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Oral history interview with Guerrilla Girls
Jane Bowles and Alma Thomas, 2008 May 8

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a digitally recorded interview with Guerrilla Girls Jane Bowles and Alma Thomas on May 8, 2008. The interview took place at an undisclosed location in New York, New York, and was conducted by Judith Olch Richards for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Guerrilla Girls Jane Bowles and Alma Thomas and Judith Olch Richards have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Alma Thomas and Jane Bowles, Guerrilla Girls, on May 8, 2008, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc number one.

Alma, I want to ask you, and then I'll ask Jane, tell me from the very beginning how you became a Guerrilla Girl.

ALMA THOMAS: Okay. I'm a performance artist, and a friend of mine, Gertrude Stein, who's also a performance artist, and whom I'd known for years and years and years, invited me. But she had actually sent me an invitation in 1985 to - to either come to an event for the Guerrilla Girls - and in 1985, I was actually leaving the art world because I was taking care of my mother, who lived in Boston and was - and had Alzheimer's. And so I couldn't do anything, and I didn't go to that event. And so maybe six years later, when a lot of ferment was occurring in feminist - in the feminist art world - WAC had just begun.

I don't know if you are familiar with Women's Action Coalition. That had begun in response to the events surrounding the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings, and I had joined WAC almost from the very beginning, well, maybe two meetings into it, and I was extremely active in that group.

I had started the Committee on Diversity and Inclusion, and, you know, and I was doing an awful lot in that, and so I - I'm trying to remember exactly when the invitation from Gertrude came, but I believe that it was - it overlapped my time in WAC, and I think it was just after the big Guggenheim Museum [SoHo, New York City] thing that both WAC and the Guerrilla Girls collaborated on [1992].

MS. RICHARDS: The Guggenheim SoHo?

MS. THOMAS: Yes, right, and so I kind of like segued into the Guerrilla Girls, but I had already sort of started collaborating with them. It was a very strange thing, because my joining the Guerrilla Girls was not really the same thing as becoming a Guerrilla Girl.

I'm a very vocal person, as you can probably tell, and - and very opinionated and - and I had been very, very visible in WAC, you know, and I was one of the ones that was, you know, most on the scene, and - but when I joined the Guerrilla Girls, there was something about the environment. Perhaps it was the mystique of the Girls. Perhaps it was simply a room full of, you know, 25 - it was a much larger group then than it became later. It was - it's like - in terms of membership, there were - I think that was probably a peak moment for it, and -

MS. RICHARDS: This is approximately -

JANE BOWLES: It must have been '91, because I was in graduate school when WAC had that thing.

MS. THOMAS: Okay. Yes.

MS. BOWLES: In '91, I finished graduate school.

MS. THOMAS: I told you that it - yeah. I told you that -

MS. RICHARDS: This is Jane Bowles speaking.

MS. THOMAS: - that in November of '91 -

MS. BOWLES: That sounds right.

MS. THOMAS: - that I actually -

MS. BOWLES: Because there were some -

MS. THOMAS: - that I went to my first meeting.

MS. BOWLES: - women in my graduate program who were doing all the graphics for WAC.

MS. THOMAS: Okay. Yeah.

MS. BOWLES: So -

MS. THOMAS: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Is this a good moment, Jane, to talk about how you -

MS. BOWLES: I think we need to finish the thought that she had.

MS. THOMAS: Yeah. Well -

MS. BOWLES: Sorry.

MS. THOMAS: Yeah. I'm - all - I was going to say that this is a very strange thing to say for somebody like me, and I can assure you that Jane will be shocked when I say this, but it was six months before I said a word in the Guerrilla Girls, and I went to every meeting.

MS. RICHARDS: About how often were those meetings?

MS. THOMAS: Those meetings were - they were pretty often then. They were at least once every two weeks or once - certainly no fewer than once a month. They were often, but I was simply - it took me a long time to - I don't know whether it was confidence or just simply understanding the dynamic of what was going on. It was just something in the way people were speaking to each other, and they had assumed such a large degree of common knowledge amongst themselves that, you know, every conversation would contain references to things that I didn't know anything about and to people that I didn't know anything about.

I mean, basically, I was much older than most of the people. There were a few who - one or two that were my age, but most of the - but the ethos was very much younger, and they had a lot of things in common that I didn't have in common with them. But it was mostly that - I think in some ways, at that moment, I felt like I had not ever been in a room full of women that were all so smart.

These were some of the smartest women I had met in a long time, right, but they were smart in a particular way. I later came to feel that they were not so smart in other ways. Okay? [Laughs] But at which point I really began to start talking. But they were sharp, they were witty, and they totally intimidated me for some reason, and I'm not usually intimidated, I can assure you.

If I could actually pinpoint the reason why I was intimidated, I think I would have the whole secret to the Guerrilla Girls, you know, but I can't. That's it. I don't know if that satisfies what you were asking.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. We'll go back to, from that moment, but let's turn to Jane and hear how you began your involvement.

MS. BOWLES: Let's see. I think my first experience with the Girls was not really as a member but sort of as a worker, because when I was in college, I spent a summer in New York and helped poster. I think it was in '87.

MS. RICHARDS: And how did you get recruited to do that?

MS. BOWLES: And that was at the time that - I can't remember. That was, like, a friend of a - I was doing an intern program at the MoMA [Museum of Modern Art, New York City], and someone's friend knew about this, and it was still when posters were going up in SoHo. And it was like, you know, there were lots of posters and they were visible, and it was kind of the height of that.

MS. RICHARDS: When was that, about?

MS. BOWLES: In '87, summer of '87.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, wow.

MS. BOWLES: And it was like this really kind of exciting, illicit kind of thing. Scary.

MS. THOMAS: Did you wear a mask?

MS. BOWLES: No, we didn't wear masks, and it was - it was like, you know, watching out for the police; it was

very scary. I'm not such a - it was scary at the time, but it was a lot of fun, and we got some posters. I think we put up - I'm trying to remember what we put up, but that was - so that was in '87, and then I wasn't invited to join the group until '95. It was around '95, I think. A good friend of mine and neighbor, who I had known for a long time, very mysteriously invited me over to her house and wouldn't tell me what it was about and -

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember her Guerrilla Girl name?

MS. BOWLES: No. Well, we assigned her a name, Dorothy.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay.

MS. BOWLES: Right. And she - she didn't - I got there, and she still wasn't telling me what it was about, and she started asking me questions. Did I - what did I think about the Guerrilla Girls? Had I ever seen actions with them before? And I had just - they had just done some leafleting outside of the Whitney Biennial [Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City], like a few weeks prior to that, and so she asked me what I thought about that and - and I remember feeling like it was - it seemed very intangible compared to the very visible, tangible experience I had had doing postering back in '87. But - so I - I hadn't been as aware of their activities because they weren't as visible as they had been.

But she - so she asked me, and it took a long time for us talking about it till I realized that she was actually asking me to participate [Bowles and Thomas laugh], and so that was - that was how she - how I joined. She invited me to go to a meeting, and then Alma and I were talking about it. I'm not actually sure if she was at that meeting, and I had a very similar feeling of feeling completely out of place and not quite sure how I was going to fit into this group. And whereas Alma was much older than everyone, I was much younger than everyone, and also it was just a different life - place, you know. I had finished graduate school. I was kind of struggling as a young artist.

MS. RICHARDS: At that first meeting, about how many people were at that meeting, and how many did you think were members, if they were not - it was a large group. Did you have a sense of the size of the membership, perhaps beyond the number of people at the meeting?

MS. BOWLES: I don't know. There were, maybe, 15 people there, and -

MS. RICHARDS: This is '95?

MS. BOWLES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] And -

MS. RICHARDS: And we're talking about late '91 with Alma as being a peak, perhaps, of membership.

MS. THOMAS: I wasn't present before that, but my sense was that this was a large number of girls.

MS. RICHARDS: Anyway, so - so, Jane, you went to that meeting, and do you remember what happened at the meeting?

MS. BOWLES: And I remember there were many different - you know, I was - there was so much to absorb, because it was a totally new experience and I was trying to figure out what was going on and how things worked. And there was no real initiation process, other than my conversation with Dorothy when I was first invited, you know. It's not like there's an office policy manual or anything. You get in there and you kind of are like, who's who, and what are you supposed to do, and what's the protocol? And actually later, when we tried to increase the membership of the group, we did create a kind of introductory package for people, because that was something that I think -

MS. THOMAS: That was a much larger introduction, and they needed to be acclimated quickly.

