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Transgressive Techniques of the Guerrilla Girls

Author(s): Frida Kahlo and Kathe Kollwitz

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Transgressive Techniques of the Guerrilla Girls

Frida Kahlo and Kathe Kollwitz

The Guerrilla Girls' archive at the Getty Research Institute traces the feminist artist protest group's history in letters, minutes of meetings, drafts of lectures, fan and hate mail, photographs, drawings, working materials, and other unpublished writings, offering an inside look at this group from 1985 to 2000. On acquiring the archive in 2008, we asked Guerrilla Girls Frida Kahlo and Kathe Kollwitz to contribute to the pages of this journal. — Ed.

The Art of Creative Complaining

The poster below embodies our philosophy and exemplifies our strategy: how do you take a subject no one wants to be reminded of—discrimination in art—and present it in a way that can't be ignored?

When a Jasper Johns painting sold for \$17 million in 1989, then a record price for a living artist, we decided to go on a shopping spree to see what else the same sum of money could buy. We discovered we could purchase enough art by women artists, historical and contemporary, to fill an entire museum. What a great investment tip for art collectors! Too bad they hadn't thought of it themselves.

We're happy to report this poster is no longer accurate; women artists still lag way behind male artists at auction, but their values have appreciated considerably.

WHEN RACISM & SEXISM ARE NO LONGER FASHIONABLE, WHAT WILL YOUR ART COLLECTION BE WORTH?

The art market won't bestow mega-buck prices on the work of a few white males forever. For the 17.7 million you just spent on a single Jasper Johns painting, you could have bought at least one work by all of these women and artists of color.

Bernice Abbott	Elaine de Kooning	Dorothea Lange	Sarah Peale
Anni Albers	Loisiana Fontana	Marie Louise	Liu-Liou Pappova
Sofonisba Anguissola	Meta Warwick Fuller	Edmonia Lewis	Olga Rozanova
Diana Arbus	Artemisia Gentileschi	Judith Leyser	Nellie Mac Row
Veronica Bell	Marguerite Gérard	Barbara Longhi	Rachel Ruess
Isabel Bishop	Natalia Goncharova	Dora Maar	Key Sage
Rosa Bonheur	Kate Greenaway	Lee Miller	Augusta Savage
Elizabeth Bougeron	Barbara Hepworth	Lisette Model	Yvonne Stepanova
Margaret Bourke-White	Eva Hesse	Paula Modersohn-Becker	Florine Stettheimer
Romaine Brooks	Hannah Hoch	Tina Modotti	Sophie Taeuber-Arp
Julia Margaret Cameron	Anna Huntington	Berthe Morisot	Alma Thomas
Emily Carr	May Howard Jackson	Grandma Moses	Marietta Robusti, Titosetto
Rosalba Carriera	Frida Kahlo	Gabriele Münter	Suzanne Valadon
Mary Cassatt	Angelica Kauffmann	Alice Neel	Remedios Varo
Constance Marie Chappelet	Filina of Nimi	Louise Nevelson	Elizabeth Vigée Le Brun
Ingram Cunningham	Kathe Kollwitz	Georgia O'Keefe	Laura Wheeler Waring
Sonia Delaunay	Lee Krasner	Meret Oppenheim	

Please send \$ and comments to
Box 1056 Cooper Sta. NY, NY 10276 **GUERRILLA GIRLS** CONSCIENCE OF THE ART WORLD

Guerrilla Girls (American, est. 1985). *Racism & Sexism*, 1989. All photos courtesy www.guerrillagirls.com

Getty Research Journal, no. 2 (2010): 203–8 © Frida Kahlo and Kathe Kollwitz. The authors are members of the Guerrilla Girls; their names are pseudonyms



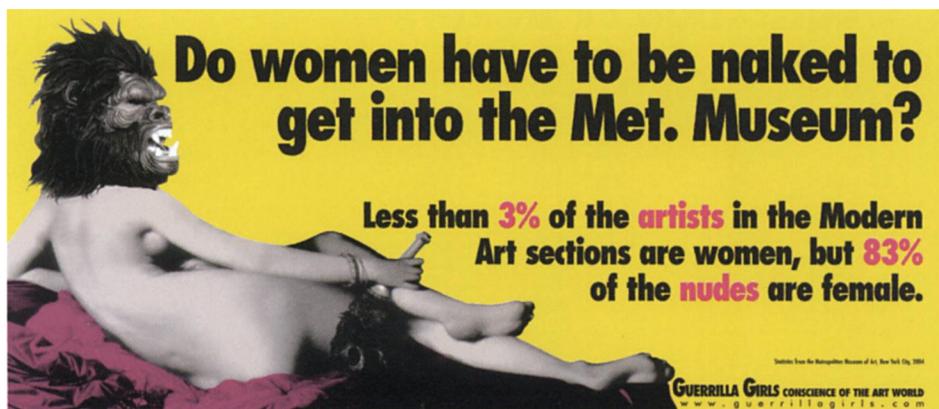
Guerrilla Girls (American, est. 1985). *Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get into the Met. Museum?* 1989

Facts, Humor, and Outrageous Visuals

In 1989, we went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to conduct what we affectionately came to call the “wienie count.” We tallied naked males versus naked females in the artworks to find out what this information might reveal. In the classical art sections, most nudes were male. In the early Christian department, we couldn’t find any flesh at all. In the Renaissance and baroque galleries, the only fully frontal naked figure to be found belonged to the baby Jesus. It was only when we reached the art of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when sex replaced religion as the major preoccupation of western artists, that we found our statistic: Only 5 percent of the artists were women, but 85 percent of the nudes were female.

