

The Guerrilla Girls: Art, Gender, and Communication

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In her introduction to *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art*, Maura Reilly asks, “In an era that postdates the women’s and civil rights movements, how can a curator organize an international contemporary art exhibition that includes almost exclusively Euro-American male artists?”¹ This is the same question that the Guerrilla Girls, a collective of anonymous female artists, pose to the public through their work. By producing posters, books, and performances, the Guerrilla Girls achieve their the goal of “exposing acts of sexism and racism in politics, the art world, film, and culture at large.”² I argue that the group’s method of exaggerating the rhetorical strategies used to propagate the normalcy of male domination in the art world translate well to their critiques of popular and political culture, and that this method is an important aspect of feminist discourse today. I will explore the history of the Guerrilla Girls and the reasons for their work, as well as the ways in which they have transcended the topic of art in order to provide a compelling critique of broader societal attitudes towards women.

The Guerrilla Girls’ work helps to answer questions about what the possibilities and manifestations of third wave feminism can be. They incorporate aspects of current feminist focus such as the intersectionality of race, class, and gender, as well as a desire to use new tactics to reach a wider audience through social media, television, and art. In contrast with the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 70s, Shugart, Waggoner, and Hallstein describe the third wave as more focused on difference, empowerment through individualism, embracing sexual desire, and embeddedness in popular culture. They say it is also defined in opposition to the second wave, which many perceive as ignorant of the needs of those who were not white,

¹ Reilly, Maura, and Linda Nochlin. "Introduction: Toward Transnational Feminisms." *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art*. London: Merrell, 2007, 22.

² "Guerrilla Girls: Fighting Discrimination with Facts, Humor and Fake Fur." *Guerrilla Girls: Fighting Discrimination with Facts, Humor and Fake Fur*. Web. 09 May 2012.

middle-class, and heterosexual women.³ Anita Harris discusses the decline in the familiar feminist of the 1960's and '70's in her article, "Mind the Gap." She says that young women today are just as concerned about issues of equality as were their counterparts fifty years ago, feel more able to create their own narrative in order to define feminism instead of simply identifying as victims of a patriarchal society. They are more likely to participate in alternative, more culturally oriented forms of political action, such as public street parties, blogs, and arts activism. Harris argues that accepting these new forms of activism is what will move feminism forward. "What is required, I think," says Harris, "is an openness in our ideas about what constitutes feminist politics today... such an approach might enable us to yet move beyond generationalism to forge a 'new feminism' we do not yet know".⁴ The Guerrilla Girls' strategies further the aims of contemporary feminism in a way that promotes real change, especially for women who are artists but also for anyone who views art and even images in popular culture. The covert artists espouse these characteristics by using things like posters to inform viewers about continuing inequality and appropriating images that are recognizable to their audiences.

It is also important to note the Guerrilla Girls' work calls attention to societal issues of race, political discourse, and reproductive health, attempting to address the intersectional nature of feminism. However, because the group's primary concern is women in museum culture and art, I will mainly focus on this area of their work, using one example of their work that does not deal with fine art specifically and two that do.

³ Shugart, Helene, Catherine Egly Waggoner, and D. Lynn O'Brien Hallstein. "Mediating Third-wave Feminism: Appropriation as Postmodern Media Practice." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18.2 (2001), 195

⁴ Harris, Anita. "Mind The Gap." *Australian Feminist Studies* 25.66 (2010): 475. MasterFILE Premier. Web. 8 Feb 2012.

Despite the gains made by women in many areas, including art, during the past several decades, there is ample evidence to show that men are still the dominant players in the field by a wide margin. In 1984, the Museum of Modern Art in New York held an exhibition titled *An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture*, marketed as a current summary of the most significant contemporary art in the world. Not only were a mere 13 of the 169 artists in the show were women, the exhibition's curator said that any artist who wasn't in the show should rethink 'his' career.⁵ This event sparked the curiosity of several women artists, who did research on the representation of women in galleries and museums. Their findings were upsetting enough to inspire the group's first posters, which exposed the discrepancies perpetuated by art dealers, collectors, and critics.⁶

