

An Interview with the Guerrilla Girls, Dyke Action Machine (DAM!), and the Toxic Titties

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# An Interview with the Guerrilla Girls, Dyke Action Machine (DAM!), and the Toxic Titties

#### KRISTEN RAIZADA

In 1970, in an unsuspecting rural community in central California, Judy Chicago married feminist studies with art-making at Fresno State University, promising future generations of women new, expressive forms of art with activist aims. Since then, activist strategies and aesthetic concerns have metamorphosed as each new generation of feminist artists puts feminist theory into practice. Recently, I had the pleasure of engaging three feminist activist art groups—the Guerrilla Girls, Dyke Action Machine (DAM!), and the Toxic Titties—in a discussion regarding their practices. In this interview, the women addressed their methodologies, the challenges each collective faces today, and the future of feminist activist art practices. For all three groups, a strong visual language, subversive wit, and collective identity serve as key weapons for their interventions into the worlds of art, politics, and the media, exposing domains where gender, racial, and sexual injustice still lurk.

Of the three groups, the Guerrilla Girls has the longest history, bursting onto the art scene in the early 1980s. By that time, the headiness of the first wave of the feminist art movement was long gone; feminism was no longer "in," if it ever had been in commercial galleries and museums. Instead, the 1980s were characterized by record-breaking prices for works created by a select group of young, male art stars, effectively marginalizing the conceptual and activist practices that dominated the previous decade. And, despite years of feminist agitation, museums continued to organize large, group exhibitions of contemporary art with virtually no women artists represented. In June 1984, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) opened one such blockbuster exhibition in which only ten percent of the 169 artists chosen were women (Guerrilla Girls 1995, 13). The message was clear: the art world was still a male-dominated arena of culture. MoMA's gross oversight was the impetus for the Guerrilla Girls' most famous campaign on the streets of New York City, where the group surreptitiously plastered the walls, kiosks, and construction fences of SoHo and the East Village with provocative posters that exposed the sexist practices of the art world. In straightforward, bold, block letters, the posters questioned What do these artists have in common? and blatantly listed every prestigious art gallery that showed less than ten percent of women artists' work along with the names of the male artists whom the galleries represented (Guerrilla Girls 1995, 8) (Fig. 1).

Over the ensuing two decades, the Guerrilla Girls have continued to unabashedly parry and thrust with the art world, wielding their sassy

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# WHAT DO THESE ARTISTS HAVE IN COMMON?

Arman
Jean-Michel Basquiat
James Casebere
John Chamberlain
Snadro Chia
Francesco Clemente
Chick Close
Tony Cragg
Enzo Cucchi
Eric Fischl
Joel Fisher
Dan Flavin
Futura 2000
Ron Gorchoy

Keith Haring Bryan 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 Nonas

Claes Oldenburg
Philip Pearlstein
Robert Ryman
David Salle
Lucas Samaras
Peter Saul
Kenny Scharf
Julian Schnabel
Richard Serra
Mark di Suvero
Mark Tansey
George Tooker
David True
Peter Youlkos

THEY ALLOW THEIR WORK TO BE SHOWN IN GALLERIES THAT SHOW NO MORE THAN 10% WOMEN OR NONE AT ALL.

A PUBLIC SERVICE MESSAGE FROM GUERRILLA GIRLS
SOURCE: ART IN AMERICA ANNUAL 1984-5
CONSCIENCE OF THE ART WORLD

Fig.1. Guerrilla Girls, These Galleries Show No More than Ten % Women Artists or None at All, 1985. Street posters in New York City.

brand of feminist activism that attracts media attention. Their weap-ons—posters, stickers, billboards, bus ads, magazine spreads, protest actions, and letter-writing campaigns—deploy humor, ridicule, mockery, and embarrassing statistics delivering irrefutable information in a disarming manner aimed at shaming the artworld. As Susan Tallman reported in *Arts Magazine*, "The posters were rude; they named names and they printed statistics. They embarrassed people. In other words, they worked" (Guerrilla Girls 2006a).

