13 VISIBLE GUERRILLAS

Karen Springsteen

Figure 1. Copyright © 1989 Guerrilla Girls, Courtesy www.guerrillagirls.com

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DO WOMEN HAVE TO BE NAKED?

The representation above, created by the feminist art activist group the Guerrilla Girls, is a disruption of much more than the multitude of lounging, creamy-skinned women who line the walls of museums, silently offering come-hither looks. Not only does this image place a gorilla head on what should be Ingres's beautiful grand odalisque, and not only was it displayed as posters on New York City busses, its use of words allows the concubine to speak, enacting a sarcastic challenge to the representation of women in the city's Metropolitan Museum. It is disruptive precisely because those abilities of women to speak, question, challenge and act were rarely accounted for in the tradition of painting from which the nude comes.

I need not rehearse the history of women conceived as sexual property, as beautiful, passive objects to be gazed upon or used in the service of men. Critics T. J. Clark and John Berger (both men) agree:

> A nude, to repeat, is a picture for men to look at, in which Woman is constructed as an object of somebody else's desire (Clark 131).
>
> …
>
> In the art-form of the European nude the painters and spectator-owners were usually men and the persons treated as objects, usually women. This unequal

> relationship is so deeply embedded in our culture that it still structures the consciousness of women (Berger 63).

I need only point to some pages from glossy "women's" magazines like *Allure* and *Cosmopolitan*, or start to parse the rhetoric of 2008 female presidential and vice-presidential candidacies in the United States, to signal that this history is still in process, still structuring some aspects of a collective conscience. The subject-object dichotomy, in which women can be painted but not painters, carries such historic and psychic weight because it has long been aligned with and reinforced by other binary oppositions. In what follows, I offer a brief sketch of these (mis)alignments, as well as some key feminist responses to them. I offer this sketch in order to provide a context for the arguments I set forth in this chapter—namely, that visual modes of representation are integral (not just incidental) to the rhetorical work of the Guerrilla Girls and that an understanding of this function of visual modes is dependent upon a more primary understanding of how the subject-object dichotomy took on its gendered valence.

In her classic study, *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy*, Genevieve Lloyd traces, from Plato to de Beauvoir, the philosophical development of the association of masculinist ideals with ideals of human reason. Lloyd quotes Philo writing in the first century CE, as he echoes both Plato and the Pythagorean table of opposites formulated six centuries earlier. Philo wrote:

> The male is more complete, more dominant than the female, closer akin to causal activity, for the female is incomplete and in subjection and belongs to the category of the passive rather than the active. So too with the two ingredients which constitute our life-principle, the rational and the irrational; the rational which belongs to the mind and reason is of the masculine gender, the irrational, the province of sense, is of the feminine. Mind belongs to a genus wholly superior to sense as man is to woman. (qtd. in Lloyd 27)

Lloyd does not suggest that Philo was self-consciously aware of the long-term social implications of this kind of description. Yet, we see in Philo's description an articulation of several oppositions that stack up and then flatten or compress into a dense dichotomy still with us today. This dichotomy includes not only the subject-object opposition but also the male-female opposition in which reason, the mind, and causal activity are gendered male while the irrational, passive domain of sense (and, by extension, the body) is gendered female. The former is dominant; the latter "in subjection." It is no coincidence, then, that female nudes served for centuries as subject matter for male painters. Their bodies were exactly that: matter, material, object, the stuff of men. And the dichotomy thickened

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further when the display of nudes on canvas was accompanied by a simultaneous rejection of the bodies of living, breathing women as inappropriate for active engagement in the public sphere, resulting in yet another layer of opposition: public versus private.

It is important to note, at this point, that much of the build-up of this dichotomy was and is ideological rather than purely descriptive: the dichotomy reflects the world-view of interested parties who tell versions of history for benefit or convention, versions to which feminist theorists and activists can and do respond. For example, in "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," Nancy Fraser writes that the notion of the public sphere, idealized in the work of Jürgen Habermas, "rested on, indeed was importantly constituted by, a number of significant exclusions"—exclusions rooted in processes of class formation, in masculinist gender constructs, and in the precepts of racism (73). Fraser draws upon revisionist historiography to demonstrate the existence of multiple public spheres, multiple public arenas, and multiple "competing counterpublics," including "nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women's publics, black publics, and working-class publics" (75). She points out that the version of the public sphere that rejected the work of these bodies was, in fact, a bourgeois, masculinist, white-supremacist conception.