Since the Guerrilla Girl's inciting event, the art world has continued in many ways to enforce the dominance of men. It has only been 24 years since H.W. Janson's *History of Art*, the standard text for college art history classes, thought to include any women in its examination of 2,300 artists. In 1986, 24 years after it was first published in 1962, 19 women were added to these thousands of men. In exhibitions, too, women are vastly underrepresented. After its extensive expansion in 2004, the Museum of Modern Art in New York featured 410 works in its 4th and 5th floor galleries, where painting and sculpture are exhibited. Only 16 of those works were by women.⁷ The problem continues: on a poster from their March 2012 exhibition at Columbia College in Chicago, the Guerrilla Girls stated that the 90 percent of the artists whose work is displayed in the Art Institute of Chicago's Modern galleries are male.⁸ Not only museums, but galleries also fail to feature female artists. In 2005, only 32 percent of artists

⁵ Reilly, 22

⁶ "Guerrilla Girls: Fighting Discrimination with Facts, Humor and Fake Fur."

⁷ Reilly, 19

⁸ "Guerrilla Girls: Fighting Discrimination with Facts, Humor and Fake Fur."

represented 50 New York City galleries surveyed were women, and just 17 percent of the solo shows in New York galleries were by women.⁹ Similar imbalances exist across the globe, as the Guerrilla Girls have made known through poster and letter campaigns in countries other than the United States, including Italy, the Netherlands, Canada, China, Greece, Ireland, England, Turkey, Spain, and Mexico.¹⁰

Failing to represent women in galleries is especially troubling because of the effects it has on those women as working professionals. It results in less recognition through press coverage, leading to lower interest from collectors and museums, making art made by women carry lower market and monetary value. The difference between the price of a work made by a woman versus one by a man, says Reilly, citing a 2005 investigation by New York Times reporter Greg Allen, can be “tenfold or more.”¹¹ The Guerrilla Girls summed up this problem in a sentence on their 1989 poster, “The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist,” one sarcastically stated perk being that these women have “an escape from the art world in your 4 free-lance jobs.”¹²

The Guerrilla Girls and their tactics are worth exploration as agents of feminist change – their work has been translated into more than eight different languages and praised by figures such as Gloria Steinem and Yoko Ono. They have even been recognized by their inclusion in museum and gallery exhibitions, and they have existed as a group since 1985. While the Guerrilla Girls have received little scholarly attention, according to Anne Demo, they have been a model for grassroots movements and feminists in a time when there is a call for “increased critical attention to nontraditional forms of feminist rhetoric.”¹³ Steinem says that the Guerrilla

⁹ Reilly, 20

¹⁰ "Guerrilla Girls: Fighting Discrimination with Facts, Humor and Fake Fur."

¹¹ Reilly, 21

¹² "Guerrilla Girls: Fighting Discrimination with Facts, Humor and Fake Fur."

¹³ Demo, Anne Teresa. "The Guerrilla Girls' Comic Politics of Subversion." *Visual Rhetoric: A Reader in Communication and American Culture*. By Lester C. Olson, Cara A. Finnegan, and Diane S. Hope. Los Angeles: Sage, 2008, 242

Girls are a “group that symbolized the best of feminism in this country . . . Smart, radical, funny, creative, uncompromising, and (I assume) diverse under those inspired gorilla masks, they force us to rethink everything from art to zaniness.”¹⁴ Appreciation for this ‘zaniness’ from fellow feminists is evidence that the Guerrilla Girls represent what at least a portion of the group in opposition to the forces that control the art world wants to see, lending further justification to the idea of studying the group and the ways in which they communicate.

