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WE WANT YOU IN GGBB COUNTER-RECRUITING RESERVES

Guerrilla Girls, Breadland, English/Spanish
Counter-Recruiting Poster, 2009, 17 x 11 in.
(43.2 x 27.9 cm) (artwork © Guerrilla Girls,
Breadland, Inc.)

In the 1970s numerous artists with feminist leanings sized to imagine that female artists producing autonomously, radically different art might undo the prevailing visual regime, deciphering the business as usual of art-world institutions. Others conjured a less idealistic, but still ambitious vision: that the art world’s extant institutions might expand to accommodate a complement of female artists once a convincing case was made for their fitness for inclusion. The most prominent feminist exhibition of the 1970s, Making Their Mark: Women Artists Move into the Mainstream, 1970–1986, a full-dress traveling survey of contemporary women’s art, dovetailed more from the latter initiative, emphasizing inclusion and a potential for more proportionate representation. So, too, did the program of the Guerrilla Girls, an anonymous activist collective of female artists formed in New York City in 1985. The 1980s proved an immensely bloody decade for the contemporary art market—the “age of decadence,” recalls one Guerrilla Girl. “That’s why we formed,” affirms another, “for the gush of collectors’ cash was profiting mostly white male artists, many of whom brandished their virility in time-honored art-world fashion.” The art community’s ostensible liberation notwithstanding, female artists largely found themselves marginalized as women in some other, more shadowy realms: “Bus companies are more enlightened than NYC art galleries,” proclaimed a 1989 Guerrilla Girls poster, for instance, which noted that 49.2 percent of bus drivers were female, whereas women constituted only 16 percent of “Artists represented by 33 major NYC art galleries.” Likely aware that calls for equality had generally proven the most dubiously appealing of feminist strategies in the United States, broadly, the Guerrilla Girls framed initiatives that were haunted by the specter of a 50–50 gender split. They posted the walls of Soho (then the contemporary art world’s epicenter) with the names of galleries that showed fewer than 10 percent women artists, the names of critics whose writings addressed female artists less than 50 percent of the time, statistics on solo shows New York museums had lately devoted to women (next to none), and so forth. While they refused the charge that they were “quota queens,” as one critic tagged them, the larger issues implicitly emplaced in the Guerrilla Girls’ initiatives somewhat mirrored those long vying Affirmative Action programs generally: namely, whether a mandate for diversification signaled a salutary broadening of the art field, or a relaxing of standards long governing that field, or both; and whether those standards themselves might be shown to be biased or otherwise unsound.

2. The words of “Rosita Carneiro” and “Guerrilla G." respectively, Oral history interview with Guerrilla Girls Rosita Carneiro and Guerrilla Girl Linda Goheen, December 1, 2007, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Judith Chick Richards conducted the interview and all the other Guerrilla Girls interviews from the Archives of American Art Oral History Program (and available online at http://si_historycollections/ome下手). I thank archivist staff member Justin Brokenspeck for helping me to make this (previously unavailable) material accessible to me.
4. The broader strategies, of course, were not approaching enough to secure ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution, which passed both houses of the US Congress in 1972 but failed in 1982 to achieve ratification by the necessary three-fifths majority before in 1982 deadline.
5. For “quota queens,” see Hilton Kramer, quoted in Concerned, 38.

Anna C. Chavez

The Guerrilla Girls’ Reckoning

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ostate job of conceiving and baking an entirely new dessert. The group did imply, however, that greater inclusion of women and, for that matter, also of artists of color would be beneficial to the field; thus, a 1998 poster declared that "You're seeing less than half the picture without the vision of women artists and artists of color."

