“Gertrude Stein” et alia

Guerrilla Girls and Guerrilla Girls BroadBand: Inside Story

The year 2011 marks the tenth anniversary of the founding of Guerrilla Girls BroadBand.

In the current upsurge of young collective art practices, we saw fit to tell our cautionary tale for the benefit of others.

The life of any activist group is not only fueled by idealistic goals, but often full of internal power struggles based both on ideas and on personalities; this struggle between individual desires may dictate the group’s longevity. Ultimately people come and go depending on their commitment and their individual ability to stomach contentious conversation, the method by which the collective process moves forward. This contentious conversation can foster creativity, or it can serve as a destructive force for consolidation of power. The trajectory of the Guerrilla Girls, a group which included the contributions of nearly one hundred women who changed art history through their collective work, is an example of contention and regrouping that is pertinent to the renewed action and debate around collective artistic production and participatory practice. This is one founder’s story of the Guerrilla Girls, and of the emergence of Guerrilla Girls BroadBand as an effort to continue in the spirit of the original group.

The Guerrilla Girls was founded by seven women artists who met in the spring of 1985 in the loft of “Frida Kahlo” in SoHo. We were steamed because MoMA curator Kynaston McShine had gone on record to say anyone not in the exhibition An International Survey of Painting and Sculpture should reexamine HIS career. Of 169
artists in this show, only thirteen were women. Fewer than this number were artists of color, and none of these were women.¹

I recall that Frida’s original idea was to form a union to agitate for parity in the art world. But feminist demonstrations of the 1970s had failed to move public opinion, and somehow, in contemplating the absurdity of our condition as feminist artists, we hit on the brilliant strategy of naming names while maintaining our anonymity, all with a sense of humor.

“Liubov Popova” remembers that I, “Gertrude Stein,” came up with the name, Guerrilla Girls. I don’t remember this! What I do remember is that Lucy Lippard, the activist, author, and curator who devoted a decade to organizing shows by women, felt the term “girls” was demeaning to feminists and their high purpose; this was before terms like “queer” were reclaimed. An early Guerrilla Girl who was taking minutes misspelled the word “guerrilla” as “gorilla,” giving us the idea of using gorilla masks to maintain our anonymity. “Rosalba Carriera” hit upon the idea of taking the names of dead women artists to restore them to art history; this was also a time in which criticism was being leveled at H. W. Janson’s History of Art because of the dearth of women he included in the canon.

The early days were an exhilarating time. Our first poster was WHAT DO THESE ARTISTS HAVE IN COMMON? It listed prominent male artists who allowed their work to be shown in galleries that show no more than 10 percent women artists or none at all. We would go out on the streets in the dead of night with carts filled with posters, wheat paste, brushes. The 420 West Broadway building, where Castelli Gallery was located, was the center of the art universe, and the streets of SoHo formed a
neighborhood where we could efficaciously broadcast our ideas to the art public. Multiple times we were chased by security guards and police, and one night Rosalba almost broke her leg when she stepped in a hole in a loading dock. After that we hired crews of men to put up our posters for us.

In those early days, the Guerrilla Girls were invited to do a show at the Palladium, a club on Fourteenth Street in Manhattan, which was, at the time, the center of “cool.” “Ana Mendieta” ran the installation coordination. We invited artists whom we admired . . . but decided during this process that we should not champion individual women artists, but rather women artists as a class. We vowed not to do any more exhibitions, but to do projects that would instead focus broadly on discrimination in the art world.

Our process was to meet once a month in someone’s loft, have dinner together, gossip, and vet the poster and project ideas that had been developed in subcommittee meetings. “Elizabeth Vigée-LeBrun” was our first treasurer. She was married to a banker, so we were able to get a checking account even though we were an unincorporated collective; she would sign checks “Leo Castelli” or “Ileana Sonnabend,” or with the names of other famous art-world figures. Pretty soon we needed an archivist to keep track of all our posters, so “Alice Neel” stepped up to the plate. After we had done thirty posters, we decided to sell portfolios to museums; “Eva Hesse” took this on, working on commission; she additionally suggested we write to colleges and universities for lecture gigs, charging a fee for our services. Rosalba was our “gig girl,” who negotiated with venues where we did performance gigs. Our first publicist was “Meret Oppenheim”; she got us tons of articles and even appearances on TV. Barbara Hoffman served as our pro-
bono attorney, vouching for the unincorporated collective by signing a book contract with Harper Collins, and keeping the real names of the Guerrilla Girls in a sealed envelope, where they remain.