One of the Guerrilla Girls’ primary modes of communicating is through exaggerated discourse aimed at mimicking the rhetoric of established institutions in order to call attention to societal problems. This idea is evident in the group’s name, which includes the reclamation of the word “girl,” often connoted with the idea of immaturity or incompleteness. Anne Demo points to this idea in her essay on the Guerrilla Girls, saying, “Reclamation of the term ‘girl,’ as well as all things girlish, demonstrates how mimicry functions as a strategy of incongruity.”¹⁵ Using a label with a negative connotation juxtaposed with the Guerrilla Girls’ call to attention of the ways in which women do not exemplify those ideas has the effect of distancing the word from those connotations. When asked if labeling themselves ‘girls’ stands in contradiction to their feminist politics, Guerrilla Girl Frida Kahlo (a pseudonym; the Guerrilla Girls often conceal their identities not only with masks but by using the names of female artists) explained, “Calling a grown woman a girl can imply she’s not complete, mature, or grown up. But we decided to reclaim the word ‘girl,’ so it couldn’t be used against us.”¹⁶ The Guerrilla Girls’ mimicry of representations of what is feminine in the art world as well as in popular culture continues in their posters.

¹⁴ Demo, 243

¹⁵ Demo, 246

¹⁶ Demo, 246

Maximum Exposure



“How Women Get Maximum Exposure in Art Museums” was the Guerrilla Girls’ response to a request in 1989 from the Public Art Fund in New York to design a billboard that would appeal to a general audience. The headline of the poster reads, “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?” and underneath, “Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.”¹⁸ Beside the text is a reclining nude woman wearing a gorilla mask with disproportionately large teeth and holding a fan that is distinctly phallic. The woman is an appropriation of Auguste Dominique Ingres’s 1814 painting *Grand Odalisque*, the gorilla mask similar to those worn by Guerilla Girls during appearances in public to hide their identities. The advertisement for the Met’s exclusionary exhibiting practices ultimately appeared on busses instead of billboards – The Public Art Fund rejected the design with the reasoning that it was not clear enough. The Guerrilla Girls instead rented ad space on New York busses until the company canceled their lease due to the opinion that the image of the Odalisque and the phallic fan were too suggestive.¹⁹

¹⁷ “How Women Get Maximum Exposure in Art Museums,” 1989.

¹⁸ “How Women Get Maximum Exposure in Art Museums”

¹⁹ “Guerrilla Girls: Fighting Discrimination with Facts, Humor and Fake Fur.”

This piece exaggerates the role of women in the art world through the appropriation of a well-regarded historical work and through the colors of the poster. “How Women Get Maximum Exposure in Art Museums” uses the image of Ingres’ *Odalisque* to comment on the long history of the female nude in Western art as a subjugating theme, with a man’s perspective or the ‘male gaze’ being the prevailing viewpoint in art. John Berger describes this history and its impact on women, saying, “In one category of European oil painting women were the principal, ever-recurring subject. That category is the nude. In the nudes of European painting we can discover some of the criteria and conventions by which women have been seen and judged as sights.”²⁰ Nudity, Berger posits, is related not only to two-dimensional paintings but also to lived sexuality.²¹ Nakedness is an expression of oneself, he says, whereas nudity is different in that it objectifies bodies, therefore nudity grants the viewer power and agency. “To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself,” Berger says. “A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude. (The sight of it as an object stimulates the use of it as an object.) Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display... in the average European oil painting of the nude the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the picture and he is presumed to be a man.”²² The man’s gaze is active, whereas the pose of the nude is typically passive, turning toward the viewer with a downcast or indirect glance from the subject, allowing the viewer to examine the feminine physique as he pleases. The nude facing the viewer is significant, according to Sturken and Cartwright, because it invites the male spectator to take possession of the image and the woman. “The act of looking,” they say, “is commonly

²⁰ Berger, John. "3." *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin, 2008, 47

²¹ Berger, 53

²² Berger, 54

regarded as awarding more power to the person who is looking than to the person who is the object of the look.”²³

The Guerrilla girls, however, cover the face of the figure with the face of an aggressive-looking gorilla. “In covering the face of the model, or odalisque, with the gorilla mask, these artist-activists are quite pointedly refusing to look back at the spectator” (Sturken and Cartwright 123). The Guerrilla Girls’ *Odalisque* also refuses passivity in her pose by brandishing a fan that has been modified from Ingres’ version with the omission of the detailing on the handle and the addition of a sack-like shape on top to make it resemble an erect penis. Replacing the passive face and pose with these elements gives the figure agency – actively brandishing teeth and gripping a ‘fan.’ Discussing representations of the female body, Sturken and Cartwright say, “The values and meanings of signifiers reproduced in these generic codes have become so embedded in the culture as to seem as if they are natural and unmediated.”²⁴ Using the nude, something viewers expect to see in art, in an exaggerated way allows Guerrilla Girls to expose what is problematic about it and to show an alternative. They also exaggerate the idea of sexuality in regards to the nude, taking control of it without denouncing it entirely.