From 1989 to 1991, the Guerrilla Girls began taking on issues outside the artworld such as the threat to reverse *Roe v. Wade*, the Clarence Thomas hearings, and the rape trials of William Kennedy and Mike Tyson (McQuiston 1997, 150). In 1992, the collective created a poster specifically for the Republican Convention, which stated, "Republicans *do* believe in a woman's right to control her own body" followed by six picture boxes with images of female circumcision, plastic surgery, anorexia, and foot binding (Guerrilla Girls 1995, 78). In addition, they poked fun at politicians such as Newt Gingrich for his hypocritical stance on family values, in response to revelations of his extramarital affair and subsequent divorce in 1999 (Fig. 2). The Guerrilla Girls' agitprop style was characteristic of the times



Fig. 2. Guerrilla Girls, Who is this Slimy Creature?, 1995. Poster.

and echoed the feminist grassroots political activism of such groups as the Women's Action Coalition (WAC) and Women's Health Action and Mobilization (WHAM) that took to the streets in large numbers across the United States during this period. By addressing issues beyond the art world, the Guerrilla Girls' campaigns functioned as consciousness-raising "public service announcements" (1995, 78).

Most recently, the Guerrilla Girls have targeted Hollywood, exposing the appallingly low numbers of women and people of color working as directors, producers, screenwriters, cinematographers, and studio executives. Their 2001 poster, *The Birth of Feminism* (see image in color insert), purporting to be an advertisement for a film about the feminist movement, starring bikini-clad Pamela Anderson, Halle Berry, and Catherine Zeta-Jones, mocks the well-established conventions of Hollywood productions that confuse women's self-empowerment with the objectification of the female body. In 2002, in their billboard *The Anatomically Correct Oscar*, the Guerrilla Girls redesigned the Oscar award as a white, pudgy male film director—the person who nearly always wins the film industry's highest award.

At the beginning of the 1990s, as the Guerrilla Girls were targeting sexism in national politics, two artists, Carrie Moyer and Sue Schaffner,

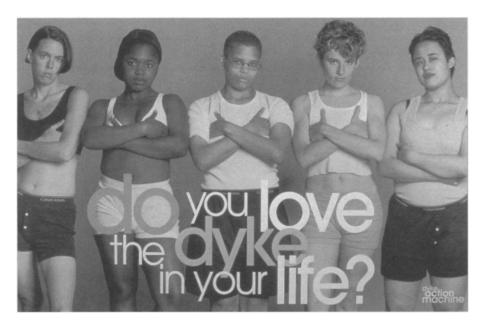


Fig. 3. Dyke Action Machine (DAM!), Do You Love the Dyke in Your Life!, 1993. Poster.

decided to challenge what they termed "lesbophobia." "Lesbophobia" referred to the invisibility of lesbians in both gay activist organizations, where lesbian issues were often subordinated to the problems facing gay men, and in society at large (Smyth 1996, 85). In 1991, Moyer and Schaffner founded the Dyke Action Machine (DAM!) dedicated to dispelling cultural myths about lesbians, questioning their invisibility in mass media, and refuting inane questions about them by appropriating mainstream advertising strategies and then subverting them through the insertion of lesbian-coded images. In some of their most humorous projects, DAM! attempted to claim public space for lesbians ignored in mainstream culture and the commercial niche queer market by both playfully engaging a lesbian audience and challenging other viewers to stretch beyond their "hetero-centric" outlook through "culture jamming," an aesthetic mechanism that interrogates stereotypes through subversive mimicry of advertising styles (Smyth 1996, 85).

For their first collaboration, the duo used as their point of departure the popular 1991 Gap ads ubiquitous on the sides of mass transit buses and payphone kiosks throughout New York City. Matching the slick, professional quality of the advertisement, DAM! replaced the image of the celebrity in the original ad with the figure of a young lesbian, styled in a manner identifiable as queer (Hammond 2000, 179). The success of the work hinged on the uncanny resemblance of the DAM! surrogate ad to the trendy multicultural and polysexual ads published by the Gap, Benetton,

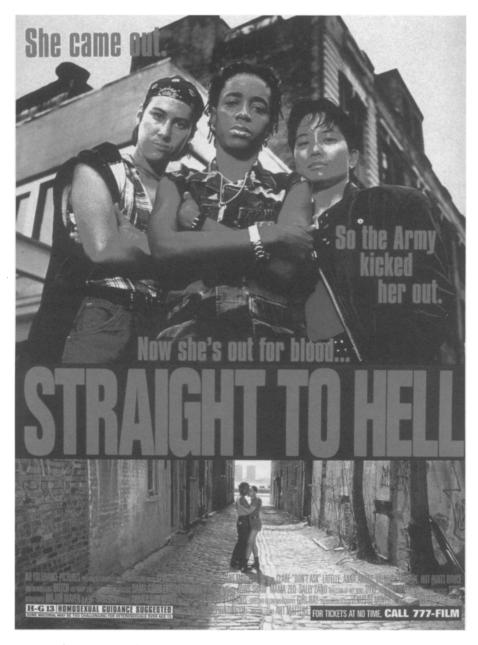


Fig. 4. Dyke Action Machine (DAM!), Straight to Hell, 1994. Poster.

and Calvin Klein in the period. The DAM! image used the same conventions to lure the viewer in but offered the surprise pleasure of recognition for lesbian viewers of the image.

