In the late 1970s and early 1980s, U.S. cultural discourse increasingly engaged with post-structuralist and postmodern theories. Thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, and Gilles Deleuze gained prominence, especially among critics associated with the journal *October*, where a left-leaning postmodern approach was taking shape. Rejecting modernist ideals of masters and masterpieces, postmodernism declared the «end of grand narratives» and offered a critique of representation and power, giving voice to historically marginalized groups, including women and minorities.¹

During this same period, American society was becoming increasingly visual, with advertising, branding, television, and cinema shaping popular culture by influencing perception, desire, and social norms. Women were often depicted in mass media through objectifying lenses, and in response, women artists began appropriating these visual codes to assert their subjectivity, using bold, slogan-like phrases and recognizable typography, as seen for instance in the work of Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer.² Within this cultural context, the anonymous feminist art collective Guerrilla Girls was founded in June 1985, following protests outside MoMA against the underrepresentation of women artists in An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture in 1984.3 The ineffectiveness of these demonstrations - which were ignored by most visitors - allegedly prompted the founding of the Guerrilla Girls and their search for an effective communicative style, which they refined over time, eventually developing the irony, sharp wit, and culture-jamming graphic strategies that would come to define their artistic practice.4 In addressing this now-canonical collective, still active today, this article intends to reassess the Guerrilla Girls' activities through an intersectional framework, focusing on selected posters and exhibitions. It explores central questions such as the extent to which their critique addressed intersecting forms of discrimination. What challenges and contradictions did they face over the past forty years, both inside and outside institutions? And how can we assess the increasingly positive institutional response to their criticism?

Taking activism into the 1980s

In 1985, the Guerrilla Girls began illegally pasting posters in SoHo, in Lower Manhattan, denouncing the near-total absence of women artists in major New York museums and galleries, the lack of solo shows, and the disregard they experienced at the hands of critics and dealers. Signed «A public service message from Guerrilla Girls. Conscience of the art world», these black-and-white posters, written entirely in bold,

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HOW MANY WOMEN HAD ONE-PERSON EXHIBITIONS AT NYC MUSEUMS LAST YEAR? Guggenheim O Metropolitan O Modern 1 Whitney 0

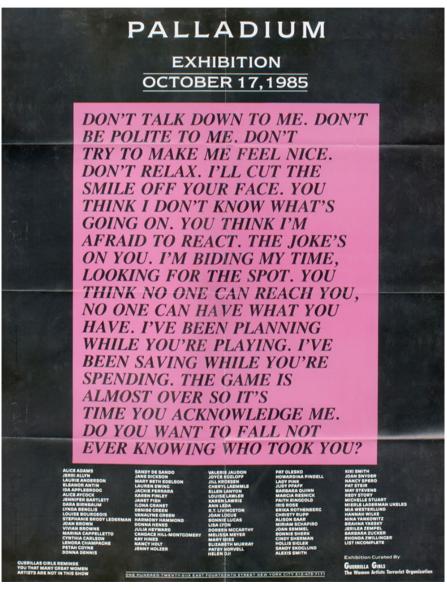
1 One of the very first posters of the Guerrilla Girls, 1985-1986

presented only the data and cited their sources (fig. 1). During their illegal poster campaigns and increasingly frequent public appearances as their fame grew, group members wore, and still wear, gorilla masks. These masks serve as both a powerful symbol and as a way to safeguard their anonymity, which in turn protects the professional careers of each member, especially in the early years. The choice of the gorilla mask - whose ambivalences we will explore later - has often been interpreted as a play on words (gorilla-guerrilla), with some suggesting it originated from a misunderstanding in an early meeting. While the exact origin remains unclear, members of the Guerrilla Girls, whether fully embracing or unsure about the mask, have emphasized its powerful and communicative effectiveness over the pun. Additionally, the word Guerrilla could also reference the Guerrilla Art Action Group (GAAG), known for its protests against museums, especially MoMA. However, there seem to be no direct connections between the two groups, aside from a shared cultural context and similar concerns. The slogans and the posters, even the numerical count of women's representation, were also not an entirely new concept: as early as 1970, WAR (Women Artists in Revolution), a group that grew out of AWC (Art Workers Coalition), sent a letter to MoMA protesting its policies and another to the Whitney Museum criticizing the small number of works by women artists included in its Annual Exhibition (which would later become the Biennial, in which form it continues to exist today). The Whitney itself had already been the subject of protests by the Ad Hoc Committee of Women Artists, which specifically demanded 50 % representation of women artists in the museum's annual exhibitions.6

Building on these precedents, the Guerrilla Girls' posters quickly gained traction and sparked a considerable degree of debate within New York's art scene. In

October 1985, just a few months after their first posters, the Guerrilla Girls organized an exhibition of works by more than eighty-eight women artists at The Palladium, a nightclub widely regarded as a stronghold of male dominance.