The Guerrilla Girls themselves also bring levity to what I have described as the dense dichotomy through their use of gorilla masks and fake names. When asked who they are, the Guerrilla Girls offer the following response:

> We're a bunch of anonymous females who take the names of dead women artists as pseudonyms and appear in public wearing gorilla masks. We have produced posters, stickers, books, printed projects, and actions that expose sexism and racism in politics, the art world, film and the culture at large. We use humor to convey information, provoke discussion, and show that feminists can be funny. We wear gorilla masks to focus on the issues rather than our personalities. Dubbing ourselves the conscience of culture, we declare ourselves feminist counterparts to the mostly male tradition of anonymous do-gooders like Robin Hood, Batman, and the Lone Ranger. (Guerrilla Girls)

Maintaining anonymity, the Guerrilla Girls can't be pinned down. Their gorilla masks not only play on the alignment of women with the irrational animal body but also resist the kind of objectification that often accompanies public visibility, especially for women. Hiding individual identities, they resist what Susan Miller has called, "the political silence of the individualistic *I am*" (500, emphasis added). Moreover, the Guerrilla Girls take the names of dead women artists to increase conscious awareness of women in art who have been active producers, engaged in "causal activity," as Philo

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puts it—women who have been the painters rather than the painted. By keeping their names before us—Alma Thomas, Eva Hesse, Lee Krasner, Paula Modersohn-Becker, Emily Carr, Alice Neel, Chiyo Uno, Romaine Brooks, Rosalba Carriera—the Guerrilla Girls do not allow these women to be forgotten or overlooked. Prying open subject positions from which to move, the Guerrilla Girls say: "We could be anyone. We are everywhere." They refuse to stand within the kind of formation Lloyd describes in her conclusion:

> Our ideas and ideals of maleness and femaleness have been formed within structures of dominance and of superiority and inferiority, norms and difference, positive and negative, the essential and the complementary. And the male-female distinction itself has operated not as a straightforwardly descriptive principle of classification, but as an expression of values. We have seen that the equation of maleness with superiority goes back at least as far as the Pythagoreans . . . . Within the context of this association of maleness with preferred traits, it is not just incidental to the feminine that female traits have been constructed as inferior—the "feminine" itself has been partly constituted by its occurrence in this structure. (103–4)

Do women have to be naked? Well, yes—if we are to continue to be constituted within the structures and values Lloyd critiques. And, of course, no—we can revise that inheritance. Such revision is the source of my interest in the Guerrilla Girls.

My point of departure is as follows: if, as it seems, women have been devalued as irrational creatures who are tied to our bodies and "therefore" problematically located vis-à-vis an ideological public sphere, how might we create new embodied identities that are neither self-annihilating (transcending the body) or locked into a dominant masculinist logic that offers options like sexy and dumb, unable to speak, or dowdy and intellectual, the female figure gaining public credibility for what she lacks in femininity? How might we create a break with old, constricting options and compose ourselves anew, in ways that allow for revised patterns of recognition? In response to such questions, the Guerrilla Girls' revision of the odalisque functions in at least two ways. (1) The Guerrilla Girls are themselves "painters" who call into question the bourgeois, white supremacist, masculinist spectator-owner position by placing the art outside museums and into the city's public transit system. After all, who rides the bus? And (2) the odalisque becomes a subject who speaks with desires of her own. I read that question—Do women have to be naked to get into the Met?—as coming straight from the mouth of the woman wearing the mask.

In this chapter, I identify a key strategy (appropriative reproach) by which the Guerrilla Girls carry out such revision. I argue for the vital

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rhetorical function of this strategy in the Guerrilla Girls' effort to confront gendered dichotomies and construct new identities for women in art and in the larger world. I demonstrate why such an effort not only benefits from but necessitates the use of visual representation, a claim that has implications for compositionists who are considering the role of visual media in writing courses (George; Hess; Hocks; Selfe, *Multimodal Composition*; Shipka; Wysocki et al.; Yancey). To begin, I turn to a historical example that resonates with the contemporary work of the Guerrilla Girls.