We went back to the Met in 2004 to do a recount. We were sure things had gotten better, especially after years of Guerrilla Girls’ complaining. Here’s what we found: Fewer women artists but more naked males. Is that progress?

Guerrilla Girls (American, est. 1985). *Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get into the Met. Museum? Update, 2005*



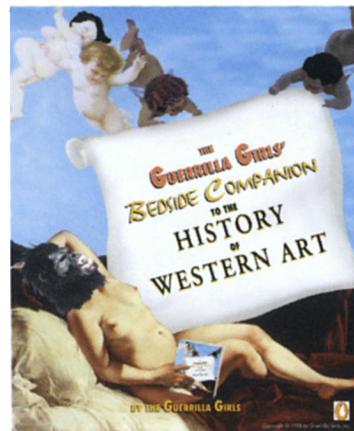


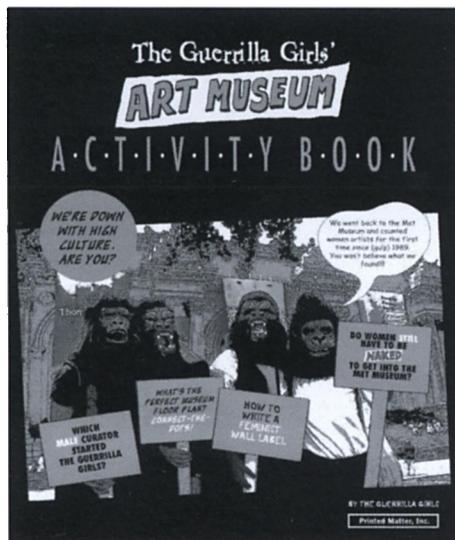
Guerrilla Girls (American, est. 1985). Altered art history texts (above left) and “Susannah Guerrilla and the Elders” (right). From *The Guerrilla Girls’ Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art* (New York: Penguin, 1998)

Reinventing the Textbook

After years of creating posters and billboards, we felt a need to go deeper, to look at some of the underlying causes of discrimination in art. We decided to write our own art history book, *The Guerrilla Girls Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art*. We wanted to present an alternative to other textbooks—and to retittle some to more accurately reflect their contents (above, left.)

When we thought about that big question “Why have there been no great women artists?” we realized there was another, even bigger, one to ask: “What happened to all the great women artists in history?” Our research showed that in every period of Western art history, there were women who figured out how to get around all the obstacles set up to keep them out of the practice of art. We wanted to tell their stories, like the one about nineteenth-century artist Rosa Bonheur. She needed to dress as a man in public in order to paint in the slaughterhouses of Paris without getting hassled. Cross-dressing was illegal, so she convinced the police to give her a special “permission de travestissement.”





Guerrilla Girls (American, est. 1985). Cover and Activity #5. From *The Guerrilla Girls' Art Museum Activity Book* (New York: Printed Matter, 2004)

ACTIVITY # 5: CORRECTING WALL LABELS



Those little labels next to the paintings tell as much about the person who wrote them as about the art they describe. Below is a wall label that hangs at the Metropolitan Museum in New York beside a portrait of Catherine Worlée (right), whose life it luridly describes.

Baron François-Pascal-Simon Gérard (French, 1770–1837)

Madame Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, Princesse de Bénévent (née Catherine Noele Worlée, later Madame George Francis Grand, 1762–1835), ca. 1808

This painting portrays one of the celebrated beauties of her time, Catherine Worlée (1762–1835). By the age of fifteen she had seduced her future husband, the Englishman George Francis Grand, an employee of the Indian civil services (as Madame Grand she was portrayed by Vigée Lebrun in an oval portrait displayed in this gallery). This was the first of a series of liaisons that culminated in her becoming the mistress and then the wife of Talleyrand, whose portrait by Prud'hon hangs nearby. Talleyrand tired of his pretty but frivolous wife, whom he had sent away in 1817. After residing in London and Brussels, she returned to Paris, where, separated from her husband, she lived a quiet and devout life.

The author doesn't say much about the painting, but sure lets us know what a slut Catherine was at fifteen, what a bore she became after forty, and how she mended her wicked ways once her husband kicked her out. But there's another way to look at Catherine's life. On the next page is the same info rewritten feminist-style.

