

# The Guerrilla Girls Are Still Relevant After All These Years



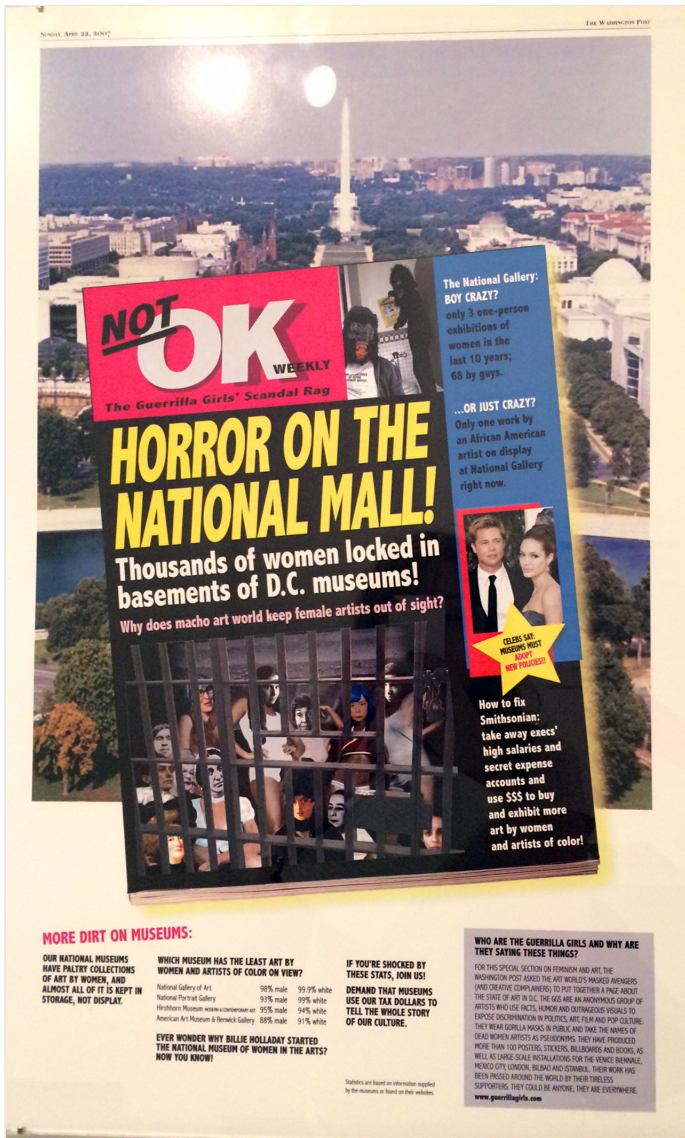
*An untitled Guerrilla Girls poster from 2011 (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)*

CLAREMONT, Calif. — When I first saw the work of the [Guerrilla Girls](#) in high school, I had a similar reaction as when I first read Linda Nochlin’s “[Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?](#)”: ashamed that something so obvious had to be laid out for me. Of course, societal norms prohibited women from pursuing their artistry to the fullest extent possible in the past, but now, I’d thought, things were different: female artists had solo shows at major museums, and powerful women worked as gallerists, curators, journalists, and tastemakers. But there’s something about seeing the black-and-white numbers presented by the Guerrilla Girls, usually in the form of accessible posters, that’s eye opening and enraging. It’s one thing to have a gauzy concept of past wrongs and present progress, quite another to know just how much the status quo is still upheld today.