In 1994, DAM! created "Straight to Hell" (Fig. 4), a poster ad for a fake film about a butch lesbian outlaw posse that appropriated the aesthetic strategies of movie posters made for low-budget, action films. Created as a response to Clinton's "don't ask, don't tell" policy effectively keeping homosexuals in the military in the closet, the poster advertises the story of a dishonorably discharged lesbian who is "now out for blood." The film's title and the poster's visual cues and graphics, which play on the bad-girl, lesbian erotics of 1950s B-grade films as well as the contemporary visual language of action films was so convincing (and evidently, appealing) that thousands of people called the phony number published on the poster to inquire about opening dates and times of the movie (Hammond 2000, 179). A poster produced in 1997 on the topic of gay marriage represents another example of DAM!'s work that responded to current political debates over the status and recognition of lesbians in society. Mimicking the bourgeois style of a wedding magazine spread, the image depicts a lesbian couple surrounded by wedding gifts and the text: "Is it worth being boring for a blender? Gay marriage: you might as well be straight."

A critical aspect of DAM!'s artistic practice is commitment to the continual re-evaluation of strategies for effective activism. After subverting commercial advertising with lesbian images, DAM! decided that increased visibility did not necessarily lead to progressive change and perhaps risked commodification of non-mainstream lesbian identities through their assimilation by the media. So, in 1994 they turned their attention to the new frontier of cyberspace. Online domains such as Dyke TV and the Girlie Network gave DAM! a forum and virtual space for projects like Gynadome (see image in color insert). Created in 2001–2, Gynadome is an interactive website that follows three lesbian action heroes as they save the planet in a post-digital age. Utilizing web-based technologies such as video, Flash® animation, live chat, and hypertext stories, website visitors watch a post-digital world in which there are "no computers, no electricity and no men." Gynadome warns its readers, "Prepare yourself for the post-digital age in Gynadome when your battery pack dries up and the only communication left is a primal scream" (Moyer and Schaffner 2006). This satire on the fears and desires of the contemporary technophile provided Moyer and Schaffner with a platform to express concerns regarding technological dependence and the environment with a good dose of humor and plenty of camp.

Both the Guerrilla Girls and DAM! cannily deploy arresting visual images and graphics as key aesthetic tools for their political activism, which, when combined with humor, capture the attention of an unsuspecting audience. Taking a cue from their predecessors, the Toxic Titties

represent the next generation of feminist activist artists fearlessly skewering gender oppression through creative practices characterized by parody and irony. The founding members of the group Julia Steinmetz, Heather Cassils, and Clover Leary first met as graduate students at the California Institute of Arts (Cal Arts). They consider the union of art, feminism, and activism to be the touchstone of their work, and they engage in a range of performative tactics that "undermine familiar notions of gender, sexuality, and class within culture, feminism, and art commerce" (Steinmetz, Cassils, and Leary 2006, 754). The Toxic Titties have appeared as queer perversions of camp counselors, police officers, a feminist militia, blushing brides, B-movie lesbian starlets, and high society art collectors. By denaturalizing cultural stereotypes through these roles, the group activates indeterminate subject positions that reveal existing power structures.

In 2002, the group assumed the task of providing security at the outdoor media arts festival, LA Freewaves, cleverly naming themselves the *LATT*, spoofing the Los Angeles Police Department (Fig. 5). The waggish performance presented a fantastical vision of an unlikely feminist future in which "Big Sister is Watching Big Brother" and was supported by graphic propaganda visible throughout the festival. Next, the Toxic Titties became the Toxic Troopers, a campy portrayal of the U.S. military as promoted in its recent ad campaigns and the media at large (Fig. 6). This work was performed at another arts-based, outdoor festival in Mexico City where the Toxic Titties recruited women artists to march from the U.S. Embassy to the Ex Teresa Arte Actual Museum. Clad in pink and black uniforms, the marching women physically embodied a fantasy of female power while parodying the masculinist display of militarism, transforming downtown Mexico City into a site of resistance.

