

Women Artists Still Face Discrimination

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By [Eleanor J Bader, Truthout | News Analysis](#)

Twenty-seven years ago, [the Guerrilla Girls](#) - an anonymous group of artists who use humor to illustrate gender inequities in the art world - surveyed the most influential galleries and museums in the country and found that most exhibited little to no work by women.

The [Museum of Modern Art](#) (MOMA) was but one example. Of 169 artists on display, only 13 were female. Even worse, the modern art section of [New York's Metropolitan Museum](#) was 97 percent male; on the flip side, 83 percent of the nudes were - you guessed it - girls and women.

"Frida Kahlo" - Guerrilla Girls adopt the names of dead artists when speaking publicly - says that while some progress has been made since 1985, parity remains distant. "At the emerging level, things are better for women. There are more women in museum collections as a whole, but it is still not an adequate record of what female artists do. It's still tokenism," she begins.

In addition, Kahlo argues that as museums have become more corporatized, the situation facing women has become increasingly fraught. "Museums have become venues of investment that produce unbelievable profits," she continues. "Trustees are collectors. They influence what museums do and they manipulate the art market. There's a direct connection. Art collectors who sit on museum boards know what is being shown and buy it. They can also get museums to show art they already own, that they bought years ago for very little. If they donate it, they get millions in tax deductions. The more corporate museums become, the more they serve as a vehicle for the one percent."

Decades back, she adds, collectors thought of themselves as philanthropists. Now, though, the trend is to buy art as an investment. "In Europe museums are owned by the government and staffed by civil servants. Here in the US, directors and curators are extremely well paid. In 2008, the director of MOMA made \$2.25 million," Kahlo reports. Not surprisingly, museum boards are top heavy with business executives, socialites and speculators who expect their acquisitions to increase in value.

If you're wondering what this mean for art by women, the short answer is nothing good. A 2011 Guerrilla Girls survey investigated New York museums and found just four percent of the artists in the Metropolitan Museum's contemporary section were female. MOMA and the Guggenheim fared somewhat better, with 26 and 23 percent respectively. Before you cheer, however, take heed: Women of color produced two percent of MOMA's art and five percent of the Guggenheim's.

What's more, it's not only a New York phenomenon. In fact, the [National Museum of Women in the Arts](#) estimates that five percent of art currently on display in US museums was made by women. From the newly opened Broad Contemporary Art Museum in Los Angeles - where 87 percent of the work was created by men - to the National Gallery of Art and the Hirshhorn in Washington, DC, the story is identical.

That said, it's not all doom and gloom, and the Guerrilla Girls credit the National Museum of Women in the Arts, the Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum and The Institute for Women and Art at Rutgers University - among others - with keeping the issue of representation in the public eye.

Sculptor [Linda Stein](#) is a feminist who uses art to raise political and social issues. Her current project, The Fluidity of Gender, utilizes wearable body armor to question what it means to be male or female. The project - an exhibition, lecture and performance - will travel to 19 venues throughout the US by 2015. "I start by telling the audience that while women in most employment make 78 cents for every male dollar, in the art world women make 10 to 30 percent," Stein says. "It's an old boy's network. When I read Art News or Art in America, I would say 70 percent of



(Photo: [modenaroid](#))

the reviews are of male work. My non-profit arm, Have Art Will Travel, did a survey of Chelsea art galleries and found that women are getting only 30 percent of the shows. Many of my talks are at colleges where women are more than 50 percent of undergrads and 60 percent of graduate students. Being in school is like being under a protective umbrella. Women feel more equal there than they will after they graduate. I see female art students who are at the top of their class, who succeed on the graduate and undergraduate levels, but as soon as they go out into the world, they're met with a wall of resistance."

Statistics confirm this. The prestigious Gagosian Galleries - 12 venues in eight cities make it the largest gallery chain in the world - will show no women whatsoever in 11 of its dozen sites during 2012. Similarly, none of this year's solo shows at the highly regarded Mary Boone Gallery will feature women.

"The glass ceiling is still up there," Stein concludes. "Studies have shown that if you submit work to a juried exhibit and the jurors don't know the gender of the person submitting, it ends up pretty equal in terms of who is selected. But as soon as the artist's gender is known, women drop back to one third."

Elly Flomenhaft, a former museum director and curator, opened the [Flomenhaft Gallery](#) in New York City in 2004. Of the 16 artists she represents, ten - including Linda Stein - are women. "I look for authenticity," she says. "Enabling artists is what thrills me. When I stand in front of something and say, 'This is wonderful,' I'm making a decision of the heart."

Flomenhaft notes that auction houses rarely handle work by women and states that the few exceptions - Louise Bourgeois [1911-2010], Joan Mitchell [1925-1992] and Louise Nevelson [1899-1988] - bring in far less than their male counterparts. Moreover, she wastes no time hiding her contempt for artists like Damien Hirst, whose installations sell for millions. "His work, dead animals in formaldehyde, is nonsense, but it is considered newsworthy because it causes a sensation. Some curators and critics want to be in the news. It's unfortunate that these attention seekers have abolished their aesthetics to chase the media."

While Flomenhaft does not have a social agenda, other "outsider" gallerists seek to challenge the status quo and promote those who might otherwise be ignored. Painter and poet Danny Simmons, for example, of [Rush Philanthropic Arts](#) - two nonprofit galleries in Manhattan and Brooklyn created by brothers Danny, Russell and Joseph "Rev. Run" Simmons in 1997 - is eager to counter the racism and sexism of the contemporary art scene by showcasing women and people of color.

Rush's intent, Danny Simmons says, is to highlight "work that is new, edgy, that people have not seen before." A review committee looks for artists who are starting out as well as those whose careers have waned. "We're looking for people who are not included in the mainstream or who are not considered commercially viable," Simmons adds. "We show art for art's sake. Just because no one wants to buy it doesn't mean artists don't want to create it and audiences don't want to see it."

True enough.

Amanda Adams-Louis, a 25-year-old Haitian American, photographs the underground dance community. And while she has already displayed work in Amsterdam, Paris and throughout the US, she believes that "women have to be twice as good as men to get shows. I feel very blessed as a young female of color to have had the benefit of great mentorship," she says. "Most of the exhibition opportunities I've had have come from women but I've also encountered female gatekeepers who keep other women out."

The Guerrilla Girls agree that increasing solidarity among excluded artists is key. Indeed, their quarter century of work is a testament to feminist organizing and the joy that comes from collective resistance. Furthermore, they've been inspired by Spain where a new law mandates gender equity in all cultural institutions. If Spain can require parity, so can other places, they argue. After all, shouldn't the 99 percent be entitled to equality in art - as well as life?

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[ELEANOR J BADER](#)

Eleanor J. Bader is a teacher and freelance journalist based in Brooklyn, New York, She writes for RHRealityCheck.org, The Brooklyn Rail, Theasy.com and other progressive and feminist blogs and magazines.

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