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Guerrilla Girls: Invisible Sex in the Field of Art

Guerrilla Girls is an anonymous collective of female artists, who declared a war against sexism and racism in the world of art and social life. The group came to life in 1985 in New York. It was created by seven women protesting against the exhibition *An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture*, curated by Kynaston McShine in the Museum of Modern Art. The exhibition, conceived as a review and a summary of current international art, presented the works of 165 artists, among which only 13 were women; even smaller amount had a skin colour other than white. As a sign of protest, the collective put up posters in the Soho district bearing the names of institutions that presented less than 10% of works by women, as well as of critics who wrote about female artists in less than 20% of their reviews. Bringing to light this inequality became the group's major goal.

The identity of Guerrilla Girls is unknown¹; they hide their faces behind gorilla masks, and they use pseudonyms – names of deceased female artists. During the 40 years in which they took action, over 55 women became members. According to a “founding myth” of this collective, the gorilla mask occurred as a result of a mistake. The name of the group – “guerrilla” – connected directly with the partisan-like way of taking action, was incorrectly spelled by one of the artists. This brought up the word “gorilla,” which automatically was seen as a perfect symbol for the collective (as it turned out – not for everyone).

Of central position among the tools used by Guerrilla Girls in their feminist fight have been statistical data and facts, compiled with visual materials. The quoted numbers were a result of research, mostly cited as the source of information. This was the reason why it was so difficult to undermine the credibility of the statistics, which depicted – among others – wages, participation in exhibitions, being represented in collections. These visual and textual collages became a basis for posters, stickers, books, T-shirts and gadgets; sometimes they were interpreted

¹ The issue of the collective's members' anonymity is described later on in the article.

in performance forms. The key element was the ironic humour. As Guerrilla Girls said in one of the interviews – it was a consciously chosen strategy, which was supposed to attract a new generation of women, disappointed with the previous methods of feminist actions. They chose humour as a tool, because: “if you can laugh about something that is the most brilliant [ploy] because a laugh makes everybody feel a part of the inside joke” (Chave, 2011: 104). A classic example, illustrating the GG’s sarcastic sense of humour is the poster *The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist* (1988), which mentions (among other titular benefits): “Working without the pressure of success,” as well as “Knowing your career might pick up after you’re eighty.”

In her description of the collective’s actions, Anne Teresa Demo diagnoses that they employ the strategy of mimicry and are largely founded upon the practices of historical revision and strategic juxtaposition. Mimicry can be found in Guerrilla Girls’ representation of womanhood and girlhood, drawing on its depiction by both the art world and pop culture, such as their association with the colour pink. As a strategy, mimicry is successful as a means of “exposing the harms of norms without being reduced to them” (Demo, 2000: 146). Another strategy point – historical revision – consists in the quest for rewriting art history and incorporating within its frames women who were never given their rightful spot in the canon. To reach this goal, artists published a book, *The Guerrilla Girls’ Guide Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art* (1998), as well as have used the names of deceased female artists. Strategic juxtapositions are revealed in the act of clashing quotations from institutions with verified facts about them, as well as contrasting popular symbols with the collective’s aesthetics.

The goal of the collective’s activities is to undermine the mainstream narrative by underlining its undertones and invisible aspects, or rather the aspects that are unnoticed – such as the issue of inequality. The works of Guerrilla Girls took on topics from outside the art field, although rarely. They were connected with women rights, social and political issues (for example, works made against George Bush and his ideas for education reforms or his military campaigns), as well as the movie business. The art world has still remained their primary field of interest. The Guerrilla Girls’ iconic work was their first colourful poster, made in 1989, after diagnosing that women’s art accounted for less than 5% of Metropolitan Museum of Art’s collection, while almost 85% nudes in the possession of the Museum presented women. The poster posed an ironic question: “Do women have to be naked to Get into the Met Museum?,” which accompanied a nude by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, titled *La Grande Odalisque*, in which the face of a woman was replaced by a gorilla’s head. Anna Chave wrote the actions of the collective into the frames of “institutional criticism” (Chave, 2011: 105), giving examples of works, where Guerrilla Girls uncover the connections between the art world and the business world, as well as *Guerrilla Girls’ Code of Ethics for Art Museums* (1990), in which one of the rules states: “Thou shalt not be a Museum Trustee and also the Chief Stockholder of a Major Auction House.”