Arguably, the Toxic Titties' most well-known intervention was their involvement in a Vanessa Beecroft installation/performance that took place in Los Angeles at the Gagosian Gallery in 2001. While cash-poor students at Cal Arts, the group discovered an unusual call for models posted on a campus bulletin board. In the most offensive manner, the ad specifically requested "20-30 nude models, eighteen plus, skinny, tall androgynous body, very small breasts, available to pose nude. Preferably with short hair, boyish cut, blond and fair. Will be covered in body make up,"—and the kicker—"Will wear Manolo Blahnik shoes." What sounded like a call for extras for Sex in the City was for a work by Vanessa Beecroft, a veritable art star whose work was often described in neutralizing language as "living paintings" and supported by blue-chip galleries in Western Europe and the United States (Steinmetz, Cassils, and Leary 2006). The call announced VB46 (see image in color insert), a highly controlled performance in which the artist arranged nude, or scantily clad. women, with their pubic hair removed, wearing designer, stiletto-heeled shoes in a manner that crosses the representation of women's bodies in



Fig. 5. Toxic Titties, *LATT*, 2002. Poster

pornography with that of the high fashion world. This work has earned Beecroft the classification "post-feminist" in the art critical press, as she allegedly intends to offer a critique of the fetishization and objectification of women in the fashion industry. However, the Toxic Titties' analysis of their experience of *VB46* led to their demand for "a new set of readings of Beecroft's work, with serious consideration of the process behind the product" (Steinmetz, Cassils, and Leary 2006, 782). Through personal narrative and critical analysis based on two members of the group's participation in the installation/performance, the collaborative essay published by the Toxic Titties, "Behind Enemy Lines: Toxic Titties Infiltrate Vanessa Beecroft," offers an insightful and scathing feminist analysis of Beecroft's exploitative methodology that is one of the most original feminist activist interventions to date (2006).

As the impact of these three feminist art collectives continues to reverberate through mainstream culture, I (KR) asked the Guerrilla Girls (GG),



Fig. 6. Toxic Titties, Toxic Troopers performance, 2003. Photo documentation.

Dyke Action Machine! (DAM!), and the Toxic Titties (TT) to respond to questions about their practice to date and what they see as their next moves.

**KR**: Who would you count as key movers in feminist activist art history? What do you see as your connection to this history?

GG: Every Guerrilla Girl would have a different answer to this question. My personal fav[orit]es weren't artists but Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. They were so far out for their time and they were a true collaborative team being radical and trying to change the world. And they did!

**DAM!**: Chicago Women's Graphics Collective, Women's Graphic Center Printing Studio (Women's Building, L.A.), *Heresies Magazine*, Sheila de Bretteville, Arlene Raven, Fran Winant for her early street graphics. Later on, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and Fierce Pussy. Because most feminist/lesbian activist art is ephemeral and topical, the Lesbian Herstory Archives plays an important role in the conservation of such work. These histories formed the basis of our desire to participate in visual culture and gave us the hope that our aesthetic activities could constitute a form of

queer feminist political action. DAM! is a direct benefactor and inheritor of aesthetic and ideological innovations made by the artists of the feminist art movement. A primary concern is to create visual interventions in which current social conditions are expanded and examined in relation to lesbian/feminist, activist, and design histories.

TT: The Toxic Titties take an expansive view of what constitutes both feminism and activism and also what might be included under the umbrella of art history. As such, our inspiration comes from sources including Adrian Piper, David Wojnarowicz, ACT UP [AIDs Coalition to Unleash Power], General Idea, Ana Mendieta, Valie Export, Carolee Schneeman, Hannah Wilke, Martha Rosler, Yoko Ono, and Harun Faroki. Our work is also very influenced by the history of conceptual art and our collective time as students of artist Michael Asher.

We continue to be inspired by kindred spirits Vaginal Davis, Ron Athey, Le Tigre, Critical Art Ensemble, Pilot TV, LTTR [Lesbians to the Rescue], and Lesbians on Ecstasy as well as by the vital critical work of those who are currently writing feminist art history, including Amelia Jones, Jennifer Doyle, and José Muñoz.

**KR**: The slogan on the Guerrilla Girls' website reads, "reinventing the 'f' word: feminism" (Guerrilla Girls 2006a; 2006b) Does this slogan resonate with Toxic Titties and DAM!? Do you see your practice addressing the perceived need to "reinvent" feminism? If so, how are you doing this, and if not, why not?