While the artists who founded the Guerrilla Girls were mostly shaped by the 1970s women's movement, their resolve to deviate new methods to pay the claims of female artists in the differing climate of the 1980s. As the story in the spray-painted panels at the New Museum of Contemporary Art's "The Guerrilla Girls on Art" exhibition indicates, the forming of the collective was impelled in part by some of the founders' experience with a lackluster prospect toward the paltry offerings of women in a swelling Museum of Modern Art show of contemporary artists. The Guerrilla Girls founders rightly saw the skewed make-up of the MoMA survey as symptomatic of a decline in women's standing in the art world since the Guerrilla girls won by 1970s feminist campaigns, and saw also that outwoman tactics—as the intellectual content hole the Women's Caucus for the Arts had nurtured at the museum—were a symptom of a momentary "backlash" (as Susan Friedman would unabashedly note it)." We had to have a new image and a new kind of language to appeal to a younger generation of women, recalls a founding Guerrilla Girl, who uses the alias "Lisa Popova." Although "feminist" (the second wave women's movement has been terminologically homogenized was widely cited in the day—-for being overly serious, humorless, puritanical, and antimasculine, not to mention mean-hating—it came to be in perhaps even worse odor in the 1980s. Then the movement was pasted by its own self-lashes, a rising generation of women in the way of postmodernist theory, for its positivist naive and susceptibility to essentialism (that feminism is-in-fighting words to end all-in-fighting words), in the event, the collective's practices were somewhat belated, or indebted to 1970s initiatives—a lot of the things that the Guerrilla Girls did had been done by feminist groups years earlier, but with a different language and a different style." acknowledged Popova—not only in their appeals to principles of equality, but also, say, in their gesture of adopting the causes of deceased female artists as theirs, a gender-turbocharged feminist art historian's "work to rehabilitate forgotten careers." The Guerrilla Girls' recourse to a lighthearted humor (which earned them the nickname "the saniest of all the sanest at the outset but in some brochures of 1986) also owed a debt to 1970s feminists, whose often comical art attacked the would-be irrefutability of Women of the 1980s. As the curator of the 1986 "A New Look: Feminist Art in the U.S.," 1986, "In the beginning was the image—of the "New Woman." The private sphere remains sexually polarized means remained, injunctions, however, that this polarized remains briefly differentiable."

"In female history," the consequences of reproductive roles mixed markedly in the public sphere."

"Confronted Frequently in the commonly utilized during this period a well, with the new motherboard and a MIT's of (of 1982-73) was followed by the Via Fina."Followed by the dining room's Friday (1978), followed in the year in which the bite itself is a bite itself."

"She, Ruth Baas, The World's Open Now."

"The New Museum: A Woman's History, A Woman's Art, A Woman's Place."

"New York (New York: Penguine 2002), 236. Also, the social relations of power was so dense in the late 1970s, and early 1980s."

"Male Body, Male God: Women's Art in Post-War America."

"Lisa Leibl and Mary Pope, eds. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin 1986)."

"Of History Interview, Elizabeth Vigil Leblon and Lisa Popova, 2008.

"Seeing your ideas live on in the work of others, and "Knowing your career might pick up after you're "gypsy"—a very nod to the latter-day successors of the likes of Louise Bourgeois and Alice Neel. To maintain their anonymity in public appearances, the Guerrilla Girls donned gorilla masks; a playful use of masquerade (which became a 1980s buzzword with the rise of Cindy Sherman) and a vamping with feminine stereotypes—as by the Girls who sported false stockings and high heels with their masks—exemplary time tested, if controversial, strategies of these in the 1970s feminist ambit, such as Sam Halli or (or more eccentric feminist) Bourgeois.

Besides being indebted to a preliminary of (1970s) feminist principles and practices, the Guerrilla Girls also tacitly built on a history of politically motivated conceptual work by artists dating back to the 1960s, initiatives now generally grouped under the rubric "institutional critique." Thus, there is the (somewhat eponymous) case of the feisty Guerrilla Art Action Group, which issued in 1969 an antiwar-manifesto "Call for the Immediate Resignation of All the Rockefellers from the Board of Trustees of the Museum of Modern Art," or the case of the German-born, New York-based conceptualist Hans Haacke, one of whose projects systematically exposed, for instance, the business interests of museums trustees. In 1987, at their Guerrilla Girls Show at Whitney installation—which skewed the museum for its shabby treatment of women and artists of color—the Guerrilla Girls likewise enumerated the museum's trustees' business interests, and provided their addresses, while exhorting viewers to "Write a trustee today." In addition, a "Rare the Curator" section, the Girls noted that Lisa Phillips—who had enjoyed an unusually swift rise through the Whitney ranks, for a female curator especially, and whom the Girls called out for never having devoted a show to a female artist's work—is a daughter of Warren Phillips, then identified as the editor of the Wall Street Journal and CEO of Dow Jones, a major Whitney contributor. This installation, staged at New York's Clockwork alternative space, would be termed "Required viewing for anyone interested in art and power" by New York Times reviewer Roberta Smith, notwithstanding that she herself had been an erstwhile target of the collective. (To their credit, both Phillips and Smith acknowledged having been edited by the Girls' attacks, as did some other of their targets, though there were also of course some counterattacks)."

