

Taste as a Political Matter: Coco Fusco on the Guerrilla Girls

“They taught me crucial lessons that have informed the way I make art today.”

BY COCO FUSCO

1985 was the year I decided that I didn’t want to end up teaching *Moby Dick* in Kansas and said bye-bye to grad school. I was 24 years old and every kind of social convention felt onerous. I returned to New York and let it be my laboratory. Wandering took my mind off a boring day job and tuned me in to political dramas that were unfolding—battles between homeless and the police, between poor but tenacious tenants and encroaching developers, between strident bohemians and cultural elites. From what I could tell, few below 14th Street paid attention to noise ordinances—parties were loud and street life was wild. I met a guy on the subway who wrote about art and music for *Condé Nast*, and I followed him into downtown Manhattan’s nocturnal underworld, leaving the day job behind. We boogied next to coked-up stockbrokers at Area, sipped cocktails at the Milk Bar across from a dazed but still beautiful Jean-Michel Basquiat, and chowed down with fabulous drag queens at Florent. On one memorable evening, we slipped past the bouncers at the Palladium, which was mecca for night crawlers of the time.

In my memory of that cavernous club, everything glowed—the crimson walls, the light-studded stairways, the spiked-up hairdos and the overblown eye shadow. Hundreds of trendies were chattering, smoking, snorting, giggling, lounging, and teetering on high heels, while rockers and artistes feted above and below us in their private sanctums. In the middle of the whirling bodies and blaring music there were ten women ironing clothes with gusto under spotlights in one area of the lounge. Several other women in gorilla masks were also milling around. The crowd around them had parted, creating the effect of a stage. I read their dramatic statement as a well-aimed zinger and was intrigued. Of all the strange encounters I had in 1980s pleasure dens, this is one of the only ones that I vividly recall, even though I knew nothing at the time about the political back-story or the performers.

The ironing performance, devised by Jerri Allyn, was part of an exhibition in the club curated by the Guerrilla Girls. The show also featured provocative artworks hung on walls of the bathrooms, stairways, and halls by the likes of Louise Bourgeois, Jenny Holzer, and Hannah Wilke, together with numerous works by Guerrilla Girl members. Inserting agitprop feminist art into a downtown pleasure dome was the Guerrilla Girls’ way of skewering the Palladium for owning a collection of art produced exclusively by men. It was my first encounter with a full-on feminist art intervention, and I was tickled and inspired. This was an activist approach that I could connect with, as it spoke truth to power playfully, with wit and style. The Guerrilla Girls’ ironic and data-packed posters detailing the ways that seemingly liberal art dealers and high-minded museums reinforced sexism by limiting the visibility of women artists were starting to pop up around Manhattan. They made me think about museums as more than showcases, as institutions that wielded power and shaped public understanding of what art was by virtue of what was left off the walls, not just what was on display. They taught me crucial lessons that have informed the way I think about art, the way I understand feminism, and the way I make art today.

Admittedly, I was primed for the Guerrilla Girls’ message, having studied many feminist texts in college; and even before that, I had embraced pop cultural celebrations of women’s lib as a teenager, reading Xaviera Hollander under a blanket with a nightlight. I knew that women’s

Launching with a **Jan. 21 kick-off celebration**, the **Guerrilla Girls Twin Cities Takeover** features events in the Twin Cities and Rochester through March 2016, including the Walker’s presentation of the 88-poster **Portfolio Compleat** in the exhibition **Art at the Center**.

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Guerrilla Girls Käthe Kollwitz and Frida Kahlo at the Walker Art Center, 2014

Photo: Gene Pittman



Mass ironing, orchestrated by Jerri Allyn at the Palladium, October 1985

Photo: Doug Vann



Hannah Wilke posters at the Palladium, October 1985

Photo: Doug Vann

bodies were objectified and exploited and that independence, sexual freedom, and equal pay were things one had to struggle for. But none of that showed me how to get a discussion going about how people's decisions in the art world, not just the content of artworks, affected the status of women as cultural workers and shaped aesthetic values. The Guerrilla Girls, together with other political art collectives of the 1980s, introduced me to a different kind of conversation about art, one that focused on institutions as social organisms that produced and reproduced ideologies with palpable effects. The Guerrilla Girls gave me a way to consider taste as a political matter. They used irony to make institutional critique entertaining and low-cost graphics to make it publicly accessible. The billboards and counter-art historical books they produced as the group gained momentum showed how fun and illuminating it was to poke fun at the cultural establishment. In doing so, they made a place for artists to be publicly present as thinking subjects, not just as crafters of beautiful things.