**GG**: We want to rehabilitate the concept of feminism. We're always surprised to find people who agree with the tenets of feminism—equal pay, social justice, equal opportunities, et cetera—but who refuse to use the word feminist to describe themselves. We want to figure out a way to make everyone who believes in gender equality proud to be a feminist. Come to think of it, the world really needs more men who are feminists.

**DAM!**: No, DAM! isn't trying to reinvent feminism. If anything, we are trying to reclaim some of the outrage and clarity that much feminist art from the 1970s displays.

TT: Toxic Titties are definitely interested in building on feminist histories and using our awareness of prior theories and practices of feminist art to approach the particular problems and opportunities of our current cultural moment. For us, this opening up and adaptation means expanding both the participants and audiences for our projects to include a diverse array of people, moving away from feminism as a form of identity politics and toward a type of feminism that isn't dependent on the solidity of the category "woman."

**KR**: What place do aggressive protest tactics have currently in your activist art lexicon? Has this been totally superseded by humor and parody? Please cite specific examples in your work where either or both have been deployed, and assess if one is now more effective than another, given current conditions. What dangers do you see in deploying one or the other of these aesthetic/activist approaches?

**GG**: We were always annoying; it got people to talk about us, pro and con. Then we discovered that if you can make someone laugh at something difficult, you have an IV into their brains. If you can make them laugh then think, all the better. There's our opportunity to change their minds.

**DAM!**: Appropriation and parody was DAM!'s initial modus operandi. As lesbians, we wanted to make our absence/presence visible by intervening into the visual culture of the street. We felt we must counter or culture iam mainstream advertising imagery as we did in our earliest campaigns ("The Gap Ads" 1991; "Family Circle/Lesbian Family Values" 1992; and "Do You Love the Dyke in Your Life?" 1993). In the early 1990s this seemed like a novel idea. We gradually understood that our agitprop efforts would be subsumed by the endless cool-hunt of the advertising industry. We moved on to projects that employed the formal and social tropes of recognizable design genres such as action films ("Straight to Hell" 1994), bridal magazines ("Gay Marriage: You Might as Well Be Straight" 1997), and WPA (Works Projects Administration) propaganda ("Lesbian Americans: Don't Sell Out" 1998). We have recently been producing more "traditional" activist ephemera, including bumper stickers ("S.U.V. = WWIII" 2002) and buttons ("Run Bush Run. The Lesbians are Coming" 2003). Humor has always been the best delivery method for aggression and transgression.

TT: In our work, we often take advantage of the peculiar situation of public spaces being taken over for an art event or performance festival in order to engage in aggressive protest tactics that wouldn't otherwise be tolerated. For instance, in Mexico City we staged a protest walk as the fictional militant futuristic feminist force *Toxic Troopers*, which involved protesting without a permit in front of the United States Embassy on the 4th of July. In our numerous encounters with police officers and embassy guards, the presence of museum officials and the fact that our actions could be called an artwork allowed us to continue with this action that would otherwise have been stopped.

In our performance, *LATT*, we took advantage of the situation of the streets of Chinatown in Los Angeles being transformed entirely into an art space by the LA Freewaves Festival in order to engage in a really aggressive performance as a police force repeatedly assaulting President Bush while placing him under arrest.

We often combine the aesthetics of protest with camp elements, humor, and parody. Each artwork is conceived for a particular situation, and we choose the tactics that are most appropriate for the constraints of that event. The *Beecroft Intervention*, for instance, required a more passive approach of infiltration and observation followed by a published account of the mechanisms of the performance after the fact.

**KR**: The Guerrilla Girls choose always to conceal their individual identities; Toxic Titties have both revealed and concealed their true identities, and DAM! never conceals. How did you come to the decision to reveal or conceal, and how do you see this decision as having either benefited or hampered the effectiveness of your work?

**GG**: Originally we were anonymous to protect our individual careers. Then we realized it was a great way to represent all women, not just our membership. The mystery of who we were and the fact that we could be any woman, anywhere struck terror and caution into the entire artworld. Everyone was careful because they might be talking to a Guerrilla Girl! Now we think it's really bizarre that the best way to be taken seriously as a feminist in the artworld is to be anonymous and wear a gorilla mask!

**DAM!**: Actually we were noncommittal about our individual identities for the first several years of our project. Dyke Action Machine! began as the lesbian working group of Queer Nation. We met there and began doing graphics on behalf of the group. When the working group dissolved, we kept working under that name. Perhaps for this reason, many people envisioned DAM! as an "army" of angry lesbians. In the beginning we worked underground because pasting posters on public property is illegal. Once we began to receive a modicum of funding, we were able to hire the same companies that posted outdoor advertising and who were tacitly sanctioned by many property owners. As we received more and more notoriety, we decided to finally "come out" as public artists with our 1998 postcard mailer, "Meet the Muffiosi: We are Dyke Action Machine!," which featured a photograph of us.