*Installation view, 'Guerrilla Girls: Art in Action'*

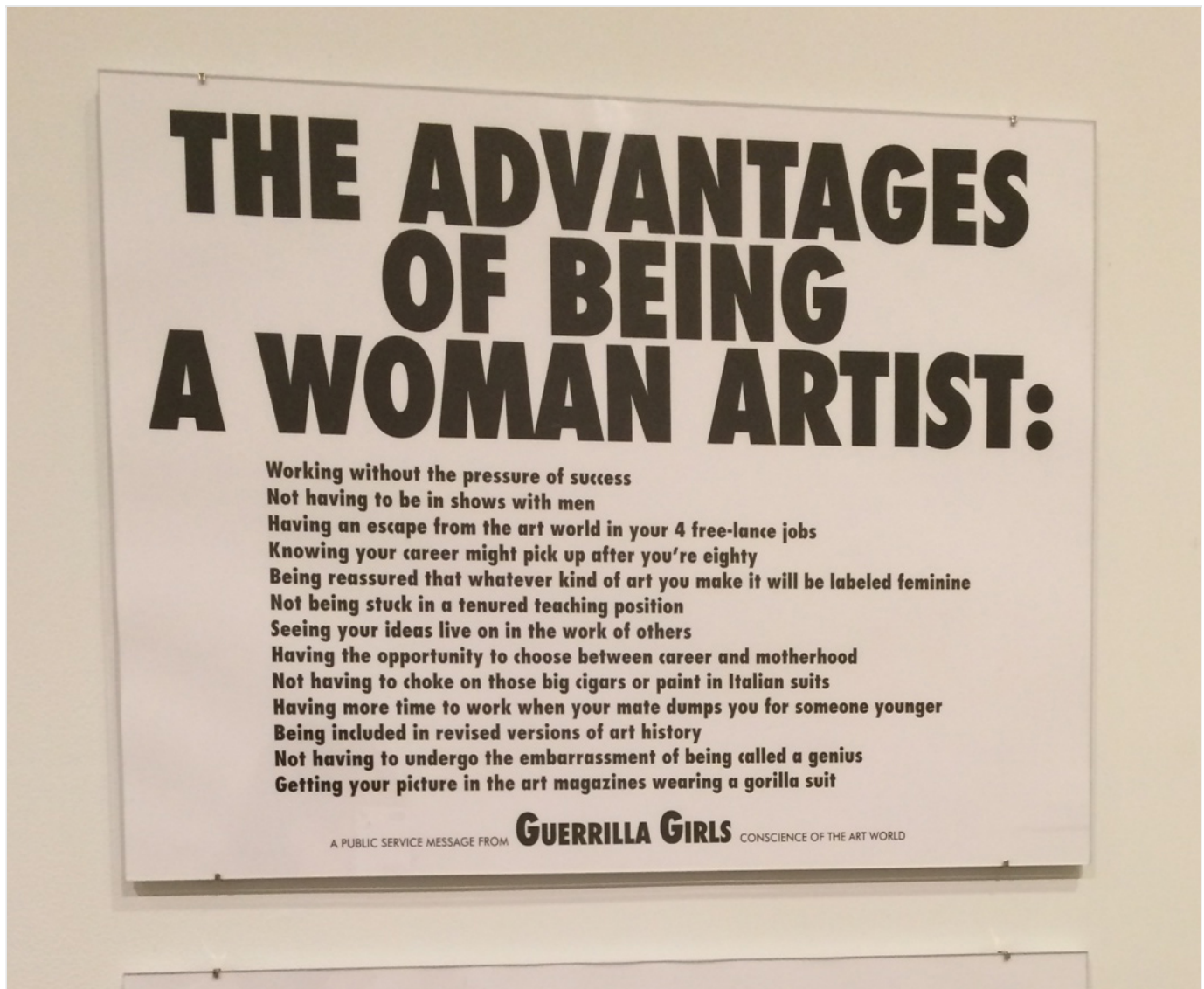
*Guerrilla Girls: Art in Action* at the Pomona College Art Museum, curated by Benjamin Feldman, a Pomona senior and the Josephine Bump '76 curatorial intern, is a small but potent look at the confrontational posters and publications created by the feminist group. Started in 1985 by an anonymous cluster of critics, artists, academics, and museum workers, the Guerrilla Girls have made a long career of critiquing the art world's male- and Caucasian-centered focus. While the exhibition would benefit from wall labels dating each poster, its setting in an academic context has undoubtedly exposed many students to the continuing existence of troubling imbalances in museums, galleries, and publications.