Another exemplary case of institutional critique, the 1986 Guerrilla Girls' "Cafeeteria in Art Museum" desired from naming gapes, but involved equally questionable practices whose actual correlates were known in many in the insular art world. Thus, "Thou shalt not give more than 5 reserves to any Artist whose Dealer is the brother of the Chief Curator," was widely recognized as a dig at the once-bust to Frank Stella's career provided by MoMA curator William Rubin, whose brother was a prominent galerie. Museums and their head gapes, as well as making institutions for contemporary artists, comprised obvious and favored Guerrilla Girls targets; but the collective proved shrewdly willing to admonish one and all within a community where, when pressed to explain the poor status of women, "Everybody in a position of power—curators, critics, the artists themselves—poured the cup. The artists blamed the dealers, the dealers blamed the curators and the critics on." Either that, or the standard excuse was that, "It was an issue of quality, not prejudice." Notwithstanding the historical continuities their practices entailed, in some
respects the Guerrilla Girls did come across as timely. For example, artists' collectives were proliferating and commanding newfound respect in New York in the 1980s. The radically minded membership of the Colab (Collaborative Projects) collective had come together already in 1977; Group Material held its inaugural show in 1980 in its community-oriented gallery on the derelict Lower East Side; Group Material principal Tim Rollins formed and led a group of art-making youngsters from the South Bronx during the early 1980s (with their official name, Tim Rollins and K.O.S., assumed in 1983); and Gran Fury formed to address AIDS-related fears in 1988, often through polemical posters somewhat comparable to those of the Girls. While they have not generally acknowledged the example of their peers, the appeal to feminism of the democratic content of the artists' collective is evident, as it served to undermine the binary model of the artist-as-individual (male)-genius—a model called into question from the very advent of feminist art criticism. Appropriating the urban landscape (often, if not always in unauthorized ways) with posters, stickers, graffiti, projections, billboards, and the like was a commonplace strategy, not only for collectives, but for emergent individual artists such as Jenny Holzer and Keith Haring in New York of the late 1970s and 1980s. Unlike most of those nomadic city-street in this period, however, the Guerrilla Girls did not universally represent their posters—or, in due course, their lecture-performances at venues worldwide—as constituting an art form: "People always ask if what we do is art or not. From the beginning, as a group, we could never agree." 25 Most of the Girls on record on the matter describe themselves merely as "activists." 26 In their official careers, numerous of the Guerrilla Girls did venture to make explicitly feminist or otherwise political art, but numerous others did not. While the Guerrilla Girls mostly carried suggestions that their activities amounted to a form of art, their public graphics nonetheless garnered great attention from critics (who tended to be less whittling of the Girls' live appearances, realized by a subset of group members whose gifts for performance, by all accounts, varied). 