KR: DAM!, how did your audience react to "Meet the Muffiosi?"

**DAM!**: Our audience reacted with nervous laughter and delight. . . . But seriously, with "Meet the Muffiosi," a whole new cast of personas and level of performativity became a part of our work. The Lesbian Gangsta was just the beginning.

TT: As the Toxic Titties, we are constantly working with the interplay between individuals and the collective. We often take on fictional roles as

a group, which are part of our play with the malleability and highly constructed nature of group identity formations. Toxic Titties is an expansive name that refers to a constantly changing and evolving collective. This is useful for us as a way to open up our practice to a wide range of collaborative participatory endeavors. We also use the name Toxic Titties as a type of branding playing off the highly effective strategies of commercial advertising in the deployment of our humorous political messages.

**KR**: How do images of women function in your work?

**GG**: We use lots of different images not just women. But when we do use female images, they're usually used to dismiss stereotypes, like Marilyn Monroe wearing a gorilla mask or Pamela Anderson being cast as Gloria Steinem in our *The Birth Of Feminism* poster.

**DAM!**: Since DAM!'s projects are first and foremost aimed at the lesbian viewer, images of women function in a particular way. While our work acts as a reminder that lesbians are rarely portrayed in mainstream culture, it also seeks to give lesbians visual pleasure within the same highend, consumerist paradigm. From the beginning, we have used attractive, younger butch models to telegraph this dichotomy. Except when it comes to race, our projects play within the conventional parameters of beauty—mainly because we want the work to read as "advertising" first and foremost. The hip, young butch has since become the visual token for the mainstreaming of lesbianism, as in such television shows as *The L Word* and Bravo's *Workout*, a reality TV series that follows the life of a lesbian fitness trainer.

**KR**: Going forward, DAM!, how will these shows affect your work? Does it change the direction visually?

**DAM!**: As the image of the "soft butch" or lip-gloss wearing tomboy became synonymous with lesbianism in mainstream visual culture, we turned our sights on other representations. In 1999, we introduced online viewers to Gynadome, the only lesbian planet, a galactic patch of Wimmin's Land inhabited by hairy, lesbian hippies. Our most recent projects use no images of women at all. Instead, our presidential campaign button uses the labrys, the ur-icon of '70s lesbianism. One would be hard pressed to see a labrys on Bravo.

TT: Ideally, the images of women in our work should function as slippery (miss) representations. We undermine static notions of gender by recruiting a multiplicity of performers for each project, including both women and men performing and miss-performing their various gendered roles.

Using strategies of pleasure and play, the group mutates with each performance to include an array of participants who embody queer perversions of cultural ideals. Through failure and excess, Toxic Titties simultaneously invokes and destabilizes collective identity formations. The Toxic Titties have appeared as camp counselors (Camp TT), police officers (*LATT*), a feminist militia (Toxic Troopers), blushing brides (Toxic Union), members of a lost art movement (The Mamaists), high society art patrons (Be My Patron), and B-Movie lesbo-sploitation starlets hell bent on world domination (Invasion of the Toxic Titties).

**KR**: A strong visual language is an integral part of activism as it has either shocked an audience into greater awareness or conveyed women's collective experience. Aesthetically Guerrilla Girls, DAM!, and Toxic Titties leverage guerrilla graphics and a mass-media form of communication taken from advertising and graphic design. Is there a cohesive visual language for feminist activism today?

GG: There are so many different kinds of feminists that we believe everyone needs to develop their own language—both visual and verbal—and then get to work. The world needs more groups like ours and DAM! and Toxic Titties. The Guerrilla Girls usually start with an outrageous statement that introduces a subject and makes you laugh. Then we back it up with some information that makes you think about things a little differently. Our strategy and sensibility has remained pretty constant, but we're always trying to deepen our critique and come up with more effective ways of reaching people.

**DAM!**: If there is, we are not aware of it. We have noticed a sort of nostalgic return to the handmade and/or zine aesthetics, as in the work of LTTR (Lesbians to the Rescue) and Ridykulous. At the beginning of the twentyfirst century, "activism" is still signaled by a certain aesthetic branding in the same way that social movements such as punk rock or womyn's land possess their own recognizable "look."