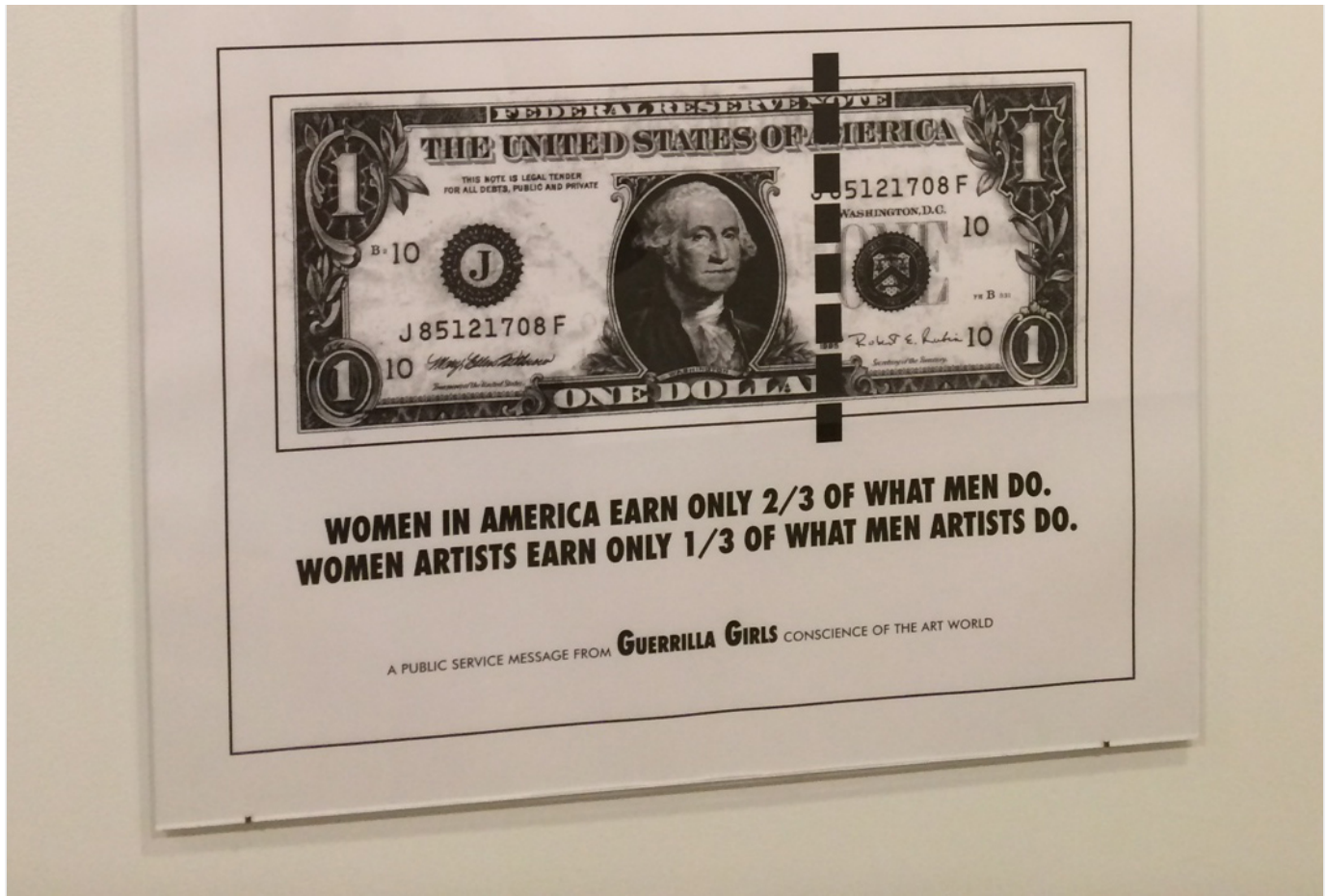


Guerrilla Girls, "Horror on the National Mall!" (2007) (click to enlarge)

The statistics outlined in the works are staggering. A 1985 poster reports that the average woman artist earned one-third of what the average male artist earned, while another, from as recent a year as 2011, announces that fewer than 4% of artists in the Metropolitan Museum's modern art section are women, but 76% of the nudes are female. The colorful 2007 mock tabloid *Horror on the National Mall!*, originally presented in the pages of the *Washington Post*, lists jaw-dropping numbers: at the time, the creators of art on view at the National Gallery of Art were 98% male and 99.9% white; respective numbers at the National Portrait Gallery, the Hirshhorn Museum, and the American Art Museum and Renwick Gallery were not much better.

A work I'd never seen before, "Token Times" (1995), cut close to the bone despite the fact that it's 20 years old. I texted a picture of it to a few of my female art world friends and got laughing exclamations of recognition in response to the poster's tongue-in-cheek descriptions of entry-level art world jobs for women. Months before, we'd sent around a *New York Times* article with statistics for the low numbers of female museum directors, underlining how few women work their way up from entry-level museum jobs into the upper administrative echelon. As detailed in the article, a 2014 report by the Association of Art Museum Directors found that only 24% of institutions with budgets over \$15 million have female directors, and these women make 29% less than their male counterparts. In addition, just five of the thirty-three museums with budgets over \$20 million have female directors.





*Guerrilla Girls posters from 1989 (top) and 1985 (bottom) (click to enlarge)*

One of the things that's appealing about the Guerrilla Girls' message and the way they broadcast it is that they make clear that everyone in positions of power in the art world bears responsibility for the current state of affairs and can work to improve the situation. It's easy to think about exhibitions as discrete entities, awarded based on individual merit, timing, or popular appeal, but when one sees the slim numbers of solo museum shows awarded to female artists or their overall slice of gallery representation, the systemic nature of the problem comes into sharp relief. Curators, gallerists, academics, and writers of both genders and at all levels of the career ladder need to collectively work to better represent the demographics of the contemporary world.

The Guerrilla Girls regularly create new posters and host events, such as a program at Pomona in February in association with the show. For 2014 alone, their website lists performances, lectures, and workshops held at 15 venues, including the New York Art

Book Fair, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Google Cultural Institute, and various universities. Along with their identifiable graphics, which resist feeling dated due to their simplicity, the educational bent of the group is a key strategy — the more people are informed about the current situation through punchy graphics and memorable statistics, the more they will want to act upon the problem (hopefully).



*Installation view, 'Guerrilla Girls: Art in Action' (click to enlarge)*

As I was waiting to look at a few workbooks near the exhibition exit, I fell into conversation with two female college students curious about the origins of the group. Charmed by the accessible and stingingly funny books, they were shocked by the statistics and the continuing necessity of the group's work today, just as I had been the first time I saw the Guerrilla Girls' posters. This type of reaction speaks to the effectiveness of the Guerrilla Girls' strategy, as [outlined by the members themselves](#):

We try to be different from the kind of political art that is angry and points to something and says ‘This is bad.’ That’s preaching to the converted. We want to be subversive, to transform our audience, to confront them with some disarming statements, backed up by facts — and great visuals — and hopefully convert them.

**Guerrilla Girls: Art in Action** continues at *Pomona College Art Museum (330 N College Ave, Claremont, California) through May 17.*

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