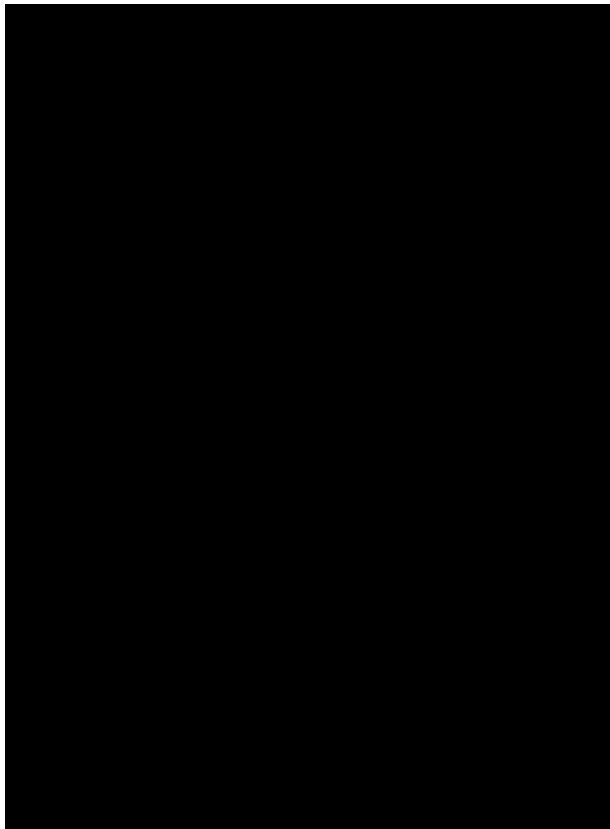
The poster also uses the stereotypically ‘feminine’ colors pink and yellow, but uses highly saturated hues instead of the more calm and muted tones associated with peacefully reclining women. Like using the term ‘girl,’ the bright yellow background and pink text is an action of reclamation. Paired with a snarling gorilla head, the colors become abrasive and attention grabbing. Such mimicry is, as Demo says, “exposing the harms of norms without being reduced to them.”²⁵

²³ Sturken and Cartwright, 111

²⁴ Sturken and Cartwright, 119

²⁵ Demo, 246

Exposing the harms of societal norms is increasingly important today, not only in the art world, but also in popular society and political discourse. As male politicians assume control over women’s reproductive health rights, and women conform to magazine cover standards by putting feeding tubes through their noses as a way to diet, it is apparent that feminist goals of equality have not yet been reached. The Guerrilla Girls are also a voice outside of the arena of art, and have been making posters calling out politicians, the film industry, and perpetrators of



stereotypes that negatively affect women since 1991.²⁶

The Birth of Feminism²⁷

One such poster, “The Birth of Feminism,” deals with representations of women in media and film. In 2001, the Guerrilla Girls responded to calls from filmmakers for a movie about the history of feminism by imagining how Hollywood might interpret this story. The result was a poster made to look like a movie advertisement with

the characteristic yellow background and pink lettering of Guerrilla Girls’ art posters. It featured Pamela Anderson, Halle Berry, and Catherine Zeta-Jones, all scantily clad and holding a banner across their hips that read “Equality Now!” Below the banner, each woman’s name appears,

²⁶ "Guerrilla Girls: Fighting Discrimination with Facts, Humor and Fake Fur."

