

‘Conversation Piece’ on women in art, for ‘Still Visible?’

Jenny Brownrigg, The Glasgow School of Art Exhibitions Director

Tate Modern has announced two new Artist Rooms by Phyllida Barlow and Louise Bourgeois [“in a bid to inspire girls”](#); Saatchi Galleries has its first “all women” show, [Champagne Life](#), to celebrate the gallery’s 30th anniversary; [Pussy Riot](#) announced plans to open a women-only museum in Montenegro, the “New Balkan Women’s Museum . . . in an effort to address long-spanning issues with gender equality in the art world, in a space referred to as, ‘for women, by women, about women’”. [Karen Archey](#) writes in a January 2016 e-flux conversation, “Are all-female exhibitions problematic?” Is there something in the water? Are there too many women artists visible in contemporary art, or is this part of a reaction to there being too few?

Guerrilla Girls formed in New York in 1985 to fight the inherent gender and racial inequality in the fine arts, by producing posters, billboards, and actions containing key messages and statistics about institutions and their track records on showing female artists. Taking a straw poll, here are the statistics for men and women artists represented by a sample of UK commercial contemporary galleries (as listed in January 2016 on their websites). In Scotland, Edinburgh’s Ingleby Gallery is 15% women artists (4 out of 26 artists on roster). This figure increases if “project artists” are included, to 22%. In Glasgow, the Modern Institute has 33% women (13 out of 43), whilst smaller commercial gallery Mary Mary has the highest number at 43% (6 out of 14). Whilst more in number, this is still under half. Workplace Gallery, Gateshead, is 38% (8 out of 21 artists); in London, Hollybush Gardens was an exception with 62% of their total being women (8 out of 13); whilst White Cube (London, Hong Kong, São Paulo, Miami) was 28% (17 out of 60) and Hauser & Wirth, with galleries in London, New York, and Somerset, at 31% (20 out of 64). Why are the numbers of women represented by commercial galleries consistently much lower than the number of male artists? Is this because fewer women study fine art so there are fewer female artists? The statistics of female graduates from the Glasgow School of Art would contradict this. In the academic year 2014/15, 75 female to 33 male students graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Fine Art with Honours, making the ratio 69% female graduates. In 2013/14, 63 women students versus 39 male students graduated from the same course. Each year back to 2010/11 the gender split is the same, with female students always the higher number of graduates from the undergraduate Fine Art course.

Sarah McCrory, Director of Glasgow International Festival of Visual Art since 2013, and previously curator of Frieze Projects, makes the point that to alter these statistics, change can only occur through gallery programmers and, in terms of commercial galleries, the buyers, who ultimately are the market. In 2010 McCrory worked with [Annika Ström](#) for Frieze Projects. The artist’s piece saw a group of “Ten Embarrassed Men” (2010) roam the tent, ashamed by the low number of women represented at the art fair. McCrory believes that rather than explicitly brand an exhibition as “all women”, these types of curatorial decision should be implicit in programming.

Guerrilla Girls aim to stop their activism when the situation of visibility of women in contemporary art is balanced. They continue, with their show at [Walker Arts Center](#) running throughout 2016. The artist Amy Bessone wrote recently: “I’ve noticed galleries whose roster may consist of 20–30% female artists, bring a 90–100% male line-up to art fairs.”¹ Clearly, we need to do more work.

¹ Amy Bessone, “Post Woman”, *Kaleidoscope* 23 (Winter 2015), 82.