It is difficult to reconstruct exactly who participated, and the exhibition poster does not provide a full list (fig. 2). However, it confirms the involvement of many women active in the New York art scene at the time, reflecting – at least in part – the state, composition, and shortcomings of that scene. There appears to have been no conscious focus on the diversity of participants' backgrounds – something that would emerge soon after – but rather a general, and perhaps simplistic, ambition to represent



2 The Guerrilla Girls' show at The Palladium, exhibition poster with a work by Jenny Holzer, *Untitled* (Don't Talk Down to Me), from Inflammatory Essays, 1979/82, 1985

«all women». Nevertheless, the inclusion of African American artists such as Vivian E. Browne, Candace Hill-Montgomery, Faith Ringgold (born in 1930 and older than most participants), and Howardena Pindell – whose heritage spans African, European, Seminole, Central American, and Afro-Caribbean roots – suggests some degree of diversity. Notably, the exhibition also included Asian American artist Helen Oji and the then very young Lady Pink, of Ecuadorian background.

The exhibition poster was produced by the Palladium, which added a work by Jenny Holzer to a graphic previously created by the Guerrilla Girls. This, in turn, contributes to its particular interest. Despite Holzer's work quoted in the poster stated «looking for the spot» for women artists, the project ultimately led the Guerrilla Girls to confront the reality that an exhibition is an inherently selective process, often shaped by mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, and that it constitutes an exercise of power in and of itself.8 «It was kind of great because it changed that very male culture there, but it was horrible because we had to leave lots of women out. And we realized we will never, ever do an exhibition again. We will never be curators. We represent all women artists, not a selection of them. We don't ever want to be in a position of saying, (You, not you; you, not you)».9 Although focused solely on gender, in retrospect this exhibition stands as a pivotal moment in the Guerrilla Girls' history. On the one hand it echoed 1970s feminist protest strategies; and on the other, it confronted their limitations and contradictions.¹⁰ Realizing that an exhibition could itself reproduce mechanisms of exclusion, they moved away from conventional curating. The Palladium exhibition therefore marked a turning point: from that moment on, the Guerrilla Girls began using exhibitions as tools for institutional critique, relying on data to expose the exclusion of women and minorities in the art field, rather than attempting to construct an alternative.

Intersecting racialized and gendered identities

Initially, the Guerrilla Girls' posters focused solely on gender disparity, without other distinctions. However, between 1986 and 1987, they began addressing racial statistics among artists, consistently including data on Black and minority artists. 11 Their first poster to address both race and gender stated: «Only 4 commercial galleries in N.Y. show black women. Only 1 shows more than 1», specifying which galleries were involved and citing the source: Art in America Annual 1986–7. Another poster read: «What's fashionable, prestigious and tax deductible? Discriminating against women and non-white artists», with examples from MoMA, Whitney, Guggenheim, and the Brooklyn Museum, listing the curator, sponsor, and percentages of male and white artists for each exhibition. While a 1986 poster had already warned, «It's even worse in Europe», the following year they focused on the documenta, highlighting that the 1987 edition featured 95 % white artists and 83 % male artists. 12 That year, the Institute for Art and Urban Resources (IAUR) invited the Guerrilla Girls to organize an exhibition of women artists whom the collective believed should have been included in the Whitney Biennial. Learning from The Palladium, they accepted but chose a different approach.13

The exhibition *Guerrilla Girls Review the Whitney*, held between April and May 1987 at The Clocktower Gallery, focused not on artworks but on statistics and analyses of the Whitney Museum, its acquisition policies, Biennials, and organizational power structures from 1973 to 1987. The findings echoed the same issues highlighted in their posters. This exhibition was significant, not only for the data it presented but most

of all for its role in the Guerrilla Girls' history: it brought them the most visibility up to that point and became a model for their future exhibitions.