Primarily, the posters and leaflets were meant to be seen in the urban area, however later on the collective found its place in the institutional space, carrying out projects for museums and galleries in several countries, among others in Mexico, Istanbul, London, Bilbao, during the Venice Biennale and in Krakow, during Artboom Festival in 2012. They were honoured with monographic exhibitions in Bilbao and Madrid, *Guerrilla Girls 1985–2015*, and a travelling exhibition: *Guerrilla Girls: Not Ready to Make Nice*.

The main goal of Guerrilla Girls was to make the scale and effects of inequality evident. However, the group also became the object of critical analysis.

The things that are less visible

The collective was rooted in the second wave of feminism, which evolved in the 1960s and '70s; the main demand at that time was to bring equal rights for men and women. The movement postulated (among others) tearing down sex discrimination, legalising abortion, making contraceptives available, and recognising domestic violence as a public, not a private issue. Many things can be mentioned in terms of what we owe to the movement's activists. However, since the beginning of the 1980s, second-wave feminism became a target of serious charges, especially ones concerning its essentialist definition of women's experience, and its characterisation from a white middle class and woman's perspective, coming from Western society and culture. As a response to such criticism, starting from the 1980s, a new, third-wave feminism started to evolve, sometimes referred to as post-feminism. It speaks on behalf of women previously omitted; it includes diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, religion, and so forth. How do Guerrilla Girls fit into this new perspective? It seems as if their practice has not been affected by the developments within feminism. The collective's members are being accused of essentialism – i.e. of being convinced that womanhood is a set of fixed qualities, shared between every member of this sex. This approach can be seen, for example, in the work that promotes an oestrogen bomb, which the world needs (*Estrogen Bomb*, 2003). This way, the work levels being a woman with having oestrogen, therefore omitting issues of gender, queer or transsexuality.

The charges concern also the group's structure, specifically its lack of diversity. It seems like the collective repeats and reflects the mistakes that they themselves previously attacked. It is difficult to verify whether these accusations are justified or not, due to the members' anonymity. It is evident, however, that the founders and initiators of Guerrilla Girls were white. Some of the group's members of different skin colour or who defined themselves as non-heteronormative admitted in an interview with Judith Richards, that they diagnosed their presence in the collective as a sign of tokenism (Hurstun, Martin, 2008). They felt their membership was a façade, which served only the purpose of proving that there was no discrimination in the group. The voices of each member were not equal. There appears to

be no room here for the musings of bell hooks, a pioneer of black feminism, who said that a fundamental matter for the evolution of feminism is the acknowledgment that there is a difference between individual experiences. She juxtaposed the oppression on the grounds of sex with other forms of submission, based on racist prejudice and class division. This is why the issue of equal rights should not be generalised into women's/men's experiences, because there are no common female/male interests. To strengthen the feminist fight against a dominating and oppressive order, hooks offers the category of "sisterhood," meant as a common movement created by people of different experiences, needs and limitations. Any presence of the idea of "sisterhood" among Guerrilla Girls is questionable.

The issue of the masks used by the members of the collective is also worth mentioning. The inspiration behind them comes from the figure of King Kong, a symbol of masculine power that objectifies a woman. It is hard to belittle the racist connotations that a gorilla mask brings. Suffice it to recall the historical context of the film's first version, which had its opening night in 1933. In the USA, it was a time of an active, although declining activity of the Ku Klux Klan, as well as a time of racial segregation. The character of King Kong was a picture of how the racists saw black people, treating them as crude, wild and threatening to white women. The inappropriate nature of the form that the collective's emblem holds is obvious, for example in the eyes of one of its members, an Afro-American woman who goes by the pseudonym Alma Thomas.

The main guideline for the group's actions appears to be the feminism of equality. GG aim to level the female-male proportions in both the institutional space – by presenting and collecting the works by female artists – and the space of art criticism and art history. They point out the galleries that omit to show art made by women (*These Galleries Show No More than 10% Women Artists or None at All*, 1985), as well as critics that stay silent about the topic of female art (*These Critics Don't Write Enough about Women Artists*, 1985). They try to revise the art canon and uncover the heritage of women's art. In an interview by Suzi Gablik in 1994, two members of the collective, who introduced themselves as Romaine Brooks and Guerrilla Girl 1, admitted that their goal is not to demolish or remodel the entire system. They called themselves pragmatics and explained that the institutional circulation of art does not seem to have an alternative (Gablik, 1994: 45). This resignation in terms of seeking a counterproposal for a system with patriarchal foundations, which was partially responsible for the fact that "there were no great female artists" (Nochlin, 1971), seems to be Guerrilla Girls' biggest weakness. In my opinion, a group that limits itself to a contestation of the lack of women in art canon and modern art only contributes to the legitimisation of the dominant order. By simply asking for change, it does not undermine the rules that lead to those oppressive exclusions.