²⁷ “The Birth of Feminism,” 2001.

followed by the names of the three American feminists they would portray in the imaginary film: Gloria Steinem, Flo Kennedy, and Bella Abzug. “They made women’s rights look good. Really good” says the caption below. Above the women’s heads the text reads, “A Major Hollywood Studio presents: *The Birth of Feminism*,” with the first portion in a script-like font, followed by the bold letters of “birth” and “feminism,” and “the” and “of” in a bubbly typeface.²⁸

Like “How Women Get Maximum Exposure in Art Museums,” this poster uses a popular image of sexuality, three women widely recognized at the time for their physiques and their success in Hollywood, posed in a way that both highlights their bodies and resembles a common movie poster. By mimicking popular representations of femininity, the Guerrilla Girls show the lack of importance or misunderstanding of feminist issues in popular culture. The incongruity between the actresses and the women they would represent in the movie emphasizes the discrepancy between the reality and expectations of women in society. Pamela Anderson, for instance, has become globally recognized for her body since her role in *Baywatch*, and has been photographed for *Playboy* magazine 12 times. Gloria Steinem, on the other hand, founded Ms. Magazine and worked as a bunny in New York’s Playboy Club to investigate the working conditions for young women in Hugh Hefner’s empire.²⁹ The poster tweaks common imagery to comment on society’s insistence on a certain image of women without simply castigating that image.

On the other hand, this poster can be read in a way that opens a newer kind of discourse that calls into question outdated assumptions about feminists and their protests of sexualized representations of women’s bodies. The Guerrilla Girls’ website implies that the poster is critical of women like Anderson, Berry, and Zeta-Jones, and it is necessary to consider the impact of

²⁸ “The Birth of Feminism”

²⁹ “Guerrilla Girls: Fighting Discrimination with Facts, Humor and Fake Fur.”

reducing these women, who have been highly successful in their careers, to emblems of ideals that are incongruous with those of feminism. A reading like this brings to mind the Miss America Pageant protest in 1968, which is recognized as a catalyst for the second wave of the feminist movement, and has influenced popular perceptions of feminism since. Those feminists argued that the pageant depicted women as submissive, posing in bathing suits for the amusement of male viewers.³⁰ Today these events are billed as “scholarship pageants,” and place an emphasis on the agency of the contestants by discussing the professional ambitions and competitive qualities of the contestants.³¹ Similarly, a more complex reading of the Guerrilla Girls’ poster and the sexuality that it portrays might take into account the agency that these women display by having lucrative careers in the acting business and sometimes choosing to wear revealing clothing as a part of this career. Juxtaposing thin, scantily clad women with the names of feminist intellectuals in the way that the Guerrilla Girls intend in this piece works to undermine the idea that feminism should be collaborative. Rather than positioning some types of women as working against others and propagating the idea that only women who are not invested in their appearance in conventional ways can participate in feminism is antithetical to its goals of equality and partnership; we should strive to be inclusive for the purpose of supporting a common cause.

Despite the shortcomings in the message from “The Birth of Feminism,” the Guerrilla Girls are an integral contributor to the feminist cause in 21st century America. As advocates for feminism in art, the Guerrilla Girls bring a tactic of resistance that fits the current mood in society, and as advocates for equality in general, they critique harmful norms in a way that calls attention to them through mimicry. Feminism is coming to encompass an increasingly broad set

³⁰ Dow, Bonnie J. "Feminism, Miss America, and Media Mythology." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 6.1 (2003), 128

³¹ Dow, 142

of issues in contemporary society. This combined with a stigma of the term seems to be the diffusion of action or organization and a rejection of the idea that radical demonstration is necessary. The Guerrilla Girls' eye-catching activism may be part of this new feminism, as it encourages thought and analysis about culture in a way that Harold compares to Michel Foucault's observations on political action. "Rather than using political action to discredit a line of thought (as the parodist might have it), Foucault urges us to 'use political practice as an intensifier of thought, and analysis as a multiplier of the forms and domains for the intervention of political action.'"³² While Guerrilla Girl-style sarcasm and poster-making do not need to be the only forms of activism or critique, they are especially well suited to the complex, varied, and individual attitudes toward feminism today in that they do not force a single answer or even the idea that change and current ideas are mutually exclusive.