The gallery walls, painted with blackboard paint, featured a series of tall, intuitive graphs. One histogram displayed male and female representation, using the stereotypical blue and pink colors. The Colorblind Test was a line graph illustrating the representation of non-white male and female artists, broken down by ethnicity (Asian, Hispanic, Black, and Native American) across different Biennial editions. Another panel presented data intertwining gender and race: «No black woman has been chosen for a Whitney Biennial since 1973; Of the 30 non-white artists who have been in the Biennials since 1973, only 3 have had work acquired for the museum collection; more than 70 artists have been chosen for more than one biennial. Only one of them is non-white», and so on. A large wall display mimicked the game of Monopoly, featuring New York galleries.

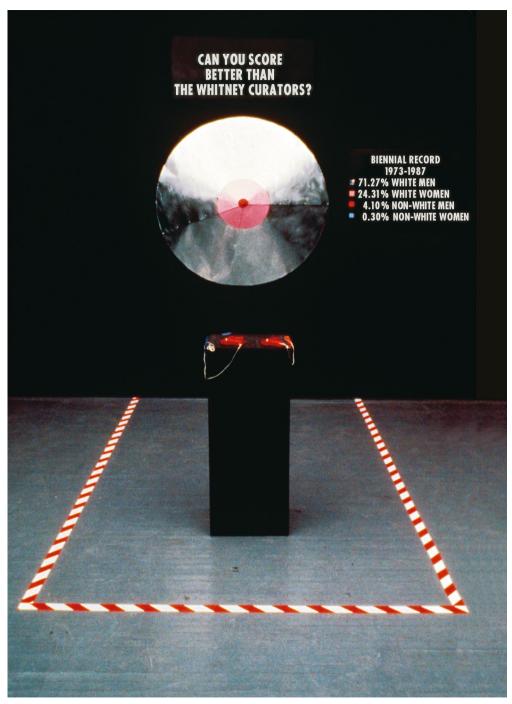
An interactive game with toy guns challenged visitors: «Can you score better than Whitney curators?» Participants were encouraged to shoot at a circular target, where the largest ring represented the percentage of *white* men exhibited in various Biennials, the next smaller ring represented *white* women, an even smaller ring represented non-white men, and a very tiny dot represented the 0.3 % of non-white women who had participated in the Biennial over the past 14 years (fig. 3). The extensive use of color, sharp irony, and direct visitor engagement would become a distinctive and constant feature of their exhibitions moving forward.

Racial discrimination, alongside gender, appears to be the Guerrilla Girls' most consistent concern, though class-related factors also came into play.¹⁴

Despite their attention to racial issues, as they defined this focus, differences within the group emerged, epitomized by the contradictory meaning of their own symbol, the gorilla mask. Anonymity was crucial to the collective's early success, so much so that even former members continued using pseudonyms and wearing disguises after leaving the group. However, the gorilla symbol was far from neutral. While the mask helped obscure individual identities and foster a sense of a collective voice – particularly when the goal was to speak on behalf of "all women" – it also risked producing erasure. Some Black artists, former Guerrilla Girls members, felt conflicted or uncomfortable wearing the gorilla mask: while acknowledging it as "an extremely powerful thing", they also noted that the image of the gorilla carried such a terrible connotation for Black women". Julia de Burgos" recalled raising the issue at the time, remarking that the fact that other members felt comfortable wearing the mask was indicative of an unconscious white privilege.

These tensions reflect broader questions not yet fully articulated in the public discourse at that time. The ambition to speak for all women – though genuine – developed in a cultural context in which the differentiated experiences of race, class, and sexuality were increasingly beginning to be addressed within feminist movements after the particular criticism through the work of Black feminists. ¹⁷ Although these ideas had already been explored in pioneering works – particularly in postcolonial theory – they had not yet become part of the broader feminist discourse of the 1980s. ¹⁸ In retrospect, the challenges posed by the mask's symbolism highlight the limits of a universalist approach and the growing importance of intersectional awareness, which would gain wider recognition in the years that followed.

