



# ART AND ACTIVISM: Talking Steubenville, ANDREA BOWERS In Conversation with Ashton Cooper

by Ashton Cooper

Several weeks ago, at the opening festivities for the Montréal Biennial, we had the opportunity to sit down with LA-based artist Andrea Bowers to talk about her powerful piece in the show—which centers on the Steubenville rape case—merging art, activism, and rape culture.



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**Ashton Cooper (Rail):** These works are from a larger project called #sweetjane, which focuses on the Steubenville rape case of 2013. In this installation, “Courtroom Drawings [Steubenville Rape Case, Text Messages Entered As Evidence, 2013],” (2014) you specifically focus on the text messages exchanged between the men involved, Jane Doe, and other figures. You are from Ohio right?

**Andrea Bowers:** This project is particularly personal for me because I’m from Ohio. I graduated in 1983 and I was a cheerleader and my football team was one of the better football teams in the state, just like Steubenville is one of the best football teams. This project is my wanting for us not to forget and wanting to have a document of what rape culture is. I feel like things haven’t changed from 30 years

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ago when I was their age. I flew out three or four times. The last time, during the trial—because I am from Ohio and speak Ohioan I guess—I spoke to the sheriff and he allowed me to sit in on the trial. I was told I couldn't even draw representational images. I was only allowed to write notes. My first day was the day these text messages were entered into evidence so I sat there and handwrote every one of them with Amanda Blackburn and Don Carpenter, two local independent journalists. The three of us wrote this group of texts entirely by hand. They really do tell the whole narrative of what happened. The violence of these words shouldn't be forgotten. These stories come and they go, they keep repeating in our culture. One of the really beautiful things about art is that it takes a really long time. Art is slow in a lot of ways. It takes a while for a show to develop. If you can use that slowness to your advantage, it can also be about memory and not forgetting.

**Rail:** So you were transcribing these texts as they were being read aloud?

**Bowers:** Yeah, I was frantically writing. It would be like "L-M-A-O." It was so insane. I was trying to make sure I was getting everything, even the "LOL." Would they use a "u" or would they spell it out "y-o-u?" There was no way to know. The punctuation is totally off. It's the three of us who did this. It's our invention.

**Rail: So this information doesn't exist outside of this project?**

**Bowers:** No. I don't think they have yet released the court transcript. Up until a couple of months ago I was trying to buy the transcript. It's supposed to be public. One of the things about this show is that it's so much about mass digital information. But the fact is, so much of it disappears. While all of this was going on, I downloaded every one of the violent posts. It was insane. I was trying to immediately download all of this stuff. So when I went to get some of this stuff back, it had totally disappeared. We always think that it's there forever but it's actually not. It disappears more than, say, a newspaper article.

**Rail:** How do the aesthetics of the pieces relate to digital information?

**Bowers:** It's all hand drawn with marker. I was thinking about the blue digital space of the phone. I was thinking of each being a phone. Each one of these is one conversation. Each time the color switches, it signifies a different text conversation. We used as many archival blue markers as we could find. There were six of us who did this for quite a while. I've never done anything with aesthetics where I wasn't paying homage to the subject matter so I was really concerned with whether or not it

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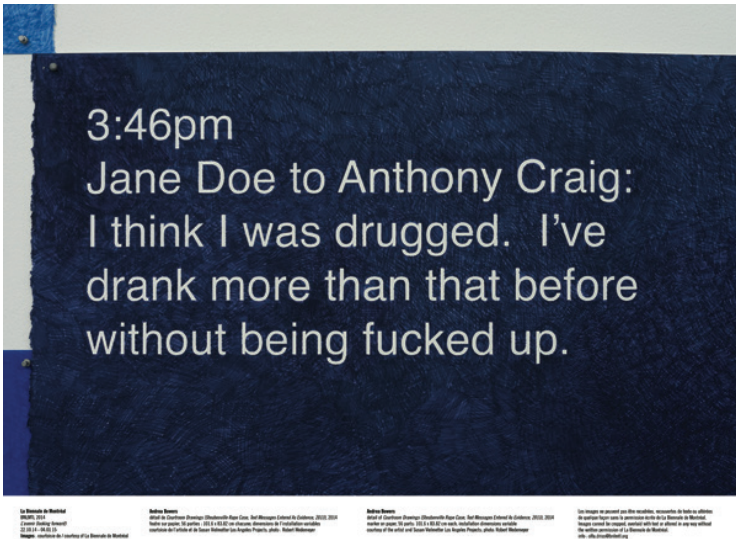
would make these more emotionally poignant or if it would aestheticize the content too much and take away the harshness. But I was hoping that the aesthetics would make it more emotive: draw you in and shock you and make it more bodily

**Rail:** And so much of the text is really shocking.

**Bowers:** Well, Jane Doe, she says, “Tell me what the fuck happened. I need to know the truth.” “Why wouldn’t you try and help me?” She’s speaking to her rapist. It’s really complicated. He said, “You still mean a lot to me. Maybe we should take a break.” I think he still wanted to date her. Not only was this a rape case where she was passed out because she drank too much or perhaps was drugged—I think that’s still really unknown—but this was one of the first cases where, while it was going on, it was being posted on social media. Whether it be text messages, videos on YouTube, pretty much every social media site. It’s one of the first cases that is based on evidence from social media. That really fascinated me too. At one point the prosecution asked, “Why did you take pictures? Why didn’t you try to stop it?” and he said, “I thought rape looked violent. That didn’t look violent to me because she was passed out.” Ultimately, too, I was interested in the ethical moral effect. I think I’m posing the question: Does this obsession with social media and digital space affect the morality of a whole generation? I’m not sure if I can make that hypothesis, but I’m presenting that. Is that something that’s being lost through completely communicating on social media? Are we losing our sense of ethics?