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. THOMAS: In the beginning, I think - I'm not quite sure how they decided this was a moment to bring somebody new in, but they were normally not bringing in more than one or two people at a time.

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. THOMAS: So it didn't seem necessary to do something so formal, but when we -

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. THOMAS: - brought in all of those people at that time, do you remember -

MS. BOWLES: Yeah.

MS. THOMAS: - at that time, we actually had a two-day orientation.

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. RICHARDS: Should we talk about that now, or do you want to go to that time frame later?

MS. THOMAS: She hasn't finished.

MS. BOWLES: So I don't know if I have that much more to say. I remember we were talking at that first meeting. I had a conversation with Gertrude about the gigs and the format of the gigs, and there had been a lot of debate about how to make them more effective and inclusive to people who weren't comfortable with the traditional format. The gigs being lectures, public lectures, which was sort of our main source of income.

And I don't remember the projects. I remember more, kind of, administrative discussions, like - or not administrative but talking about, you know, who was going to participate in upcoming lectures and how they were done and -

MS. RICHARDS: At some - I'll ask Jane, and then I'll ask Alma this. At what point did you start to imagine what your participation would be, how you would contribute, what you would like to do?

MS. BOWLES: Not for many years. I mean, I think at - when I first became involved, it took me a long time to just kind of suss out the various roles and how it operated and -

MS. RICHARDS: Was there a general understanding among the members that you needed this time, that nobody was pushing you to -

MS. BOWLES: Oh, yeah. I mean, everyone was - there was such a strong social network amongst the existing members, the, sort of, professional and personal were very closely aligned, and that's, of course, part of the nature of the group's mission, too. And so finding a way to fit into the action of the group, also, I think, involved finding a way to personally engage the group, and that took me a long time, I think. Actually, I don't feel like I really hit my groove in the group until the group separated and I had my own group of people my age who I really had more in common with.

MS. THOMAS: That's very funny because when you - when - I knew that you were about to ask me a similar question, and for me, it was a very similar process because, as I said, I came in at this moment when there was a large number of women, but Gertrude had kind of like warned me that there was friction. She didn't describe the friction, but she just sort of like hinted very broadly that there was. And as I said, it took me, like, six months to say anything, because I'm just sitting there. I was in shell shock in a way, and I was listening and looking, and the friction began to become more and more visible, and it sort of like came up around people wanting to do work and feeling that they were being stifled. That was sort of the general idea, and within - in less than a year after I had joined, came the sort of like big break-up, in which many people left because of this friction.

And at that time, I was feeling sort of like - I was feeling somehow a bridge between the two groups, and so my - I was kind of like trying to bring people together and make sure that they didn't leave, but they left anyway because they - you know, but - and then I was left sort of almost on my own but in a much more visible position because I had been trying to be the bridge-maker and - but then I found myself left with the people who had caused the problem. Because the people who were having the difficulties had left, and the people, other people, had stayed. And then I began to express myself, because I began to see what the problems were and I began to speak about them, and I'm not quite sure.

My attitude shifted in this process. It took another year or two before that happened, and then I just said to myself, I've got to, like, do it. I've got to, like, just start campaigns that interest me. I mean, you were talking about, well, how do you find your role? I mean, I found my role because there were things that were not being covered, and the biggest thing that was not being covered, for me, and which had left - led several - there had been a few girls of color when I entered, but they had left in this exodus, because of this problem, and so I was, like, all by myself, right, and so now I have to start fighting for certain things and I - I said, okay.

There was - this is not, like, a personal statement. It just simply was true in the early to mid-'90s. It was true of a group, of an age group of feminists who had not been educated in the time of theory or had not - did not have vocabularies to understand that they themselves were not representative. I'm not going to say it was essentialist feminism, but it sort of bordered on that.

People felt - it was more what I would call universalist feminism, the idea that all women were the same, right, and these - this group, the group that was left after the break-up was much more of that universalist frame of

mind. And what happened was that I myself had had to completely retool in about 19 - actually, everything overlapped.

So as I was becoming a Guerrilla Girl, I was intellectually retooling in order to write an article, which became very - well, somebody just referred to it as a classic. It's a very important article. In order to write it - it was about the subjectivity of - the black female subjectivity - and in order to write this article, I had had to study theory. I had had to do a crash course. And I did nothing in my life for six months except read theory in order to be able to write this article.

So by the time I had finished writing this article about the problems between black feminists and white feminists and - black female difference - I was really ready to take on this problem within the Guerrilla Girls and - but it was almost impossible to really successfully do it, because the vocabulary was so different. You just simply couldn't, you know, be understood, even when you spoke.

MS. BOWLES: Well, I think that we talked a lot about - there was a kind of formula for the posters which had a "you" and an assumed speaker, of which we, as the feminists, were supposed to identify with the "I" and that - it was - it had a very, sort of, simplified, in a way, understanding of who the "I" and who the "you" is or could be -

MS. THOMAS: Yes.

MS. BOWLES: - and many of the questions that I think a later group of women who joined the group were interested in -

MS. RICHARDS: When you say later -

MS. BOWLES: Like I mean, say, my generation and younger, were -

MS. RICHARDS: Ninety-five and later?

MS. BOWLES: I think so.

MS. THOMAS: Yeah.

MS. BOWLES: Yeah.

MS. THOMAS: Yeah.

MS. BOWLES: - were not so easily expressed in terms of I and You or, you know, they - a lot of the identity-in-politics question, you know, questioned who is the I and who is the You.

MS. THOMAS: Yeah.

MS. BOWLES: And the kind of I-and-You formula that was so successful for some of the very basic questions that were posed by the Girls in the early years were not as effective, and I think there was a lot of tension, sort of, maybe, post-'95 or whatever between Girls who were interested in asking questions in different ways and then finding, kind of, the medium or format for asking those questions that didn't fit into the older members' idea of what the Guerrilla Girls should be saying and how they should say it.

And there's a whole thing, like I said, a particular sense of humor and a particular kind of cheeky way of talking and - but I just remember that this I/You problem was kind of the -

MS. THOMAS: Well, even as you're speaking now, I can see - I can actually phrase something that I hadn't actually thought of before, but the Guerrilla Girls went over a 15-year period, and they actually in themselves played out the contra talk that occurred in the early '90s between the second-wave and third-wave feminists.

I remember that at WAC, we had - we were addressed by Alice Walker's daughter [Rebecca Walker], who was one of the three women that had written the manifesto, the Third World - the Third Wave Feminism. So, I mean, it was a fairly new idea. It wasn't that the problems that led to it were new, but the expression of it had just sort of recently occurred.

She gave that talk in '91, and by '95, these issues were being discussed and argued in the Girls. I mean, it became almost impossible to really work, because people had such different ideas.

MS. BOWLES: I'm just looking in my notes, because I remember, actually, we still have discussions in the Broadband [GuerrillaGirlsBroadband] about what is third-wave and second-wave feminism. We just recently had this big discussion about it in the context of talking about this show that was in L.A., the WAC Show.

MS. THOMAS: The WAC Show.

MS. BOWLES: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Jane, from '95, when you began, to when the Guerrilla Girls changed and ended its previous reality and divided and you - you immediately became a member of GuerrillaGirlsBroadband, but during the period before that happened, what were the projects that you - or what was one of the early projects that you were involved in?

MS. BOWLES: Well, I -

MS. RICHARDS: It's still a question of your role -

MS. BOWLES: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: - as a Guerrilla Girl.

MS. BOWLES: Yeah. I mean, I think that when Alma was talking, I was thinking that since Alma's focus was finding a project, but I was more interested in finding a kind of role. I didn't have a pressing issue for a long - I hadn't really found my focus. I guess in my own work at the beginning, I hadn't even found my focus, and so the thing that I felt I could contribute was more doing graphic work. And I was interested in, you know, doing more visual work, because I was a visual artist, [laughs] as were many other people in the group. And that was actually a real problem, because there was one - one of the original members had really taken control of a lot of the graphic production of the group and excluded, through a complicated process that took me - I mean, I still don't entirely understand it.

MS. RICHARDS: That's Frida Kahlo?

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. THOMAS: Not Frida.

MS. BOWLES: No.