27 Work consisting strictly of text, or of posters and text combined, had been intrinsic to conceptual art practices since the 1960s. But Holzer brought new immediacy and visibility to text-centered art with the "Tennis and inflammatory signs she posted around New York in the late 1970s. And the photo-text format attained new importance, in the 1980s especially, through the efforts of artists such as Victor Burgin and Barbara Kruger. Indeed, some wondered whether Kruger had a hand in the Guerrilla Girls' posters, which at times appeared somewhat Kruger-esque. The available record now indicates, however, that a single Guerrilla Girl, "Kithe Kolwitz," is a founding member and almost entirely responsible for the group's cachet graphics, including eventually several books and the inaugural website. 28 Since Kolwitz's actual name became part of the public record during the group's subsequent legal struggles, one can say positively that (although the reportedly shares with Kruger a professional background in commercial graphics) she remains a figure far more for what she has done in Guerrilla Girls than for it. The fact that Kolwitz oversaw the collective's graphics (even after relocating to California early in the group's history) served swiftly and usefully to "brand" the Guerrilla Girls, as contemporary parlance might have it; and some fellow Girls, especially "Alma Thomas," describe as rewarding the process of collaborating with Kolwitz to shape the content of graphic projects. In her regular career, however, Thomas is a performance artist, whereas to some visual artist members who wished to try their hands at the Girls' graphics, Kolwitz's unofficial status as designer-in-chief came to represent instead an immensely powerful role. 29 The posters the Guerrilla Girls issued in their first year of operation exclusively addressed art-world issues against women. This monofocal focus might serve as another marker of the group's 1970s feminist roots, but also does the decision (narrated with a poignant aside by "Griette Stein") in the essay that accompanies this one (as for many from any official standing in the group, a choice long commonplace in feminist organizing, but one revisited in time by some younger feminists). Second-wave feminism in the United States stemmed historically in part from other movements devoted to social change, including the civil-rights and antiwar groups, as well as the New Student Left. Women were impelled to branch out from these movements due to the damaging treatment they often received within them and owing to the reluctance of those groups' (male) leadership to address women's issues. As a consequence, 1970s feminists, who were predominantly white, tended to confine their attention to women's issues, often deferring even the perceived dilution of focus represented by issues surrounding sexuality, as lesbians claim on the movement's attention entailed besides a feared stigma. Stein (who is not lesbian, despite her alter ego) admits in her essay here that the Guerrilla Girls were not immune to such fears. And while the collective did eventually acquire some self-identified lesbian members, its projects never dwelled much on matters of sexuality, even as "queer" issues gradually came more to the fore in the general culture. The
feminism of the 1960s did in time help provide models for the evolution of a more visible gender movement, however, as well as for the advent, over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, of what was dubbed "multiculturalism." And the Guerrilla Girls participated in their own way in this shift to a multifaceted form of identity politics. Already by 1986, for instance, they had issued a postcard complaining that "Only a commercial gallery in N.Y. shows black women. Only 1 shows more than 1." And in their (still) installation critiquing the exclusionary history of the Whitney and its biennial program, their statistics surveyed the museum's representation of white versus "non-white" men and women.

