

# GUERRILLA GIRLS IS IT EVEN WORSE IN EUROPE?

1 October 2016 – 5 March 2017  
Whitechapel Gallery

*Guerrilla Girls: Is it even worse in Europe?* has already attracted vast amounts of publicity, hitting most, if not all, of the UK tabloids. An undeniable feat for the activist group of female artists, who have spent the last thirty years challenging and exposing gender equality and racism within culture, the arts and politics. They notably gained public attention in 1984 for their backlash against the large scale show ‘International Survey of Painting and Sculpture’ held at MoMA, where only 13 out of the 182 artist exhibited and recognised for their influence in modern art were female. They are now back with a vengeance for their first ever exhibition in the UK, thanks to museum director Iwona Blazwick.

This time, they are putting European museums in the hot seat, as they showcase the response (or lack of) received from 383 European museum directors on a questionnaire they sent out in the summer of 2016. The specific topics addressed centre around artists in their recent exhibitions who are gender non conforming, female, or from Africa, South America, Asia and South Asia.

Although their questions are relatively simple (“What percentage of artists (not works) in your collection are women?” and “How many artists in your collection and/or exhibition programme are gender non-conforming?”), it is telling to see the often complex responses that have covered one of the walls in the Archive gallery.

In true Guerilla Girls style, a banner has been placed on the facade of the Whitechapel, revealing that only a quarter of the museums responded to the questionnaire. In the exhibition the viewer is bombarded with the alarming statistics, comments and analysis, on ten

new posters, that the questionnaire has revealed. First things first: out of the 383 museums only 101 replied, which leads one to speculate that 282 of the well respected and established institutions did not see the topics addressed as worthy of a response. Furthermore, we are shown that even some of the institutions who did respond did not necessarily react positively to the questions asked. One of the boards, titled ‘Complaints Department’, highlights a selection of replies which query the significance of the topics addressed, ultimately sidestepping and ignoring these critical questions and their relevance. The Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow, for example, appeared to believe that the lack of diversity in the arts is impossible to eradicate: “It is not enough to address statistics and issues such as gender, identity or regionality if the same old organisational models are not challenged too... equality does not mean much in a system that is deeply dysfunctional and profoundly opposed to the equality being sought.”

Although it is promising to see informative and observant responses from some museums, who acknowledge their responsibility in the lack of diversity (for example Dunkers Kulturhus in

Helsingborg, Sweden, who say “We are disappointed with our failure [to be diverse] and are aware of the problem, and taking steps to address it”), it would seem that, overall, this project illuminates the ongoing corruption in art, where the fight for diversity is still necessary. What’s more it rather exposes the contradictory nature of the art sphere as a whole, which seems to continually congratulate itself for its progressiveness.

Although it appears ‘Is it even worse in Europe?’ unfortunately has a definitive answer, the Guerilla Girls still manage to make some light of the situation. Known for their humour – their signature Guerrilla masks are a prime example – they end the exhibition with a board featuring all the institutions that did not complete the survey, placed on the floor, with a note: “Feel free to walk on them. Love, Guerrilla Girls.” A powerful message, and an invitation I am sure most visitors have enjoyed accepting. It is worth visiting this informative campaign, if not crucial, as its refreshing honesty helps strengthen one’s understanding of the contemporary arts and their (still rather backwards) attitudes towards diversity.

— LARA MONRO

