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Guerrilla Girls BroadBand, *English/Spanish Counter-Recruiting Poster*, 2008, 17 x 11 in. (43.2 x 27.9 cm) (artwork © Guerrilla Girls BroadBand, Inc.)

Anna C. Chave

The Guerrilla Girls' Reckoning

In the 1970s numerous artists with feminist leanings dared to imagine that female artists producing authentically, radically different art might undo the prevailing visual regime, derailing 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 1980s, *Making Their Mark: Women Artists Move into the Mainstream, 1970–1985*, a full-dress traveling survey of contemporary women's art, devolved more from the latter initiative, emphasizing inclusion and a potential for more proportionate representation.[1] 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 intensely heady 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.[2] The art community's ostensible liberalism notwithstanding, female artists largely found themselves more marginalized than women in some other, more stodgy 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."[3] Likely aware that calls for equality had generally proven the most durably 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.[4] They postered 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 20 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 entailed in the Guerrilla Girls' initiatives somewhat mirrored those long vexing Affirmative Action programs generally, namely: whether a mandate for diversification augured 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.[5]

In the 1970s, when the pioneering feminist critic Lucy Lippard began to curate some all-women's art shows, she at times fretted about the prospect of merely assimilating women to an art system she (among other leftists) considered deeply flawed, a system she would rather have seen fundamentally overhauled.[6] Evidently motivated by similar concerns, the critic Suzi Gablik kept pressing a pair of "Guerrilla Girls" during a 1994 interview as to whether they might not wish to change the art world rather than simply to demand fuller participation within it. But "Guerrilla Girl 1" stoutly responded that the group's goal was "more access . . . that's our attitude about change, as opposed to breaking down the system."[7] Downplaying the utopianism historically instrumental to feminist theorizing, the Guerrilla Girls tended to represent themselves as pragmatists, asking only for their fair share of the proverbial art-world "pie," not the

1. Randy Rosen, Catherine C. Brawer, et al., *Making Their Mark: Women Artists Move into the Mainstream, 1970–1985*, exh. cat. (New York: Abbeville, 1989). Curated by Rosen and Brawer, the exhibition toured the Cincinnati Art Museum, the New Orleans Museum of Art, the Denver Art Museum, and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. The catalogue's "Career Markers" section by Ferris Olin and Brawer presents a wide range of statistical gauges of the relative "visibility of women artists within the mainstream" in the years in question. *Making Their Mark*, 203–30.

2. The words of "Rosalba Carriera" and "Guerrilla Girl 1" respectively, Oral history interview with Guerrilla Girls Rosalba Carriera and Guerrilla Girl 1, December 1, 2007, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Judith Olch Richards conducted this and all the other Guerrilla Girls interviews from the Archives of American Art cited below (and available online at http://aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts). My thanks to archives staff member Justin Brancato for helping to make this (previously unavailable) material accessible to me.

3. All the Guerrilla Girls posters cited here are reproduced in chronological order in the "Stick 'Em Up: Posters & Projects, 1985–1994" section of Guerrilla Girls, with Whitney Chadwick, *Confessions of the Guerrilla Girls* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 33–89. In these notes, the book is hereafter referred to as *Confessions*.

4. The broader strategies, of course, were not appealing enough to ensure ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution, which passed both houses of the US Congress in 1972, but failed to achieve ratification by the necessary thirty-eight states before its 1982 deadline.

5. For "quota queens," see Hilton Kramer, quoted in *Confessions*, 28.

6. See, for example, Lucy R. Lippard, "Works on Paper: Women Artists" (1975), rep. Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976), 55.

7. Suzi Gablik, "'We Spell It Like the Freedom Fighters': A Conversation with the Guerrilla Girls," *Art in America*, January 1994, 43, "[T]he

system is fundamentally pretty fucked up," Guerrilla Girl "Romaine Brooks" admitted to Gablik, and "we don't have an alternative"—although, Brooks allowed, "we might be delving for alternatives in one part of our brain." Gablik, 47. Says "Käthe Kollwitz," more recently, "Even if we participated in the art world, we hated it. And we still do; we hate the system. It's so unethical." Oral history interview with Guerrilla Girls Frida Kahlo and Käthe Kollwitz, January 19–March 9, 2008, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

8. "What we do agree on unanimously is that women and artists of color deserve a piece of the pie and shouldn't be prevented from getting a big piece, if that's what they're after," says Kollwitz, in *Confessions*, 28–29.

