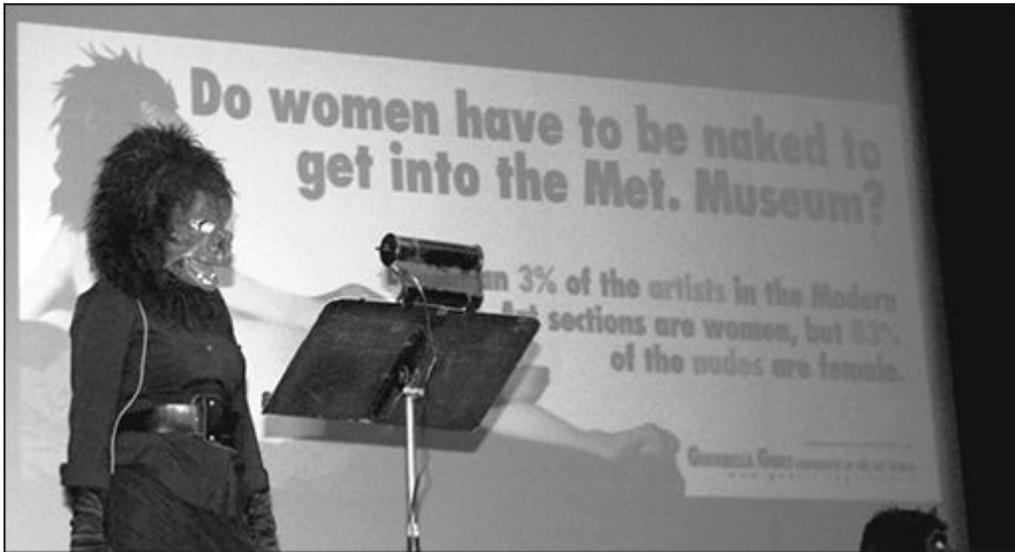


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Chelsea Now photo by Abby Luby

An anonymous Guerrilla Girl at the Brooklyn Museum of Art's award ceremony for the famous feminist art provocateurs.

Women artists of the world unite

BY ABBY LUBY

Over two decades ago a group of four women artists squeezed their heads into ape masks, climbed into ape suits and called themselves the Guerilla Girls. They started to publish posters, stickers and postcards with outrageous rhetoric, ranting against what they saw as sexism and racism in the art world. In the middle of the night, they would take to the streets and slap their fiery posters on public walls, mailboxes (a federal offense) and buildings; during the day they unmasked and watched people react.

Their popularity as masked avengers and do-gooders with “in-your-face” sarcasm and humor caught the imagination of not only women in the art world, but also the status quo. The posters blasted messages like “Do women have to be naked to get into the Metropolitan Museum?” or “How many women had one-person exhibitions at NYC museums last year?”

Eventually Guerilla Girl posters became billboards and were found worldwide. They began lecturing, performing and conducting workshops in universities and museums. As an integral part of the feminist art movement (think Judy Chicago), their work became part of art history curricula and has since been written about in doctoral dissertations. They've been widely covered in the national and international media and have authored "The Guerrilla Girls' Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art," "Bitches, Bimbos and Ballbreakers," "The Guerrilla Girls' Illustrated Guide to Female Stereotypes," and "The Guerrilla Girls Art Museum Activity Book." They've been recipients of numerous awards and honors and to this day, their true identities are unknown to most.

Last week, four of the original Guerilla Girls were honored at the prestigious Brooklyn Museum of Art, just the kind of art institution they railed about 25 years ago. They spoke to a packed auditorium as part of the museum's fifth annual Women in the Arts Fundraiser and later accepted the "Women in Arts Award."

Dressed in full jungle drag, they used pseudonyms of deceased women artists to keep their anonymity: Kathe Kollwitz, Frida Kahlo, Gertrude Stein, Alice Neel.

The Guerilla Girl calling herself Frida Kahlo talked about their history. "We started putting out our posters in 1995 because we were pissed off," she said. "In a few years we developed this crazy voice that was successfully provocative."

The Guerilla Girls' mantra was that the art world was dominated by men who were "too male, too pale, too Yale." Using statistics reflecting the low number of women artists in major museums, or the very few whose work was auctioned at Christies or Sotheby, people started to take notice. Eventually museums and galleries recoiled, seeking out more women artists. But was it enough?

Early on the Guerilla Girls sojourned to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and did what they called a "weenie count."

"We counted naked males and naked females in each historical era from the Egyptians to the 20th century."

Apparently female artists were totally lacking in many eras, and overall the numbers weren't that impressive. Years later, after the Guerilla Girls gained notoriety, they returned to the Metropolitan to see if there was more art by women. "We found fewer women artists, but more naked males. Our work has made a big difference in the art world, we hope," said the Guerilla Girl 'Kahlo.' "But old habits die hard and some museums still lag behind."

In 2005, the esteemed, century old international art festival, the Venice Biennale, invited the Guerilla Girls to participate. The Biennale had long been hailed by the Guerilla Girls for being male dominated. "We have been faced with a problem," said Guerilla Girl 'Gertrude Stein.' "What do you do if the system you've been attacking for years suddenly

embraces you?”

That year (2005) was the first time a female director headed up the Biennale. It was something the Guerilla Girls took some credit for, but it still didn't change their approach to large-scale art festivals.

“It's necessary to criticize museums on their own walls,” said Guerilla Girl 'Kahlo.' “We took on the Biennale itself, documenting 110 years of discrimination. We did an installation of six 17-foot posters. They were the first thing viewers saw when they entered the Biennale.”

For one poster they sought out women artists in all Venice museums only to find that their work wasn't exhibited on the walls but stored down in the basements. Addressing this appalling fact with biting wit was a Biennale poster using appropriated images from “La Dolce Vita” showing Marcello Mastroianni straddling Anita Eckbert on all fours. The words under the image read, “Where are the Women Artists of Venice? Underneath the men.”

Another poster laid out some harsh statistics about the Biennale itself. It said that from 1978 to 1995, men accounted for 90 percent of the work in the Biennale.

As full-fledged activists, the Guerilla Girls went after politicians, war, and poverty. “Many of us were activists in the world as well as in the art world,” said Guerilla Girl 'Kahlo.' “We were operating in an atmosphere of total disbelief,” added Guerilla Girl 'Stein.' “Everyone wanted to believe that the art world was a very liberal, open place and that it was ahead of the rest of the world. But every time we looked at the numbers we realized [the art world] was backward in the way that it treated women and artists of color. But eventually we did get apology letters from critics and curators who said ‘thank you for making me think of what I do.’”

In the end, the Guerilla Girls admit that more women and artists of color are a large part of the art scene, but their caveat is the higher you climb the art ladder, the less you see women artists. “This month is the big art auction month,” said Guerilla Girl 'Kahlo.' “Take a look and see how many women and artists of color come up at auctions and whether their work sells for the same prices gotten for works by white male artists. The situation changes — it gets better in some ways and worse in others.”