Equally significant is the issue of the collective's members' anonymity, which – as they themselves confessed – allowed them to stay safe in the art world and provided them with a chance to continue their careers. If they were to uncover their

identities in the first years of their actions, they would likely be ostracised. The situation changed significantly in the 1990s, when – due to the collective’s popularity – revealing their identity could have helped their individual careers. Also, anonymity of the members was partially a fiction, especially in situations when they cooperated with institutions, which required them to disclose their identities (for example for the purpose of buying plane tickets). The groups’ subsequent actions were also a topic of discussion within the collective (Bowles, Thomas, 2018). Still, the artists use pseudonyms and declare that they want to focus on larger problems and not on the work by individual members (Gablik, 1994: 46). This leads to them working simultaneously as separate artists, acting under their own name and functioning within the current system. On the other hand, they criticise the foundations of this system. Suzi Gablik notices this inner conflict. She appreciates the collective aspects of the group and the fact that they represent non-individual demands. However, she also diagnoses that this communal dimension fades during the periods when the members are focused on individual careers, subsiding under the ideology of independent art.

The works of GG, such as posters, masks, books, catalogues and gadgets can be bought online; they mostly cost less than 30\$, but some of them became part of institutional collections, for example in Tate Modern. In response to accusations concerning their cooperation with institutions, Käthe Kollwitz – a member of the group – explained that it is dictated by the wish to reach a larger audience. She also explains that institutions are interested in their practices, because they want to change; it is a need coming from within museums and galleries, where employees “saw [GG] as a way to jump-start this” (Kollwitz, 2017).

It seems that accusations against Guerrilla Girls uncover a specific quality of the group’s actions. By that I mean bipolarity, which can be seen in many aspects. These aspects do not involve the differences within every collective, which is analysed in the context of social interactions and therefore cannot be seen as a “homogenous, unified body in which singularities are irrevocably drawn into an anonymous mass” (Block, Nollert, 2005:14). GG actually expresses this issue, sometimes accentuating inner tensions, different opinions on staying anonymous, or discussing whether their actions are art or activism. By bipolarity I mean the frameworks of the group’s strategy. Here are some examples. The collective uses devices typical for the third-wave feminism, which is “colourful (mostly pink) and self-mocking” (Graff, 2005). It uses specific resistance strategies, basing on aesthetics that draw attention; it works beyond the individual and creates a limitless work of art – constantly renewed and refilled. On the other hand, it is accused of embracing essentialism as a way of formulating definitions of the experience of being a woman in the art world – the biggest accusation against the second wave of the movement. The diversity among the group’s members was often questioned, or rather the intentions and methods of providing this diversity. GG fights against the art system, but only until it allows other women to become a part of it. They respond positively to invitations from museums and galleries, even though there is

a risk of their interventions being used in an instrumental way. It is worth noticing that the presence of Guerrilla Girls in an institutional program may as well be used as a way of proclaiming self-criticism and reformative efforts. As a result, GG reinforce the system and feel gratitude when it cares, even just a little bit. They legitimise it, performing within its space.

Revision

For almost 40 years Guerrilla Girls have been fighting an uneven battle against discrimination. After such a long time, questions concerning the effectiveness of their actions occur automatically. However, the questions are not about the group itself or the relevance of their work, but about the art field. It seems that the answer is an oxymoron: it is better, but still the same. This concern was expressed in one of GG's posters, saying: "Have many women had one-person exhibitions at NYC museum last year?" In 1985, the collective published relevant numbers: Guggenheim, Metropolitan and Whitney – zero, Modern – one; in the year 2015: Guggenheim, Metropolitan and Whitney – one, Modern – two.

It's Even Worse in Europe – claims the title of a poster from 1986, which was revised in response to a request from Whitechapel Gallery in London, which organised an exhibition of the collective's work in 2016/2017. Guerrilla Girls sent out a questionnaire to 383 European institutions, in order to diagnose the situation. They asked them about the gender of artists in collections and exhibitions, and about exhibiting works by artists from outside of Europe and North America. Only 1/4 of the institutions answered, which is already a sign of their attitude towards the issue. The results of the questionnaire showed that in the case of a 100 museums, only two had a collection that consisted of over 40% of women's work and that artists from outside of the European cultural circle are rarely shown.