9. See Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown, 1991). The Women's Caucus for the Arts, an affiliate of the College Art Association, was established in 1972. For an overview of women's art organizations in the United States, see Mary D. Garrard, "Feminist Politics: Networks and Organizations," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s*, ed. Norma Broude and Garrard (New York: Abrams, 1994).

10. Oral history interview with Guerrilla Girls Elizabeth Vigée LeBrun and Liubov Popova, January 19, 2008, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

11. Ibid.

12. For a brief synopsis of the principles of egalitarian feminism and their strategic shortcomings, see Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 15–16. Grosz noted that, "At most, equalization of the relations between the sexes is possible only within the public sphere. The private sphere remains sexually polarized insofar as sex roles, especially reproductive roles, remain binarily differentiated," 15. Yet, as Grosz's "at most" may intimate, the consequences of reproductive roles redound significantly in the "public sphere."

13. Comedy flourished in the commercial culture during this general period as well, with the newfound popularity of sketch television (*Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In* of 1968–73 was followed by the first incarnation of the long-running *Saturday Night Live* in 1975), followed in time by a dedicated comedy channel (launched by Time Warner's subsidiary HBO in 1989), joining other new outlets, such as comedy clubs, for the rise in comedy writing and "stand up" as a form.

14. See Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How The Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2000), 220. Also gainsaying the notion that feminists lacked a sense of humor was *Pulling Our Own Strings: Feminist Humor and Satire*, ed. Gloria Kaufman and Mary Kay Blakely (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980).

15. Oral history interview, Elizabeth Vigée LeBrun and Liubov Popova, 2008.

outsize job of conceiving and baking an entirely new dessert.[8] The group did imply, however, that greater inclusion of women and, for that matter, also of artists of color would of itself alter the art field; thus, a 1989 poster declaimed: "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, they resolved to devise new methods to press the claims of female artists in the differing climate of the 1980s. As the story is told, the forming of the collective was impelled in part by some of the founders' experience with a lackluster protest against the paltry quotient of women in a sweeping 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 gains won by 1970s feminist campaigns, and saw also that outworn tactics—such as the ineffectual picket line the Women's Caucus for the Arts had mustered at the museum—were unequal to a moment of virulent "backlash" (as Susan Faludi would indelibly name it).[9] "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 "Liubov Popova."[10] Although "1970s feminism" (as the second-wave women's movement has been terminologically homogenized) was widely derided in its day—for being unduly strident, humorless, puritanical, and antimaternal, not to mention man-hating—it came to be in perhaps even worse odor in the 1980s. Then the movement was assailed by its own would-be heirs, a rising generation of women wise in the ways of poststructuralist theory, for its putative naiveté and susceptibility to essentialism (that feminist in-fighting word 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 earlier, but with a different language and a different style," acknowledged Popova[11]—not only in their appeals to principles of equality, but also, say, in their gesture of adopting the names of deceased female artists as aliases, a gambit tacitly corroborating feminist art historians' early efforts to rehabilitate forgotten careers.[12]

The Guerrilla Girls' recourse to a sly, sardonic humor (which emerged not at the outset but in some broadsides of 1986) also owed a tacit debt to 1970s feminists, whose often comical art broached the would-be *Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter*, as the curator Jo Anna Isaak memorably titled a New York gallery show of 1983.[13] Ruth Rosen has pointed out that the feminist reputation for humorlessness was due to the sober face activists mostly showed the public when dealing with a spectrum of exceedingly unfunny issues, such as sexual violence, while among themselves feminists often evinced tremendous wit, relying on laughter to keep their spirits intact.[14] In their ambition to reach a broad audience, the Guerrilla Girls saw humor as invaluable because, as "Elizabeth Vigée LeBrun" noted, "if you can laugh about something that is the most brilliant [ploy] because a laugh makes everybody feel a part of the inside joke."[15] Tellingly, the poster the Guerrilla Girls call their "all-time favorite" (one that has been translated into at least eight foreign languages) forgoes the usual recitation of lopsided statistics for a mischievous and rueful list of supposed "Advantages of Being a Woman Artist," including: "Working without the pressure of success,"

"Seeing your ideas live on in the work of others," and "Knowing your career might pick up after you're eighty"—a wry nod to the latter-day successes of the likes of Louise Bourgeois and Alice Neel.[16] 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 fishnet stockings and high heels with their masks—exemplify time-tested, if controversial strategies of those in the 1970s feminist ambit, such as Hannah Wilke or (a more inconstant feminist) Bourgeois.