**Rail:** Do you think our understanding of what rape is has anything to do with the use of social media?

**Bowers:** I think it’s a mixture of patriarchy and maybe social media. I don’t know. That is my guess. I think it has more to do with being treated so special as athletes, but I wonder if there is an aspect of it that is because this is the first generation that has grown up this intensely with social media. At the one point during the trial they listed the amount of text messages on their phones. There were hundreds of texts. All the adults in the audience, at the coffee breaks, were like, “How could they have time to do anything? That is an insane amount of text messages.” But, I think so much of it is believing that you have the right to have sex with whoever you want to. That’s rape culture—believing you have the right to do anything, to sexually abuse someone and to believe you were born with that right.



**Rail:** In doing this project, do you feel like you learned more about the ways in which rape culture is created and perpetuated?

**Bowers:** I don't know if I learned anything about it. I think what I learned is that it's such a silent subject matter. So many women are raped or sexually assaulted and they do not talk about it and it affects their lives forever. Even someone like me, who is such a devout feminist, still has so much to learn. I've been working with a lot of young campus groups and in their brochures and pamphlets, they discuss issues of consent and I realized how clueless I am to all of this and how much I have to learn in my own life in terms of how to ask for consent. There's so much work that has to be done. It's such a silent abuse of the patriarchy. Rape culture is all about believing that men have a right to rape women, but it's not just about men or women. Men are raped all the time too. It's an issue of power.

**Rail:** Do you ever feel powerless when confronting these huge systemic issues?

**Bowers:** I always see myself as an activist, but one of the key things is that I don't feel like I have to do everything. All I have to do is my part. I'm part of a huge network of people working together on the same cause. I don't always have to be on the front line, I don't have to be the organizer. All I have to do is step in and do my part. So I do as much as I can do with the skills that I have. One of my main skills is making artwork. There are a lot of ways I do that. When an artwork sells I give money back to an organization. Any video footage I shoot, I lend to an organization. I'll make fliers, posters. I'll connect people. Whatever I can do. I'm just doing my part and trusting that there are a lot of other people who are doing their parts. I think the most rewarding thing is when I go to the meetings and volunteer at some of

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It's a really interesting brief. A national pavilion is a really interesting set of things to work with and it plays into my interests very well because I've done work in the past that engages with New Zealand-ness. Probably the piece that people are most familiar with, if at all, is about the redesign of the New Zealand passport, which I showed at Art Basel Statements in 2012. So there's a lot of interesting things that I try to unpack from what is essentially official, government-sanctioned information about design and concepts of space and identity. I've also done a piece, which is ongoing, about a really prominent tech figure in New Zealand — Kim Dotcom, this guy who owned Megaupload. He's a German guy who moved to New Zealand and was busted by the New Zealand police on behalf of the FBI. He's being extradited to be tried in the US for piracy stuff. Megaupload was this platform where you could put all sorts of things. Many people used it for sharing music and videos so the US government wants to try him for all sorts of copyright things. That's a very interesting thing because it says a lot about the way that we exist in the world as a country. Especially at this moment, there's something about technology and the way that it's affecting nations and the way that people think about communication online. I think it's a poignant moment for that conversation and to be addressing that in an official, semi-diplomatic event is a pretty unique opportunity that I don't ever think I'll get again. I was really honored.

**Tell me more about the exhibition in your pavilion.**

I'm trying to do something which addresses some of the issues we've just been talking about, but addresses them from a context of trying to think about ways of imagining the globe right now, ways of imagining geopolitical space. It's a process — I made a pitch about a certain topic, which was trying to unpack the Snowden releases, these slides which I found to be really compelling cultural documents (and I think a lot of artists have been attracted to these objects).

It's a long process. One of the things that New Zealand has to do is find a venue. We don't have a permanent building. I saw that as a really good opportunity because you can choose something that interacts with the content really strongly. Very quickly we came to this amazing library, the Biblioteca Marciana, which is right on San Marco and also housed somehow within the Museo Correr. It's a building designed by Sansovino. The interior is amazing. The building and the interior are designed as an allegory for the benefits of

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acquiring and keeping knowledge. There are these Titian paintings on the ceiling, of wisdom — it's an amazing space. Plus, the library collection is really amazing too. They have a number of important cartographic pieces. One of the most famous ones which will be in my exhibition somehow is this Fra Mauro's world map, which is a very famous world map from that period which is supposedly the first map from Europe that included depictions of Japan. To put this type of imagery alongside the imagery that's used in his slides is a very productive thing to see this material in a longer cultural view.

There's been a lot of unpacking of this material but I don't think so much has been done from the visual angle. There's been a gut reaction of "Oh they're ugly" or "Oh it's a PowerPoint slide," but there hasn't been a lot of unpacking. There's a lot of material to put that alongside these other systems from another moment from another commercial empire — if you think of these intelligence systems as very sophisticated ways of reimagining what the globe means in a geopolitical sense and also in a physical sense. This physical network of undersea cables and various satellites has become more important than a lot of other pathways through the earth. I think to look at that with a longer more cultural view, not with an aim to work on the more controversial aspects of that material, but to try to look at what some of the imagery means and how that looks within a context like this, I think that's a really fun thing to do.