Perhaps our most famous poster is THE ADVANTAGES OF BEING A WOMAN ARTIST, published in 1988. The collective process takes time; we met for nearly a year at Liubov Popova’s loft to come up with the right balance between humor and hopelessness. Alice Neel took the lead in developing YOU’RE SEEING LESS THAN HALF THE PICTURE. In 1991, Alice collaborated with the artist Hope Sandrow, who was not a member of the Guerrilla Girls, in a project to create posters with homeless women initiated by the Artist & Homeless Collaborative: WHAT I WANT FOR MOTHER’S DAY. This project was among others in 1991 which examined issues outside the art world: “Q. What’s the difference between a prisoner of war and a homeless person? A. Under the Geneva Convention, a prisoner of war is entitled to food, shelter, and medical care.”

Not all of our projects were posters. In 1991 we did a billboard project at the invitation of the Public Art Fund, FIRST THEY WANT TO TAKE AWAY A WOMAN’S RIGHT TO CHOOSE. NOW THEY’RE CENSORING ART, with an image of the Mona Lisa with a fig leaf over her mouth. “Guerrilla Girl #1,” the only Girl who never took the name of a dead woman artist, managed the logistics of the billboard project. This was after our first design, based on Ingres’s Odalisque, was rejected. So we refashioned it as a bus poster; it stayed up for a little while before the bus company canceled our lease, saying the image was “too suggestive.”
In 1992, the Guerrilla Girls collaborated with another feminist activist group, Women’s Action Coalition, or WAC as it was known. When we heard that the inaugural show for the Guggenheim Museum downtown branch in SoHo would consist of only white men, Eva Hesse wrote a pink postcard which was given out to women, who mailed hundreds of them to the Guggenheim Museum’s director, Thomas Krens, and WAC staged a demonstration outside, on Broadway at Prince Street. We printed white paper bags with gorilla faces so everyone could be an honorary Guerrilla Girl for the occasion—and guess what? At the last minute, Louise Bourgeois was added to the exhibition.

The Guerrilla Girls made decisions by consensus, a time-consuming process. Only once did a poster, GUERRILLA GIRLS URGE DRASTIC N.E.A. CUTS!, which included the advice that guys should cut off their schlongs, accompanied by images of knives, make it all the way to print, only to get voted down by the group; this was the only time in my memory that we used a vote of the majority to make a decision. Alice Neel made the case that swayed the group’s opinion:

I did not think we should align ourselves nor mimic nor repeat any bad (mostly male) behavior. This poster gave the message that we were competing with men by using the tactics more associated with them—that we were condoning, on some level, violent physical behavior, because we were suggesting to them to cut their dicks off, in order to get our message across. Instead of enlightening them or offering another alternative to make a difference, we were lowering ourselves and
our standards. The truth is when it comes to this kind of behavior (the use of physical force or violence) women will lose. Also I did not think it was funny!²

I liked this poster because it contained the text, “YES! WE WANT EVERY PRICK IN THE ART WORLD IN JESSE HELMS’ OFFICE RIGHT NOW! We know this makes you nervous. It’s not easy handing your reproductive organs over to the federal government. But take it from us girls, you’ll get used to it!”

