

The Guerrilla Girls: 'We upend the art world's notion of what's good and what's right'

The art world rebels have spent 35 years fighting against sexism and inequality in the art world and they have only just begun

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Adapted by Fishtank Staff



The Guerrilla Girls: 'We feel museums have a duty to tell the real story of art history, not just the white male artist part.' Used with permission.

- 1 In 1984, a group of women in New York gathered outside the Museum of Modern Art as part of a protest. A group show, [An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture](#), was showing [165 artists](#), 152 male artists exhibited alongside just 13 women.
- 2 Outraged, they attended the protest, bringing placards and chanting outside the museum. But a handful of women within the larger crowd learned something.
- 3 "We realized it didn't work, nobody cared about what we were saying," artist Käthe Kollwitz told the Guardian (each member of the Guerrilla Girls takes the name of a dead female artist as a pseudonym). "We figured there had to be a better way of getting people's attention, to prove to people that the art world is not the meritocracy that everyone thought it was."
- 4 These women—and dozens more—would later fuse forces to become a legendary DIY art group, making a career out of the art of protest.

- 5 They're called the [Guerrilla Girls](#), a collective that has been active since 1985. Just recently, they have released a book, a retrospective of sorts, entitled [Guerrilla Girls: The Art Of Behaving Badly](#), which features over 200 artworks by the group, who have pasted up thousands of feminist posters across the globe, with scathing discrimination statistics.
- 6 "We wanted to see all our work together in one book, we haven't done a book like this," said Kollwitz. "It's a journey through our artwork, the same issues and political art we've been doing since the beginning in 1985."
- 7 The book attempts to rewrite art history that has erased female artists, as well as people of color, many of whom have been left outside of the art world canon—especially when it comes to museums.



Guerrilla Girls at the 2016 Women's March. Photograph: Courtesy of the artists

- 8 "We feel museums have a duty to tell the real story of art history, not just the white male artist part," said "Frida Kahlo," one of the group's co-founders. "Our goal is always to twist an issue around and present it in a way, so you think about it differently."
- 9 Their real names are secret and they wear masks, to "conceal their identities and focus on the issues, rather than their personalities," they write on their website.

- 10 Over the course of 35 years, more than 100 women have joined their collective, creating poster paste-ups, billboards, protests, books and projects, all armed with a feminist message, one aimed to trigger social change. Sort of like art world superheroes, they call themselves "feminist masked avengers."
- 11 Their formula is as such: "Writing a killer headline, using killer statistics and crazy visuals," said Kollwitz. "We really just kept on doing that. In time, it really has added up to something that has an effect."
- 12 It led to their early 1985 posters, which read: "How many women had one-person exhibitions at NYC museums last year?"
- 13 The Guggenheim, MET and Whitney were all listed scoring as "0," with the MoMA having a meager "1."

GUERRILLA GIRLS' 1986 REPORT CARD

GALLERY	NO. OF WOMEN 1985-6	NO. OF WOMEN 1986-7	REMARKS
Blum Helman	1	1	No improvement
Mary Boone	0	0	Boy crazy
Grace Borgenicht	0	0	Lacks initiative
Diane Brown	0	2	Could do even better
Leo Castelli	4	3	Not paying attention
Charles Cowles	2	2	Needs work
Marisa del Rey	0	0	No progress
Allan Frumkin	1	1	Doesn't follow direction
Marian Goodman	0	1	Keep trying
Pat Hearn	0	0	Delinquent
Marlborough	2	1	Failing
Oil & Steel	0	1	Underachiever
Pace	2	2	Working below capacity
Tony Shafrazi	0	1	Still unsatisfactory
Sperone Westwater	0	0	Unforgivable
Edward Thorp	1	4	Making excellent progress
Washburn	1	1	Unacceptable

A PUBLIC SERVICE MESSAGE FROM **GUERRILLA GIRLS** CONSCIENCE OF THE ART WORLD

Guerrilla Girls' 1986 Report Card. Photograph: Guerrilla Girls/Courtesy of the artists

- 14 Another poster the same year, took a stab at commercial art galleries, listing those that show no more than 10% female artists (or none at all). "All hell broke loose," said Kollwitz. "From the time our first posters went up in 1985, it was a breath of fresh air for artists who were struggling and not getting any appreciation. We keep making trouble, keep upending the art world's notions of what is good and what is right."

- 15 While the group has unveiled a dark side of art world, have they seen much change over the past 35 years? "It's always two steps forward one step back," says Kollwitz. "The changes aren't great, but we are in a moment where museums are playing catch-up and collecting work by artists of color. That's a change, but will they stick with it? Many of their collections don't have people of color or women at all."
- 16 In a [recent report](#), only 11% of art acquired by America's top museums, between 2008 and 2018, was by female artists.
- 17 Why would artists be so afraid to make trouble and speak up about this? "There's so few people who pull the strings, that's why," notes Kahlo. "It's a smaller place than you imagine when you climb that ladder."
- 18 One of the artworks in the book is a piece called the Guerrilla Girls' 1986 Report Card, which lists 17 gallerists and their representation of women artists. With cursive handwriting, each gallery is scrutinized for their lack of improvements in showing women artists.
- 19 "Diane Brown: Could do even better," they write like a fourth-grade teacher, comparing each gallerist with their programming from the previous year.
- 20 "Mary Boone: Boy Crazy," noting that she showed zero women artists over two years.
- 21 "Pat Hearn: Delinquent," the note, following the same pattern.
- 22 "It was a parody of an elementary school postcard," said Kollwitz, looking back. "We were always scolding the art world, so here we are being the teachers, showing how poorly they were all doing."



Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get into the Met. Museum? 1989. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

- 23 Probably their most famous piece is a 1989 poster of a reclining nude woman wearing a gorilla mask, which asks: "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met Museum?" detailing that: "Less than 5% of the artists in the modern art section are women, but 85% of the nudes are female."

- 24 In another piece, a poster from 1990, their Guerrilla Girls pop quiz asks: "If February is black history month and March is women's history month, what happens the rest of the year?" The answer: "Discrimination."
- 25 They have focused on the art market for a reason. "The art world has become a market-based place," Kahlo says. "We started going after museums, which are meant to be democratic educational institutions, because that's where art collectors go to appreciate the value of their collections and buy influence."

[Paragraphs 26–29 have been omitted. [Read the full article.](#)]



Guerrilla Girls in Onassis Cultural Center in Athens, Greece in 2017. Photograph: NurPhoto/NurPhoto via Getty Images

- 30 What also has changed is the role of the artist-activist, and the amount of resistance art that has sprung up under the Trump administration.
- 31 "Before, there was a lot of disbelief and antagonism to anyone standing up to institutions and calling out discriminations," said Kollwitz.
- 32 "It's an amazing time for activism," she adds. "There's so many activists in the political art and cultural realm, that we're all pushing progress forward and protesting all the horrible things that are happening."