None of this may seem unusual in the age of social media, when anybody can fill thousands of email boxes with boldly designed political messages—and you can delete them before opening. But the Guerrilla Girls emerged in another time, when the art world was much more of an elite fortress that paid little attention to the public, when contemporary art was just beginning to make its way into museum collections and artists imagined they might have rights, and when people with a message who lacked access to mainstream media scribbled on walls, handed out leaflets, Xeroxed zines, and spray-painted subway cars. Exposing cultural elites with a humorous deployment of facts was risky enough to warrant the use of disguises, and in those days, it was actually possible to maintain anonymity. Indeed, the assuming of names of dead women artists extended their critique of art institutions, allowing the Guerrilla Girls to haunt the cultural sphere with memories of others who lacked sufficient recognition. Operating collectively not only enabled the group to benefit from a range of talents, which yielded artfully designed and incisively composed artifacts, but it also made them seem like a cultural sensibility rather than an individual whose criticisms might be dismissed as the effects of personal bitterness.

Twenty-two years after seeing the Guerrilla Girls in action at the Palladium, I was invited to be on a panel with them at MoMA's first conference on feminism and the arts. I was nothing short of ecstatic to be sharing the stage with such living legends—but I also sensed that their simian guises upped the ante as far as how to appeal to the public. So instead of walking on stage in an artsy black get up and reading a paper, I put on the military fatigues I was using for a performance about the joys of being a female interrogator in the War on Terror, and congratulated powerful women in the art world on having espoused conservative values that mask persisting inequities. I wasn't so much trying to throw down as to step up. To this day, the Guerrilla Girls remind all women artists that the most effective way to convey painful truths is to make them hilarious. It may take a while for those who hear you to change, but in the meantime, they won't forget.

Coco Fusco is an interdisciplinary artist and writer. Her latest book, *Dangerous Moves: Performance and Politics in Cuba*, was just issued by Tate Publications. She has performed at the Walker multiple times, notably in 2014 (*Observations of Predation in Humans: A lecture by Dr. Zira, Animal Psychologist*) as part of the exhibition *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art* and in 1992 (*Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West*, with Guillermo Gomez-Peña).

WHAT DO THESE ARTISTS HAVE IN COMMON?

Armen Jean-Michel Basquiat James Caspary John Chamberlain Sondra Cilis Francesca Clemente Chuck Close Tony Crag Ezra Cornell Eric Fischl Joel Fisher Don Hertz Futura 2000 Ron Gorchow	Keith Haring Royce Hunt Patrick Ireland Neil Jenney Bill Jensen Donald Judd Alex Katz Anselm Kiefer Joseph Kosuth Roy Lichtenstein Walter De Maria Robert Morris Bruce Nauman Richard Noosa	Claes Oldenburg Philip Pearlstein Robert Ryman David Salle Louis Soutter Peter Seal Kenny Scharf Julian Schnabel Richard Serra Mark di Segre Mark Tansey George Tooker David Trone Peter Voulkos
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THEY ALLOW THEIR WORK TO BE SHOWN IN GALLERIES THAT SHOW NO MORE THAN 10% WOMEN ARTISTS OR NONE AT ALL.

Guerrilla Girls, *What Do These Artists Have In Common?*, 1985

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Guerrilla Girls, *Do Women have to be Naked to Get Into the Met Museum?*, 1989

Photo: courtesy the artists



The Guerrilla Girls at the Walker Art Center, February 5, 1998

Photo: Walker Art Center Archives