Questions central to our purpose were constantly debated: Was the focus of the Guerrilla Girls social justice within the art world, or within the wider world? We ended up doing both. Were the events we presented at educational and art institutions performances or lectures? In the late 1980s I invited “Claude Cahun” to join; she was an internationally recognized performer who helped us develop choreography and scripts. Could the group admit men as members? Claude proposed that a man—a very gentle, feminist man—be invited to join the Guerrilla Girls. This caused an outburst of tears from “Aphra Behn,” who was a survivor of domestic violence and did not feel safe with men in the group; thus, the idea was dropped. Should the Guerrilla Girls speak with one voice or exhibit differences of opinion? We always sent at least two Guerrilla Girls on gigs and appearances in order to demonstrate that there was a range of feminist views within the group. Last but not least, should we consider discrimination against lesbians as one of our concerns? There was fear of the being labeled a lesbian group, which in the social climate of the day might have caused us to be marginalized; consequently, there was constant debate and no resolution to this issue.
Should we encourage or discourage other groups from forming and using our strategies? We heard about a group in Texas called Guerrilla Gals, which sounded great. We also got missives from a group in California, Guerrilla Girls West, primarily made up of academics and not particularly funny. They were asked to cease using the name Guerrilla Girls. This made some members mad; in the words of “Georgia O’Keeffe,” “Whatever happened to the idea of letting a thousand flowers bloom?” The closest the Guerrilla Girls came to being inclusive of everyone who was sympathetic to our cause was a 1990 poster, GUERRILLA GIRLS’ IDENTITIES EXPOSED! in which were listed column after column of names (including our real names) of people in the art world who supported our aims.

The Guerrilla Girls were asked on every gig, “How can I become a Guerrilla Girl?” The standard answer became, “You can’t.” Instead, we urged people who wanted to join to look around in their own communities for artistic, social, or political injustices that needed to be protested and to form their own groups—but without using the name Guerrilla Girls. New members were nominated by current members and also mentored so they could navigate our boisterous process. Certain big-deal feminist artists were never invited because they were seen as lacking a sense of humor. Altogether, nearly one hundred women were invited to become Guerrilla Girls between 1985 and 2000, staying for short, medium, and long periods, sometimes leaving and returning—because once a Guerrilla Girl, always a Guerrilla Girl!

One of the most critical recurring issues was the lack of diversity in the group. The Guerrilla Girls was founded by seven white women, and honestly, we did not have many artists of color as members for many years. Artists of color who joined the
Guerrilla Girls often left after a few meetings because they could sense the unspoken hierarchy in the group; multiple women of color could not find a place and left to start their own organizations.

“Zora Neale Hurston” hung in there during the early years, and “Harriet Tubman” created a wonderful sculpture entitled Can You Score Better than the Whitney Curators? for our 1987 exhibition, Guerrilla Girls Review The Whitney. It consisted of a metal cone breast, the boob part of which represented the 72.29 percent white men in Whitney biennials, 1973 to 1987; the aureole represented the 24.31 percent white women shown during the same period; the nipple 3.1 percent nonwhite men; and the hole, 0.3 percent nonwhite women. Visitors to this exhibition in The Clocktower in Lower Manhattan were invited to shoot suction darts at the boob target.

Near the end of the 1990s, “Alma Thomas,” who had spearheaded the Tokenism posters and issue of our Hot Flashes newsletter, was frustrated by the hollow mentions of race in our work not backed up by consciousness or process within the group. After a text claiming that the issue of diversity had been addressed appeared in The Guerrilla Girls’ Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art, Alma brought articles by bell hooks and other authors to meetings in an effort to educate us. 3

This effort spurred an effort at the end of the millennium to keep our message current and our membership diverse. A number of new younger artists and activists were invited into the group—the “New Girls.” Many of these younger members questioned the traditional Guerrilla Girls formula of poster-centric messages, which was rooted in the power center of the art world located in SoHo. They saw that the globalization of the art world required new tactics and new ways of speaking to and with our audiences.
So, on the action front, Aphra Behn created a subcommittee of Guerrilla Girls concerned with injustice in the world of live performance and theater. In 1998 we wore black silk capes produced by “Rosalind Franklin” for our Tony awards action; they bore the legend “There’s a tragedy on Broadway, and it isn’t Electra.” About six of us stood across the street from where the Tony awards were being given to protest the fact that women weren’t nominated for Tonys because women playwrights and directors weren’t hired on Broadway. (It was on this occasion that the cops told us of a law dating back to the days of the Ku Klux Klan that states you cannot protest in masks.) This action was documented by *Mother Jones* magazine. The “Theater Girls,” as we became known informally, also produced some trenchant stickers that were posted in toilet stalls of theaters on and off Broadway. One said, “In this theatre the taking of photographs, the use of a recording device and the production of plays by women is strictly prohibited. — The management. During the current season this theatre will not produce any plays by women.”