While the Guerrilla Girls' works seem to be the right avenue for promoting a shift in attitudes in the art establishment, have they actually made a difference? Continuing gender disparities in art would lead some to answer no, that the group may have prompted thought but not action. In 2004, Guerrilla Girls did a count identical to their 1989 survey of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and found that not a lot had changed. While the percentage of female nudes had dropped slightly from 85 to 83 percent, the percentage of female artists in the Modern Art sections had also dropped from less than five percent to less than three percent. For the 2005 Venice Biennale, the Guerrilla Girls released a poster identical to their 1989 version but with updated statistics. These numbers, along with the disheartening facts that the monetary value of women's artwork is still far lower than men's and women curators are rarely invited to organize the more prestigious international exhibitions, are not optimistic. In addition, the current

³² Harold, Christine. "Pranking Rhetoric: "culture Jamming" as Media Activism." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 21.3 (2004), 208

conversation about women's reproductive health points toward an unhealthy attitude in society about women and their ability to make decisions about their lives. However, the Guerrilla Girls work has been received in a way that shows a shift towards equality, albeit a slow one.

The Guerrilla Girls' recognition by popular media and inclusion within the art establishment is one indicator of their success in promoting thoughtful change. In addition to inclusion in major media publications, members of the group were invited to speak at the commencement address for the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2009. The same year, the group spoke at MoMA's "Feminist Future Symposium," discussing activism, race, and geopolitics.³³ The event brought the Guerrilla Girls to the very museum that inspired the group's original members to start their work; it is a significant sign of success that collaboration is able to occur between this establishment and some of its most outspoken critics.

³³ "Guerrilla Girls: Fighting Discrimination with Facts, Humor and Fake Fur."

Gender Reassignment



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More than two decades after “How Women Get Maximum Exposure in Art Museums,” the Guerrilla Girls continue to create new work. In their 2012 work, “Guerrilla Girls to Museums: Time for Gender Reassignment,” the women tell museums that it is “Time for gender reassignment!” in bold letters over a photograph of a museum bearing the recognizable names of male renaissance artists such as Donatello and Botticelli. Flying out of the clouds above the building are winged gorillas and angels, or *putti*, also of renaissance popularity. The gorillas hold pink banners with names in lettering identical to that of the names on the museum, but the banners hold the names of female artists: Artemisia Gentileschi, Frieda Kahlo, Edmonia Lewis,

³⁴ “Guerrilla Girls to Museums: Time for Gender Reassignment,” 2012.

Rosa Bonheur, and Alma Thomas. The collaged photograph appears to be ripped aside, showing a collection of statistics about Art Institute of Chicago, including the percentages of male artists in its Contemporary and Modern galleries. The bottom corner reads, “Time to do what Paris, London, Madrid, and Stockholm are doing: collect and exhibit more art by women!”³⁵

This poster is more explicit than past works in its suggestions for alternatives to the status quo. “Many museums have names of famous artists inscribed on their facades. None are women,” says to the point at the top of the poster’s list of objections to museum practices. Solving this problem could be as simple as placing a banner over inscriptions of male artists’ names, as the flying gorillas show with their banners that seem to be made to fit over Da Vinci and Michelangelo’s names. On their website, Guerrilla Girls reveal that they would actually like to be able to translate the picture to life. “Now that we’ve done the poster version, we’re ready to do it for real by putting temporary banners on some museum façade. If any curator out there wants to step up and let us perform this sex change operation on their museum, please let us know,” says the caption.³⁶

The Guerrilla Girls provide part of the answer to questions regarding the direction of feminism and equality today. Their success in the art world has led them to gain a voice also heard in the broader context of popular culture, and is an important model for the possibilities that can come of creative ways to promote feminist ideals in an era when disconnect and apathy are often seen as more common than organization and passion. By using recognizable images and exaggerating or changing them, the group catches viewers’ eyes and provides easily understandable information that asks the public to examine their assumptions. They avoid alienating viewers by using humor and by not specifically calling for an end to current norms,

³⁵ “Guerrilla Girls to Museums: Time for Gender Reassignment”

³⁶ “Guerrilla Girls: Fighting Discrimination with Facts, Humor and Fake Fur.”

but for alternate versions of them. Through this work, the Guerrilla Girls have opened up conversations about gender and equality in both the art world and in the rest of society.

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