TT: I am not sure that there is or should be any one unified or cohesive visual language for feminist activism today. There are certainly a number of contemporary feminist artists who pull from a trajectory of feminist and activist imagery. The Toxic Titties are definitely inspired by the aesthetic strategies of artists and artist groups such as Fluxus, Guerrilla Girls, ACT UP, and many others. For us, visually referencing a history of feminist art activism within a performance has the benefit of drawing out a discourse that we can then engage with in the piece. A coherent style is also a necessary tool we use to visually unify our somewhat chaotic performative

events. We have a great graphic designer as a Toxic Tittie adjunct, who often works with us in translating our aesthetics into the appropriate graphic identity for a given project.

**KR**: Guerrilla Girls, DAM!, and Toxic Titties gravitate to certain domains and spaces where feminist discourse and activism is still largely absent. DAM!, your work most frequently enters the media and the internet; Toxic Titties, through performance, your work creates a feminist discourse in the gallery, and in addition to Hollywood, film, and theater, the Guerrilla Girls continue to assault the museum world. Can you each address why you are drawn to these spaces?

GG: We started doing work about the art world because that's the world we knew best, but we quickly branched out to other social and political issues. When we realized that Hollywood was worse than the artworld that was an opportunity we couldn't pass up—especially since the film industry presents itself as the bastion of liberal politics while women and people of color have such marginal roles behind the scenes. As for museums, who can resist attacking those snobby institutions, most of which do a terrible job exhibiting and collecting the work of women and artists of color?

**DAM!**: Even though we have art school educations, both members of DAM! worked in the print and advertising field before we started collaborating. Sue is a commercial photographer, and Carrie is a graphic designer for hire. Initially we were drawn together by the desire to subvert the images we were producing at our day jobs. We are steeped in the ideology of marketing and the media, and this was a logical place to intervene.

TT: Some of our recent work has been conceived for feminist exhibitions, symposiums, and performance festivals. For each of these events we have created context-specific performances that engage with both the specific environment and the theme of the exhibition or festival. These forums allow us to engage with an audience more directly and offer them an experience in which they can become participants. In these contexts, our work does not really function as guerrilla theater. Many of our performances have occurred in public spaces that have been partially appropriated by curators of outdoor arts festivals. The Toxic Titties "patrolled" the streets of Chinatown, Los Angeles, as the *LATT* for the LA Freewaves: TV or not TV Media Art Festival. As the *Toxic Troopers* we led a "protest/march" through Mexico City for Outside Field: International Performance Art Festival at Ex-Teresa Arte Actual. Although live, context-specific performances have been a big part of our practice, we also make and show films, videos, photographs, drawings, installations, and net art.

**KR**: DAM! how has the name you have given your group reclaimed the word "dyke?" Toxic Titties, was there a similar strategy in naming your collaborative? Guerrilla Girls? Please elaborate.

**GG**: We reclaimed the word girl because it was so often used to belittle grown women. We also wanted to make older feminists sit up and notice us since being anti-"girl" was one of their issues. Also, "girl" sounded so good with "Guerrilla."

**DAM!**: We met in Queer Nation in 1990, a time when celebrities were being outed, and there was an attempt to unify the concerns of lesbians and gay men under the "queer" rubric. The name Dyke Action Machine! was both startling—try applying for a grant with that name—and playful. Is DAM! an anonymous posse of superheroes? A man-hating militia? The name also signaled that lesbians had their own particular set of oppressions and social conditions—separate from gay men—that needed attending to.

TT: Toxic Titties. . . . It actually started as a bit of a joke; when we first started working together in 2001 we thought it would be amusing to posit our collective identity as a fake biker gang. At that time we had no idea that our fledgling collaboration would continue beyond a small project or two, but for better or worse the name has stuck.

**KR**: Does feminist or gender theory influence your aesthetic choices?

**GG**: We're not scholars; we're artists, but feminist and gender theory certainly inform our work.

DAM!: Yes.

TT: Feminist and queer theory are part of the backbone of our art practice, particularly the veins of that theory, which seek to complicate, challenge, and open up identity politics. Our process of developing new works typically involves months of discussion about the potential aesthetic and political significance of our proposed actions, all of which is informed by both theory and experience. We are all always reading new things, which in turn inform our work. Our collective was initially formed when we were all in graduate school together at the California Institute of the Arts (Cal Arts), and that also helped to solidify a common theoretical basis for the development of our art. Of course we are also inspired and influenced by fields as diverse as bodybuilding, cake decorating, postcolonial theory, electronic music, biotechnology, and film.