OLYMPIA

Appearing in 1865 at the Paris Salon, Édouard Manet's *Olympia* was stark and scandalous. Viewers and critics did not know what to make of her. The following are characterizations of *Olympia* that appeared in French newspapers at the time.

> A sort of female gorilla, a grotesque in India rubber outlined in black, apes on a bed in a state of complete nudity, the horizontal attitude of Titian's *Venus*: the right arm rests on the body in the same fashion, except for the hand, which is flexed in a sort of shameless contraction. (Amedee Cantaloube, *Le Grande Journal*, qtd. inT.J. Clark 94)
>
> . . .
>
> The august *jeune fille* is a courtesan, with dirty hands and wrinkled feet; she is lying down, wearing one Turkish slipper and with a red cockade in her hair; her body has the livid tint of a cadaver displayed in the morgue; her outlines are drawn in charcoal and her greenish, bloodshot eyes appear to be provoking the public, protected all the while by a hideous Negress. No, never has anything so. . .strange been hung on the walls of an art exhibition. (Ego, *Le Monde Illustre,* qtd. in T.J. Clark 96)

Who was this figure with the corpse-like color and dispassionate stare? How dare she flex her hand so immodestly? From whom do those flowers come and why is she painted with such thick and disgraceful lines? She is accompanied by a black woman, who is clothed and actively working. To what extent is the offense compounded by the presence of this woman? What is her role? And the cat?

Unlike the idealized nudes of the neoclassical style, the realist Olympia did not blend away softly as the passive, consumable object, despite her class status as a prostitute (*une fille publique*, or "public woman.") Olympia violated the traditional form of the nude, a violation that brought her identity, body, and purpose in the painting to be of issue. Her lack of passion was provocative; although nude, she had to be recognized as something

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Figure 2. Manet, Edouard. Olympia. 1863.
Musèe d'Orsay, Paris.

else. Manet wrote his friend Baudelaire, "I really would like you here, my dear Baudelaire; they are raining insults on me, I've never been led such a dance" (qtd. in T.J. Clark 82).

Yet it was possible for Manet's Olympia to be successful in another regard. The painting startled the viewer into recognizing his own position of sight because Olympia recognized it, with her gaze, in no way modestly turned to the side, returned to the viewer. Because Olympia issued a different mode of address to the viewer, that viewer was kept from relaxing into the conventional position he had heretofore not considered to be a position at all. He was now at least temporarily aware of the relationship of looking between himself and the alien canvas. In a chapter entitled "Olympia's Choice," which emphasizes the agency of the woman Manet depicted as I am doing here, T.J. Clark concludes, "In order that the painted surface appear as it does in Olympia, the self-evidence of seeing—seeing the world, seeing Woman—had to be dismantled and a circuit of signs put in its place" (139). In other words, the shock of Olympia registered when the conditions that had seemed natural and obvious, the truths men took to be self-evident about women on canvas and in the world, were forced into a breakdown, such that instead of the impenetrable density of the subject-object/male-female/reason-sense/active-passive/public-private dichotomy, there was now a "circuit of signs"—that is, a dynamic system of representation, laden with values and recognized as such. I argue that the work of the Guerrilla Girls seizes on the value of visibility in this system.

The Guerrilla Girls could writing scathing editorials to the *New York Times* all day long about the ill representation of women in the Metropolitan Museum, and their words would likely stay at the level of commentary. By appropriating visual modes to issue reproach, the Guerrilla Girls avail

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themselves of the operant forms in an inherited structure and exploit their self-awareness of their position in history. This is the move that necessitates visual representation and generates revision right before the public eye.

