



# **GUERRILLA GIRLS** REINVENTING THE "F" WORD — FEMINISM!

BOX 1256 KNICKERBOCKER STATION • NY, NY 10002

[www.guerrillagirls.com](http://www.guerrillagirls.com)

[gg@guerrillagirls.com](mailto:gg@guerrillagirls.com)

## **SCHOOL OF THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS MAY 22 2010**

I bet this is the first time a woman wearing a gorilla mask has ever given a commencement address. If this makes it into Ripley's Believe it or Not, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago should get an award for taking the leap. It's delicious that an anonymous, masked artist is speaking to you today, when the art world still clings to the outmoded idea that art has to be about the individual — one great genius after another, creating entirely original work, passing the mantle on to the next genius, forming a master narrative that tells the history of our culture. And, ok, these geniuses are mostly pale and mostly male. So, what are the rest of us, including the 67% of Art Institute students who happen to be female, to do?

In 1985, we got the idea to put up two posters on the streets of NY about the state of women artists in the New York Art world. It wasn't a pretty picture. But we had a philosophy about how to construct political art — to twist an issue around and present it in a way that hadn't been seen before. Who knew that our work would cause all hell to break loose? Who knew it would cause a major crisis of conscience about diversity in the art world, a subject museums, collectors and critics had ignored and denied for a long, long time. Now, it's a no brainer.... you can't tell the story of a culture without all the voices in it.

Who knew that those two posters would lead to hundreds of others, plus actions, billboards, sticker and books -- not just about about art, but about women and people of color in the worlds of film, politics and pop culture. Who knew that 25 years later we — the agitating outsiders — would wind up inside the museums we criticize: the Art Institute, The Museum of Modern Art in NY, the Pompidou in Paris... and be speaking to all of you today. The Guerrilla Girls have been so lucky to do this work and we're so grateful that thousands of people all over the world, aged 8 to 80, write us each year telling us that we inspired them to become activists, too.

We were just a bunch of girls who couldn't put up and shut up. We saw something that needed to be done. And we figured out a way to do it. We didn't have a plan but we had attitude and a strategy. We know that each of you in the Class of 2010 want to do great creative work and have strategies and attitude, too. We know you want to be the best artists, designers, writers, administrators,

architects, and educators you can be. But we also know that you want to do good in the world at the same time. We all have to. We can't not.

So today, as you go out to transform the worlds of art, design, fashion, architecture, art history, writing, critical theory, etc, plus fields that haven't been invented yet, I want to share some things we learned along the way.

Presenting:

### **The Guerrilla Girls' Guide to Behaving Badly (Which You Have to Do Most of the Time in the World as We Know It)**

**Be a loser.** The world of art and design doesn't have to be an Olympics where a few win and everyone else is forgotten. Even though the art market and celebrity culture is set up to support the idea of hyper-competition and to make everyone but the stars feel like failures, there's also a world out there of artistic cooperation and collaboration that's not about raging egos. That's the one we joined, and the one you can join, too. Get beyond the outdated assumption that only a handful of you will "make it." Don't all waste your time running after the same few carrots.

**Be impatient.** Don't wait for a stamp of approval from the system. Don't wait around to be asked to dance. Claim your place. Put on your own shows, create your own companies, develop your own projects. To steal a phrase from the Dalai Lama, "Be the change you want to see in the world." In other words, Be the artworld you want to take part in.

**Be crazy.** Political art that just points to something and says "this is bad" is like preaching to the choir. Try to change people's minds about issues. Do it in an outrageous, unforgettable way. A lot of people in the art and film world didn't believe things were as bad as we said they were and we brought them around....with facts, humor and a little fake fur. Here's a trick we learned: If you can get someone who disagrees with you to laugh at an issue, you have a hook into their brain. Once inside you have a better chance of changing their minds.

**Be anonymous.** You'd be surprised what comes out of your mouth when you're wearing a gorilla mask. We started wearing them to protect our careers, but soon realized it was one of the secrets of our success. Anonymous free speech is protected by the First Amendment. So join that long line of anonymous masked avengers, like Robin Hood, Batman, and of course, Wonder Woman.