Baron François-Pascal-Simon Gérard (French, 1770–1837)

Catherine Noele Worlée (1762–1835), ca. 1808

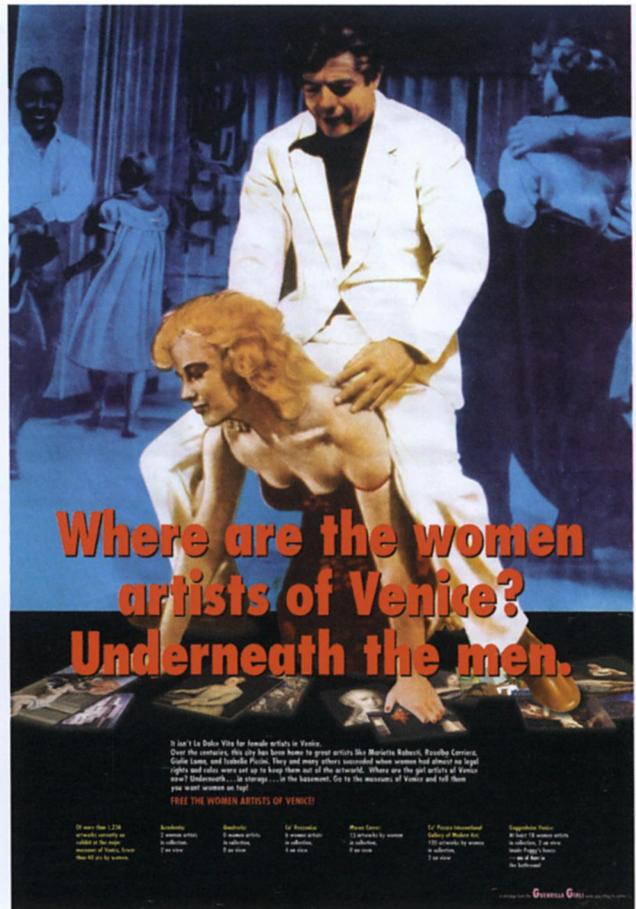
Catherine Worlée (1762–1835) couldn't wait to get away from her parents! With little choice but to submit to sexual advances that would today be considered statutory rape, she was forced to marry an older Brit with the hope he would take her somewhere. Despite her married state she had a sexually liberated life in Calcutta and London, where she soon became bored with her civil servant husband. She found her way to the intellectual salons of revolutionary Paris where her beauty and intellect attracted the attention of powerful men. She became the mistress of statesman Talleyrand, who helped her dump her dull husband and figured out a way they could marry in 1802. The corrupt Talleyrand became a political turncoat several times over so Catherine dumped him, too, had fun in Brussels and London, and finally led the life of a wise crone in Paris.

Now it's your turn. Find some wall labels at your favorite museum that could use a face-lift! Rewrite and send 'em to us at gg@guerrillagirls.com. We'll post them on our website.

My new, improved (feminist) wall label:

Repurposing Museums

We wrote *The Guerrilla Girls' Art Museum Activity Book* as a parody of those books museums sell to teach children to appreciate and respect art. However, ours encourages everyone to criticize museums. There are capsule histories, quizzes, puzzles, and ideas for actions, like how to write a feminist wall label (above).



Guerrilla Girls (American, est. 1985). Project for the Venice Biennale (two of six banners). Left: *Benevenuti alla Biennale Femminista*, 2005, 17 × 13 ft. Right: *Where Are the Women Artists of Venice*, 2005, 17 × 13 ft.

Infiltrating a Venerable Institution

Rosa Martinez, codirector of the 2005 Venice Biennale, invited us to do an installation of six, 17-foot-tall banners that would be the first things viewers saw in the Arsenale. First, we took on the Biennale itself, documenting 110 years of gender bias. But we

also declared it the First Feminist Biennale. It was the first time the Biennale appointed women directors. And, surprise! The exhibitions they curated had the largest number of women artists ever!

Then we looked at the historical museums of Venice. All, except one, had work by women in their collections, but most of these works were in storage, in the basements, not hanging in the galleries. We appropriated an iconic image from Fellini's *La dolce vita* and demanded that museums put more women on top.





Guerrilla Girls (American, est. 1985). Large-scale outdoor banners. Clockwise from upper left: Hollywood, California, 2002; Istanbul Modern Museum, 2006; Shanghai Art Fair, 2008; Witte de With, Rotterdam, 2007; Mexico City, 2006; Art Athina, Athens, 2006

Outsider Art

Over the past several years we've been faced with a big dilemma. What do you do when the art institutions you've spent your entire life attacking suddenly embrace you? The Tate Modern included an entire room of our posters in their 2006 rehang, and our work has appeared at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and at the Pompidou in Paris, and in many other exhibitions, both at museums and on the streets of major cities. So, what's a girl activist to do? We've agonized over it, but for now, we've decided we can't pass up these invitations; they are another way to get our work out to as large an audience as possible. Plus, we love to critique museums right on their own walls.