MS. THOMAS: No. Kathe Kollwitz.

MS. RICHARDS: That's right. Kathe Kollwitz.

MS. THOMAS: Kathe Kollwitz took control of the visuals, but this was aided by -

MS. BOWLES: Frida.

MS. THOMAS: - Frida Kahlo.

MS. BOWLES: Right. So the first project that I really participated in was an election year lottery ticket that we designed and I designed. She was busier or something. For some reason, she was too busy to get involved, and so it was the first thing I got to do, with Gertrude's help sort of facilitating everything. And it was something that we passed out at this downtown arts festival parade in SoHo. And it must have been '98 or '97.

MS. THOMAS: Yeah.

MS. BOWLES: Maybe it was - it was pretty early after - it was pretty soon after I joined. Maybe it was '96.

MS. THOMAS: I think it might have been '96, '96-97. Yeah.

MS. BOWLES: Yeah. And it was - I think it was the first time, also, that I participated in a kind of public event with a mask on. I was participating in this parade and handing out these cards that I designed, and I don't really even - it was something - it was about the election. So it must have been -

MS. RICHARDS: How did you feel about that?

MS. THOMAS: Yes, it had to be '98, right?

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you feel about doing that, appearing with the mask?

MS. BOWLES: Oh, that was really a lot of fun and I - I had been - you can't really describe the experience of - I

mean, you can't anticipate, I guess, the experience of appearing in public with a mask on until you do it, because I had been kind of nervous about it. I mean, there's a kind of history that you also become part of when you put on that mask. So there's some pressure to really perform, you know, be able to respond to questions people ask you, but it also, I hadn't realized, gives you a kind of liberty to be someone that you're not. And so that was pretty exciting to participate in that.

MS. THOMAS: Well, I had actually been burning, with a program in mind, and this book was put out in '93.

MS. BOWLES: Ninety-five was the copyright, but it was out before '95.

MS. RICHARDS: *Confessions of the Guerrilla Girls* [New York: Harper Collins, 1995].

MS. THOMAS: Yeah. And I think the materials were done by '94 probably, but my - this is my first piece -

MS. RICHARDS: Could you describe it?

MS. THOMAS: - for the Girls. There was a very famous moment in feminist history which was - well, actually, here it is. This says '93-94. When the cover of the *New York Times* had a photograph of the stable of Pace Gallery -

MS. BOWLES: *New York Times Magazine*.

MS. THOMAS: *New York Times Magazine*. The artists that were with Pace included - was a small - much smaller operation than it is now, so there were perhaps, you know, maybe 12 artists in all represented by the gallery, and the one woman was Agnes -

MS. BOWLES: Martin.

MS. THOMAS: - Martin, and she was like 90 years old and living in Arizona. So she was not in the photograph.

MS. BOWLES: New Mexico.

MS. THOMAS: New Mexico. So she was not in the - yeah. She was not in the photograph.

So here was this photograph of all these, you know, white men, and I very excitedly, you know, called people up the day - I think the came out on a Saturday night - the newspaper comes out on Saturday, actually, and that night, I called people up and we all met at Eva Hesse's loft and started to work on something. And it really crystallized because they were totally focused on the fact that there was no women in this group, and I was focused on the fact that there was no woman and no blacks, and it was kind of like nobody else had noticed that there was no blacks. And so the - the title, "Hormone Imbalance and Melanin Deficiency," that came from me, and also the "White Supremacism" came from me, and, I mean, actually the entire poster, all of the conceptual ideas were mine, but the actual physical graphics I had to work out with Kathe Kollwitz, okay, which was always going to be the way it was. Okay. This was in spite of the fact that she was living in California.

So this was the only one of what later became the Tokenism Campaign.

MS. BOWLES: Is it in the second book?

MS. THOMAS: Is that in the second book?

MS. RICHARDS: And the title of that book?

MS. BOWLES: *The [Guerrilla Girls'] Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art* [New York: Penguin Books, 1998].

MS. THOMAS: I don't think so. I don't think there were any posters in that book, actually.

The Tokenism Campaign is actually one - one of the moments of the campaign, was the passing out of the leaflets at the Whitney.

MS. RICHARDS: The tokenism campaign that you initiated, -

MS. THOMAS: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: - were you the only one working on it, or were -

MS. THOMAS: I was the only one that was working on it for a while. I can't tell you when one other person, who you will be talking to later, Julia De Burgos, came into the group, and she helped with the, I think, the best of the posters in that campaign, which was a riff on the 10 ways of, you know, how do you tell, you know, a token, or

whatever. And so she made, you know, an absolutely brilliant contribution on the production of that poster, but the entire - I think that was one of the later - oh, and there was an issue of a magazine or a newspaper or a broadsheet that the Girls put out that made tokenism the central theme, and that poster was the central visual of that broadsheet, and so that was - that was Julia.

MS. RICHARDS: So when - at that moment, you had this idea, and you were free to implement it, to go for it. People said -

MS. THOMAS: Oh, everybody went along with it and -

MS. RICHARDS: And other people were doing other things simultaneously?

MS. THOMAS: The Girls didn't have that much energy. They didn't have that much - everybody had lives. Everybody had careers. By this point, a lot of people had children. It was not that there was so much simultaneous activity. It would be whoever had the energy to work on something at that given time would be working on it and -

MS. RICHARDS: And then the feeling was the Guerrilla Girls were accomplishing their mission at this one thing?

MS. THOMAS: Yeah. It was - so you almost felt like there was a campaign and that everything - all of the resources of the Girls had been devoted to the campaign at that moment. And so when I look back - this may or may not be true, but when I look back, I think of the Tokenism Campaign as being kind of like a solid moment of the Girls' history. You know what I mean? That not much else was happening.

MS. RICHARDS: When you created that campaign -

MS. THOMAS: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: - did you ever appear in a gorilla mask, or that was all behind the scenes? You created that campaign and then it gets distributed. So was that - did you personally -

MS. THOMAS: This is a little bit of having to go back just a bit. The Guerrilla Girls had two major activities. One was creating posters and postering, and the other was delivering the message and making money, okay, and I was sort of part of both of them. I was one of the primary gig Girls because I was free to travel and because I was very comfortable performing in front of a group.

So I had been wearing a mask and being part - you know, had that identity and -

MS. BOWLES: Yeah, I never went on gigs. [Laughs.]

MS. THOMAS: So she did not, because, you know, she had a full-time job and so forth. So I was very much into being a public Guerrilla Girl. And if you would like to know some of the more interesting things that I discovered about the mask, it's not only that it leaves you free to adopt another identity; when you have a mask, you do become featureless, and so one of the issues for me was that when I had a mask, which covered my hair and my face, and my skin is actually not that much darker, especially if I'm on a stage, almost - and my vocal intonations are not particularly black because of my background, nobody would believe that I was black, and they didn't even make the connection to the fact that I was being Alma Thomas, right.

So, you know, there would always be this moment when I would have to explain to the audience that I was actually black, and then you would look out and there would be, like, kind of in a strange, like, blank expressions. Nobody believed me, in fact. They thought I was - they thought that that was part of the performance and - but the mask was an extremely powerful thing, and entering a space, the two girls, you know, throwing bananas, it was very, very - it was very powerful, but I myself always objected personally to the mask because the mask had such a terrible connotation for black women, the gorilla image.

It was too close to home, but I didn't want to wear the mask. I never wanted to wear the mask, but I always had to bow to the symbology that the Girls had locked into that was so powerful. I mean, there was nothing that you could ever replace this gorilla mask with that would be as powerful as it was. And so no matter what your philosophical, your psychological attitude toward it was, you had to go along, okay?

But - so that was one thing, and then there was the postering, and the postering, by the time I became a Girl, I remember the really last time that we were able to really just poster with impunity was we did an Ana Mendieta poster, which had to do, of course, with being thrown out of the window, right, [Mendieta died from a fall from her New York City apartment in 1985. Husband Carl Andre was tried and acquitted of her murder, and maintained her death was suicide] and it was very shortly after that that it was clear that postering was no longer a viable means of communication.

When the girls first started, the posters could stay up for, you know, months at a time, and by this time, by the early - by the mid-'90s, postering had become a commercial activity for, you know, for clubs and record companies and so forth, and a poster couldn't last more than 24 hours anywhere. And then the police had become very much more difficult to deal with. It was just - it had become both dangerous and - and ineffective, you know.