While the Guerrilla Girls started keeping periodic tabs on statistics pertaining to racial, as well as gender discrimination in the art world—and, for instance, plastered some offending gallery's windows with a "We sell white bread" sticker in 1985 ("Really wonderful," exclaimed a satisfied "Zora Neale Hurston")—they staunchly, and problematically, resisted being surveyed as to the make-up of their own membership, a survey potentially complicated, admit- tedly, by the personal flux in their ranks. Lately it has emerged that the founding members of the group were all white, although African-American member Alice Thomas believes that she was invited to participate in the group from the first (an invitation she had to defer for some years, for personal reasons). The need to diversify the group's membership (including generically) appears to have weighed on some Guerrilla Girls more than others, with Stetl especially being credited as a force for diversification. Because of the group's continuous—whose racial values proved predictably offensive, to Thomas for once ("I would have preferred pink ski masks")—it can be difficult to discern the ethnicity of members in photographs. Though some members of color recount having been asked often to pose for publicity photos of representative Girls, to my eye the photographed Girls generally appear to be white, in keeping with the group's predominant ethnic make-up.

Judging from the interviews Thomas and Hurston have lately given to Judith Olch Richards for the American Art, they both counted themselves highly committed Guerrilla Girls: "The conversation was the forest I've ever had in any organization, and I was a member of many of them," affirmed Hurston. "I felt like I had never been in a room full of women that were all so smart, that all had something to say," and adding pointedly, "I came to feel that they were not so smart in other ways." Some other ever-loyal members of color describe hav- ing become disaffected, however, both by their perceived status as tokens within the group, and by the sometimes disrespectful interactions among group members. (By many accounts, at once the most exasperating and the most produc- tive aspect of the collective feminist process generally were the episodic fights.) Along with Thomas and Hurston, these disaffected figures in turn recount stories of other members, or prospective members, of color who left meetings in a huff, against the raucous dynamic. Hurston particularly lamented the departure of an "extremely smart and extremely able" member of Chinese descent who was "pretty much silenced" by an "overbearing couple" of "Guerrilla Girl lead- ers," an apparent reference to "Trudy Kahlo" (who, despite her chosen alias, was not an artist of color) and Käthe Kollwitz—the duo, that is, by most accounts, came to assume the role of de facto leaders of an essentially leaderless group. Meanwhile Asian-American member "Agnes Martin" likewise described himself as having been driven away by the behavior of "the kind of leaders." In spite of the fact that Martin loved "the way of coming out of [the group's] discussions," she found its "hard to get your voice in there at all," Hurston believes that, "If it had been a more open leadership," the Girls would have spent more time addressing art-world segregation, and she became chagrined by "the top- down way things were going"—regardless that, as she poetically put it, "Any kind of group I can ever think of is under the foot of a few," and that of a man. Thomas, for her part, was ultimately put off by the promulgation of a retrograde "universalist" feminism she saw as undermining the group's credibility—most publically, ergo problematically, in aspects of the Guerrilla Girls' 1998 retrospective Companions in the history of Women's Art, a somewhat sophomoric text whose production is said to have been directed largely by Kollwitz and Kahlo. No matter their difficulties policing themselves, the Guerrilla Girls did not shy from policing others. Positioning themselves, not entirely tongue-in-cheek, as "the conscience of the art world," they went on conducting a reckoning, in all senses of that term—a reckoning that extended beyond the art world for an interval in 1996 and 1997 (spurred by the Gulf War, by the plight of the homeless, and by issues surrounding reproductive rights and gay rights), though their chief impact appears to have been in the art realm. From the outset, "We said 'Let's just start by counting numbers. Let's get the facts, the black and white facts,'" in the words of "Alice Neel," and it was very obvious. It was the best way to do it. We counted. And we came up with these appalling figures of the state of women artists and artists of color." Counting, or reckoning, remained all along the collective's chief modus operandi.

When the Guerrilla Girls mounted an attack on the Guggenheim Museum in 1992, for example, for planning a show with an all-male roster to launch its downtown branch, they bombarded director Tom Krens with pink, postcard-
sarcastically wishing him "Loca Luck" with his impeding "Four White Boys at the White Boys' Museum" show. That Saturday was finally added to the roster, as a token woman—and reportedly participated in the Guerrilla Girls' protest at the opening, donning a paper-bag gorilla mask—not only evidences her victory on the group's part (accounting for the 'profoundly meaningful' of Stein), but also signifies, to my mind, a kind of tapping point: a moment after which no one could plan an exhibit or a slate of exhibitions in the contemporary art world any longer without considering the gender and complexity of the participants, and having a compelling defense ready if those elements were homogeneous. Such self-monitoring newly became, to short, materialistic and reflexive, even within the most conservative bastions of the art world; "there is consciousness, where there wasn't before," as Stein puts it. 51. After the Guerrilla Girls' 1996 appearance at Tate Modern, the museum announced a women's initiative, Kolvitz notes. So too, of late, have MoMA and the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris mounted various—exceedingly belated and at times (but not) clumsily conceived—catch-up initiatives. Institutions have no other hope behind the pretense that some would-be transcultural, universal measure of quality exists to serve as their sole criterion for work featured, or that the best art is invariably, totally innocent of gender and ethnicity. If the Guerrilla Girls alone cannot be credited for this monumental turn of events, neither should their contribution by any means be diminished.

