Are you being served with a mask?
Lorraine Gamman ten years later on the Guerrilla Girls

After ten years of fighting sexism and racism in the art world, one might have imagined the Guerrilla Girls beginning to tire of giving men bananas. Not true. The familiar figures of these female masked avengers, clad in mini skirts and stilettos, are still at large confounding the image of female sexiness. In London and Edinburgh recently, the Guerrilla Girls energetically attempted to make feminism fashionable again by donning their costumes and playing to packed houses to promote their new book Confessions of the Guerrilla Girls.

One of the most enjoyable “confessions” was that the “guerrilla girl” image that has inspired so much publicity and attention came about accidentally. One of the original group of underground art activists was a bad speller and at an early meeting wrote “gorilla” instead of “Guerrilla”. It was an enlightened mistake because the hairy masks, that enacted the pun literally, gave the women the required anonymity they needed when making their assault on the New York art world. Using statistics and hard words (instead of heavier ammunition), witty poster campaigns attacking institutions that excluded women artists of colour immediately hit their targets.

One of the first posters created by the Guerrilla Girls was sponsored by the Public Art Fund. Unfortunately they weren’t impressed with the image based on Ingres’s famous Odalisque, saying that it was too suggestive and that the central figure appeared to have more than a fan in her hand! So Guerrilla Girls rented advertising space on buses in New York, until this was also banned. Undeterred, they went on to create another poster about censorship which, because of an accidental juxtaposition next to a Toyota advertisement that also tried to utilise the language of equal opportunities, achieved added humour.

Overall, the impact of the Guerrilla Girls poster campaigns should not be underestimated. In the early days, the anonymity of the organisation as well as the “in your face” nature of the words and graphs, gave rise to much speculation about the brains behind the masks. Their kudos increased when it was suggested that well-known women artists and curators as well as art students, featured amongst their numbers. Precisely who was gathering in hairy outfits and donning the names of dead women writers and artists in order to organise assaults on the virtually all white male art establishment became the question for much of the art world.

The poster campaigns were immediately followed by messages to individual collectors, dealers, curators and critics. The personal messages were often signed “A public service from the Guerrilla Girls”, and were found by some to be intimidating, but nevertheless a damn sexy female boot in the rear. Consequently, a legend was born. Hard facts coupled with streetwise copy and playful aesthetics gave the Guerrilla Girls a recognisable style that got them immediate attention and international recognition. Mockery and humour channelled female anger. In their own words the group learned to “fight sexism and racism in the art world with facts, humour and fake fur”.

Perhaps it wasn’t only the pranks and the graphic banana bombardments that gave the Guerrilla Girls space in the museums to make their views known. The fact that so many famous or powerful women were rumoured to be among the masked membership caused much paranoid speculation in New York. Who was watching whom? Under this sort of pressure the white male art bastion started to wonder whether senior female colleagues were by night masked avengers. Very soon Guerrilla Girls were being invited to make masked personal appearances everywhere specifically at these institutions they
had previously criticised or attacked.

Of course, success is the best revenge, but what sort of success did the Guerrilla Girls actually achieve? Apart from personal satisfaction derived by individual women from dressing up as female avengers to demonstrate female power and talent at large, how did all the activism, personal appearances across America, as well as over 50 graphic poster campaigns, actually change the situation for women artists and those of colour in the USA?

When I interviewed the Guerrilla Girls at the ICA in London they argued that since 1985, when they first started counting and turning visual pranks into equal opportunities assaults on the art world, their campaigns made a difference in America. No longer could women and artists of colour simply be forgotten. "We have made dealers and critics accountable ... and things have got better for women and artists of colour since then ..." argued one of their numbers speaking as "Frida Kahlo". Yet the statistics on the latest Guerrilla Girl poster undermines their idea of continued improvement.

It's clear that the headcount of women and artists of colour exhibiting at the Whitney today is better than ten years ago, nevertheless it is still less than inspiring. The figures are more optimistic than 1985 but the current numbers have decreased since 1993 (when most of the headcount appeared at the now notoriously "PC" 1993 Whitney Biennial Exhibition). So what has prompted the backslide? Have the Guerrilla Girls lost their energy? Are they still inspiring new or younger generations of women to fight for equality in the art world?