In this way, the work of the Guerrilla Girls can be read by compositionists as an indication that visual media is worthy of attention not because a picture is worth a thousand words, a cliché that reinforces what T.J. Clark terms the self-evidence of seeing; not because there is some built-in "affordance" of visual representation that is distinct from writing, as Gunther Kress has sometimes suggested (78); not because visuals are simply hip or cool; and not, as Diana George makes clear, because students are somehow positioned as unsophisticated consumers of visual media who need to be inoculated against its harmful effects (32). Rather, the work of the Guerrilla Girls can be read as a call for compositionists to consider the role of visual media in writing because both forms of representation—visual and verbal—are coimplicated as producers and products of an inherited circuit of signs that carves out spaces for people to live and breathe.

To the extent that compositionists want students to be able to intervene in such a circuit, in what Min Zhan Lu calls "the living process of language" ("Composition's Word" 193), important pedagogical questions remain. How do we teach people to have some consciousness of historical and philosophical contexts like the ones Lloyd and Fraser describe, while also teaching them to employ active literate practices by which they may speak back to that history and philosophy? In other words, how do we teach subjects to both articulate and intercede in the context of symbolic relations that affect their very lives? We are not faced here with an either/or choice. Just as we do not have to choose between visual and verbal composition, we do not have to choose between analysis and design, thinking and doing, consumption and production, or reading and writing. The work of the Guerrilla Girls demonstrates just how tightly interwoven are modes of representation, social positions, rhetorical strategies, and historical-philosophical formations of gender, race, class, and bodily potential.

Susan Miller has suggested that compositionists have lost an awareness of this interweaving and erred on the side of unrelenting reflective analysis. In "Technologies of Self?-Formation," she claims that "by teaching texts rather than their making, by teaching awareness rather than rhetoric, and by teaching the power of meanings rather than the making of statements, we inadvertently reproduce a politics that is aware but passive" (499). Miller suggests we take a dose of "vulgar composition" (499). She believes writing courses "should focus on what powerful writers know and do" and direct students "toward practice in manipulating genres . . . toward Guerrilla stylistics . . . toward strength to withstand forces that prevent their critiques from wide acknowledgement" (499).

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In the next section, I respond to Miller's suggestions for writing classes by positing the Guerrilla Girls as examples of powerful writers. I highlight a key productive strategy—appropriative reproach—that enables them to confront, dismantle, revise, reject, and resist sexism and racism in the art world, politics, film, and the culture at large. And I remind readers that looking at the Guerrilla Girls' work in a writing classroom does not restrict the people in our classes to the role of passive analysts, observing a powerful rhetorical practice from the outside—lest we forget that, in fact, the Guerrilla Girls could be anyone; they are everywhere.

APPROPRIATIVE REPROACH

I define appropriative reproach as taking possession of a commonly accepted or normalized form and altering it such that it is implicated in a design that disgraces, discredits, shames, or blames an offender, an offender who is often instrumental in the creation and maintenance of the appropriated object. In the opening image of this chapter, the Guerrilla Girls claim the form of the traditional nude and disrupt its typical appearance by adding the mask, changing the location of its display, and injecting words that question the credibility of a museum in which a large number of women ("nudes") are kept naked on the walls. Likewise, in Figure 3 the Guerrilla Girls take hold of the George W. Bush administration's rainbow colored terror alert chart by adding "for women" to the title.

Repetition of "President" as the first word in each level of warning identifies the offender who is to be disgraced, shamed, or blamed. True to form, each of the five warning levels issues an increasingly severe reproach; the lowest level simply mocks the president's cowboy antics, whereas the most severe level invokes the murder of innocent people.

In Figure 4, the *New York Times Magazine* masthead indicates the object being appropriated.

The group of men, who are piled together and posed in a studio, face the viewer directly. Arnold Glimcher, the man responsible for this scene, is seated front and center with his art world all-stars backing him up. The text directly below Glimcher on the magazine cover explains to viewers the substance and importance of the photo. Below this, in a signature typeface, the Guerrilla Girls issue their reproach: hormone imbalance, melanin deficiency. The Guerrilla Girls diagnose what is wrong with this picture and take both Glimcher and the *New York Times* to task for glorifying an exclusively white, male artistic ensemble.