So pretty much the posters - I mean, we were leafleting. That was a poster, handing out - handing things out.

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. THOMAS: Sometimes -

MS. RICHARDS: In SoHo?

MS. THOMAS: In SoHo. Well, the leafleting of the - one of the tokenism posters was at the Whitney -

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. THOMAS: - to protest the Whitney's lack of inclusion. And we had to - a whole process had to come of finding different ways of getting the message out. So in that moment, I think that's when the idea of the broadsheet of newspaper sort of arose. That was, like, another way of getting the message out, and it was, like, in '95 that Kathe Kollwitz put up the website.

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. THOMAS: So -

MS. BOWLES: And then the books.

MS. THOMAS: And then the book.

MS. BOWLES: And there was that - didn't they do a CD-ROM?

MS. THOMAS: Yes, Voyager Company.

MS. BOWLES: With Voyager.

MS. THOMAS: Voyager Company collaborated on a CD-ROM. Nobody in the Girls had Internet or even any kind of like, you know, Photoshop or digital expertise at that time. So it was pretty crude, and this company Voyager took pity on us or something and -

MS. BOWLES: They were doing all these interesting projects with various artists.

MS. THOMAS: Yeah. I can't quite remember that.

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. THOMAS: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, they were one the earliest ones in the field.

At that moment that you're talking about now, where you switch from posters to broadsheets, what year was that?

MS. BOWLES: Must have been sort of right before I joined, '94, '95.

MS. THOMAS: Ninety-five. Yeah. Ninety-four - '95. Yeah. So by the time Jane entered, I think that the ideas of the Girls, in terms of, like, how to get the message out, what kind of graphics to do, what kind of thing - what kind of objects to create, were becoming actually much more interesting.

MS. BOWLES: Right. By necessity.

MS. THOMAS: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Let me get back for a moment to that time in '93-94, when there was a big exodus, and ask you if you could talk about why that happened, and what kinds of members left, and where did they go, and why didn't you leave? Talk about that entire experience for you and for the Guerrilla Girls.

MS. THOMAS: Well, as I think we've said amongst ourselves, we don't want to dwell on the negative, and we want to talk more about, like, what we actually accomplished.

I - at the time, I couldn't tell you why those people left. At the time, I was still new and I only was able to determine that the biggest issue that most people had was that they could - they had come into the Girls as artists and they were not able to express themselves artistically in the Girls. They didn't feel like they had the freedom to do that.

MS. RICHARDS: Were they members who had participated just a brief period of time and immediately faced this frustration, or were they long-time members?

MS. THOMAS: You know, I hadn't thought of this before, Judith, but I think you're putting your finger on something. I think that most of the people who left were fairly new members. The older members, the ones that had been there almost from the beginning - and there were a large number of those, too - they stayed.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think that that break was a precursor, had some relationship to the later break in 2000?

MS. THOMAS: Yes, I do.

MS. RICHARDS: So what difficulties those Girls were facing, whether it was right or wrong or whatever, remained difficulties for future members or for current people who stayed?

MS. THOMAS: Yeah. I -

MS. RICHARDS: Ultimately -

MS. BOWLES: Certainly.

MS. THOMAS: Yeah. I mean, I think it's really interesting to talk to her because it's becoming much more clear to me, even.

MS. RICHARDS: You mentioned that you thought that there was a generational divide. So were the Girls who left, in general, younger?

MS. THOMAS: No, not during the - not -

MS. RICHARDS: That break?

MS. THOMAS: That break - that was the only exodus. What happened later was slightly different.

MS. RICHARDS: So the exodus -

MS. THOMAS: But during - that exodus -

MS. RICHARDS: Was that generational?

MS. THOMAS: No, it was not generational. These were - actually interestingly enough, if I were to tell you the names of the women who left - were not just of the same age as those who had invited them to come in, but they actually were far more advanced in their careers than the - I mean, the Guerrilla Girls who actually started and maintained the Girls were not, I would say, the most professionally well known or -

MS. BOWLES: Except for maybe Gertrude.

MS. THOMAS: Except for Gertrude, except for Gertrude, right, and Gertrude was not - Gertrude was not known as being an artist.

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. THOMAS: Gertrude was known as being more of an administrator.

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. RICHARDS: So if these -

MS. THOMAS: So these women, some of them, I mean, you know, these are some of the biggest names and so -

MS. RICHARDS: They had expectations of their time. Perhaps they considered it more valuable, more limited. They expected to be able to make an impact. They had wanted, of course -

MS. THOMAS: Yes, of course they did. They had been making a big impact, in their lives, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MS. THOMAS: They didn't expect to come in and then have to, you know, kowtow to people that they felt were not as good artists as they were.

MS. RICHARDS: Right. And not only did they expect to make an impact, they expected to have a say -

MS. THOMAS: Oh, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: - to participate in the dialogue. And you're saying that the older - the earlier - the members who were already there had a kind of a lock on the -

MS. BOWLES: Production.

MS. RICHARDS: - production, on the -

MS. THOMAS: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: - direction that the ideas, the projects would go.

MS. THOMAS: You know, this is a complicated issue because I have to say that when you have a group like this that has done what the Guerrilla Girls have done, which is create something which is so definite, so specific in terms of its image, in terms of its ethos, in terms of its language, everything, that, you know, this is an extremely talented accomplishment, and it's one that's not maintained without someone - without people, certain people taking control.

I mean in any artistic activity, that's the way it is. So this was something that was working, do you know what I'm saying? It had been successful, and in these people's mind, there was no reason to change it. And it wasn't so much that the new people would have changed it, but they wanted to tweak it. Okay? And the fear was that tweaking it would change it, I think.

MS. RICHARDS: This exodus has nothing to do with the exodus of - that other Guerrilla Girls that have talked about - of Asian artists or of women of color from the group?

MS. THOMAS: Well, you know, several things -

MS. RICHARDS: I don't mean any of this as negative.

MS. THOMAS: Several things - no, several things were happening simultaneously, and just because a woman who is black may be feeling alienated because of the limitations of the discourse around difference, right, but she's also feeling annoyed that she can't paint or she can't do her graphics. [Laughs.]

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. THOMAS: Everybody was feeling the same things around that issue, and so, on the other hand, maybe somebody would feel more strongly about one issue over another but everybody was being affected by the issue of the graphics, I think.

MS. RICHARDS: From what you just said, it sounded like one of the reasons you stayed was you recognized the fact that what had been done and established was such a great accomplishment, and as a kind of an artist collaborative accomplishment, that you somehow sympathized and recognized that maybe that needed to go on in some way.

MS. THOMAS: Well, I believed; I was a believer, and I also enjoyed working with Kathe Kollwitz, okay, to be honest with you.

MS. BOWLES: You were able to accomplish your projects with her.

MS. THOMAS: Yes, I can show you one after another. It wasn't just this one.

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. THOMAS: We did a dozen of them, and we did it long distance over the phone. We had a great time. I got my work done with her, and so I mean, I - no, I wasn't going to leave around that issue. I was able to get what I needed to get done, but that's also because I was not - I'm an artist, but I'm not a hand artist, and so I also needed to get my ideas out.

I mean, I always had ideas to contribute to the visuals, like the idea of using the New York subway token. I mean that was my idea. That's a great idea, right, to encapsulate the campaign, but Kathe knew the Photoshop program. Kathe knew how to put things on the page in a way that made it look good.

MS. RICHARDS: After the exodus, there was a recognition that you should have a push for new members. Was that when you said there - later that you drew up a kind of a -

MS. BOWLES: No, that was the second push.

MS. THOMAS: Yeah.

MS. BOWLES: I was the product of the first push.

MS. THOMAS: She was the product of the first push.

MS. RICHARDS: So there was a push?

MS. THOMAS: Yeah.

MS. BOWLES: There was a small push.

MS. THOMAS: It was a small - it was a small push.

MS. BOWLES: There was, like, three of us.

MS. THOMAS: Yeah. Because there was not that many of us left to bring in new people.

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. BOWLES: That was what happened. So many people left that were not that -

MS. RICHARDS: Can you give a sense of how many were left, and how many left -

MS. THOMAS: Well, -

MS. RICHARDS: - and how many were left? Approximately.

