

ARTFORUM

"Andrea Bowers"

By Colby Chamberlain

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Andrea Bowers, *Trans Liberation: Building a Movement* (CeCe McDonald), 2016, ink-jet print, 95 × 57 1/4".

When Hillary Clinton recently described the barriers to racial equality as “intersectional,” the leftist journal *Jacobin* tweeted a wry salute to whichever Ph.D. student had joined her campaign as a speechwriter. The editors were calling out Clinton’s nod to legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw’s influential argument that discriminatory practices structured by differences in race, gender, or class “intersect” and compound one another. More subtly, the tweet posited an intersection of a different sort: an imagined Ph.D.-politico coupling academic jargon with campaign rhetoric. These two valences of *intersection* were both evident in Andrea Bowers’s “Whose Feminism Is It Anyway?” Thematically, the exhibition focused on how activists bring intersectionality theory into praxis by forming alliances

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across diverse constituencies. For instance, the video *Roundtable Discussion*, 2016, documented a panel with Black Lives Matter cofounder Patrisse Cullors, African American trans woman and LGBTQ activist CeCe McDonald, and undocumented trans Latina leader Jennicet Gutiérrez. At the same time, Bowers's decision to convene the panel at Otis College of Art pointed to how she creates intersections between art-world institutions and social-justice movements.

Bowers's particular combination of art and activism shouldn't be confused with that of Tania Bruguera, Laurie Jo Reynolds, and other "social practice" artists for whom aesthetic expression and political organizing are coterminous. Rather, Bowers primarily produces work intended for exhibition, establishing a remove from her subject matter that crops up in formal decisions. For "Whose Feminism," Bowers added to her already extensive series of richly detailed pencil drawings based on photographs taken at protests, in this case several Trans-Latin@ Coalition actions in Los Angeles. In each, she depicted a single protester—holding a sign or waving a fist—and left the rest of the page blank, as if to connote the larger assembly not shown. The accurate individualization of figures in a crowd caught in mid-gesture is an artistic strategy that originates in Bruegel's peasant scenes, which, Svetlana Alpers has argued, maintain an ethnographic detachment from their surrounds. (Of Bruegel's *Wedding Dance*, Alpers writes, "We can enter, and learn, but we cannot stay.") Adding to another body of work, Bowers presented two monumental-size color drawings based on iconic illustrations from earlier political movements—a Cuban Communist Party poster for International Women's Day and a famous silk screen from May '68 in Paris. Here, Bowers enacted the signal strategy of Pop art, i.e., the importation of graphics from vernacular culture into a traditional studio medium. The distancing dash in Pop's play of "high-low" was thus relocated to "art-activism."

Museum-based appropriations of agitprop often come off as either deferential or exploitive—a seesaw with Sam Durant's championing of the Black Panthers' Emory Douglas at one end and Josephine Meckseper's peddling of RAF as radical chic at the other. By contrast, Bowers here employed her skills and platform to ensure that her art-activism intersection was a two-way conversation. Of late, the limits of intersectionality theory have been tested by feminist coalitions reluctant to include trans women. Bowers contributed to this debate by staging life-size photographs of trans women of color framed in the iconography of past social movements—an attempt to remedy the lack of trans representations within activist visual culture. Of the four photographs in "Whose Feminism," the most striking riffed on socialist illustrator Walter Crane's *In Memory of the Paris Commune*, 1891, showing CeCe McDonald adorned with wings and standing before a construction site. The image recalled the stirring passage from Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* in which one character imagines heaven as a city overflowing with "racial impurity" and "gender confusion," akin to San Francisco in the 1980s: "On every corner a wrecking crew and something new and crooked going up catty-corner to that . . . Piles of trash, but lapidary like rubies and obsidian, and diamond-colored cow-spit streamers in the wind. And voting booths."

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