Appropriative reproach, however, is not just a strategy for counterstatement or backlash. Figure 4 has less to do with Arnold Glimcher or the *New York Times* than with exposing the sexism and racism that are plastered across the cover of a national magazine. Similarly, Figure 3 is not just an

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Figure 3. Copyright © 2003 Guerrilla Girls, Courtesy www.Guerrillagirls.com

Figure 4. Copyright © 1993 Guerrilla Girls, Courtesy www.Guerrillagirls.com

anti-Bush poster. As the title suggests, it is a poster for women. It is a feminist articulation of the global terror of war, disease, poverty, and a leadership out of touch. Indeed, Figure 1 may take issue with the Met, but it is the gendered subject-object dichotomy—the deeper problem reflected on the surface of that image—which holds the locus of the critique. Whether the Guerrilla Girls use a magazine cover, a government terror alert chart, a traditional nude, or—as we will see shortly in Figure 6—a movie poster that displays women in bikinis, these images are the status quo and are symptomatic of a world in which particular groups of people are rendered speechless, invisible, marginal, objectified, expendable. The Guerrilla Girls' effort to change this rendering is quite literally an effort to change how we see. Their work changes not only the image, but also the ways in which we think about the world that produces that image. In this sense, then, appropriative reproach is a strategy for revision in the most global sense.

MAKING FUN

The Guerrilla Girls show how forms of visual representation that have helped hold up dichotomous structures and annihilate subject positions can, in fact, be penetrated. The Guerrilla Girls make fun of such forms. And while not all of the Guerrilla Girls' representations do so by drawing

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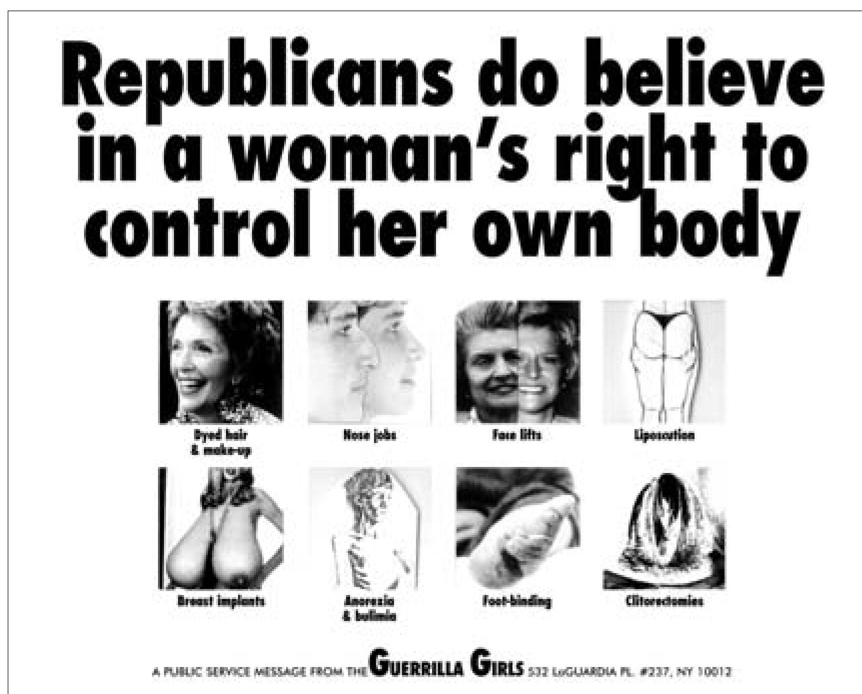

Figure 5. Copyright © 1995 Guerrilla Girls, Courtesy www.Guerrillagirls.com

upon the strategy I have labeled appropriative reproach, as evidenced by Figure 5, the full body of their work does contain a sarcasm, parody, irony, and humor that cannot be denied.