MS. THOMAS: Well, here's the thing. Of those people that were left, I can't tell you how many there were, but of those people that were left, some of them didn't really want new people because they felt that new people just slowed things down, frankly. Then there was some people who didn't want - who might have wanted new people but were so busy in their lives having children and whatever that they didn't have time to think about getting new people to bring in.

The biggest people who were always pushing for new members and being active in recruiting new members were myself and Gertrude. The two of us, I think, were responsible each time, the first wave and the second wave, for bringing in the new people, and Gertrude needed - Gertrude needed - always wanted balance in the group. She always wanted, you know, there to be more voices than just a few, and I needed new voices to support me.

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. THOMAS: So that was -

MS. RICHARDS: And then what prompted the second recruitment? You described this as a second wave.

MS. BOWLES: Well, so I was brought in with Irma and Lorraine Hansberry at the same time, and then the three of us, with one other woman whose name I can't remember formed, this subgroup called the Absurd Government Spending Group, and we met independent -

MS. THOMAS: Was Djuna [Barnes] part of that?

MS. BOWLES: And Djuna. And Djuna Barnes was part of that, too. And we met, like, every week or every other week. We met regularly to develop projects around this issue, these issues, but it was also just - we all became very good friends, and I think it was, again, like, sort of as much a social project as a political one. And also it was during the [President William J.] Clinton years, and there were - it was a different kind of, I think, urgency during Clinton, as there had been during [President George H.W.] Bush, the first Bush.

MS. THOMAS: Yeah.

MS. BOWLES: And so just trying to find - to navigate what was happening kind of publicly and where we wanted to focus our voice as Guerrilla Girls and then also the, you know, moving away from the posters and finding new forums and then the constant problem of dealing with the Kathe and Frida.

MS. THOMAS: And Frida. It sort of drove us to want to bring in a whole new group. And, oh, this other thing that was happening was Kathe and Frida signed a contract to do the second book, and it was a huge distraction for the group. And it wasn't anything that we were interested in participating in, and there was money involved, which they took because it was mostly their work and something they were interested in. And that also created a lot of tension over, you know, who are we to put out this book, and who's taking credit for it, and who wants to be - I mean, it was - it had a lot of problems. And then also I think the Girls had always steered away from attacking or promoting any particular artist - or no, just promoting other women, not attacking.

MS. THOMAS: Yeah.

MS. BOWLES: We had never had problems attacking.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you -

MS. BOWLES: So the nature of this book, which is telling a story of the history of art, also brought up problems in that regard.

MS. RICHARDS: This book -

MS. BOWLES: And there were so many problems -

MS. RICHARDS: Referring to the book -

MS. THOMAS: This is the *Beside Companion*. I have to tell you that this book - really, I think, if you want to know why there was a breakdown and then a bringing in, it really was this book, I think, that precipitated all of the problems, because there was something so undemocratic and so against the spirit of the Girls in the way the book had been contracted, in the way in which people's ideas were used without being given credit. I mean, because all of the text and so forth and images, many of them were contributed by other Girls, but they were not given credit.

Then there was the other -

MS. RICHARDS: How would they get credit? You mean Alma Thomas?

MS. BOWLES: Was anyone given credit?

MS. RICHARDS: How would they get credit if - just by the Guerrilla Girl name?

MS. THOMAS: Well, the credit had to do with the money.

MS. RICHARDS: You're talking about compensation?

MS. THOMAS: That's the - there was a certain issue - you know, I mean, the book contract came - it was a contract, and so some people got money for working on the book, and many people who contributed to the book did not get a penny. That was one problem. I don't know if it got stated in that particular way, but it was there, affecting the discussions.

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. THOMAS: And then there were others of us, and I know I was very vociferous. I did not like the concepts of the book. The book, to me, was so embedded in that second-wave feminist and even pre-second-wave essentialism, this whole idea that women were - that women were feminist artists just because they were women artists and that all of them were the same was just like - from start to finish, I mean, I hated the text. It's amazing to me personally that it's done as well as it has, you know, that it's even been recognized by CAA [College Art Association], because I feel that it's not a good book. And so, you know, to come in and be - and then we were being berated because we weren't contributing.

I wasn't contributing to the book at all. So, you know, there was that problem that I faced every time I saw them. And then not only was I not contributing, but I was, you know, like tearing it down. So I - because I wasn't - I was totally disagreeing with it. So I'm sure that I, you know, I contributed greatly to the tension of the group at that point, you know, whereas before I had been the peacekeeping - I was the one that had been sort of keeping things together. Now I was one of the primary -

MS. BOWLES: Rabble-rousers.

MS. THOMAS: - problems.

MS. RICHARDS: Jane, go back to this subcommittee that you and four or five other Girls founded, and tell - talk about what projects you accomplished, or the project.

MS. BOWLES: No, I don't think we - we worked on a couple poster ideas, and I think we maybe completed - actually, what we were interested in doing was developing some of them through the website as digital projects. I think - although we did some -

MS. RICHARDS: The Guerrilla Girls had a website at that point?

MS. BOWLES: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: It was just the Guerrilla Girls' website?

MS. BOWLES: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And I'm trying to remember exactly the sequence that all this happened.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember what the issues were? You said government spending.

MS. BOWLES: Well, we were reading all these books about pork, pork-barrel spending and the inequities of, like, military spending -

MS. RICHARDS: So was that -

MS. BOWLES: - and women's health care and -

MS. RICHARDS: Was there an issue - so you're way beyond the point where Guerrilla Girls stopped focusing just on art, the art world?

MS. BOWLES: Oh, yeah, yeah. None of us were that interested in doing art, just art world-related projects. That was another -

MS. RICHARDS: That characterized your group.

MS. BOWLES: Not in this group.

MS. THOMAS: I was still much more interested in the art world and the inequities of the art world, but the younger girls, I think, were - you know, had gone on to something else. I never participated in their activities. I wasn't that interested in what they were doing.

MS. RICHARDS: You both stayed in the Guerrilla Girls till 2000, when Broadband was created.

MS. THOMAS: I was sort of out of it in the last couple of years. I had gone to California.

MS. BOWLES: When did you go?

MS. THOMAS: It was in the fall of '99, I think.

MS. RICHARDS: Right. So from about '91 to '99 you were a member?

MS. THOMAS: Right.

MS. RICHARDS: And Jane, you were a member from about '95 to 2000 -

MS. BOWLES: Till today.

MS. RICHARDS: Till today, when you became a member of GuerillaGirlsBroadband?

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. RICHARDS: So what were some of the issues, such as pork-barrel spending?

MS. BOWLES: Honestly, I can't really remember. We had a couple posters that we were doing, working on, and I'm just trying to remember what those posters were.

MS. THOMAS: Were there any objects that you were doing?

MS. BOWLES: No, I just remember those posters with piggy banks on them.

MS. THOMAS: [Laughs] I never saw those.

MS. BOWLES: And it's embarrassing that I can't - I mean, nothing really ever came - we didn't really produce very much. But it was - I would say -

MS. THOMAS: But you had a good time.

MS. BOWLES: But we had a really good time, and we spent a lot of time just - I mean, I think the issue that we weren't dealing with just the art world.

MS. RICHARDS: I'm going to stop for a second and change discs.

MS. THOMAS: Sure.

[END MD 01.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is disc two, Alma Thomas and Jane Bowles.

So Jane, why don't you continue?

MS. BOWLES: So I didn't really become very productive creatively in the group until the Broadband was formed and we did this - the launch of our website.

MS. RICHARDS: Jane, talk about, then, the start of Broadband.

MS. BOWLES: So - well, there was a period of about a year where the groups had actually broken up. I'm trying to remember exactly what happened. I think we had broken up into three different wings unofficially, but -

MS. THOMAS: There was a theater group.

MS. BOWLES: Yeah.

MS. THOMAS: One girl had been brought in who was a theater person, and she kind of like never quite got with the program of the - the main Guerrilla Girls, so she had her own group.

MS. BOWLES: And - but we were still doing lectures, participating in gigs and earning money, and I can't remember exactly the sequence of events, but at some point, we formed GuerrillaGirlsBroadband and launched this website and this - a bunch of projects related to, kind of, online activism. And one of the constant sore points at the end of our being in Guerrilla Girls had been that Kathe would never give anyone else the log-on information so that anyone else could do anything to the website. She was the sole gatekeeper to the website-related stuff.

