

"Andrea Bowers's 'The New Woman's Survival Guide'"

By Alan Gilbert

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View of, "The New Woman's Survival Guide", Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, 2011. All images courtesy of Andrew Kreps Gallery

If one of the critiques—made by writers such as Audre Lorde and bell hooks—directed against early second-wave feminism was that it focused primarily on the concerns of white, middle-class, heterosexual women, more recent protest cultures have been criticized for fracturing into a plethora of identities and subject positions that resist being subsumed within larger social movements. The anti-globalization protests of the late 1990s and early 2000s may have been the pinnacle of this organizational mode. Occupy Wall Street, in turn, has shifted the focus more exclusively to economic questions, and in doing so has, like second-wave feminism, been accused of neglecting issues of ethnicity and sexual orientation, as well as, albeit to a lesser extent, gender.



Andrea Bowers, *Feminist Health Collective*, 2011. Graphite on paper. 30 inches x 22 1/4 inches

Andrea Bowers's second solo exhibition at Andrew Kreps adroitly touches on a wide range of these topics and histories. Part of what makes this possible is that Bowers has structured the show as an archive of past and present feminisms (all works are from 2011). The exhibition centers on an independently produced 1973 manual for everyday living entitled *The New Woman's Survival Catalog: A Woman-made Book*, which was the result of firsthand research and reporting compiled from around the United States. It presented practical information on topics ranging from art, birth control, and health centers, to divorce, self-defense, and unionizing. Bowers's contribution is to quite literally interlace more recent feminist and progressive activism into its pages.



Andrea Bowers, *Girlfriends (May Day March, Los Angeles, 2011)*, 2011. Graphite on paper. Diptych. 15 inches x 22 1/4 inches

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View of, "The New Woman's Survival Guide", Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, 2011

Thumbtacked on facing walls at Andrew Kreps are black-and-white reproductions of all two hundred-plus pages of *The New Woman's Survival Catalog*. Between each of these pages Bowers has inserted colored pieces of paper printed with a wide variety of images, slogans, and graphics from contemporary protests, feminist and otherwise, including enlarged "Keep Abortion Legal" buttons and stickers, "Stop the War on Women" posters cropped and positioned sideways, a reproduced drawing of an African American woman with a clenched fist, part of an anti-Walmart placard, etc. Many of the colored pieces of paper are taken from gift wrap. Bowers leaves some of them blank, thereby creating a counterpoint patterning of geometric shapes, playful abstractions, shiny sparkles, and vivid hues. After all, if the revolution isn't also going to be a party, why would anyone want to participate?

Bowers's large, meticulous wall grid blends past and present in a way that both collapses and honors them. It's not difficult to quickly recognize which visual moment is affiliated with which era. Yet a historical narrative is only loosely outlined, and it tends to follow the pre-established trajectory of feminism's expansion to address a greater diversity of concerns, such as immigration and LGBT rights (topics of previous Bowers exhibitions). At the same time, whereas much protest ideology from the 1960s and 1970s has been handed down as slogans, here the situation is reversed: *The New Woman's Survival Catalog* is a detailed guide to independent living, while current issues are presented in mostly slickly designed visual sound bites: "Fight the Radical Right," "Make Out Not War." But, then, how does one create an archive for an ongoing and still-contested present?

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Andrea Bowers, *Mother and Daughter (May Day March 2011)*, 2011. Colored pencil on paper. 30 inches x 22 1/4 inches

Bowers's resuscitation of the out-of-print *New Woman's Survival Catalog* is a historical reclamation project that also involved her producing an oversized artist's book version which collects, collates, and binds the pages of the wall installation—both the original catalog and Bowers's colorful interventions. Although prominently displayed on a table near the middle of the gallery, the book is too fragile for the public to peruse. Rather, the present tense enters more directly in other works. For years, Bowers has been making photorealistic drawings of images from political protests, and four new ones are on view, two done with colored pencil, and two in graphite. Executed on pieces of bright white paper, the individual figures, drawn from the waist up, occupy a small space at the bottom of each sheet. Here, a looming historical context and immediate social circumstances have been erased; only the titles indicate that the drawings derive from photographs taken at a May Day March in Los Angeles earlier this year.

In these drawings, Bowers focuses on the individual: she even goes so far as to divide lovers onto two separate sheets. Politics mark each figure's body in the form of pro-immigration t-shirts and a women's power tattoo, just as Bowers's pencil inscribes her political agency on the paper. Similarly, on the opposite wall, a series of six drawings fastidiously replicates letters written to Planned Parenthood by women grateful for the services it provides. Alongside the vast, multi-decade social and political history Bowers plots in the *New Woman's Survival Catalog* wall installation and artist's book, these voices are smaller, quieter, more immediately human—vulnerable yet presented as stronger than the social and institutional forces seeking to constrain and silence them.

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