On the virtual front, “Hannah Hoch,” a young web-savvy member of the Guerrilla Girls, asked at each meeting for the password to our website so she could streamline the cluttered design and make it more dynamic. At each meeting Frida said, “No problem,” but never supplied the password. This went on for two years. Another young member of the Guerrilla Girls, “Jane Bowles,” started putting “power sharing” on the agenda to our meetings in an effort to foreground the lack thereof in our process. No administrative process was ever instituted.

In a way, the Guerrilla Girls took pride in not having an administrative process, though this meant that the person who could yell the loudest carried the day. Minute-
taking was always haphazard, and we never followed Robert's Rules of Order or even majority rule to make decisions. Projects were developed by subcommittees and subsequently presented to the larger collective, which approved, changed, sent back to subcommittee, or killed the idea. At one point, Frida suggested a seniority plan: the votes of women who had been Girls the longest should count for more than those of women who had just joined. This did not go over well with the “New Girls,” the younger, energetic, and ambitious members of the group, and was never adopted.

Money represents power, and perhaps every collective struggles with how its resources should be spent. We made money from sales of poster portfolios to museums, from gigs at colleges and universities, and from donations sent (along with hate mail!) to our anonymous post office box. We spent money on paying Girls who performed on gigs, on the publishing and postering costs of our posters—and because all armies march on their stomachs, on the cost of food and drink at meetings. The Guerrilla Girls established a reimbursement policy for child care expenses, while the WAC collective did not. We could afford to be generous to Girls in need; the collective decided to give two thousand dollars to “Djuna Barnes” after she was burned out of her loft.

There was no process to rotate jobs among members of the group. If one or more members didn’t like the way another member was doing her job, there was no formal mechanism for change. Crucially, some of the jobs allowed for more control over the means of production than others. “Kathe Kollwitz,” who designed all the posters, kept access to those graphic files limited so all posters would have to go through her. (Kathe allowed Jane Bowles to design one project, an English/Spanish palm card for the 1996 elections.) Frida refused to share access to the website. Frida and Kathe did not want to
give up their power, effectively dominating and controlling the group’s production and presentation: they introduced the term “quality” as an excuse for those projects not realized. Ironically, this term was the code word traditionally used by art critics to exclude the work of artists based on color, gender, or sexual preference. The lack of power sharing and the fundamentally different interests and working strategies of the members were driving us apart.

After a March 1, 2000, meeting, five Guerrilla Girls, Jane Bowles, Claude Cahun, Hannah Hoch, Gertrude Stein, and “Irma Stern,” were “fired” by letters from Frida and Kathe suggesting we start our own group. Our first reaction was to laugh—what gave these two members of the Guerrilla Girls the right to fire us? But as it turns out, in 1999, without the knowledge or consent of the collective, Frida and Kathe had begun taking the legal steps necessary to trademark the name “Guerrilla Girls,” and, on paper at least, they owned the name and its use, and the legacy of a collective practice spanning fifteen years. March 1, 2000, turned out to be the last meeting of the Guerrilla Girls.

At first there were months and months of direct negotiation back and forth between the “Pink Slip Girls,” as we started calling ourselves, and Frida and Kathe. But there was no going back with such gaping differences of approach exposed; we decided to reemerge as a collective true to our personal and political ideals. Were we a wing of the original collective or a separate group? The name “Guerrilla Girls New Media” was OK with them, but didn’t sound very compelling to us. Now that we were divided, how should the ownership of the work we had been doing collectively be divided? And what about the archives of the Guerrilla Girls?
Aphra Behn decided to form Guerrilla Girls On Tour! to develop their own feminist theater style and to tour new comedies around the world. Sometime in the summer we hit on the name Guerrilla Girls BroadBand (GGBB). This name had the advantage of suggesting that the wide, networked world, including the art world, was our theater of action—and besides, we could call ourselves the “Broads”! The first thing we did as a separate group was write a constitution that would ensure diversity and power sharing. Irma, our first president, said, “If South Africa can get over apartheid, we can get over our differences.” We expanded our membership by reconnecting with Guerrilla Girls of color who had been disaffected and had left the group; “Josephine Baker,” “Julia de Burgos,” and “Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz” rejoined the Broads. We also recruited a diverse band of next-generation feminists to our cause.