So as more and more young digitally savvy women joined the group, not only were they frustrated that they couldn't do anything graphically [laughs], but then that they couldn't use the website, which was, you know, becoming increasingly, sort of, the medium for doing projects.

So we did this whole series of projects about discrimination in the workplace where we worked with - we worked with a programmer, who helped us create these templates so that people who felt discriminated in their jobs could have the GuerrillaGirlsBroadband send an anonymous letter to their boss on behalf of one of their - sort of, on their behalf, and there were these various template letters about - I'm trying to remember one. There was one about a boss who would constantly tell them stuff about their personal life and then never, you know, have any interest in their personal life. Some of the - they were very specific letters, and that was very well received. It was reviewed in the *New York Times* when it came out, and that whole project around that time - we - the Broadband was very active. And it was a group of women who were, you know, my closest - became my closest friends.

I had brought in Hannah Höch, who was a student of mine, and she - I think part of the success of the group was because she was as strong a graphic designer as Kathe -

MS. THOMAS: Yeah.

MS. BOWLES: - and so she was the one who designed the website and helped with a lot of the graphics projects after that. And although it was a much more, kind of, open process, she helped realize things in a way that I think had the same strength as Kathe had. And we met, you know, I think, weekly for a long time just - we had kind of set these goals for ourselves about -

MS. RICHARDS: This is GuerrillaGirlsBroadband.

MS. BOWLES: - Broadband.

MS. RICHARDS: And how many members would you say?

MS. BOWLES: I think there were up to 15 or 20, but active probably 10 who would come to these meetings. And I can't remember exactly how come we had set this goal of releasing the site. Maybe we had some contact with the writer from the *New York Times*.

Anyway, so we had set this goal of trying to finish this project by a certain date, and we were very active, I remember, for a long time getting that project together. And then that's continued to become, kind of, the vehicle for us to do projects going forward.

MS. RICHARDS: And did you have an agreement from the beginning that it wasn't focused just on art or any - or music or theater or movies. It was on any subject that you wanted to tackle that had to do with discrimination of any sort?

MS. BOWLES: I think that was understood. I mean, one thing that happened was we spent a lot of time over the summer just in the process of launching the website, coming up with our mission statement and, you know, a forum for our message basically.

MS. RICHARDS: So it wasn't anymore focused on feminism?

MS. BOWLES: Well, I think feminism was part of the focus, certainly.

MS. RICHARDS: But not the exclusive focus?

MS. THOMAS: I remember when Broadband started, I volunteered to help with the first poster so that, you know, people could get a sense of, like, how the poster would be created and what the look might be. And it was that Bush poster, remember, where Bush is standing on the map.

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. THOMAS: And already at that point, it was pretty clear that Broadband was going to be responsive to contemporary politics, and it was also true - a couple of other things that I noticed about Broadband was, first of all, they had worked very, very hard to diversify their membership from the get-go. It was almost like built into their mission statement that they wouldn't proceed unless they had a representative grouping and - but I had also noticed that with - in getting a representative grouping of women in terms of identity, they also diversified the membership in terms of professional background.

So that it wasn't any longer the kind of like overwhelmingly arts group that the original Guerrilla Girls had been. It was much different kind of group.

MS. BOWLES: Well, I think it was also not - there were maybe a similar number of artists but not as many traditionally, you know, using traditional medias.

MS. RICHARDS: When you decided in your mission statement that you wouldn't focus just on feminist issues, did you consider including men?

MS. BOWLES: We had many conversations about including men, and I think it's still open, I have to say. It's still open because I think that, first of all, the ideas of sex and gender are very fluid, and that's something that everyone in the group was interested in. So why - you know, you need men to be able to really make any changes in feminism.

You also need men to talk about feminism in all these different issues. So having men as part of the discussion was something that we talked about all the time.

MS. RICHARDS: Since you are working so - is the GuerrillaGirlsBroadband solely focused on projects using the website?

MS. BOWLES: No, we're not.

MS. RICHARDS: And therefore do you never wear your masks?

MS. BOWLES: No, we do get gigs, also.

MS. RICHARDS: And you call yourself GuerrillaGirlsBroadband?

MS. BOWLES: Yeah. We call ourselves the Broads as opposed to the Girls. [Laughs.]

MS. THOMAS: Yeah. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: So if you are creating visually and that is - you'd want to indicate maybe you'd want to be called Broads and not be -

MS. BOWLES: Well, right.

MS. RICHARDS: There's a -

MS. THOMAS: Well, it's always been, kind of, what - the question about even the word "Girls," right, you know? I mean that was, like, why "Girls"? And I actually organized a group of retired Girls, because there are now a lot more of us than there are of them, right, and yet we still have issues at stake, because there's the disposition of the archive and so forth.

So I very self-consciously changed the word "Girls," and I organized the Yahoo groups, so I - because I was the one that was doing it. I was able to do it just the way I wanted to do it, right. [Laughs.] So I changed the name, and instead of making it Old Girls, I made it Old Grrls, you know, G-R-R-L-S, you know, because I like the Riot Girls, right, and what they all did with their names. So the Old Girls are, as far as I'm concerned, they're the Old Grrls.

MS. RICHARDS: Let me ask you about the issues of money and how the Guerrilla Girls survived from '91, Alma's experience from '95, Jane's. It sounds like you - the activities where things had to be paid for was paid for through gigs, and that the books - did the books contribute to the activities?

MS. THOMAS: The books didn't - that's another - that's an interesting question, because the gigs contributed to the actual functioning of the group, but the books did not. The books simply paid for the time of the two people that initiated it.

MS. BOWLES: There was some royalty, but I - I don't remember.

MS. RICHARDS: The royalties would go to the group?

MS. BOWLES: The royalties were minimal. I think the royalties probably went to the group, but I don't know. They were so minimal.

MS. THOMAS: You were the treasurer.

MS. BOWLES: Not at that point.

MS. THOMAS: So I haven't got a clue what happened to the money. My impression was that the money did not actually come to the group. But I probably could be wrong, but I do know that - I mean, I was a Girl who went out, you know. I must have done 12 gigs a year at a certain point, and so I know that was bringing in a lot of money, and I know that I was contributing to the maintenance of the group. But this activity, I would say, I never felt that was what that was about.

MS. RICHARDS: How about the issue of anonymity? How was that, if at all, in your experience with the group, each of you, and how do you feel about it today? Not meaning anonymity of Guerrilla Girls active; I mean, in your life when someone's writing a biography, do you ever want it known? Do you think that Broadband's a different answer than Guerrilla Girls, Inc., to that question?

MS. THOMAS: Judith, I have, like, such conflicts about this because, frankly, I, as I say, I really to this day feel that the Girls miraculously slipped into exactly the sort of thing that was going to make the biggest impact on the world, you know, and many of the things that are trademarks occurred accidentally, you know. The gorilla masks were accidental, and the artist name, the dead women artist name, that was not part of the original thing, you know. But everything sort of was an accretion of symbolism, right, and I know the power of anonymity, but by the time I joined the Girls, any pretense that anonymity was to save careers was, you know, that was a pretense, because anybody who was a Girl by 1991 would have added to their career -

MS. BOWLES: Right, for sure.

MS. THOMAS: - to be known as a Girl. So there was that thing, you know. What purpose was anonymity serving? It was really only serving this larger purpose, which was to maintain the symbolism of the Girls intact, as far as I was concerned. And it became - it was - because I was traveling so much, it was impossible to maintain

anonymity just because, you know, you had to get on a plane. You had to give your real name to get on the plane.

Anybody - you couldn't wear a plastic mask for 24 hours, you know. I mean, you were only wearing a mask for the moments that you were actually on stage. So your face was being seen.

So the one thing - there's been a moment which is still living with me to this day, which is that I did a gig in Georgia, and it just so happened that it was in Millidgeville, which is the town that Flannery O'Connor lived in at her old college, Georgia State Women's College. And I am an incredible devotee of Flannery O'Connor. And so I actually, as myself, not as myself but as Alma, because the woman for some reason or other never actually knew my real name, because my plane ticket had been bought by somebody in purchasing, right. So she didn't know my name, and she asked me if I would write an article for a [inaudible] that she was doing for Flannery's birthday. And I wrote an article as Guerrilla Girl Alma Thomas, and I said things in this article that I will never, ever say in that way, ever, and it is such an important part of my life and my, you know, my thought process, and I can't publish it. I've just done a website and I can't put it on my website and I'm really upset.