Figure 5 is representative of much of the Guerrilla Girls' work. Making bold written statements, the Guerrilla Girls most often directly and candidly address the public, using simple declarative sentences or rhetorical questions, set in thick, black no-nonsense type. Their visual work is matter-of-fact in tone and straightforward in style, relying like enthymeme on audiences' abilities to induce "correct" conclusions from declarations and questions as they are paired with statistics, lists, photographs, and statements of fact. Calling themselves the "conscience of the art world" and the "conscience of culture," the Guerrilla Girls serve the public with an ethos that combines whistle-blowing, objective revelation of evidence, and adjudication. Substantively, their representations can be read as public service messages. Stylistically, they make visible facts and predicaments that had been hidden, unknown, or avoided. In Figure 5, what is the connection between face-lifts and clitorectomies? Both are painful bodily mutilations; yet, placing visual representations of these practices in the context of a message about women's self-determination and political control yields some degree of ironic pleasure for sympathetic

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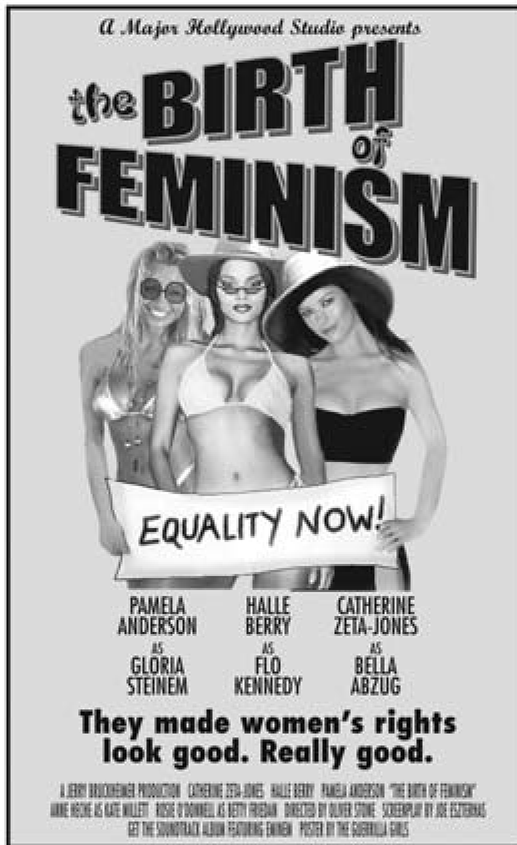

Figure 6. Copyright © 2001 Guerrilla Girls, Courtesy www.
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audiences—perhaps a smirk, if not an outright laugh. This pleasure is important as it marks a departure from earlier feminist approaches to the subject-object dichotomy. For example, in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey also sees women enclaved in the "to-be-looked-at" position and ultimately suggests the destruction of pleasure as a radical antipatriarchal weapon that would work at the site of the scopophilic male spectator. She writes that "the ultimate challenge [is] how to fight . . . while still caught within the language of the patriarchy. There is no way we can produce an alternative out of the blue, but we can begin to make a break by examining the patriarchy with the tools it provides" (35). If pleasure was one such tool, Mulvey's suggestion resulted in a brand of progressive but anesthetic film. Absent pleasure, what reason do people have to go to the movies?

The Guerrilla Girls, on the other hand, provide pleasure. In Figure 6, for example, they work on material provided by "a major Hollywood studio."

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They appropriate the common form of a movie poster and push the to-be-looked-at position to the point of farce. The pleasure they create is both embodied and derived from public visibility of injustices and hypocrisy rendered so ludicrous they are laughable. Indeed, there is some visceral satisfaction in the exercise of power we see in this poster. It is a remaking of matter that is clearly tied to the body, has implications for the body, and registers in the body when the viewer laughs. Perhaps this is why Miller refers to the kind of writing instruction she privileges as "vulgar composition" (499). Perhaps Miller would like for students, like the Guerrilla Girls, to be able to look at the world and, commanding a sarcasm that betrays deep analytic ability, create this statement: They made women's rights look good. Really good.

The jest the Guerrilla Girls take part in by creating representations like the ones I have showcased in this chapter does not displace the very real pain that was likely a motivating factor in their creation. In the context of bodies driven to commit literal and symbolic acts of violence upon each other and upon themselves, the pleasure the Guerrilla Girls provide is political. It generates strength to withstand war; it offers strategies to create peace. For these reasons, among others I have outlined here, the sort of visual/verbal work carried out by the Guerrilla Girls offers a rich site for analysis and production in composition classrooms.

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