**KR**: Collaboration and collectivity have been integral to the feminist movement from the 1970s to the present. How have collaboration/collective approaches to activism functioned in your work over time? Do you consider your audiences collaborators?

**GG**: Our work is collaborative. Our audiences and supporters are our collaborators, too. They give us feedback, ideas, and suggestions during our performances; they help distribute our work, and they tell us their experiences—amazing stories that inform new projects and/or find their way into *Hot Flashes*, the newsletter on www.guerrillagirls.com. We also do workshops all over the world where we help participants come up with actions and posters, which they then go out and produce.

**DAM!**: DAM!'s collaboration has been very long-lived, approximately fourteen years and counting. No doubt it has had such a long life because it is primarily a two-person project. Collaboration is essential to our project in that it subverts the "master" narrative of the single voice/artist while simultaneously mirroring the inner workings of an advertising agency. In this case, DAM! acts as both the agency and the client. From modeling to prop building to printing, the success of all DAM! projects depends on the support and services donated by various members of our extended community. In the early 1990s when it was more controversial to put a picture of a butch dyke on the street, many of our posters were defaced. Thus our "collaboration" with our models became inherently activist while doubling as a part of the urban landscape.

TT: Our practice as politically engaged artists includes the collective authorship of our projects by the three core members of Toxic Titties, long-term collaboration with about a dozen performers who frequently participate in our performances and film and video works, a crucial collaboration over the years with graphic designer Cathy Davies, as well as a host of more or less "on-off" collaborations with stylists, fashion designers, cinematographers, film crews, ice sculptors, and other artists. Toxic Titties is the product and process of a community of amazing, creative people who have been at the heart of our practice in Los Angeles over the last half-decade. We do consider our audiences to be collaborators, inasmuch as frequently our performances are events that absolutely require their participation, and the audience is a key visual as well as participatory element in the production.

**KR**: What has been the role of technology in your aesthetic/activist lexicon?

**GG**: We used handset type when we first started and could only afford black and white printing. Then computers and the internet allowed us to do more complex, color images and send them all over the world. Technology has made us global! Lately, we've been doing digital banners—17 feet tall and more—for venues like the Venice Biennale and exhibitions in Europe and the United States. And of course we've done many billboards attacking Hollywood for its discriminating ways.

**DAM!**: Like other media interventionists, Dyke Action Machine! would not have come into being without the proliferation of digital technology. We started collaborating in 1991, around the same time that desktop computers became sophisticated enough to challenge professional-grade production methods. In 1995, when the web became the great leveler in terms of access to technology, everything changed again. For a short time, it was not about who had the most money but who had the best idea. Ostensibly, all image producers had the same corporate tools and now were in a position to target the same audience. The ease with which DAM! circulates between the role of the corporation, the activist, the graphic designer, and the historian is completely facilitated by the computer.

TT: Technology has been a useful tool for us in our work largely in the form of digital video, digital photography, and lots of e-mailing behind the scene to plan projects and build audiences. We have finally finished a website with an archive of our performance documentation, which you can find at www.toxictitties.com. Possibly the most crucial role of technology in our artwork has been the ways in which it has oriented our conception of activism toward the idea of tactical media and to a certain extent away from direct action.

**KR**: What's the greatest challenge you face today as feminist activist artists?

**GG**: Figuring out new, even more effective methods of activism. Getting conservatives in every culture to realize that equality in the world is dependent on women claiming basic human rights everywhere. Fighting the forces that have oppressed women for centuries.

**DAM!**: Most people don't believe that feminism is needed anymore. The nuanced differences between an empowered female sexuality and an exploited female sexuality have collapsed and become culturally naturalized. Men still own the world.

TT: As artists we are constantly trying to challenge our own conceptions of both "feminism" and "activism." In the contemporary era, for us

this means linking up the histories and tactics developed in the past 30 years of feminist art practice with a broader set of concerns. We are currently working to expand the frame of our work to link up with emerging transgender political movements within the United States and the work of global feminist actions in response to the conditions of transnational capitalism. One of our greatest challenges is the difficult but necessary work of moving beyond our own immediate experience to find the places where feminism has its most crucial work to do.

Of course, the challenges we choose are all faced within the context of the material difficulties of doing this kind of work, which of course have to do with finding the money and time to do it and creating audiences and distribution networks largely outside the mainstream art world. These practical struggles can be exhausting; being a feminist activist artist for the long haul takes grit and determination.

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