I had, like, about one week when I really thought, I'll put this on my website, right, because it's a real loss to me, and so, if you want to know, it's a complicated issue. It's a complicated issue.

MS. RICHARDS: I think that we need to explore this with other Guerrilla Girls in these conversations. The issue of leaving it out of your personal artistic bio and your life, both for the impact it had on your work and the impact your work had on it, and how to deal with it.

So you're still maintaining that it's important. Alma Thomas, you still believe overall it's important to maintain the anonymity?

MS. THOMAS: I think that for the sake of the Girls, for the sake of the entity, that it's absolutely essential.

MS. BOWLES: Well, I think also for the work. I mean -

MS. THOMAS: Yes.

MS. BOWLES: - as soon as it becomes this -

MS. THOMAS: Yes.

MS. BOWLES: - named group of people, then people start becoming more interested in who's doing what and is this so-and-so's work or so-and-so's work, rather than - I mean, the anonymity focuses the message on the content as opposed to the producer.

MS. RICHARDS: But I mean afterwards. So in the archive, when Guerrilla Girls pass away, when it's history or part of its history, at that point is it revealed, or never?

MS. THOMAS: We've had this discussion recently. We've had this discussion. I am one of those who does not mind if my name is mentioned.

MS. BOWLES: Right. I also - my name will be in there, too.

MS. RICHARDS: So you just leave that as instructions?

MS. BOWLES: Well, I think - I mean that this goes back to the discussion of the role of Kathe and Frida and how we felt that if - certainly the two of them, it was - it appeared [they] wanted their names to be known and -

MS. RICHARDS: Now, or in history?

MS. BOWLES: Well, probably now. [Laughs.] I think if they had been able to do it, they would have done it earlier, right? So part of maintaining the group and the legacy of the group and continuing work, that was part of the reason for bringing in more members, was not - you know, the two of them probably wanted to just take credit for a lot of the work and make their names known.

So I think a lot of people in this archive decision, as to whether or not to have their name taken out of the archives or not - because we all have to decide that - part of the reason to leave your name in was so that, in history, it would be known that there were very many active women in the history of the group, and it was not just the work of these two members. And many women contributed in many different ways, and that's really important for the legacy of the group and for other collectives of women trying - other collectives trying to work together.

I mean, there are so many challenges that collectives face in trying to be democratic and still be able to be productive and coherent and -

MS. THOMAS: I agree 100 percent with what she's saying.

MS. BOWLES: Yeah. And so - but the anonymity - I feel there's a tremendous burden because, I mean on a personal level - like now, you know, I work full time and I have two very young children, and so the Girls, the Broads, have become sort of my main art activity that I'm doing. I just don't have time to do much else right now, and it's very difficult for me when people say, oh, what are you working on right now? I can't - nothing. I'm not working on anything. That's all I can say, except to the few people who know that I'm part of the group.

So that's very, very difficult to deal with, I have to say.

MS. THOMAS: I mean, for some of us -

MS. BOWLES: Because it can take up a tremendous amount of time. [Laughs.]

MS. THOMAS: People will say, well, what - you know, when you think of how much time I spent on the Girls, that's why I didn't do more art.

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. THOMAS: You know.

MS. BOWLES: That's the issue of importance it might have in understanding your work in the future.

MS. THOMAS: Yes, exactly. I mean, for me, it's important that people know that I did this, because that explains so much about what I did do.

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. THOMAS: And also this reminds me of another issue that is ancillary to this. It's the way in which the Girls were formulated as a symbolic entity brought me into a bit of conflict with Frida, with whom I was a gig partner for many, many gigs.

There would always be a question from the audience, which was, how many Girls are there? And Frida always answered the questions in a very mythic way, you know, and her answer to this question would be, we're everywhere, we're - there are thousands of us, right, you know. We could be sitting beside you or whatever, and I used to jump in, and, you know, it would be a real problem between the two of us, because I would just jump in and say, "We could fit in your living room," and the - because for me - she wanted the myth. I wanted to convey to people what you could accomplish with what - to me, it was a disservice to feminism to have this concept, whereas what you could accomplish was - with such a small group of people - was so large. And that was what I wanted to leave these young women with, right? So we would always have this moment in the gig where she would go one way and I would go the other way and, you know, but it was - and it was kind of symptomatic of -

MS. BOWLES: Very.

MS. THOMAS: - of differences. Yeah. And it's a little bit to do with anonymity. I don't know exactly what, but I thought I wanted to say that. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: So do you - from the time you were a member - I just want to ask one more question about finances, because it seems - it's very difficult, as you said, Jane, for a collaborative to work together, and there's lots of collaboratives today, interestingly enough. Guerrilla Girls is one of the early artistic collaboratives.

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. RICHARDS: Money would always - always does come up.

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. RICHARDS: Were there some written rules about it, and if you wanted to do a project and you didn't have money in the Guerrilla Girls' bank account for some expenses, what happened?

MS. THOMAS: I never saw that moment.

MS. BOWLES: [Laughs] I don't think that ever happened.

MS. THOMAS: I mean, there were always more gigs than there were projects.

MS. BOWLES: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, so the gigs were plentiful enough to keep the posters and the -

MS. BOWLES: Yeah.

MS. THOMAS: Oh, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: - website expenses -

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. THOMAS: The Girls have always been a very popular group.

MS. BOWLES: Right. I think Broadband has had trouble -

MS. THOMAS: Yes.

MS. BOWLES: - keeping up because the main - you know, when people want a Guerrilla Girl to come lecture, they go to the Guerrilla Girls website, which takes you directly to the original group. So it's been harder for us to get access. We now have our own booking agent, who has been able to get more access.

MS. RICHARDS: So when people talk about the Guerrilla Girls and wanting a Guerrilla Girl, you have a set policy, and Guerrilla Girls, Inc., have a set policy on describing why there are two of you?

MS. BOWLES: Yeah. It was - we came up with a kind of narrative describing how the group split, and it's on - it should be on the Guerrilla Girls, Inc., website, right? I think it's on the Guerrilla Girls - the narrative describing the split is on the website.

MS. THOMAS: I think so. I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: So people can make an informed choice.

MS. BOWLES: Right. But I think it's kind of buried so that you're -

MS. THOMAS: And also -

MS. BOWLES: And they've also kind of promoted themselves as the original Girls, which is not necessarily -

MS. THOMAS: Also, there's no bones about it. This is - their website says, this is the only way to get an authentic Guerrilla Girl for your gigs.

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. THOMAS: It's pretty - they're pretty aggressive about it.

MS. RICHARDS: What happened to the interest in focusing on the movie industry, and where did that come from, and does it still survive in GuerrillaGirlsBroadband?

MS. BOWLES: No. That was Kathe out in L.A.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, okay.

MS. BOWLES: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay. Any other - and the theater -

MS. THOMAS: Actually, let me correct that a bit because -

MS. BOWLES: That was my perception.

MS. THOMAS: - Kathe - I don't know whether Kathe would have had the ideas to go to - to sprint out to the movie industry if it had not been for Lorraine Hansberry and Aphra Behn starting the theater thing. And we had done several theater actions in New York around Broadway.

MS. BOWLES: That were very successful.

MS. THOMAS: They were very successful, and it was after that that Kathe and GGI [Guerrilla Girls, Inc.] took many of those ideas and translated them to the film industry in California.

MS. RICHARDS: Speaking of GGI -

MS. BOWLES: Actually, I just want to - I'm just thinking about this financial issue because it's actually something that we're facing now where - and I think there's a kind of - one thing about a volunteer organization is who's going to do the grunt work of the administration, because it's not paid and it's always - in all the forms of it, it's all been white women doing all that work, and now, like I actually don't want to be the treasurer of Broadband anymore. And we're trying to create a policy where this is a rotating position and try to - and actually one of the other current - Minette [De Silva], one of the current members, suggested that, you know, it's not - it's a disservice to the group to have the same people doing things behind the scenes and not make the administration as transparent as everything else, because Gertrude has always played a very strong administrative -

MS. THOMAS: Did you ask her - I'm sorry, Jane. Did you actually say, it's always been white women?

MS. BOWLES: In the - just in this treasurer role. I think it's always been Gertrude and then - right? Is that right?