The representatives of the group I met at the ICA were full of enthusiasm and very positive about future campaigns. They certainly didn't accept my suggestions that the Guerrilla Girls have become an institution and are in danger of becoming token figures co-opted by large art institutions, rather than remaining a feminist force that makes male curators shake in their boots. When I suggested that the group has been more influential in terms of international design, rather than direct political intervention, I realized I'd hit a sore point. The two charming women, whose eyes I could just about see peering out from behind their masks, at once became tetchy. These particular Guerrillas did not agree at all that their aesthetics, like so many other postmodern aesthetics, could easily be separated from the political content that generated them. In fact, they refused to believe that Guerrilla Girl politics could ever be simply “overlooked” by collectors of past or recent “subversive” artifacts.

G: I don’t think there’s a way to separate what our posters look like from the content that’s in them. From the very beginning we wanted the look of the poster to be very direct and very sort of “in your face” and we really haven’t laboured a lot over the design of them. It’s just been very straightforward. From the beginning we wanted to be very quick and very fast. What we appropriated were the techniques of advertising in order to change people’s minds and also to get their attention. We really were working with time, with quickness ...

Perhaps it is because New York has that feeling, that energy, that urgency, that you have to get things done. In Britain you might have a meeting and discuss it, and then decide whose going to do it, and it just all takes too long. One of the reasons for our success is because we’ve learned to be succinct.

LG: Because your approach has been influenced by graphic specialists within your number?

G: Maybe yes, maybe no. The Girls are very good at lots of things ...

LG: Many of your posters use graphs or “agit-prop” techniques — a style that imploded into the art world in the 1980s (Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer and later by AIDS activists.) These technologies were also redefined by mainstream advertising in this period, companies like Benetton are known for adopting Guerrilla Girl style graphics. They have become part of the language of contemporary advertising...
... what do you think about that?

G: Well, I think there’s always a flow of ideas back and forth between the art world and the advertising world. Yes, of course we think that David Letterman stole our idea of doing the “top ten” this and the “top ten” that. Although I think our lists are more funny than his. Actually, his are usually flatfooted.

The Guerrilla Girl style was originally about cheapness and accessibility. Our original posters were letterset, in black and white. Now we are expanding the medium and going onto cd-rom. Hotflashes, the Guerrilla Girl newsletter, is already on the Internet, and we are working on other historical projects ... In fact we have been approached to work on cd-rom to write a women’s history of art for museums, which we are excited about.

LG: But what keeps you going and stops you thinking that your “success” might just be part of the institutional recuperation or co-opting of feminism?

G: Just that we can see that we are making progress ... There are also our meetings and our thousands of supporters that keep us together. In a way we sort of symbolise the secret rage of women, and we are saying things for them that some of them can’t say without a mask on?

LG: But is it all women you work for. Don’t you think the situation of women’s art in Britain is different compared to America?

G: I think the main differences are about economics and the way art is distributed. The economics of contemporary art in New York tends to be worse than the rest of the world because it’s money orientated. It’s really impure, it’s really corrupted by money. So there’s an opportunity in a place like London. If the art market is not market-driven in London, you have an opportunity for a little more purity. Purity is probably the wrong word ... honesty might be nearer it.

Each culture has its own weaknesses and it’s these you have to attack. You know, the American weakness is that we can go right out there only equating art in terms of money – and many of our posters have challenged that.

G: Why don’t you ask Fanny Adams that. We don’t know. (Long pause). Let’s not focus on Fanny Adams because I think I’ve noticed here in England is that feminists love to fight with one another, which is a way of losing their power because their solidarity falls apart. They are constantly trying to discover the perfect position for themselves at the expense of someone else’s position, rather than saying that there are many points of view and so what can we do together.

LG: The reason to focus on Fanny Adams is not to be defeatist, but to raise appropriate questions about different or specific contexts of information. American feminism may not always be completely relevant here! Whether British women can, or how they should, make political interventions has to be reviewed in terms of their specific context, doesn’t it?

G: Yes. Lets say: “Please Fanny Adams wherever you are come back!” Or to anyone else out there ... Buy our books and steal our ideas. You won’t sue you – do it your own way. You don’t need us ... steal ideas from any group that inspires you. Just remember to have a good time when doing it.

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*See Issue 60 of WAM for interview with Guerrilla Girls before their anniversary.