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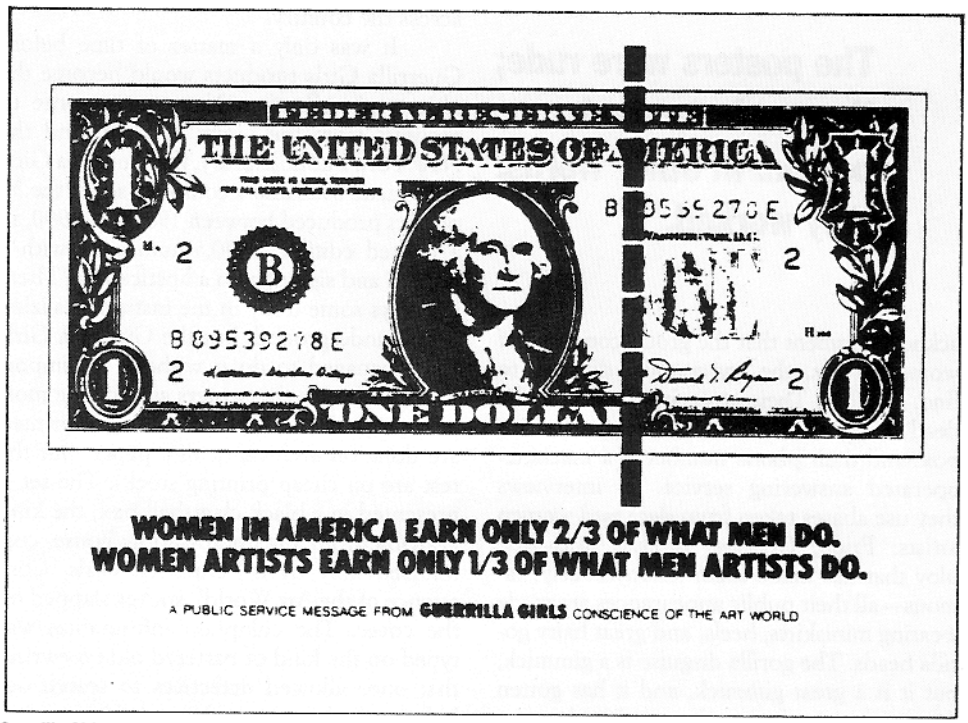
Guerrilla Girls



Guerrilla Girls poster, 1985.

Probably the best-known American print of the 18th century is an engraving of the 1770 Boston Massacre by the eminent silversmith and political agitator, Paul Revere. Revere is better remembered, of course, for his role in the Boston Tea Party, and as the man whose Midnight Ride to warn the citizens of Concord that the British were coming heralded the start of the American Revolution. (Longfellow, with poetic disregard for the facts, fails to mention that Revere was captured before he could deliver the news.) *The Bloody Massacre*, while dismissed by historians of art as "crude" and "self-conscious," has become a staple of museum collections because of its historical importance. Never intended as a work of fine art, it has nonetheless become a cultural artifact worthy of collecting. For all Revere's artlessness (or perhaps because of it), *The Bloody Massacre* was a highly successful rabble-rouser. Its comic-bookish combination of picture and text was easily understood and highly effective; the poster or broadside was the mass medium of the day.

Today's aspiring provocateur has a more difficult task, or in any case an immensely more expensive one. The audience is larger, but when a 30-second television spot can cost upward of half a million dollars, we may consider access to that audience severely limited. The means that are available and accessible to your average activist or artist—things like printed posters and pamphlets—have difficulty reaching a large enough number of people to be politically significant. The homemade poster has degenerated into the stuff of adolescent frustration, aimed at venting anger, or advertising bands, more than getting anything accomplished. And political art, limited to a few alternative galleries and side-pockets of museums, is usually in the position of preaching to the already converted. It sometimes seems that the most potent political use for art is economic: art auctions and benefit sales that convince people to part with money which they might not have, rather than to act where they might not have. (The portfolio put together to benefit the recent Harvey Gantt senatorial campaign—a portfolio featuring prints by Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Richard Diebenkorn, among others—apparently raised several hundred thousand dollars, though it did not succeed in unseating Jesse Helms.) One might despair that the confluence of art, text, politics, and effective marketing had dried to a stagnant puddle, if it were not for the Guerrilla Girls.

The Guerrilla Girls first made their presence known in the spring of 1985, with a poster that appeared all over the art turf of downtown New York. The poster asked the question, "What do these artists have in common?," listed 42 well-known male artists, and answered that they all "allow their work to be shown in galleries that show no more than 10 percent women or none at all." It was signed, "Guerrilla Girls, the conscience of the art world." Some of the artists named could probably have cared less about such things, but others prided themselves on their liberal, and even feminist, principles. A certain amount of mortification followed. They had, as the *New York Times* put it, "illuminated the gap between action and principle." Before the end of the year six more posters appeared. One of them listed the names of galleries that showed fewer than 10 percent women artists; another listed the names of critics who did not write enough about women artists.

The posters were rude; they named names and they printed statistics (and almost always cited the source of those statistics at the bottom, making them difficult to dismiss). They embarrassed people. In other words, they worked.

