YOU ARE AN ARTIST

ASSIGNMENTS TO SPARK CREATION

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THE ART OF COMPLAINING

The Guerrilla Girls

The Guerrilla Girls are expert complainers. They’ve been doing it very effectively since 1985, when they first organized and began distributing posters and stickers around New York City. A group of feminist art activists, the Guerrilla Girls had become increasingly aware that the art they were seeing in galleries and museums in New York City wasn’t necessarily the best of what was around. And after an ineffective 1984 demonstration outside the Museum of Modern Art, protesting a survey exhibition that included only thirteen women artists out of more than one hundred fifty, they decided to try a different approach.

Their posters name names and use information, statistics, and humor to expose gender bias, racism, and corruption within and outside of the art world. In bold black type, one of their first posters, from 1985, clearly lists the names of galleries that were showing no more than 10 percent women artists, or none at all. A 1989 billboard asked: “Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get into the Met Museum? Less than 5 percent of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 85 percent of the nudes are female.” They updated the figures in 2005 and 2012, noting little to no improvement. Using the language of advertising, the Guerrilla Girls seek not only to point fingers but to change minds through the intrepid deployment of facts and sometimes outrageous visuals. Calling themselves “the Conscience of the Art World,” the group has produced hundreds of posters, billboards, books, stickers, animations, and actions—about not just art, but also politics, film, war, and more.

The members of the group are anonymous, wearing gorilla masks in public and choosing the names of women artists from the past as pseudonyms. This decision was made to keep the attention on the work instead of their identities, with the added benefit that founding member “Frida Kahlo” once explained: “If you’re in a situation where you’re a little afraid to speak up, put a mask on. You won’t believe what comes out of your mouth.”

Although their work is now part of museum collections around the world, the Guerrilla Girls continue to cast their critical gaze upon the
inequities they see around them. For this assignment, they ask you to use the culture of now to find your own way to creatively complain about the world as you experience it.

Guerrilla Girls, Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get into the Met. Museum?, 2012

Guerrilla Girls, Pop Quiz Update, 2016
YOUR TURN

You’re going to complain anyway, so why not do it well? Resist the urge to hastily type out your latest gripes on whatever social media app is in front of you, and consider an alternative approach.

1. Think of something you really want to complain about.
2. Communicate your message in a unique, unforgettable way.

TIPS/CHEATS/VARIATIONS

- Spend some time coming up with what it is you want to say and to whom you want to say it. Think about it for days, weeks, or months, and pay attention to the ways people around you broadcast their ideas. Make notes, take pictures, and give yourself time to craft your strategy.

- Large problems may be difficult to address, but smaller aspects of an issue can be more feasible. How does a widespread problem manifest itself in a given community? What is it that you, in particular, are able to see that others might not?

- Try it out. Find test audiences who will give you an honest opinion. If it doesn’t strike a chord, try something else.

- Be funny. If you can make someone who disagrees with you laugh, it might just be your opportunity to penetrate their consciousness.

- Consider both physical and virtual spaces to present your complaint. It can be tough to get noticed on the internet and in a world where people are often staring at their screens. Where are the places that their attention might be captured, and when might you capture it?

- Complaining is a good place to start, but not to end. See this assignment as a springboard for other actions, making a difference not all at once, but over time.
At the age of twenty-five, Christine de Pizan (1364–1430) found herself widowed with children to support, and she became a copyist and writer to support her family. She achieved renown for her ballads, poems, and allegories, as well as her vociferous objection to the popular thirteenth-century poem *Roman de la rose* (*Romance of the Rose*), which depicts women as wanton and immoral seductresses. She countered with her allegory *Le livre de la Cité des Dames* (*The Book of the City of Women*), in which the narrator falls into a trance and three women, personifying Reason, Rectitude, and Justice, visit her and instruct her to build an entire city populated by strong, virtuous women throughout history. Told entirely by women and about women, de Pizan’s story used tropes and techniques fashionable in medieval France to counter the prevailing narrative of women as illogical and inferior. By rooting her tale in Christian morality, de Pizan got away with her harsh complaints about patriarchal society and highlighted women for their skills in discourse and peacemaking.