A factor generally seen as key to the Guerrilla Girls' effectiveness was their distinctive assumption of anonymity. Thus, Lipstadt used the Girls for having "the scene to realize that anonymity was a perfect weapon against art-scene/art market greed and gossip," remarking that from behind their masks, "they can say the unsayable." 53. In the beginning, Kolvitz recalled, "we really thought we were dealing with dangerous stuff..." If we were discovered who we were it would be like the end of our art careers." 54. For others, however, the main reason for maintaining anonymity was that "we wanted to keep the attention on the issues," inpopo's words; and, "we wanted the focus to be not on our personalities or our own work," Guerrilla Girls concurred. 55. In time, as the Guerrilla Girls encountered a mounting demand for their presence, the notion "that anonymity was to save careers was, you know... a prelude," as Thomsen saw it, "because anybody who was a Girl by 1991 would have added to their careers." 56. For that matter, anonymity eventually became a kind of burden, especially to those Girls whose Guerrilla activities comprised the majority of their working lives as artists, as, in the case of Kahlil and Kolvitz especially, their Guerrilla identities came to far overshadow their other art-world profiles. As it happened, the lawsuit ensuing from the split precipitated by Kahlil and Kolvitz (now the principals of Guerrilla Girls Inc.) led to many members' names being revealed, with Kahlil and Kolvitz themselves having been most famously unmasked in a New York article on the case. 57. In discussing her loss of anonymity, Kolvitz sounds markedly relieved. "The anonymity isn't important anymore....What's important is the fact that it's not about identities, you know that it's anonymous. That's still important, but it's not important...." 58. But this breach of the cardinal tenant of Guerrilla Girls membership informed many: including Stein, as she relates here. Regardless, Stein decided to allow her name to remain visible in documents when the Guerrilla Girls' archive was placed, by personal consent, at the Getty Research Institute. In the end, only seven women chose to have their names redacted by Getty catalogers, whereas fully forty women allowed their names to appear—perhaps with the view that remaining unamed concealed others' names were known meant choosing an invisible position, or perhaps with a sense that the important chapters in the organization's life were behind it, or both. 59. Because several ostensibly anonymous Guerrilla Girls factions remain active, however, and because it would violate the longtime egalitarian spirit of the organization to divulge some members' names while protecting others (that is, those still guarding their anonymity), I have elected here to maintain the Girls' now partly nominal cover.

The irony of course—and a telling fact besides—is that what once posed a perceived major liability for a female artist's career could become in time instead a source of bragging rights, at least for some. Given the perennially sedimentary status of feminism and the odium that has long been attached, in the general culture, to being a feminist, the question might well be asked: since when did the specter of a gagging soliciting of women's intent on airing their grievances, selling violations of principles of equal treatment, and naming mere members of offenders, represent a welcome presence anywhere? Was a signal fact of the Guerrilla Girls' existence is how much in demand they proved to be, and how long that demand endured, not only in the United States, but abroad. Popova recalls that the Girls were "shocked by the amount of attention we got. It was overwhelming. It's like we were rock stars..." In this anonymous life, not in our real lives," or "We've got a huge audience, thousands and thousands of people, officers Kolvitz, "We've gotten letters from all over the world," and "And 'Domino Blues' marvels that 'women in Japan, Brazil, Europe and even Bali were 'interested in what we were doing.'" Plainly the Guerrilla Girls—who Lipstadt credited with having "almost single-handedly kept women's art activism alive over one of the worst decades I hope we'll see"—"helped to meet a gaping need." 60. The Guerrilla Girls' heyday of the mid-1980s through the 1990s was, as Hurston saw it, "such a needy time for feminists and women of color. 'I mean, we really needed to get on it, because we were being treated so badly.'" Viewed from another vantage point, feminism and identity politics broadly were making great strides during just that period, however. The advances came in the form of a deepening and refining of discourses surrounding issues of identity, a development that helped newly entrenched gender studies and identity politics within academia. But as the terms of gender studies became more specialized, nuanced, and complex, effects to disseminate feminist messages to a general audience through grass-roots and activist practices regrettably fell by the wayside. Though they performed widely as avant-garde, the Guerrilla Girls bypassed the high-flying discourse increasingly branching to gender studies, their efforts instead on a philistinian, often humorous approach geared to a general public. That is how the collective's members drew their improbably substantial audience: by acting as gaffers, raising their mildly, witty feminist voices, and tirelessly taking to the road and the streets. 61. See Frances C. Ching is professor of art history at Queen's College and the Graduate Center, CUNY. She has published many essays concerned with issues of reception, interpretation, and identity, on subjects ranging from Picasso and O'Keeffe, to Rockwell, and the God's B'nddy sisters. She is known besides for her revealing readings of Heineken, plag of those writings may be accessed at wwwchings.com. In addition, Ching has authored monograph on Raphael and Brancusi (Yale University Press, 1991 and 1993).