When asked about this, founding member «Käthe Kollwitz» explained that such discussions – especially with women artists of color – led the Guerrilla Girls to begin



3 Guerrilla Girls Review the Whitney, exhibition view of the installation Can You Score Better Than the Whitney Curators?, 1987

to address racial discrimination and its intersection with gender. ¹⁹ These conversations gradually pushed the group to pay closer attention to race. Among other outcomes, this led to the final issue of their newsletter *Hot Fleshes* on tokenism in 1994. In the editorial, «Alma Thomas» shared her struggle with wearing the mask and not being recognized as a Black woman – linking it to broader issues of tokenism and racial visibility. This theme had also appeared in earlier posters, such as the Guerrilla Girls' 1990 Quiz: «If February is Black History Month and March is Women's History Month, what happens the rest of the year?» The answer: «Discrimination». ²⁰ For the Guerrilla Girls, therefore, the recognition that not all discrimination is the same and that its intersection shapes different identities, emerged through activism and internal discussions. Though the term intersectionality only gained traction in the late 1980s and 1990s, the issues at stake had already been powerfully addressed, among other instances, in Angela Davis's *Women, Race & Class* (1981), which combined methodological, historical, and political perspectives, a work the Guerrilla Girls were likely familiar with. ²¹

Engaging with institutions

Another reason the *Guerrilla Girls Review the Whitney* exhibition of 1987 is so significant lies in how it marked their entry into institutional critique. They began engaging with museums not only as subjects of study and statistical analysis, but as entities to be held publicly accountable for their policies and decisions. Among the informational panels detailing the composition of the museum's board of trustees and their activities, the exhibition featured a large reproduction of a handwritten letter on pink paper, denouncing a trustee's conflicts of interest: he was also the chief stockholder of Sotheby's. From that point on, the Guerrilla Girls consistently exposed similar entanglements between collectors and institutions. «We've always done institutional critique, even before there was a word for it», explained «Käthe Kollwitz». Starting with this exhibition, they embraced institutional critique in an explicit and confrontational way, fully aware of the mechanisms governing communication and marketing. They appropriated not only the techniques but also the graphic style of mass media to make gender and racial advocacy not just visible, but attractive.

Alongside their subsequent actions, the Guerrilla Girls' intervention at the Whitney helped reshape public expectations around transparency, accountability, and representation in the art field. Rather than producing definitive results, their work on museums served – and still serves – as provocation and critical reminder, despite inevitable contradictions. Two years after the Clocktower Gallery exhibition, in 1989, they created the *Code of Ethics for Art Museums*, a poster parodying the Ten Commandments. Written in a solemn, archaic style to heighten the effect of ironic estrangement, it tackled issues like conflicts of interest and the low salaries of curators, which often excluded those without independent wealth. The commandments, though seemingly basic, were rooted in real cases, for instance: «Thou shalt not be a Museum Trustee and also the Chief Stockholder of a Major Auction House», and, «Thou shalt not give more than 3 retrospectives to an Artist whose Dealer is the brother of the Chief Curator.» At a time when codes of ethics were far from common, the poster addressed a pressing need, highlighting obvious, yet frequently overlooked, ethical lapses within the institutional landscape.

This combative practice did not always receive fully positive feedback from the supporting institutions. In the same year that they produced the *Code of Ethics*, the

New York Public Art Fund invited the Guerrilla Girls to design a billboard, leading to their most famous poster: Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get Into the Met. Museum? When the proposal was rejected by the commissioners, the collective responded by renting advertising spaces on city buses to display the image independently. The following year, they collaborated once again with the Public Art Fund, this time as part of the Messages to the Public series at Times Square. For this project – presented on the Spectacolor Board, an early digital light display used temporarily for public art interventions – they created a piece urging viewers, in more general terms, to «look at the things they don't want to see». 23 This placed them alongside artists such as the previously mentioned Howardena Pindell and Martha Rosler, as well as Adrian Piper, Martin Wong, Luis Camnitzer, and Alfredo Jaar. Beyond this, the Guerrilla Girls' only other public funding in the United States came from the National Endowment for the Arts, which supported three issues of their newsletter Hot Fleshes in 1993–1994. The grant was not renewed the following year because the subscription fee was higher for white men - an irony deemed discriminatory.²⁴ This episode reinforced their move away from public funding, which had never been central to their practice. The Guerrilla Girls rarely applied for such support, aiming to maintain independence and avoid bureaucratic constraints. Overall, their work was largely self-funded, particularly in the early years. It was later sustained through fees from lectures, workshops, and performances hosted by universities and other institutions.

