



feminist art

# No monkey business

In 1985, the **Guerrilla Girls** launched an activist group to shine a light on the lack of diversity in the art world. More than 30 years on, the fight is far from over, says **Rosalind Ormiston**

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he feisty show *Guerrilla Girls: Is it Even Worse in Europe?*, at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, is one of four major Guerrilla Girls projects happening across Europe from

August this year. Each show is bursting with newsworthy commentary on the art world, scathingly and humorously delivered by the radical New York-based feminist collective.

In 2015, as part of their 30th anniversary, the Guerrilla Girls sent questionnaires to more than 400 museum directors of public and private museums and cultural institutions in Europe. The questions related to each institution's representation of artists who are female, or gender nonconforming, or from Africa, Asia, South Asia, and South America. At its core, their research asked one key question: 'Are museums today presenting a diverse history of contemporary art, or the history of money and power?'

At the Whitechapel Gallery, through their display, the Guerrilla Girls will present statistics based on the questionnaire; 300 institutions failed to respond to it, an amazing statistic in itself, and one that will be highlighted in the show. "They will not be let off the hook", states 'Frida Kahlo', one the group's founding members. Like the rest of the Guerrilla Girls, 'Frida' has remained anonymous since the group's inception.

The questionnaire's gathered statistics inform a new work commissioned by the gallery, and created by the group for its façade, to coincide with the Whitechapel show of archive material.

In 1985, the Guerrilla Girls formed their collective of female artists and art-world professionals, promoting themselves as 'the conscience of the art world', to shame museums and galleries in New York for the lack of diversity in their collections. Mixing humour with a strong missive, they took aim at public museums and >

**ABOVE** Members of the anonymous Guerrilla Girls group

# Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?

Less than **4%** of the **artists** in the Modern Art sections are women, but **76%** of the **nudes** are female.

Statistics from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, 2011

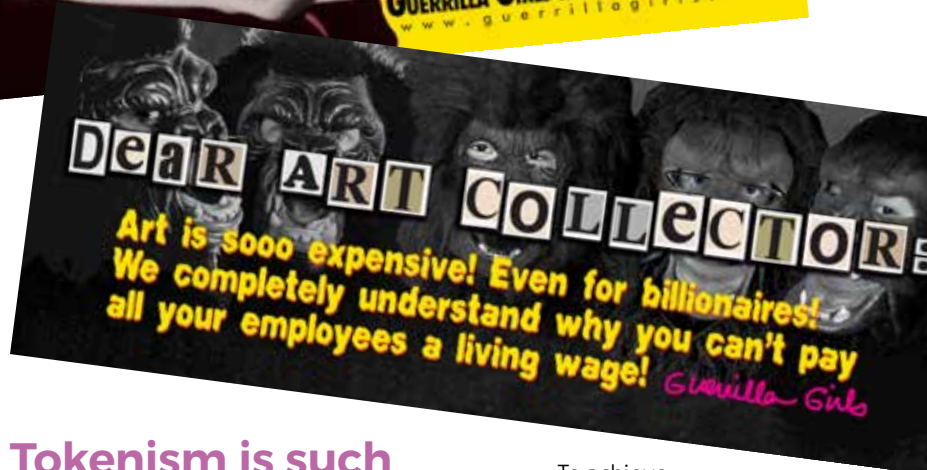
GUERRILLA GIRLS CONSCIENCE OF THE ART WORLD  
www.guerrillagirls.com

commercial galleries, asking: what percentage of their collection was created by a female artist?

Using a poster campaign to publicise the lack of female artists' works on show, or solo shows by female artists, one provocatively asked 'Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. museum?' Combined with the visual effect of the naked body of Ingres' *La Grande Odalisque* (1814, Louvre), superimposed with a gorilla mask, and holding a fan with a delicately phallic handle, it highlighted that while a high percentage of the nude paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York were of females, less than four per cent of the art was created by women. The sensational public reaction to the artwork, posted up all over New York city, established the Guerrilla Girls as the group that would go on to expose sexism, racism and corruption in art, music, film and politics.

Today, founding members Frida Kahlo and Käthe Kollwitz, and Guerrilla Girls' activists around the globe, continue to question the "white male, money-dominated" art world. In particular, Kahlo states that today it is tokenism that is the problem, "We didn't realise in 1980 that tokenism would be such an overused device in the art world to present the illusion of diversity: one show by a woman artist, one show by a trans artist, one show by an artist of colour and you think that whole issue is taken care of. And we found that is actually as much part of the problem as it is a solution. We also didn't really realise that there would be a glass ceiling beyond which diverse artists are rarely allowed to go."

So how can the conversation be moved forward? Kahlo believes it is not just about male-female representation, or economic privilege, she considers that you cannot write, or exhibit the history of art without the global representation of all artists, "diversity is essential to show the accurate story of who we are."



## Tokenism is such an overused device to present the illusion of diversity in art

To achieve their aim, the Guerrilla Girls have made it okay to count artists by various criteria, including ethnicity, gender, and global

location, to attract attention to statistics, and highlight the rich flourishing of art through its global culture. Their message may be ignored by some museum directors and billionaire art collectors, but it has been heard.

In June, Frances Morris, director of Tate Modern in London re-launched the gallery with a new extension. The overriding point made was that 50 per cent of the art now on display was created by female artists. In October, the Guerrilla Girls will open a 'complaints department' there, a four-day project in Tate Exchange.

For art students today, Kahlo says there are many art worlds to join, "not just the art world that is about selling expensive art works to wealthy people in fancy galleries [...] there is a whole art world about changing the world, social practice, using your skills and your imagination to work for good in the world, for changing things. That is really an option now." The Guerrilla Girls, 30 years on, still lead the way.

**The Guerrilla Girls: Is it Even Worse in Europe? exhibition will run at The Whitechapel Gallery, London from 1 October – 5 March 2017.**  
[www.whitechapelgallery.org](http://www.whitechapelgallery.org) **as**

**ABOVE LEFT**  
Guerrilla Girls, *DO WOMEN STILL HAVE TO BE NAKED TO GET INTO THE MET. MUSEUM?*, 2012

**ABOVE RIGHT**  
Guerrilla Girls, *Dear Art Collector*, 2015