Besides being indebted to a prehistory 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."[17] Thus, there is the (somewhat eponymous) case of the feisty Guerrilla Art Action Group, which issued in 1969 an antiwar-minded "Call for the Immediate Resignation of All of 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 museum trustees. In 1987, at their *Guerrilla Girls Review the Whitney* installation—which skewered the museum for its shabby treatment of women and artists of color—the Girls likewise enumerated the museum trustees' business interests, and provided their addresses, while exhorting viewers to "Write a trustee today." In addition, in a "Rate 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 Clocktower alternative space, would be termed "required viewing for anyone interested in the art world's inner machinations" by *New York Times* reviewer Roberta Smith, notwithstanding that she herself had been an erstwhile target of the collective.[18] (To their credit, both Phillips and Smith acknowledged having being edified by the Girls' attacks, as did some other of their targets, though there were also of course some counterattacks.)[19]

Another exemplary case of institutional critique, the 1989 *Guerrilla Girls' Code of Ethics for Art Museums*, desisted from naming names, but invoked ethically questionable practices whose actual correlates were known to many in the insular art world. Thus, "Thou shalt not give more than 3 retrospectives to any Artist whose Dealer is the brother of the Chief Curator," was widely recognized as a dig at the outsize boost to Frank Stella's career provided by MoMA curator William Rubin, whose brother was a prominent gallerist. Museums and leading galleries, as career-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, "Everyone in a position of power—curators, critics, collectors, the artists themselves—passed the buck. The artists blamed the dealers, the dealers blamed the collectors, the collectors blamed the critics and so on." Either that, or the standard excuse was that, "it was an issue of quality, not prejudice."[20]

Notwithstanding the historical continuities their practices entailed, in some

16. Cited in *Confessions*, 53. "Alice Neel" calls this "one of the masterpieces of the Guerrilla Girls, because we all chipped in, and we hammered away at it, and we kept reworking and changing it." Oral history interview with Guerrilla Girls Alice Neel and Gertrude Stein, December 1, 2007, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

17. "Without thinking about it at the time, you know, our thing is institutional critique," per Kollwitz. Oral history interview, Frida Kahlo and Käthe Kollwitz, 2008.

18. Roberta Smith, "Group Exhibitions Show Off New Talent and Striking Styles," *New York Times*, April 24, 1987.

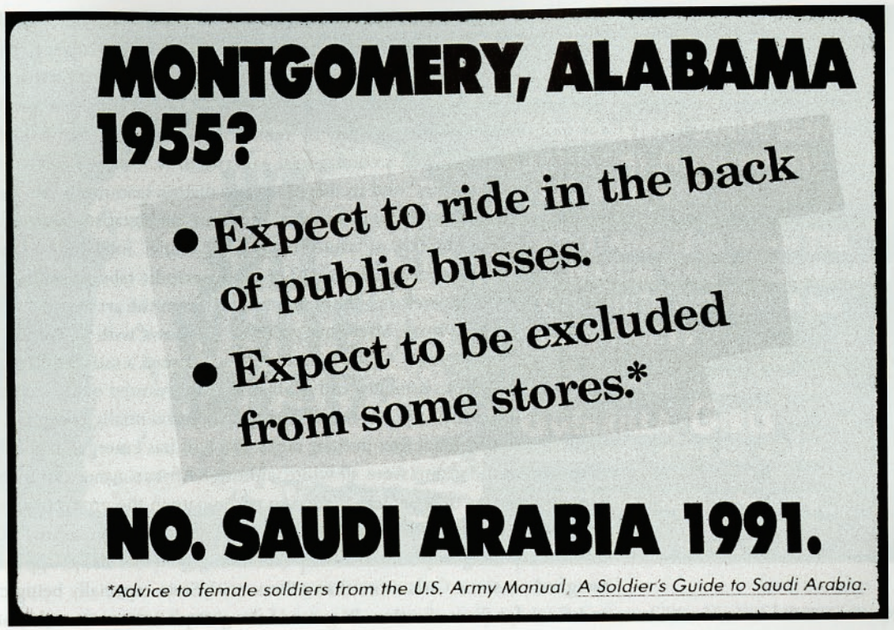
19. "'Their poster project has been extremely effective in reorienting art-world thinking,' said Lisa Phillips, a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, . . . 'It's shocking seeing your name associated with practices you don't condone.'" Phillips quoted in Roberta Smith, "Waging Guerrilla Warfare Against the Art World," *New York Times*, June 17, 1990. Smith acknowledged an impact in her own case in this same essay. See also "Love Letters and Hate Male," in *Confessions*, 91–93, and *Guerrillas In Our Midst*, a 1992 film directed by Amy Harrison, in which some of the Girls' antagonists are interviewed.

