



Art Against Art: Looking at Selected Posters of Guerilla Girls in their Resistance Against Sexual Politics

Sarah Babu Paul

Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Anne's Degree College, Bangalore

ABSTRACT

Art has always been and is mostly seen as an elite commodity. Generating and engrossing art brings pleasure. Art sells but does the women artists benefit from it? “Complaining Creatively” was a unique campaign run by the Guerilla Girls that asked its followers all around the world to complain against the injustice around them in a creative way. Fighting or rather protesting Art by employing Art as the weapon drives the Guerilla Girls movement forward. The paper looks at selected stickers and posters produced by the Guerilla Girls protesting the discrimination towards women in the realm of arts. The paper aims at looking at the images and analyses the fact in it, bringing out the truth in the history of art and its false representations.

Keywords: Art, Guerilla Girls, Protest, Posters, Resistance, Sexual Politics

INTRODUCTION

Guerilla Girls is an anonymous feminist activist artist group that takes up the pseudonym of dead women artists and writers protesting against the inequality of gender leading to sexual discrimination in the realm of arts. They protest and resist against the misrepresentations of women in art museums and against the colonial male power that holds the art world. According to them, art should be about the common man's culture that they reflect out to the world. Their

methods of protest are by creating posters, stickers, billboards, books, photographs and by giving talks in art exhibitions. They employ humor and graphic images in distinct colors that grab the attention of the crowd all in hope to open the eyes of the corrupt. The word 'guerilla' literally means 'the action of freedom fighters', though the group 'guerilla Girls' were supposed to be called as 'gorilla Girls' because they wear gorilla masks in public, the misspelled word was later accepted by the whole group and it all fell into place. They take up names of artists such as Frida Kahlo and Kathe Kollwitz among other dead women artists who were not given importance when they were alive. Frida Kahlo was a Mexican artist who claimed herself as the 'daughter of Mexican Revolution'.

The origin of 'Guerilla Girls' took place in the year 1984 at the Museum of Modern Art(MoMA), where the exhibits of 165 artists were installed out of which only 17 amongst them were women and none belonged to the colored artists(Guerilla Girls). Alarmed against the sexism and racism in the art world, they began their resistance against the canonized art being exhibited in the art collectives. The canonization of art discriminated true art along with women and colored artists. They use satirical statements in posters and stickers that catch the eye of the curious mind and later brings thoughts and ideas in their subconscious, making them think about what really happens in the art world. The group also fights against sexism in politics and movies. They wear gorilla masks to keep their identity anonymous and not to let the discussions focus more on who they really are but rather on what they really want. This portrayal can also be seen as the acceptance of the 'grotesque' as Art. The images of the women are mostly portrayed as something romantic and as mostly feminine to the core. Here, the group is helping the audience to adopt and adapt to the idea that a woman's work need not necessarily be feminine but can rather be something 'grotesque'. Breaking the chains of the concept of normativity in the world of art, the group continues to create resistance against the inequality of the sexes.

The self- proclaimed concept 'the conscience of the art world', drives them forward. Art is supposedly meant to be something that talks to us about the cultural reality. Art reflects the culture and when it doesn't art becomes corrupted, leaves with a record of who was/is in power. Predominantly, Art has become a collection of record of who holds power.

LOOKING AT SELECTED POSTERS OF GUERILLA GIRLS

The Posters by the Guerilla Girls is a protest against the 'white male faces' in International exhibitions. The use of humor, sarcasm and truth combines poetry and visual art that seeks to make a reformation on how we perceive art. "The posters were rude. They named names and 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" (qtd. in Raizada). The honest representation of the way women artists and artist of color were originally represented in the art world was pictured in an easily understandable yet interesting manner through the works of Guerilla Girls. Their work of art is aimed against the discrimination that women artists and artists of color face in the art world (including movies) and politics. Their major projects were always aimed at bringing out the complexities of being a woman artist, how they are underpaid than the men artists, the discrimination against the artists of color and against "the super rich hijacking the art". The Guerilla Girls continues to hit the face of the art being rudely honest and clearly making a point on why they are here. Despite the criticism that still continues to hit them, they are praised and their works are ironically now part of exhibits in various parts of the world.

