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500 WORDS

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Andrea Bowers

01.21.14



Andrea Bowers, Courtroom Drawings (Steubenville Rape Case, Text Messages Entered As Evidence, 2013) (detail), 2014, mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view, Pitzer College Art Galleries.

Andrea Bowers is a Los Angeles–based artist whose work addresses issues of feminism, politics, and community. "#sweetjane," her exhibition at the Pomona College Museum of Art and Pitzer College Art Galleries in Claremont, California, examines the 2012 Steubenville, Ohio, high school rape case and its trial, drawing attention to issues of "rape culture" and the Internet-based activist group Anonymous, as well as to questions of ethics across social media platforms. The exhibition runs from January 21 to April 13, 2014, at Pomona, and from January 21 to March 28, 2014, at Pitzer.

I'M FROM A SMALL TOWN IN OHIO, and so the Steubenville rape case captured my attention. For this project, I decided to go to Steubenville to record some of the Anonymous protests, in which members rallied to end rape culture and to bring the alleged perpetrators to trial. Anonymous, of course, is an online hacktivist group that organizes and works mostly on the Internet, and they wear Guy Fawkes masks to retain their anonymity. It's intense what they do, but I've become riveted by their Twitter account and a lot of their activities. The case concerned a high school girl who was either drugged or drunk and unconscious when she was assaulted at various parties by a group of boys, mostly football players. Two were convicted of raping her. It was one of the first public cases in which social media played a key role in the convicting evidence. The entire time she was being assaulted, those involved were Tweeting, texting, and posting videos of their actions online. The high school and local police didn't seem to take the assault very seriously, and it was only through the efforts of Anonymous, also using social media, that this case got a lot of media attention and went to trial.

One of the things I found interesting about the case was the issue of anonymity. The victim, Jane Doe—a minor at the time—was kept anonymous to protect her identity. But this seemed to help the media focus more on the football players, because their faces, names, and backgrounds were publicly discussed. It seemed like it was so easy to dismiss Jane Doe simply because no one knew anything about her. I'm interested in how this type of anonymity is related to ethics: When someone is kept anonymous to protect their identity, how do publics treat them? And how is this related to social media? Is there a different set of ethics?

For the exhibition, I'm making a video composed of shots of the town, interviews with Anonymous members, and some of the news coverage and public responses to the case. I'm also using old footage of myself as a teenage cheerleader in Ohio, and pictures of women protesting in Anonymous masks. I grew up in the same sort of environment that Jane Doe is growing up in, where most of the young men were never told No and were culturally given the right to do whatever they wanted. This needs to change.

I've been working with many young women activists around issues of consent since my time in Steubenville. In the exhibition there are also some small figurative drawings of women wearing Anonymous masks while protesting. At first I was bothered by the mask, because it was white and male and women would wear it, but I noticed that some of the young women wearing them were afraid and used the mask as a form of protection. It changed my mind about how the mask functioned.

During my second trip to Steubenville, I was able to sit in on some of the trial. The day I was there, all of the text messages sent between the teens on the night of the rape were presented as evidence. Allowed only a piece of paper and a pencil, myself and two other reporters transcribed all of the text messages by hand as best we could. The reporters posted their notes online and I compared all three sets of notes, so I think I have the most accurate version possible, since the official court transcript hasn't been released yet. I'm making a seventy-foot-long text-based drawing that displays this narrative. It is very violent and difficult to read. I'm also coming to terms with my own labor and aesthetic with this drawing. The entire negative space is filled in with different shades of blue marker and looks very beautiful, but the text is shockingly intense. It's an experiment: Will I fail because I am aestheticizing atrocity, or will it work because it's more than just a mechanically reproduced image?

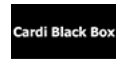
When the official trial transcript becomes available, it will cost six thousand dollars. Still, one story of that night in Steubenville is told through these texts and hopefully in my work. What the boys said and how they behaved can't be buried, forgotten, or silenced.

— *As told to Courtney Yoshimura*

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