The new site is about audience participation. So far, its most useful feature is a set of nine “Letters to Bad Bosses.” These are serious missives upbraiding employers for sins ranging from racial discrimination to taking all the credit for a team effort. . . . The new site is really a virtual performance venue, which is a more interesting aspect than the political side—who, after all, could argue against workplace equality? The Net is often perceived as a digital version of film, television or radio, but it also has strong ties to theater. As such, it encourages role playing by its users and relies on interaction with a live audience.
The “Letters to Bad Bosses” offer users a choice of hilarious accounts of grievances common among office workers, especially people of color and women, which can actually be sent to the offending boss anonymously via ggbb.org. The *Times* article attracted nine hundred thousand viewers in one day to our website and gave us a jolt of confidence to pursue our interactive activist agenda.

While GGBB was finding its footing, the tension among the various wings of the Guerrilla Girls took a legal turn. At issue was nothing less than the rights to the collective intellectual property of up to one hundred women who had participated in the work of the Guerrilla Girls. In September 2002, Guerrilla Girls BroadBand Inc. (GGBB) and the feisty Theater Girls, Guerrilla Girls On Tour Inc. (GGOT), were sued by Guerrilla Girls Inc. (GGI) over the use of the name “Guerrilla Girls.” Because GGI was suing GGOT and GGBB separately, we had to find separate attorneys, a difficult financial strain given our fledgling status. The lawsuit was settled after several years. In the course of it, Frida and Kathe’s real names were unfortunately published in an article about the case in the *New York Law Journal*, and subsequently in *ArtNews* and the *New Yorker* magazines.

One of the primary understandings which the founding Guerrilla Girls agreed upon was that anonymity would be an important strategy to shift focus to the issues we fought for, rather than the individual identities of the members. The downside of this strategy is that our individual efforts remain invisible to the outside world. You cannot list the shows and projects of the group on your résumé; projects realized for the group cannot help you get shows or teaching jobs. However, this M.O. has the benefit of equalizing the contributions of all members of the collective regardless of art-world
status. Rosalba Carriera’s brilliant idea of reviving underrecognized dead women artists by taking their names was another way that anonymity served as a powerful tool. So though it is understandable that two members who spent much of their professional careers devoted to an anonymous enterprise would want to have their efforts made visible, it was and is painful to see them claim credit for work done by so many others.

Following the settlement of the lawsuits, an Archives Committee comprising one member of GGI, one member of GGBB, and one member of the original unincorporated Guerrilla Girls collective was formed to review possible homes for our archives. Frida and Kathe placed conditions on GGOT’s participation in the committee, and thus they did not participate. We interviewed five and finally selected the Getty Research Institute because our materials would enjoy a strong art-historical context there.6

As the strain of the lawsuit abated, GGBB resumed its activities. In addition to the concerns about workplace equality that had led us to make “Letters to Bad Bosses,” the GGBBs were drawn to the then-taboo combination of feminism and fashion. In the same way that McShine’s International Survey at MoMA had been the last straw for the founding Guerrilla Girls, an article on young women painters which appeared in the New York Times Magazine was the last straw for the Broads: a photograph showed what Cecily Brown was wearing, without showing her work! We got steamed that women artists were still being judged on the basis of their sex appeal—the ability to manage your objectification was still more important than the work you made in determining the success of your career. This was a time when “postfeminism” was persuading women that we didn’t have to fight anymore.
GGBB’s website launched in 2001, and within a year, the Bush government started a war on the pretext of avenging the destruction of the World Trade Center; the whole political landscape changed. The Broads responded to Donald Rumsfeld’s call for Americans to protect themselves with plastic sheeting and duct tape with Fashion Fights Back, a line of clothing we designed and modeled, which exposed a lot while still using our traditional gorilla masks to hide our true identities. Another project to challenge the mainstream feminist direction in these early days of the attacks on Iraq and Afghanistan took on the alarming transformation of many feminists into gung-ho US warmongers on the pretext of saving the women suffering the horrors of the Taliban. After much debate we made a T-shirt with the question “How Do You Say Feminist in Afghanistan?” But in larger type in Arabic script were Farsi words that literally translate as “Defender of the Rights of Women.”

In 2004, George W. Bush was running for a second term as president of the United States. The GGBBs prepared THE ADVANTAGES OF ANOTHER BUSH PRESIDENCY, which existed as a downloadable online poster and as a physical poster which we plastered on the streets of New York right before Election Day in November 2004.