The paper looks closely at three Posters by the Guerilla Girls that to led discussions, debates and clashes in the art world, especially of that in New York. The first poster "Do women have to be naked to get into Met. Museum, 2012", gives a statistical report on the percentage of the number of women artists and the percentage of nude works portraying women. Interestingly, according to the data collected in the year 2012, the percentage of women artists in the Museum was less than 4% of the total artists and the nude exhibits portraying women was 76%. The poster is an adaptation of the famous painting "*La Grande Odalisque*" by the famous artist Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, with a few changes added replacing the face of the lady in the painting with a gorilla mask, a yellow bright background replacing the bedroom architecture in the background. The original painting is a portrayal of an Oriental concubine with elements of the orient fabric, a hookah, a peacock fan, a turban, huge pearls and a mirror.

Guerilla Girls seems to hit back at the most popular artistic exhibits, one of them being "*La Grande Odalisque*" by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres which is a very highly acclaimed and criticized work of the time as a nude painting. The word *Odalisque* means a concubine. The fact that only women who are pictured as concubines and evil witches were the subjects of the all the

highly acclaimed paintings is subtly satirized and mocked at through the poster, “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?”. The poster is confidently striking back at the face of male artists and male art curators on their taste of selecting art that majorly consists of women’s nude portraits. Women were only worthy of entering the art museums as models but not as artists. Women models became mistresses, housewives, mothers, lovers and witches through the works of men.

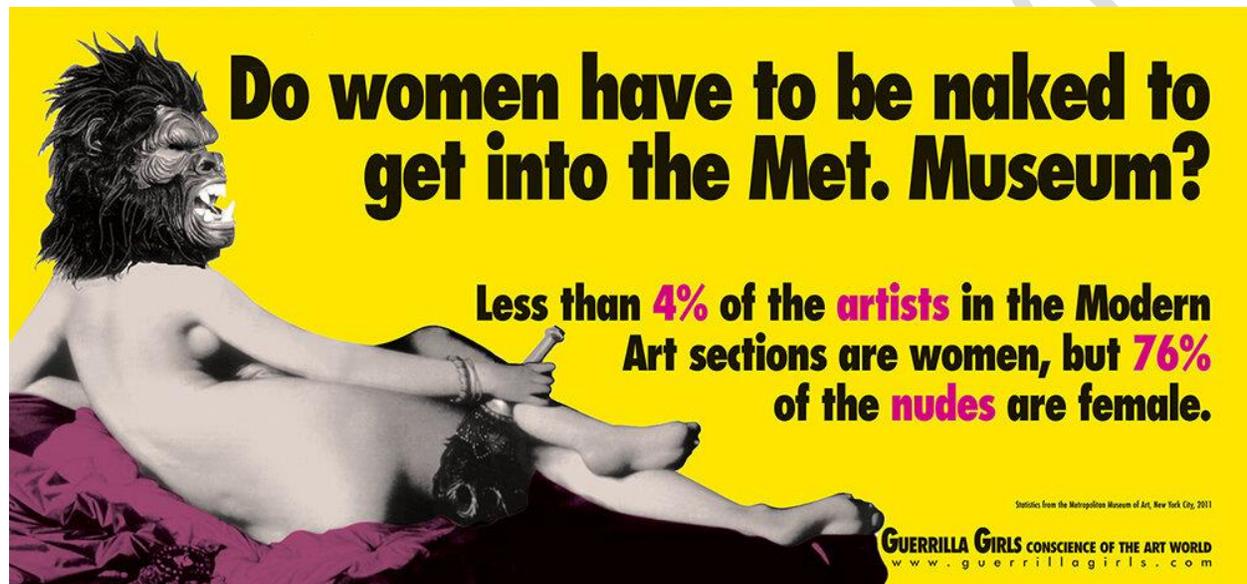


Figure 1. Guerilla Girls, Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum, 2012.

