

Sunday, January 4, 2004



By PHOEBE HOBAN

STRIDING through Chelsea on a chilly day in early December, two members of the Guerrilla Girls — fierce, furry masks topping off de rigueur black — drew admiring whistles from construction workers. “Hey, beautiful, I know somebody in Jersey related to you — my wife!” (Proof, perhaps, of the continuing need for feminist masked avengers.) And were greeted with solidarity by assorted gallerygoers, if not by all gallerists.

Frida Kahlo and Käthe Kollwitz — the group takes the names of dead female artists — responded as any celebrities might: they smiled (through their masks) and waved.

A woman with an infant outside the James Cohan Gallery on West 26th Street asked if she could pose with them for a Polaroid taken by her husband (who said he worked for Annie Leibovitz.)

A couple with a child-in-Snuggly at the Gagosian Gallery cooed admiringly, “We love you, thanks for your work.”

“Shalom,” came an Israeli accent from the back room of the Charles Cowles Gallery. “Are you really the Guerrilla Girls? I didn’t expect to see you here today.”

“We were just talking about you,” giggled Jessica and Shakti, 19 and 20, as they strolled into Metro Pictures. “We heard you had a new book.”

“I love the Guerrilla Girls, you’ve made my day,” said Jaclyn Mayer from behind her desk at the Mike Weiss Gallery.

What a difference a decade — or almost two — makes. Back in 1985, the Guerrilla Girls dashed through SoHo in the dark of night wearing their trademark masks, papering West Broadway with clever posters accusing the art world of sexism and racism. One of their most memorable, “Do Women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?,” depicted the famous Ingres “Grande Odalisque” with a gorilla head. Combining punchy copy, startling statistics and eye-catching graphics, they soon became collectors’ items. (Guerrilla Girl posters are included in the collections of the New York Public Library and the Museum of Modern Art, among other institutions.) In the 90’s, they branched out into books.

Phoebé Hoban, the author of “Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art,” is writing a biography of Alice Neel.

“The posters have to be pretty down and dirty,” Ms. Kollwitz said, “and we started to have a hankering to explore things a little more in depth.”

Their first book, “Confessions of the Guerrilla Girls” (HarperPerennial, 1995), covered their founding and first 10 years of existence, from the birth of their “maskulinity,” as Ms. Kollwitz put it, when one of their members misspelled “guerrilla” as “gorilla” — which coincided with their need for a disguise — to their hit parade of art-world posters. Their second book, “The Guerrilla Girls’ Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art” (Penguin Books, 1998), deconstructed the “stale, male, pale, Yale” perspective on art history.

Now this still-anonymous group of female activists (their number is also a secret, although Ms. Kahlo and Ms. Kollwitz, the last of the original founders, were willing to narrow it down to from 5 to 30 members) has gone almost mainstream. They have their own publicist and have just completed a 10-city tour for their third book, “Bitches, Bimbos and Ballbreakers” (Penguin Books, \$20), which examines female stereotypes. And the “delicious irony,” as Ms. Kahlo put it, is not lost on them that while once their anonymity served (in part) to protect the reputations of the members of an artists’ collective, these days being a Guerrilla Girl might actually be considered a good career move. “It’s a little disquieting that a lot of

Whatever became of the Guerrilla Girls, the furry 80’s art provocateurs ?

Ask their publicist.

people who hated us early on tend to be fans of ours now,” Ms. Kahlo said.

“Or say they are,” Ms. Kollwitz added.

Nineteen years after they formed in response to a major show at the Museum of Modern Art in which only 13 of the 169 featured artists were women, the Guerrilla

Girls, who called themselves “the conscience of the art world,” have become cultural icons. Their work is taught in art history classes, they are written about in doctoral dissertations and for years they’ve been regulars on the college circuit. Like any successful brand, they even have imitators and spinoffs, including a theater group called Guerrilla Girls on Tour, founded by a former member. But that doesn’t mean they’ve removed their masks or lost their bite.