MS. THOMAS: I have some thoughts about that.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, yes, Alma, we want to hear your thoughts on that. If you can get close to the microphone.

MS. THOMAS: I'm thinking a little bit better of it, because it's a little stereotypical, my thought process, but I have noticed a tendency in interracial feminist groups -

MS. BOWLES: Yeah.

MS. THOMAS: - for women of color to feel there's a sort of lingering resentment, because there's always this issue of who invites and who is invited, and in most interracial groups, the group has been begun by white women and then women of color have been invited.

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. THOMAS: So they are there as the invitees, which automatically means they don't have the stake in the control -

MS. BOWLES: Well, I think that's what Minette's point is, that if the invitees aren't given also the - that kind of stake, that it always - that split always remains.

MS. THOMAS: And then there becomes kind of like a thing that settles in, which is an attitude, sort of, we're being used as window dressing or we're being used as justification or something, and that's enough - we're providing psychological benefits here. So we don't actually have to do quite so much work.

MS. RICHARDS: Hmm.

MS. THOMAS: You know, I think that mentality does become part of the dynamic.

MS. BOWLES: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: If you had enough money from gigs, why not hire a once-a-week bookkeeper?

MS. BOWLES: We did talk about that, actually, right? I mean, at one point, not the Broads, but when there was this kind of shift -

MS. THOMAS: Actually, there had been - my understanding -

MS. BOWLES: Really?

MS. THOMAS: You were preceded by a paid bookkeeper. You should ask - you should ask because I'm pretty sure that there was a paid bookkeeper before you, but that bookkeeper was not a member of the Broads.

MS. BOWLES: Right. I can't remember.

MS. THOMAS: I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: So right now -

MS. THOMAS: In your experience, in collaborative groups, do members of the group get paid when they do -

MS. RICHARDS: I don't know.

MS. THOMAS: That's the issue. I mean, this person was brought in from the outside. They were just brought in as a professional, right?

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. RICHARDS: I think that - I think it's a practical decision. What will work?

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. RICHARDS: I don't think it's a philosophical decision. It's, you need help, you pay a carpenter, you pay a bookkeeper. It frees you up to do the work only you can do.

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. RICHARDS: Are there - so looking to the future of Broadband right now, because, Alma, you left the group around '99 -

MS. THOMAS: Yeah. I've been very active as an Old Girl. I - when all of the - the many legal issues that have arisen since the Girls have split and the most recent - the most important of which is the disposition of the archive -

MS. RICHARDS: Do you need to be invited to be an Old Girl, or you automatically -

MS. THOMAS: No. You're talking to somebody who just made some arbitrary decisions, right, you know, and, I mean, because it was my idea to bring everybody together, because I felt that the - I was an Old Girl and I felt they had a stake in what happened here -

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. THOMAS: - you know, and I figured if I feel this way, then everybody else does, you know, and they did. So - but it was just a matter of being very arbitrary and saying, okay, I got the list of everybody who had ever been a member of the Girls from Gertrude, who keeps that sort of thing, and that Excel document had over a hundred names on it, I believe. And I just went through it, and anybody who was currently involved, if they were currently involved with GGI or with GuerrillaGirlsBroadband or with Guerrilla Girls on Tour, they were not part of the Old Girls. Everybody else was retired, and that's who I invited, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Did Gertrude keep this list? I heard comments in the past about some people who became a member only very briefly. Was that - you have to be a member for a certain length of time to be -

MS. THOMAS: No. If somebody had been there for one day. Our feeling is always that if somebody's there for one day, they're still a Girl, an Old Girl, and, you know, we don't make any distinction. You could never make a distinction, like, based on how many meetings anybody attended.

MS. BOWLES: No.

MS. THOMAS: No.

MS. RICHARDS: So now what is the future of Broadband?

MS. BOWLES: We have an action on the 17th. That's what I'm focusing all my energy on right now. We're participating in this Performance Day at the Bronx Museum, and actually, I think GGI is doing something, too.

MS. THOMAS: Oh, that's going to be very fascinating.

MS. BOWLES: So our project is a recruitment station, because it happens to be Armed Forces Day. So we're recruiting, kind of counter-recruiting, to people to protest the war basically, to - and with a focus on counter-recruiting around schools and young kids in school who are being recruited. So people will be invited to sign up, and we have some literature about how to resist recruiting officers, you know, who come into school.

Actually, there's legislation as part of the No Child Left Behind Act that you have to - if you don't allow recruiters in your school, you lose funding. So there is tremendous issues around, you know, young kids being recruited. So we have literature from other groups.

MS. RICHARDS: And you'll be there in masks?

MS. BOWLES: And we'll be all be there in masks, and we - we've made -

MS. THOMAS: Okay. This is like -

MS. BOWLES: - recruitment patches.

MS. THOMAS: Here's an issue because this action is being done at the Bronx Museum, and the Bronx is basically a Latino borough, right? The recruitment is not race neutral. The recruitment is done primarily in Latino neighborhoods, right?

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. THOMAS: And you need much more Latino than black neighborhoods, because Latinos are considered much more enthusiastic -

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. THOMAS: - but they're also not white, right? So they're fodder, and, you know, I don't know if you're bringing up any of that.

MS. BOWLES: Well, the poster - there's a kind of - it's the Uncle Sam poster, "We Want You," with the gorrilla mask, and it's in English and Spanish.

MS. THOMAS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MS. BOWLES: And the literature deals with some of the very specific targets of recruitment.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you put that on the website, also?

MS. BOWLES: We're - and the project is you - you got in line and you sign an enlistment card and you create - you pick a name for yourself. All the people who sign up will pick a name for themselves. And we're painting this big backdrop of a recruiting station, and we're going to photograph groups of people with gorrilla masks on posing, protesting in front of the recruiting station. And those will be uploaded to the website, and you can eventually - you'll be able to go on to our website and create your own little card, ID card, your counter-recruiting ID card, and then you'll get a GuerrillaGirlsBroadband patch at the end, once you enlist.

MS. RICHARDS: I have one last question about collaboration across groups. Has GuerrillaGirlsBroadband or Guerrilla Girls, Inc., in your experience, collaborated with other feminist collaboratives, with other art collaboratives? Right now with the Internet, you - the website could have links to other -

MS. BOWLES: We have -

MS. RICHARDS: - groups, websites?

MS. THOMAS: They have - as far as I know, the only action - there were two actions that might have - the biggest action that involved a collaboration was the Guggenheim Museum, which involved the collaboration with WAC. There was a series of actions that took place around shelters, and I believe that that was also a collaboration with a group [Art and Homeless Collaborative] that was basically run by Hope Sandro, who was not a Guerrilla Girl.

MS. RICHARDS: Alma -

MS. THOMAS: I'm sorry?

MS. RICHARDS: - you need to speak into the mike. Lean a little closer to the mike.

MS. THOMAS: Okay. Yeah. Hope Sandro's group was doing work in the women's shelters and I think that the Girls had collaborated with her on that. And that produced a series of posters, which were not Kathe posters, the ones with the military woman and, you know, that discrete group of posters - I don't know - don't look like any of the others.

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. THOMAS: I think that also was part of a collaboration, but I felt, and I basically feel in general about art world feminist - especially white, art world feminist - groups is that they don't collaborate. They don't seek out other organizations to collaborate with, as a general rule.

MS. RICHARDS: But now it's so much easier on the website to do that. I was wondering if -

MS. BOWLES: But I think we recognize that there are other groups, like Code Pink, who are doing work around this recruitment issue that's much more focused than what we've been - we've taken on for this one action - and

that they can handle - their information is much more meaningful than ours. In terms of the information -

MS. THOMAS: Yeah. I was going to say artists are difficult to work with because they're so whimsical and they're so, you know - I don't know. They're just - most groups don't feel like artists' collaboratives are really real political entities somehow. I get the feeling that some - they wouldn't even welcome the offer of a collaboration necessarily because they might think you're being trivial or - you know, I mean, somebody who's doing serious work around this issue might think that what -

MS. BOWLES: Right.

MS. THOMAS: - you were doing was like -

MS. RICHARDS: I was thinking beyond the actual collaboration in terms of projects, the way artists' colonies meet to talk about common issues, not their own individual missions but survival and promotion and these broader issues.

So do you have to leave at -

MS. BOWLES: I do. I have to go back to work. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Thank you.

MS. BOWLES: Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated...April 24, 2010