The second poster ‘*The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist, 1988*’ is both ironical and satirical. It is one of the most popular and most translated posters by the Guerilla Girls. It has thirteen points that suggest you on why it is an advantage to become a woman artist. Women artists ironically would never go through the pressures of achieving success because their works were never curated to be exhibits. In a world ruled by patriarchal norms, art was also never an exemption, since it exempted women from working together with men, never allowing the women artists a chance to show that they deserve it. Women artists have lesser job opportunities than men even in the art world. Women often had to take up 4-5 freelance jobs to make a living out of the art that they made. Since the opportunities for women in the art world were very less, it took them years to earn some reputation and recognition in the realm of art, which made their youthful years even harder. A woman’s art was always referred to as a feminine work and to have reflected a feminine attribute in them. Their works were misrepresented and misinterpreted,

providing them with even lesser chances of deviating themselves from being described as the 'feminine Other'. " Women's work was described as weak, pretty, fancy, sentimental, passive, hysterical, emotional, and lacking in creative imagination in contrast to men's work, which was labeled as strong, grand, forceful, powerful, creative, bold, intellectual, structured, and tough (Loeb, 1979, p. 161). Elizabeth Eberle in an interview says, "I saw an interview of the Kunsthalle Basel, Elena Filipovic who said that she cannot see a difference between the quality of a female and male artist's work." (Stegmuller). As a women artist's works are always manipulated, they either have to sell their work to others so that they can see their work alive. Women are also given the most 'sane' position to choose between their career and motherhood. The course of a woman's life is a sacrifice of her career and to choose motherhood instead. The Guerilla Girls criticises the mentality of the patriarchal society where the women are always expected to choose between art and motherhood. Women are often forced to work in shady rooms, where they have to attend to the homely duties that are expected of her.

THE ADVANTAGES OF BEING A WOMAN ARTIST:

- Working without the pressure of success.**
- Not having to be in shows with men.**
- Having an escape from the art world in your 4 free-lance jobs.**
- Knowing your career might pick up after you're eighty.**
- Being reassured that whatever kind of art you make it will be labeled feminine.**
- Not being stuck in a tenured teaching position.**
- Seeing your ideas live on in the work of others.**
- Having the opportunity to choose between career and motherhood.**
- Not having to choke on those big cigars or paint in Italian suits.**
- Having more time to work after your mate dumps you for someone younger.**
- Being included in revised versions of art history.**
- Not having to undergo the embarrassment of being called a genius.**
- Getting your picture in the art magazines wearing a gorilla suit.**

Please send \$ and comments to:
Box 1056 Cooper Sta. NY, NY 10276

GUERRILLA GIRLS CONSCIENCE OF THE ART WORLD

Figure 2. Guerilla Girls. The advantages of being a Woman Artist, 1988

Women artists like Louis Nevelson, Barbara Hepworth, Lee Krasner and other women artists were only recognized at a very late age. The work of women artists are rarely acknowledged or never acknowledged at all. A woman artist is almost always “given” the freedom to continue to practice her art because she is passionate towards it. Women are not expected to smoke “big cigars” or paint in Italian Suits because they are restricted away from all of the luxury that are wide open to men artists. Nora Smith in an interview that talks about “what it’s like to work as female artist in Switzerland” mentions how men expect the female artists to not be able to install their own art exhibits when the artists themselves know how it best works. Denise Bertschi, another artist who was part of the same interview comments on how she was not paid for her art and when she asked about it they responded that her caution meant that she was not from a rich family (Stegmuller). Women are always expected to do art for free because the normal concept relies upon the fantasy that women practice art for “killing time”. The patriarchal society has constructed the norm that women do not practice art for financial needs.

The third poster this paper looks closely is “Dearest Art Collector, 1986”, which comes across as a satire against the art collectors who curate their works on definite patriarchal lines. The letter addressed to an anonymous Art Collector has the drawing of a flower that has a sad face on it.

