bowers: SELF-DETERMINATION

3) KAUFMANN REPETTO
Via di Porta Tenaglia 7, 20121 Milan, Italy
kaufmannrepetto.com

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 bulletproof steel with six feathers for a tail. 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 monochromatic butterfly with the slogan “Migration is Beautiful” stenciled on it; a black-and-white comic capturing police brutality hung next to a wall covered with bright and colorful posters reading “Dream!”, “Equality!”, “Stop The Hate.” The exhibition is an exploration of political activism. Even abstract expressionism has always served a real political agenda. Nothing is neutral.

NR How do you feel about the term “activist artist”? 

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. The movement needs the media 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” campaign 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 this form of politics. And as I said earlier, art cannot be removed from politics, or activism.

NR How do you feel about the Frieze campaign in 2013? 

AB I’m always asking myself, “what can I do as an artist?” 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 barista/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

4) KUNST HALLE SANKT GALLEN
Davidstrasse 40, 9000 St. Gallen, Switzerland
kunsthalle.sanktgallen.ch

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 definitions of 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-ridden world of the underbelly of the internet understandable for a broad audience, without oversimplification, based on a broad definition of the darknet as the underground part of the internet, containing works by a dozens of artists and material from amateur culture as well as workshops, a library, and computer stations with access to the darknet. The journey “From Memes to Onionland” starts with art historian Valentina Tannini’s archive of memes containing references to art history. Memes often originate in online communities such as 4-chan, 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 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 artist!”

NR That was probably the first time the moment 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 barista/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.

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