20. *Confessions*, 14.

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 1985); and Gran Fury formed to address AIDs-related concerns 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 feminists of the democratic conceit of the artists' collective is evident, as it served to undermine the hoary model of the artist-as-individual-(male)-genius—a model called into question from the very advent of feminist art criticism.[21] 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 annexing city streets 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."[22] Most of the Girls on record on the matter describe themselves as practicing artists who merely moonlighted as activists.[23] 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 parried suggestions that their activities amounted to a form of art, their pithy graphics nonetheless garnered some respect from critics (who tended to be less admiring of the Girls' live appearances, realized by a subset of group members whose gifts for performance, by all accounts, varied).[24] Work consisting strictly of text, or of photos and text combined, had been intrinsic to conceptual art practices since the 1960s. But Holzer brought new interest and visibility to text-centered art with the *Truisms and Inflammatory Essays* 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, "Käthe Kollwitz" (a founding member), was almost entirely responsible for the group's catchy graphics, including eventually several books and the inaugural website.[25] Since Kollwitz's actual name became part of the public record during the group's subsequent legal struggles, one can say positively that (although she reportedly shares with Kruger a professional background in commercial graphics) she remains a figure far more noted for what she has done in Guerrilla mufti than out of it. The fact that Kollwitz 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,"

21. Says Stein, for one, "We didn't use other models," when asked about the proliferation of collaborative groups in the art world. Oral history interview, Alice Neel and Gertrude Stein, 2007. Gran Fury and numerous other activist groups concerned with issues of sexuality, gender, or ethnicity are listed in passing in *Confessions*, 94. Of course, feminists have their own prehistory of collective practices, including collectively run galleries and magazines, especially in New York City and southern California.
22. *Confessions*, 21.
23. "What we were doing we weren't labeling art. What we were doing, we were labeling activism," asserts Carriera, taking the dominant line, though Guerrilla Girl 1 interjects, "I felt it was art. But there were people in the group who didn't." Oral history interview, Rosalba Carriera and Guerrilla Girl 1, 2007. Stein recalls debates as to whether the group's public presentations were actually "lectures" or "performances." Oral history interview, Alice Neel and Gertrude Stein, 2007.
24. See, for instance, Mira Schor, "Just the Facts Ma'am," *Artforum*, September 1990, 127.
25. Though others readily point to Kollwitz as the Guerrilla Girls' chief graphic designer, she demurred when asked whether a single person directed the design work: "Maybe. I don't think we should ever say that." Oral history interview, Frida Kahlo and Käthe Kollwitz, 2008. For her part, Popova says categorically, "One person did the graphics from day one and established the graphic style and she had been doing that in advertising. And all the books were designed by her and all the posters were designed by her. I think that was very much part of our success, that we established a visual style in the street and everywhere else." Oral history interview, Elizabeth Vigée LeBrun and Liubov Popova, 2008.



Guerrilla Girls, *Montgomery, Alabama, 1955?* 1991, poster, 17 x 22 in. (43.2 x 55.9 cm) (artwork © Guerrilla Girls)

26. "Jane Bowles" was among those who wanted a hand in the graphics, and she describes Kollwitz, "aided by Frida Kahlo," as having taken "control of a lot of the graphic production." Thomas seconds this: "Everybody was affected by the issue of the graphics" and "annoyed" that they "can't do graphics." Oral history interview with Guerrilla Girls Jane Bowles and Alma Thomas, May 8, 2008, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. "Hannah Höch," who was "really excited to design," likewise saw that "that was not happening." Oral history interview with Guerrilla Girls Julia De Borgos and Hannah Höch, May 8, 2008, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
27. Some "Baboon Boys," who provided ancillary help, eventually attained an unofficial status with the group.