If we listen to women from the very core of the art world, the voices are not comforting either. Laurence des Cars, the director of Musée d'Orsay and Musée de l'Orangerie, one of the few women in a very masculine world of people supervising art-related institutions, responded to the question about the lack of women in higher positions by saying: "It's a consequence of official institutions not reaching out to women enough, or not giving them enough confidence. We're talking about cultural habits that are deeply ingrained in our societies" (des Cars, 2018). Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, who is the director of Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art and GAM in Turin, Italy, presents a declining picture of the situation: "A disturbing fact is that in the past few months, most of the people being sacked or asked to resign from museums are women – Olga Viso from the Walker, Laura Raikovich at Queens, Beatrix Ruff from the Stedelijk, Maria Inés Rodríguez at CAPC Bordeaux and Helen Molesworth at LA MOCA" (Christov-Bakargiev, 2018).

Guerrilla Girls try to change the shape of those strong and grounded structures, while still remaining a part thereof. Any occurring changes are

time-consuming and barely noticeable. For example, the Museum of Metropolitan Art in New York, which has been the object of many critical actions by Guerrilla Girls, provides a series of meetings/walking tours of their collection, called *Badass Bitches*, organised by the group Museum Hack! The guides tell the history of Palaeozoic art, which was created by women, as well as of the significant influence that Camille Claudel had on Rodin's sculptures. Still, aside from the loud slogans and educational actions, only 6% of the art collection at the MET was made by female artists.

One of the most emphasised contributions of Guerrilla Girls is expanding the common knowledge on discrimination in the art world. However, I would like to stress the problematic areas of the theoretically positive effects of GG over their 30 years of activism. Due to significant negligence, the picture of inequality they tried to expose is not just incomplete, it is completely distorted. It becomes a cover for the true character of discrimination.

My main complain is triggered by the group's superficial way of handling exclusion processes, not noticing qualities like ethnicity, sexual orientation, education, religion, age, etc., which may influence the experience of alienation. There is no place for the idea of intersectionality, which is useful when researching how social categories intertwine and influence women's situation. The theory of intersectionality, brought to the scientific discourse by Kimberle W. Crenshaw in the 1970s (Crenshaw, 1989), teaches for example how the experiences of a white, middle class woman differ from the life of a black lesbian, not well situated and non-educated. While some of Guerrilla Girls' works take note of ethnicity-based discrimination, it is not enough. When discussing the group's actions, one cannot forget the criticism coming from within – the aforementioned confessions of black members, Hurston and Martin, who considered their own presence in the collective as a faux-membership. It is also hard not to notice the oppressive character of the gorilla-faced masks that obscured the activists' faces, which appears to be offensive only to people influenced by its negative connotation. Both facts show that while Guerrilla Girls declare to act on behalf of a wide array of women from the art field, they only speak from a narrow and privileged perspective of whiteness (Eddo-Lodge, 2018: 174–221).

The activists proclaim the idea of increasing women's visibility. While it is a highly admirable postulate, turning it into the only proposal of fixing the art system is a simplified vision. It levels the problem of discrimination with the issue of under-representation. However, the problem of alienation is so much more complicated and connected with structural ties and determinates of social life, such as race or class. To make a clear point: a postulate to divide the cake evenly does not change the fact that the recipe was bad. All things considered, I think that conducting any changes in the art system and fighting against discrimination within this structure requires including new movements and strategies.

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Abstract

The article focuses on an artist and activist collective Guerrilla Girls, created in 1985 in order to fight discrimination in the art field. It presents the group's strategies, using selected actions as examples. The article is also a critical analysis of the collective's achievements in the context of feminist theories, especially one concerning the relations between feminism and issues of race and ethnicity. The author is also interested in the connections between members of the group and the art system, as well as questions on sexism in the contemporary art field, after 30 years of Guerrilla Girls' existence.

Keywords: Guerrilla Girls, art activism, feminism theory, intersectional feminism, sex discrimination

Słowa kluczowe: Guerilla Girls, aktywizm artystyczny, teoria feministyczna, dyskryminacja

Katarzyna Maniak – received her Ph.D. degree in ethnology and cultural anthropology from the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland. In her research field of interest are forms of institutionalisation of culture and theories and practices of exhibiting cultural heritage. She is involved in many initiatives within the field of art and culture.