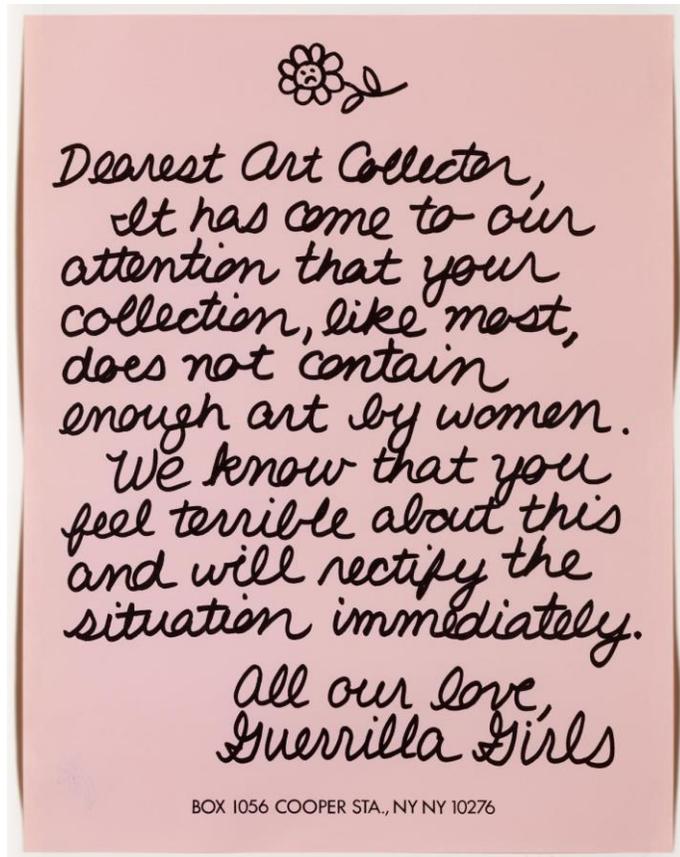


Figure 3. Guerrilla Girls. *Dearest Art Collector*, 2007

Written in cursive writing with a feminine background in the color pink the letter asks the art collector to collect more art work by women. Satire and humor works hand in hand in the poster. The poster comes across very subtly in informing the readers about the number of biased art works in museums and art exhibits. The poster at the same time denotes how art by women are unpaid because they are never bought. Art Collectors were a huge part of decision making that happened inside the museums. The competition that existed among the Art collectors themselves made the work of the highly praised male artists a rare commodity to be bought by them.

CONCLUSION

Did the movement succeed in giving out a message that they truly intended to see? The Guerrilla Girls movement comes across in a different way. It has changed and challenged the consciousness of the art world. The assumption that existed in the olden days were that the works

done by women artists and that of the artists of color were not good enough to be exhibited. The art historians who wrote and studied the art kept the women artists and artists of color away from the whole spectrum making it look like only white men were real artists. In an unpublished letter of David Bourdon, an art critic which is addressed to Cindy Nemser in 1971 he says "women artists have always been inferior to men artists"(qtd. in Nemser) Today, art has evolved but without a true reflection of the women artists and artists of color who could not come out in the open.

The work done by Guerilla girls has definitely made a change to that and is a protest against the white patriarchal supremacy. The moving away from the priestly language makes it easy for the audience to understand the message. They clearly send out a message that the problem did not lie within the women artists or the artists of color but was rather within the filtering system controlled by the hands of power. There have always been great artists but it was only a question of who filters them.

WORKS CITED

Anderson, Heather. "Making Women Artists Visible." *Art Education*, vol. 45, no. 2, 1992, pp. 14–22. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3193321. Accessed 9 Feb. 2020.

Jensen, Charlotte. "The Art movements of the 2010s". *Artsy*. 18 Dec 2019. <https://www.artsy.net/series/decade-art/artsy-editorial-art-movements-2010s> Accessed on 08. 2020

Guerillas in our Midst. Directed by Amy Harrison. 2019

Girls, Guerilla. "Do women have to be naked to get in Met. Museum", *Guerilla Girls*. 2012 <https://www.guerrillagirls.com/press>.

Girls, Guerilla. "Advantages of Being a Woman artist." *Guerilla Girls*. 1988.

<https://www.guerrillagirls.com/press>.

Girls, Guerilla. "Dearest Art Collector." *Guerilla Girls*. 2007.

<https://www.guerrillagirls.com/press>.

Nemser, Cindy. "Art Criticism and Women Artists." *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1973, pp. 73–83. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3331886. Accessed 9 Feb. 2020.

Stegmuller, Celine. "What it's like to work as a women artist in Switzerland" *Swissinfo.ch*. 14 June .2019. https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/gender-equality_what-it-s-like-to-work-as-a-female-artist-in-switzerland/45026312.

Raizada, Kristen. "An Interview with the Guerrilla Girls, Dyke Action Machine (DAM!), and the Toxic Titties." *NWSA Journal*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2007, pp. 39–58. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/4317230. Accessed 11 Feb. 2020.