**Be an outsider.** Maybe having a secret identity isn't for you. But even if you end up working inside the system, act like an outsider. Look for the understory, the subtext, the overlooked, and the downright unfair, then expose it. We've empowered lots of people inside museums, universities and film studios to jam their culture and dis their institutions.

**Lead a double life.** Be a split personality. Be two, three, four, five artists in one body, like me. I'm an artist / activist / writer / graphic designer. Be a hybrid. Hybrids are so green.

**Just do one thing.** If it works, do another. If it doesn't, try it another way. Over

time, we promise you it will all add up to something effective and great. Don't be paralyzed because you can't do it all right away. Just keep on chipping away.

**Don't make only FINE art.** Make some cheap art that can be owned by everyone, like books and movies can.

**Sell out.** If people start paying attention to you, don't waste time wondering if you've lost your edge. Take your critique right inside the galleries and institutions to a larger audience. When our work appears at venerable venues like the Venice Biennale, the Tate Modern, or The National Gallery in DC, we get hundreds of letters from people saying they were blown away by our analysis of art and culture.

**Give collectors, curators, and museum directors tough love:** (Bear with me, this is a long rant.) It's a pity that public art museums have to compete with billionaire art investors to own significant artworks. And then depend on those investors to donate the works! It's outrageous that art by women and artists of color sold at auction bring 10-20% of the price of art by white males. It's unethical that wealthy art collectors who put lots of money in the art market can then become museum trustees, overseeing museums that in turn validate their investments. What a lousy way to write and preserve our history! If things continue like they're going, a hundred years from now, many museums will be showing only the white male version of art history, with a few tokens thrown in. You need to keep that from happening. Make sure that museums cast a wider net and collect the real story of our culture.

How can you deliver tough love to the art world? Demand ethical standards inside museums. No more insider trading. No more conflicts of interest! No more cookie cutter collections of Art That Costs The Most (Eli Broad, do you hear us?) While you're at it, give some tough love to design and architecture, where women and people of color face a crushing glass ceiling. And finally, educators out there, don't teach a history constructed by corrupt institutions. Write your own!

**Complain, complain, complain.** But be creative about it. Sure we've done 45 feet high banners and billboards all over the world. But here's some simpler things we've done: Put anti-film industry stickers in movie theatre bathrooms, insert fliers with facts about art world discrimination into books in museum stores, send anonymous postcards to museum directors. Want more ideas? How about attaching political hangtags to items in clothing stores, putting up street art or billboards across from your office, slapping stickers on fashion magazine covers. You can probably think up a million better ideas than we can.

**Use the F word.** Be a feminist. For decades the majority of art school graduates have been women. Your class is no exception. But after school, when you find a too-small number of women and people of color in your field, especially at the top, then you know there's got to be discrimination, conscious or unconscious, going on. Don't just put up with it, say something. We think it's ridiculous that so many people who believe in the tenets of feminism have been brainwashed by negative stereotypes in the media and society and refuse to call themselves feminists. And guys, that means you, too. Time to man up, whether you're

female, male, trans, etc. and speak up for women. Women's rights, civil rights, and gay, lesbian and trans rights are the great human rights movements of our time. There's still a long way to go.

**And last, but not least, be a great ape.**

In 1917, Franz Kafka wrote a short story titled A Report to An Academy, in which an ape spoke about what it was like to be taken into captivity by a bunch of educated, intellectual types. The published story ends with the ape tamed and broken by the stultified academics. But in an earlier draft, Kafka tells a different story. The ape ends his report by instructing other apes NOT to allow themselves to be tamed. He says instead: "break the bars of your cages, bite a hole through them, squeeze through an opening...and ask yourself where do YOU want to go?"

Make that YOUR ending, not the tamed and broken one.

**Oh...And don't forget to have some serious fun along the way!!!!**