

STAGE & ARTS

Guerrilla Girls swing into Twin Cities for art-world 'takeover'

"Takeover" of museums aims to shed light on sexism in the arts world.

By Kristin Tillotson (<http://www.startribune.com/kristin-tillotson/10646121/>) Star Tribune |

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The gorillas coming to town this week aren't of the 800-pound variety. But they do plan to throw some weight around on the local arts scene.

The Guerrilla Girls, a gorilla-masked group of feminist artist/activists, rose to international notoriety by posing questions like "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met?" Now they're taking their campaign to overturn the art-world status quo to Minnesota with a series of events playfully billed as a "takeover."

More than 30 museums, galleries and other arts venues are joining in an unprecedented seven-week effort to celebrate the group's 30th anniversary.

These are some of the same places where the Girls see gender inequities. So will they bite the hands that feed them?

"Oh, yes," said Frida Kahlo, a founding Guerrilla Girl who, like other members, has adopted the pseudonym of an actual artist. "We're doing an intervention" at the Minneapolis Institute of Art.

Still, "we give them credit for having the courage to let us do it," chimed in co-founder Kathë Kollwitz during a phone interview last week after the two appeared on "The Late Show With Stephen Colbert" to talk about the event. "These big institutions, it's like trying to turn around an oceanliner."

Humor as a weapon

The New York- and Los Angeles-based group was founded in 1985 out of frustration over the lack of female artists represented in U.S. art museums and galleries. Using a mix of humor, in-your-face aggression and statistics, they launched campaigns to combat sexism in the arts, branching out to tackle racism and the Hollywood patriarchy, too.

Still rabble-rousing 30 years later, the Girls came to Minneapolis last year for workshops with students at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design (MCAD). That snowballed into the idea of a takeover, which gets into gear with events Thursday at MCAD, the Institute of Art and Walker Art Center, and Friday at the Rochester Art Center.

Rochester director Megan Johnston, previously an MCAD teacher, was the takeover's instigator. She had connected with the Girls through a project she asked them to do in Northern Ireland.

"This isn't a male-bashing show, but there are going to be some awkward moments, I can guarantee you, in ways we might not expect," Johnston said. "That's what it's about, providing room for debate."

'Are women artists M.I.A.?'

At the institute, the Girls filmed a short video raising provocative feminist-themed questions about its collection that will be shown in the lobby.

The museum's director, Kaywin Feldman, takes the criticism ("Are women artists M.I.A. from Mia?") in stride.

For at least the past 20 years, Feldman said, the institute has acquired art with the aim of making its holdings more inclusive. "Many collections were formed a century ago when diversity was not a particular concern," she said. "Viewed through a contemporary lens, it is clear that such collections need to be strengthened with works by women and people of color."

Feldman noted that the museum continues to add to its African and Asian holdings, and has a show of works by American Indian women artists scheduled for 2018.

Guerrilla Girl Kahlo said that in general, "things are better for women and artists of color at the entry level. But once you start going up the ladder of success, that all drops out."



Guerrilla Girls Twin Cities Takeover

What: More than 50 exhibits, performances, talks and storefront displays celebrating the 30th anniversary of the feminist art collective.

(http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/ows_1452947360177/)

When: Jan. 19-March 26, with kickoff events Thursday evening at Minneapolis College of Art and Design, Walker Art Center, and Friday at the Rochester Art Center. Photo by Nathan Lewis. Guerrilla Girls Frida Kahlo and Kathë Kollwitz posed for a snapshot with MCAD student intern Sara Suppan, who helped organize the...

Museum of American Art and Rochester Art Center.

Info: See GGtakeover.com for a full schedule.

In Kollwitz's opinion, "The art world is run more than ever by billionaires who have the same cookie-cutter approach to collecting. They sit on the boards of museums and exert influence, so museums aren't casting as wide a net as they could be."

Walker Executive Director Olga Viso said that view might be in line with the Girls' experience in New York and L.A., but applies less to the Twin Cities, where women lead both of the principal art museums.

Viso said Walker's "donors have always championed artistic and curatorial freedom. ... That said, there is a lot of work that still needs to be done. While well over 50 percent of the artists we present in exhibitions are women, only 22 percent of our collection includes works by women artists."

Seeking the next generation

While their cause is art, the Girls have always taken their cues from effective advertising strategies — get people's attention, make them laugh and then show them the numbers.

"Making headlines backed up by humor is a good way to help people change," Kollwitz said.

About 50 Guerrilla Girls have come in and out of the group since it began. Their aim is not to increase their ranks but to inspire others to form their own hives of activism.

"We've definitely met some almost-Guerrilla Girls in Minnesota," Kahlo said.

One of those "almosts" is Sara Suppan, a recent MCAD graduate who was an intern for the Girls when they did their workshops.

"The Guerrilla Girls laid a lot of groundwork around some obvious problems in the art world that are still relevant today," Suppan said. "I know women's work sells for less and not as many contemporary collectors are looking at female artists. My generation is more interested than ever in running with that torch, but we want to broaden the topic to include a whole spectrum of identities, beyond just the men-and-women concerns of the feminism of the 1960s and '70s."

The Girls will work with teen groups during the takeover to help them launch their own causes.

Nancy Robinson, a Minneapolis painter who will show her work in a related exhibit at Instinct Gallery, remembers being inspired by the Guerrilla Girls in the 1980s, when she was a member of the feminist artist collective WARM.

"Back then the advice was, you have to be your own museum if you're a woman artist," Robinson said. "Things are better than they were — at least people are conscious of the imbalance. But the glass ceiling still exists."

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