On November 9, 2006, the GGBBs launched BroadBlog as a forum for the discussion of activism, feminist history, gender equality, and pay equity; as well as the Iraq war, deforestation, immigration, and annoying terms such as “postfeminism.” Our audience and our issues had shifted from local to global, and the Internet had become our natural habitat. Meanwhile, America’s expanding wars inspired the GGBBs to develop physically interactive projects such as our Counter-Recruitment actions, which premiered
at the Bronx Museum’s 2008 exhibition *Making It Together: Women’s Collaborative Art + Community*. We restaged it for Creative Time’s *Democracy in America*, a giant show held in the Park Avenue Armory right before the 2008 elections, where our video, *GGBB Investigate Democracy . . . At the Beach*, directed by “Joyce Wieland” with “Edmonia Lewis,” Sor Juana Inez, and “Gerda Taro,” was also shown. In these participatory Counter-Recruitment actions, visitors are enlisted as Counter-Recruits. Encouraged to identify with a dead woman artist, they are photographed blocking the entrance to our fake Armed Forces Recruiting Center wearing gorilla masks and are sworn to protest the military’s practice of recruiting in high schools and colleges.

In the fall of 2009, CEPA, an art space in Buffalo, invited the GGBBs to come up with a new poster for the show *Conversation Pieces*. The poster, *THE ADVANTAGES OF NO CHOICE WHATSOEVER*, uses a version of the Buffalo transit map to ask, “Where to Get an Abortion in the City of Buffalo”—and shows there isn’t anywhere. It was displayed in bus shelters around Buffalo. This project inspired *Cartographies of Choice*, currently in development, which will be an online, interactive national map of abortion history, providers, and their local support networks, transforming dry facts into a speech-bubble narrative designed to appeal to young women. The Broads received a grant from the Open Meadows Foundation for this effort, which will unfold during the coming year.

On March 28, 2010, Yoko Ono Lennon gave Courage Awards for the Arts to the three active Guerrilla Girl groups: Guerrilla Girls Inc., Guerrilla Girls On Tour, and Guerrilla Girls BroadBand: “In recognition of their outspoken support for women artists, for challenging a male-dominated art establishment, and for their untiring efforts against
sexism. The Guerrilla Girls BroadBand have continuously provoked awareness of injustice, with humor and with courage.”

In conclusion, when years ago we sardonically said that “one of the advantages of being a woman artist is seeing your work live on in the work of others,” we never imagined that two women among us would exploit our efforts and misrepresent them as their own. In this article we have attempted to show the diverse contributions which lead to our collective work as well as the founding document that continues to guide us. The question of the balance of power between the collective and its individual artist members is a conundrum that drives some of the group’s most powerful works. We recognize the irony that the collective is only as strong as the sum of our individual contributions. Now that artist collectives are all the rage, we hope our story will invite dialogue among new generations of feminist collectives.

Bio

This article was written by founding Guerrilla Girl Gertrude Stein in collaboration with Josephine Baker, Aphra Behn, Jane Bowles, Julia De Burgos, Minnette De Silva, Chansonetta Stanley Emmons, Eva Hesse, Alice Neel, and Alma Thomas.

Notes


2. E-mail exchange between Alice Neel and Gertrude Stein, May 20, 2010.
3. The text, “A Woman by Any Other Name,” begins: “For years the Guerrilla Girls have been using the label ‘women and artists of color’ to describe the ‘others’ we represent. But we’ve always felt the phrase was inadequate because it’s unclear where women of color fit in: they are BOTH women AND artists of color. Furthermore, the history of Western art is primarily a history of white Europeans in which people of color have been excluded and marginalized. So, while we declare that when we use the word ‘women’ we mean ALL women, we wish there was a better term to express the diverse experiences of Asians, blacks, Latinas, Native Americans, etc.” Guerrilla Girls, *The Guerrilla Girls’ Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 8.

4. See http://ggbb.org/about/guerrilla-girls-broadband-constitution/.


6. In 2010, the first decade of GGBB’s archives were acquired by the Downtown Collection of the Fales Library of New York University, where they are available for research.

7. For more on the awards, see http://imaginepeace.com/archives/10507.