Over time, the Guerrilla Girls' relationship with institutions evolved due to several factors. Their increased public visibility attracted attention from major museums, while the rise of gender studies in academia and cultural institutions provided a more receptive environment for their work. As critics have noted, museums tend to absorb dissent by reframing it as part of their own narrative.²⁵

Years later, when their archives were acquired by the Getty Institute, «Frida Kahlo» and «Käthe Kollwitz» wrote: «Over the past several years we've been faced with a big dilemma. What do you do when the art institutions you've spent your entire life attacking suddenly embrace you? [...] what's a girl activist to do? We've agonized over it, but for now, we've decided we can't pass up these invitations; they are another way to get our work out to as large an audience as possible. Plus, we love to critique museums right on their own walls.²⁶» This conundrum has arisen repeatedly in various institutions over time. The elles@centrepompidou display (2009–2011), which showcased works by women artists from the museum's collection (and later toured to Rio de Janeiro and Seattle in 2013), featured several Guerrilla Girls posters and included in its catalogue a series of reflections and a chronology – albeit partial – of gender-related demands in the art field.²⁷ It was a clear effort on the part of the museum to address the ongoing lag in the representation of women artists, an issue still evident in most major international institutions. Among many other examples, in 2016, ten years after their first rehang, Tate Modern acquired and exhibited the Guerrilla Girls Portfolio Compleat Upgrade 2012-2016, a collection of twenty-seven works, including a poster that reads: «DON'T LET MUSEUMS reduce art to the small number of artists who have won a popularity contest among bigtime dealers, curators and collectors. If museums don't show art as DIVERSE as the cultures they claim to represent, TELL THEM they're not showing the history of art, they are just preserving the history of Wealth & Power.»

From today's perspective, one might raise the issue of «pinkwashing» in this and other cases. However, it is important to consider, first, that exhibiting in major

museums gave the Guerrilla Girls visibility they probably would not otherwise have had, allowing their message to reach future generations; and second - but not less significant – that their posters convey a message that becomes even more powerful when displayed within the very institutions they critique, highlighting the contradictions and exclusions they denounce. This second point applies to much of institutional critique, which has long questioned its own position.²⁸ Since the early 2000s, what has been described as a third phase of institutional critique has emerged – one in which the original practice of external contestation has shifted into an internal discourse, often promoted by museum directors and curators, where the very distinction between inside and outside the institution appears to have lost its meaning.

Inherently transitory, many interventions linked to institutional critique – including those by the Guerrilla Girls – acknowledge the historical specificity of critical action, recognizing that their effectiveness is always limited to a particular time and place.²⁹ As some artists have noted, regardless of intent, all cultural agents contribute in the maintenance and/or development of the ideological make-up of their society: they work within, set, and are shaped by that framework.³⁰ Already in 1985, after the Palladium show, the Guerrilla Girls chose not to build an alternative system but to operate within the existing one, using its tools – like exhibitions – to critique it.

I would like to thank the Guerrilla Girls, and in particular «Käthe Kollwitz» for her kind availability.

Notes

- Jean François Lyotard: The Postmodern Explained. Correspondence 1982-1985, Minneapolis/ London 1992.
- 2 See Hank Willis Thomas/Eric Gottesman/ Michelle Woo/Wyatt Gallery/Taylor Brock: For Freedoms: Where Do We Go From Here?, New York 2024.
- 3 See Kynaston McShine (ed.): An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture, exhib. cat. New York, MoMA, New York 1984; for a photographic documentation see Clarissa Sligh: 30th Anniversary of Women Artists Protest MoMA, 15 June 2014, https://clarissasligh.com/30thanniversary-women-artists-protest-moma/, last accessed on 17 April 2025.
- See Emanuela De Cecco: Käthe, Frida e le altre, in: Jessica Perna (ed.): Guerrilla Girls. Sotto la maschera, Rome 2018, pp. 5-10. For culture-jamming, see Naomi Klein: No Logo, London 2000, p. 280.
- See Guerrilla Girls: Guerrilla Girls. The Art of Behaving Badly, San Francisco 2020, pp. 6-9.
- See Randy Rosen: Moving into the Mainstream, in: Randy Rosen (ed.): Making Their Mark. Women Artists Move into the Mainstream, 1970-85, exhib. cat. Cincinnati, Cincinnati Art Museum, New York 1987, pp. 7-25.