describe as rewarding the process of collaborating with Kollwitz 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, Kollwitz's unofficial status as designer-in-chief came to represent instead an unseemly power grab.[26]

The posters the Guerrilla Girls issued in their first year of operation exclusively addressed art-world biases against women. This monofactorial focus might serve as another marker of the group's 1970s feminist roots, as too does the decision (narrated with a poignant anecdote by "Gertrude Stein" in the essay that accompanies this one) to bar men from any official standing in the group, a choice long commonplace in feminist organizing, but one revisited in time by some younger feminists.[27] 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 those movements due to the demeaning 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 deflecting even the perceived dilution of focus represented by issues surrounding sexuality, as lesbian claims on the movement's attention entailed besides a feared stigma. Stein (who is not lesbian, despite her alias) 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

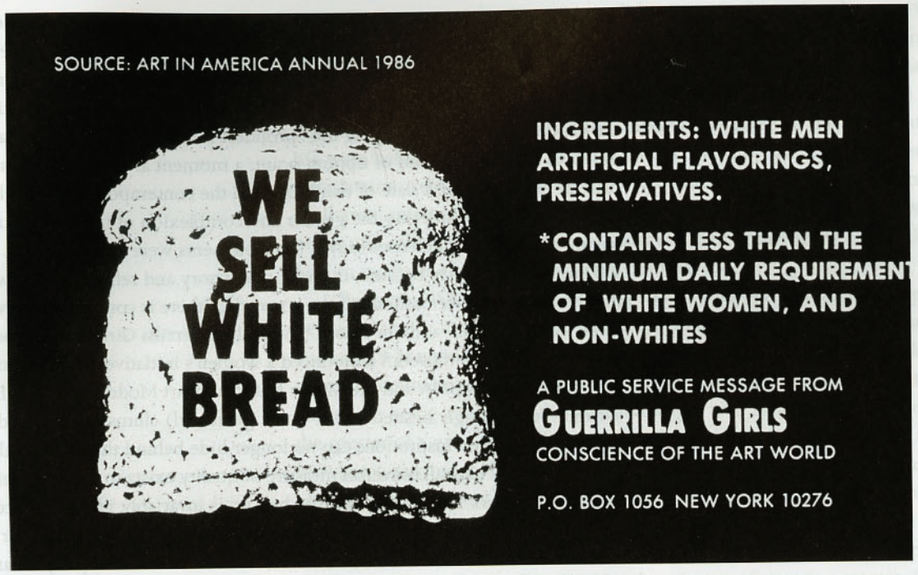
feminism of the 1970s did in time help provide models for the evolution of a more visible queer movement, however, as well as for the advent, over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, of what was dubbed "multiculturalism." And the Guerrilla Girls participated in their own way in this shift to a multifactorial form of identity politics. Already by 1986, for instance, they had issued a poster complaining that "Only 4 commercial galleries in N.Y. show black women. Only 1 shows more than 1." And in their 1987 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 galleries' windows with a "We sell white bread" sticker in 1987 ("Really wonderful," exclaimed a satisfied "Zora Neale Hurston")[28]—they staunchly, and problematically, resisted being surveyed as to the make-up of their own membership, a survey potentially complicated, admittedly, by the perennial flux in their ranks. Lately it has emerged that the founding members of the group were all white, although African-American member Alma 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).[29] The need to diversify the group's membership (including generationally) appears to have weighed on some Girls more than others, with Stein especially being credited as a force for diversification. Because of the group's costumes—whose racial valences proved predictably offensive, to Thomas for one ("I would have preferred pink ski masks")—it can be difficult to discern the ethnicity of members in photographs.[30] 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 Archives of American Art, they both counted themselves highly committed Guerrilla Girls: "The conversation was the freest I've ever had in any organization, and I was a member of many of them," affirmed Hurston;[31] "I felt like I had never been in a room full of women that were all so smart," exulted Thomas, while adding pointedly, "I later came to feel that they were not so smart in other ways."[32] Some other erstwhile members of color describe having become disaffected, however, both by their perceived status as tokens within the group, and by the sometimes disrespectful interactions among group members.[33] (By many accounts, at once the most excruciating and the most productive aspect of the collective feminist process generally were the epic 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, aghast at 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 leaders," an apparent reference to "Frida Kahlo" (who, despite her chosen alias, was not an artist of color) and Käthe Kollwitz—the duo that, by most accounts, came to assume the role of de facto leaders of an ostensibly leaderless group.[34] Erstwhile Asian-American member "Agnes Martin" likewise described herself as having been driven away by the behavior of "the kind of leaders." In spite of the fact that Martin loved "the wit of what came out of [the group's] discussions," she found it "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 disenchanted 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 fist of a few and the ire of a ton."[35] 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 publicly, ergo problematically, in aspects of the Guerrilla Girls' 1998 *Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art*, a somewhat sophomoric text whose production is said to have been directed largely by Kollwitz and Kahlo.[36]