Speculation was, naturally, rampant as to who the Guerrilla Girls actually were (especially among those who had seen their own names plastered up). But beyond the

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acknowledgment that the group consisted of women artists, the answer was difficult to find. It still is. Their postering is done in the dead of night. Their address is a post office box, and their phone number is a machine-operated answering service. In interviews they use aliases taken from deceased women artists: Frida, Georgia, Louise. And—the ploy that has made them (anonymously) famous—all their public appearances are made wearing miniskirts, heels, and great hairy gorilla heads. The gorilla disguise is a gimmick, but it is a great gimmick, and it has gotten them attention of a sort that would otherwise be difficult if not impossible for politically correct women artists to attain. From inside their gorilla masks they have hosted panel discussions, sat in on symposia, appeared in *Vogue* magazine and on CBS television's *Night Watch*.

The Guerrilla Girls maintain that the masks are vital to their purpose, that they keep the discussion focused on the issues rather than on the art career, age, or physical desirability of the individual participants. And anyone who thinks such goofiness undermines the seriousness of their political commitments should remember that when Paul Revere and his buddies went out to toss tea into Boston harbor, they did it disguised as Indians.

Over the last six years, "public service messages" from the Guerrilla Girls have appeared as stickers, posters, magazine advertisements, Christmas cards, and videotapes. They have been funny, mean, shocking, cajoling, and almost always clever. Most have the studiedly undesigned look of 1970s conceptual art: black on white and set in that most generic of typefaces, Helvetica. Nonetheless, Guerrilla Girls posters have developed a look that is so instantly recognizable that when, in 1986, a poster went up reading simply "It's Even Worse in Europe," everyone knew what it meant.

The image (long legs, hairy faces, and pointed tongues; read: cute, smart, funny, tough) could not have been designed more effectively by a Madison Avenue P.R. man. The Guerrilla Girls idea has been so successful that it has spawned copycat organizations across the country.

It was only a matter of time before Guerrilla Girls products would become the objects of collection. Now, in response to requests from the Getty Museum and the New York Public Library, the Guerrilla Girls have made available a complete set of the 30 posters produced between 1985 and 1990, in a limited edition of 50,[1] numbered with a banana and signed with a lipstick kiss. There is always some irony in the institutionalizing of the underground, but the Guerrilla Girls have managed to do it without self-importance or denial: the posters are, for the most part, original (the few that had to be reprinted are done on archival-quality paper, but the rest are on cheap printing stock). The set is presented in a black clamshell box, the kind available from any photo-supply house, customized only by a "Guerrilla Girls, Conscience of the Art World" sticker slapped on the cover. The colophon information was typed on the kind of battered old typewriter that once allowed detectives to search out kidnappers based on chipped A's or misaligned D's. The proceeds from sales benefit their not-for-profit foundation, to finance future Guerrilla Girls activities.

The portfolio is obviously the work of a committee (the *New York Times* estimates three to four dozen Guerrilla Girls), and though the quality, approach, and effectiveness of the posters vary a great deal, there is a certain consistency of effect. The posters that work best are those that rely either on remarkable statistics (like the fact that in 1985–86 the number of women given one-person shows in New York City museums was an astounding 1) or on venomous sarcasm. The "Guerrilla Girls' Code of Ethics" includes the admonition: "A curator shall not exhibit an Artist, or the Artists of a Dealer, with whom he/she has had a sexual relationship, unless such liaison is explicitly stated on a wall label 8 inches from the exhibited work." And under "The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist," they listed "Not being stuck in a tenured teaching position," "Seeing your ideas live in the works of others," and of course, "Getting your picture in the art magazines wearing a gorilla suit."

The main objection to the Guerrilla Girl's statistical approach is the same as the main objection to Affirmative Action programs: that establishing a quota system is contrary to making decisions based on quality. But the Guerrilla Girls have a gift for unearthing statistics so wildly out of whack that the issue of quality becomes immaterial. One recent work calculated that for the 17.7-million-dollar cost of a single Jasper Johns painting, a collector could buy one work each by 67 major artists, including Mary Cassatt, Artemisia Gentileschi, Frida Kahlo, Paula Modersohn-Becker, Louise Nevelson, and Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun.

The posters that are least affecting are those that depend solely on the good intentions which are the stockpile of political correctness. One, headlined "We've encouraged our galleries to show more women and artists of color," is a roll call of major art-world names. This might be gratifying to those who get to show themselves off as good guys—especially if they previously found themselves on a poster for other reasons—but it makes for dull reading.

The success of the Guerrilla Girls is an affirmation of the political maxim, Think Globally Act Locally. They were lucky in the fact that their locale, the art world, is both geographically and culturally quite specific—making it an ideal mark for the geographically and culturally limited properties of the printed poster. In focusing on the particular bias problems of the art world, they punctured the "we're so different" balloon in which the art world is happy to float most of the time.

While their carefully preserved anonymity can, and does, offend many people (when slighted in public one usually wants to know who did the slighting), there is something wonderful about the fact that it is impossible to guess at what the career artwork of any individual Guerrilla Girl might be like, either in terms of character or commercial clout. In a funny sense it succeeds in preserving the sort of unworldly, disassociated state that is often considered basic to aesthetic experience.

Paul Revere, in addition to everything else, was a greatly gifted silversmith and designer. And the pursuit of rabble-rousing graphics, midnight rides, and disguises is more than playing games. It's an American tradition. □

[1]The posters are usually printed up in batches of 500. The "limited edition" refers to the complete set, each of which is stamped with a banana and numbered on the back. Some of the 30 were originally printed as stickers or magazine advertisements, and are here reprinted as posters.