

ARTnews

"One Work: Andrea Bowers's 'Letters to an Army of Three'"

By Jackson Davidow

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Andrea Bowers, *Letters to an Army of Three*, 2005, single channel HD video, color, sound, 55 minutes.

COURTESY HAMMER MUSEUM

After the United States Supreme Court struck down [Roe v. Wade](#) on June 24, 2022, approximately half the states triggered or scrambled to enact near-total bans on abortion. A day after this development, its devastation difficult to fathom, I visited [Andrea Bowers's retrospective at the Hammer Museum](#), where I was transfixed by her video *Letters to an Army of Three* as well as an accompanying artist book and wall installation (all 2005). These projects animate an archive of letters written to the Army of Three, an activist group in the Bay Area that distributed vital information about accessing safe abortion services to women and their loved ones in the decade before the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision.

Almost an hour long, the video features actors reading aloud from a selection of inquiring letters that vary widely in affect, etiquette, and contextual detail. Whereas some performances are deadpan, as is the enactment of a clear-sighted married mother of four from Walla Walla, Washington, others brim with emotion, like that of a teary woman, a chihuahua sitting on her lap as

JESSICA
SILVERMAN

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

she vocalizes a mother writing from Hood River, Oregon, on behalf of her pregnant 21-year-old daughter. Each reader sits before a different resplendent bouquet that injects an uneasy funereal quality; after all, the video does not reveal the outcomes for any of the women whose stories are so briefly told here. The actors appear in clothing from the mid-2000s rather than period dress, as if to bring the compendium into the present to illuminate the ongoing obstacles individuals face when seeking abortions.

While the video makes this epistolary archive audible, the bound collection and wall installation—a checkered pattern of enlarged photocopied reproductions and decorative wrapping paper—make it visible. The emphatic physical presentation of these formerly furtive letters elicits a tension between public and private, while the project as a whole considers silence and speech, stillness and action. As if anticipating an era of nauseating regression, Bowers's eternally urgent work insists that, when words fail us most, we need them more than ever.

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SILVERMAN

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