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 were bent on conducting a reckoning, in all senses of that term—a reckoning that extended beyond the art world for an interval in 1991 and 1992 (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."[37] 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 postcards



Guerrilla Girls, *We Sell White Bread*, 1987, sticker, 3 x 5 in. (7.6 x 12.7 cm) (artwork © Guerrilla Girls)

28. Oral history interview with Guerrilla Girls Zora Neale Hurston and Agnes Martin, May 17, 2008, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
29. Oral history interview, Jane Bowles and Alma Thomas, 2008.
30. Thomas, quoted in *Confessions*, 23. "I never wanted to wear the mask," which "had such a terrible connotation for black women," but "you had to go along, okay?" said Thomas. Oral history interview, Jane Bowles and Alma Thomas, 2008. "I do remember bringing up this whole issue that the very fact that they felt comfortable using this gorilla mask was part of the white privilege," noted Julia de Borgos, a Latina. Oral history interview, Julia De Borgos and Hannah Höch, 2008.
31. A veteran of the *Heresies* magazine collective, Hurston recalls joining the Guerrilla Girls around the time of the 1987 Clocktower show, and she says she "never missed a meeting if I could help it." Oral history interview, Zora Neale Hurston and Agnes Martin, 2008.
32. Oral history interview, Jane Bowles and Alma Thomas, 2008.
33. Tokenism is discussed with unusual candor in, Oral history interview, Zora Neale Hurston and Agnes Martin, 2008.
34. In framing their legal complaint, Kollwitz and Kahlo claimed to be the "guiding forces" behind the collective; quoted in Jeffrey Toobin, "The Bench: Girls Behaving Badly," *New Yorker*, October 25, 2010, 34. The Asian-American woman who quit "just said, 'I don't have to teach people. I'm out of here,'" recalled Hurston. Oral history interview, Zora Neale Hurston and Agnes Martin, 2008.
35. Ibid.
36. Guerrilla Girls, *The Guerrilla Girls' Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art* (New York: Penguin, 1998). "I hated the text," Thomas says, recalling that it prompted her to become a "rabble-rouser" within the group. Oral history interview, Jane Bowles and Alma Thomas, 2008.
37. Oral history interview, Alice Neel and Gertrude Stein, 2007.

sarcastically wishing him "Lotsa Luck!" with his impending "Four White Boys at the White Boys' Museum" show. That Bourgeois 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 a victory on the group's part (accounting for the "proudest memory" of Stein), but also signifies, to my mind, a kind of tipping point: a moment after which no one could plan an exhibition or a slate of exhibitions in the contemporary art world any longer without considering the gender and complexion of the participants, and having a compelling defense ready if those elements were homogeneous. Such self-monitoring newly became, in short, mandatory and reflexive, even within the most conservative bastions of the art world; "there is consciousness, where there wasn't before," as Stein puts it.[38] After the Guerrilla Girls' 2006 appearance at Tate Modern, the museum announced a women's initiative, Kollwitz notes.[39] So too, of late, have MoMA and the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris mounted various—exceedingly belated and at times (be it said) clumsily conceived—catch-up initiatives. Institutions can no longer hide 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, ideally innocent of gender and ethnicity. If the Guerrilla Girls alone cannot be credited for this momentous 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, Lippard saluted the Girls for having "the sense 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 unspeakable."[40] In the beginning, Kahlo recalled, "we really thought we were dealing with dangerous stuff. . . . If it were discovered who we were it would be like the end of our art careers."[41] For others, however, the main reason for maintaining anonymity was that "we wanted to keep the attention on the issues," in Popova's words; and, "we wanted the focus to be . . . not on our personalities or our own work," Guerrilla Girl 1 concurred.[42] 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 pretense," as Thomas saw it, "because anybody who was a Girl by 1991 would have added to their career."[43] For that matter, anonymity eventually became a kind of burden, especially to those Girls whose Guerrilla activities comprised the mainstay of their working lives as artists, as, in the case of Kahlo and Kollwitz especially, their Guerrilla identities came to far overshadow their other art-world profiles.