One of their latest “actions” took place during last year’s Oscars. They commissioned a “Trent L’Ottscar” billboard, at the corner of Highland and Melrose in Holly-

Continued on Page 37

Masks in Place, but Firmly in the Mainstream

Continued From Page 34

wood, which reconfigured the statuette as the controversial senator and declared: “Even the U.S. Senate is more progressive than Hollywood. Female senators: 14 percent, female directors: 4 percent.” (The year before their billboard featured “The Anatomically Correct Oscar,” a pudgy white male statue shyly covering his genitals. “He’s white & male, just like the guys who win!” the billboard proclaimed.)

Then there’s the poster promoting a fictional movie, “The Birth of Feminism,” with Pamela Anderson as Gloria Steinem (who, according to Ms. Kahlo, initially thought the poster was real), Halle Berry as Flo Kennedy and Catherine Zeta-Jones as Bella Abzug. “It’s just like when we started in the art world, we’ve had a tremendous outpouring from women filmmakers of all sorts, because they feel afraid to speak up. They are not crazy rabble-rouser troublemakers and stealth bombers the way we are,” Ms. Kollwitz said.

And when Arnold Schwarzenegger was elected governor of California, the Guerrilla Girls instantly rose to the occasion with “The Schwarzenegger Shield,” admonishing “Don’t Let Your Governor Grope You,” which they proudly brandished during a reading of their book at the Central Library in Los Angeles the day after his election.

The Guerrilla Girls are already planning their next battles. They are looking at how to bring their subversive tactics to the music world. And they are working on their next book, a comic-style guide to New York City museums, which will accompany a show at a yet-to-be named art space.

“Things are better now than they’ve ever been and there are a lot of successful women, but the old stereotypes still hold,” said Ms. Kollwitz, over a snack of beer (sipped through straws) and French fries at the Half King, a Chelsea pub. “I think we do deserve some of the credit. We made it cool.”

“To complain,” Ms. Kahlo supplied.



Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?

Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.

GUERRILLA GIRLS CONSCIENCE OF THE ART WORLD
WWW.GUERRILLAGIRLS.COM

In one of the Guerrilla Girls’ best-known “actions,” they put a gorilla head on Ingres’ Odalisque to protest the lack of female artists at the Metropolitan Museum.

And complain they do. While they have been accused of whining (Hilton Kramer once called them “Quota Queens”), the Guerrilla Girls’ most potent weapon is their wit, which is still on ample display in “Bitches, Bimbos and Ballbreakers.”

The fashionably hot-pink book — like their others a slim 96 pages — started out as a joke, inspired by the notion that the stereotype of the wild and crazy Abstract Expressionist guy just didn’t fit women. “If a woman behaved that way, she’d be committed,” Ms. Kahlo said. But what was the equivalent for women? “We just started

making lists of female stereotypes, and it was hilarious. We did it as a goof, and it started to organize itself into categories.”

The book examines “The Top Stereotypes from Cradle to Grave,” giving thumbnail histories for cultural clichés ranging from “Daddy’s Girl” and “the Girl Next Door” to “the Bimbo/Dumb Blonde” and “the Bitch/Ballbreaker.” Each is given the trademark Guerrilla Girl treatment: pointed factoids and cool graphics.

Not all stereotypes are bad. In fact, some have been reclaimed over the years. “Bitch is the main one,” Ms. Kollwitz said. “A lot of

women looked up and said, ‘Hey, if a bitch is an aggressive, assertive woman who doesn’t take any lip from anyone, what’s wrong with that?’”

“And there’s a bitch empowerment movement in the United States right now,” Ms. Kollwitz continued. “I think the message is, understand stereotypes so you can play with them, you can use them, you can abuse them, you can take them into your person, you can cast them out. I say if you want to be a bimbo, be a bimbo, but understand what a bimbo is, and what you’re doing, and how you’re using it and how it’s using you.”

But there’s one stereotype that the Guerrilla Girls are making every effort to change. “The stereotype we’re trying to confound is the humorless, deadly, serious, whining, complaining feminist,” Ms. Kollwitz said. Or as Ms. Kahlo stated earlier, “I think you could say one of our largest ambitions is to make it fashionable and O.K. for women to say, ‘I’m a feminist.’”

As if on cue, a waitress, Dana Rebeiro, rushed over. “That last book you had, I just went to Barnes & Noble and heard the two of you. Right on! It was awesome. I’m an active feminist and I love you all!”