- Lucinda Gosling/Hilary Robinson/Amy Tobin: L'art du féminisme. Les images qui ont façonné le combat pour l'égalité, 1857-2017, Paris 2018, pp. 138-141; Josephine Withers: The Guerrilla Girls, in: Feminist Studies 14, Summer 1988, no. 2, pp. 284-300; Guerl talk, in: Village Voice, 31 December 1985 (p.n.n.); University of Colorado at Boulder: Visiting Artist Program 1987, in: MoMA Archives, Political Art Documentation/Distribution Archive: folder I.974.
- Tony Bennett: The Exhibitionary Complex, in: Reesa Greenberg/Bruce W. Ferguson/Sandy Nairne (eds.): Thinking about Exhibitions, London 1996, pp. 81-112; Charlotte Klonk: Spaces of Experience. Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000, New Haven/London 2009, pp. 1-48.
- Archives of American Art: Oral history interview with Guerrilla Girls Frida Kahlo and Käthe Kollwitz, 19 January-9 March, 2008, https://www. aaa.si.edu/download_pdf_transcript/ajax?record_ id=edanmdm-AAADCD_oh_292457, last accessed on 23 March 2025. With the phrase «And we realized we will never, ever do an exhibition again», they mean from the perspective of curating, not of participating.
- **10** See Rosen 1987 (as note 6), p. 14.
- 11 See Archives of American Art (as note 9).

- **12** Guerrilla Girls 2020 (as note 5), pp. 11–15.
- 13 See Archives of American Art (as note 9).
- 14 Class divisions and poverty have otherwise been addressed on specific occasions, such as their 1991 collaboration with the Artists and Homeless Collaborative, which resulted in posters like one highlighting the risk of rape for homeless women and another reading: «What I want for Mother's Day: I don't want candy. I don't want flowers. I want a lease and keys.» On other occasions, they opposed the Gulf War, supported abortion rights, and engaged with specific news events, Hollywood stereotypes, and environmental issues. While these causes often intersected with feminist concerns, their primary focus has remained the art world. Guerrilla Girls 2020 (as note 5), p. 38.
- **15** See Nicola McCartney: Death of the Artist. Art World Dissidents and their Alternative Identities, London/New York 2018, p. 137.
- **16** Archives of American Art: Oral history interview with Guerrilla Girls Julia de Burgos and Hannah Höch, 8 May 2008, https://www.aaa.si.edu/download_pdf_transcript/ajax?record_idedanmdm-AAADCD_oh_292433, last accessed on 23 March 2025.
- 17 See Angela Davis: Women, Race & Class, New York 1981; bell hooks: Ain't I a Woman. Black Women and Feminism, Boston, MA 1981; Audre Lorde: Sister Outsider. Essays and Speeches, Freedom, CA, 1984.

- **18** See Greta Gaard (ed.): Ecofeminism. Women, Animals, Nature, Philadelphia 1993; Aph Ko: Racism as Zoological Witchcraft. A Guide to Getting Out, New York 2019.
- 19 Ibid., p. 134.

24

- 20 Guerrilla Girls 2020 (as note 5), p. 33.
- 21 See Davis 1981 (as note 17).
- 22 Archives of American Art (as note 16).
- 23 McCartney 2018 (as note 15), p. 128.
- **25** See Hal Foster: The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century, Cambridge, MA 1996, pp. 171–204.
- **26** Frida Kahlo/Käthe Kollwitz: Transgressive Techniques of the Guerrilla Girls, in: Getty Research Journal, 2010, no. 2, pp. 203–208.
- 27 See Camille Morineau (ed.): Elles@centrepompidou. Artistes femmes dans les collections du Mnam-Cci, exhib. cat. Paris, Centre Pompidou, Paris 2009.
- **28** See for instance Andrea Fraser: From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique, in: Artforum 44, September 2005, no. 1, pp. 278–232.
- **29** See Simon Sheikh: Notes on Institutional Critique, in: transversal texts, 2006, no. 1, https://transversal.at/transversal/0106/sheikh/en, last accessed on 26 May 2025.
- **30** See Hans Haacke: All the Art that's Fit to Show, in: A. A. Bronson/Peggy Gale (eds.): Museums by Artists, Toronto 1983, pp. 151–152.

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- 1 © Guerrilla Girls.
- 2 Gallery 98, https://gallery98.org/2010/poster-1985-copy/, last accessed on 16 July 2025.
- 3 © Guerrilla Girls.