As it happened, the lawsuit ensuing from the split precipitated by Kahlo and Kollwitz (now the principals of Guerrilla Girls Inc.) led to many members' names being revealed, with Kahlo and Kollwitz themselves having been most conspicuously unmasked in a *New Yorker* article on the case.[44] In discussing her loss of anonymity, Kollwitz sounds terribly muddled: "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 . . ."[45] But this breach of the cardinal tenet of Guerrilla Girls membership infuriated 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

38. Ibid.
39. Oral history interview, Frida Kahlo and Käthe Kollwitz, 2008. In the same interview, Kollwitz mentions some feminist rumblings among the female curatorial staff of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, following a scathing Guerrilla Girls report on the museum published in the *Washington Post* in 2007. However, recent queries to Deborah Ziska, the museum's chief of press and public information, regarding any impending initiatives to better represent women artists yielded only the would-be anodyne assurance that the museum was "committed to acquiring art and presenting exhibitions of art of the highest quality and we continue to seek out historically important and outstanding works by American and European women for acquisition and exhibition." E-mail to the author, October 29, 2010.
40. Lucy R. Lippard, "Addendum" (1991), to "Guerrilla Girls" (1985), in *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art* (New York: New Press, 1995), 257.
41. Oral history interview, Frida Kahlo and Käthe Kollwitz, 2008.
42. Oral history interview, Elizabeth Vigée LeBrun and Liubov Popova, 2008; Guerrilla Girl 1, quoted in *Confessions*, 14.
43. Oral history interview, Jane Bowles and Alma Thomas, 2008.
44. See Toobin. Issues of territory and control, as well as of proper handling of revenue, reportedly factored in the split.
45. Oral history interview, Frida Kahlo and Käthe Kollwitz, 2008.

common consent, at the Getty Research Institute. In the end, only seven women chose to have their names redacted by Getty cataloguers, whereas fully forty women allowed their names to appear—perhaps with the view that remaining unnamed once others' names were known meant choosing an invidious position, or perhaps with a sense that the important chapters in the organization's life were behind it, or both.[46] 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 tendentious 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 gang of scolding, wisecracking women intent on airing their grievances, tallying violations of principles of equal treatment, and naming names of offenders, represent a welcome presence anywhere? Yet 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."[47] "We've got a huge audience, thousands and thousands of people," affirms Kollwitz, "We've gotten letters from all over the world."[48] And "Romaine Brooks" marvels that "women in Japan, Brazil, Europe and even Bali" were "interested in what we were doing."[49] Plainly the Guerrilla Girls—whom Lippard 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.[50]

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."[51] 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 entrench gender studies and identity politics within academia. But as the terms of gender studies became more specialized, nuanced, and complex, efforts to disseminate feminist messages to a general audience through grass-roots and activist practices regrettably fell by the wayside. Though they performed widely at universities, the Guerrilla Girls bypassed the high-flown discourse increasingly attaching to gender and identity theory, insisting instead on a plainspoken, often humorous approach geared to a general art public. That is how the collective's members drew their improbably substantial audience: by acting as gadflies, raising their bluntly, wryly feminist voices, and tirelessly taking to the road and the streets.

46. My thanks to Andra Darlington, head of Special Collections Cataloging and Metadata at the Getty Research Institute for providing me with this tally, with a list of the forty women who declined to have their names redacted, and with the aliases of the women whose names were redacted at their request. (Per Darlington, those women who could not be reached also had their names redacted, as a matter of policy). The short lead-time granted for the present essay prevented me from consulting the archive; its removal to Los Angeles might be counted a regrettable eventuality for the documentation of a New York City–based group.
47. Oral history interview, Elizabeth Vigée LeBrun and Liubov Popova, 2008.
48. Oral history interview, Frida Kahlo and Käthe Kollwitz, 2008.
49. *Confessions*, 17.
50. Lippard, "Addendum," 257.
51. Oral history interview, Zora Neale Hurston and Agnes Martin, 2008.

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