

MARY BUCCI McCOY

## More than Getting the Numbers Right

In 1989, the feminist artist collective, Guerrilla Girls, famously targeted inequities in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art by designing a provocative billboard, commissioned by the New York Public Art Fund (PAF). It appropriated Ingres's *La Grande Odalisque*, "disguised" with the group's trademark gorilla mask, silhouetted against a strident yellow background with large bold text that asked, "Do women need to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?" The answer was "Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female." PAF rejected their proposal, so the Guerrilla Girls rented advertising on city buses until they were censored there, too. The group updated this work in 2005 for the Venice Biennale and again in 2012 for China, both times finding similarly unbalanced statistics at the Met.

When Montserrat College of Art Gallery director and curator Leonie Bradbury invited the now internationally known Guerrilla Girls to create an action to coincide with the college's fall 2012 exhibition, *Not Ready to Make Nice: Guerrilla Girls in the Art World and Beyond*, the group targeted the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA) with a similar billboard, this time mounted on a truck. The artists, who protect their anonymity not just with masks but also by adopting the names of well-known women artists such as Frida Kahlo as their noms de guerre, did a "weenie count," as they call it, at the museum. This time the billboard asked, "Do women have to be naked to get into Boston museums?" and answered, "Plenty of the nudes in the Museum of Fine Arts are female, but only 11% of the artists are female." The 200-square-foot truck billboard drove around town, impossible to miss when it was parked at the museum and then at First Friday in SoWa.

The MFA version unfolded in a distinctly contemporary way. For one thing, when they informed Bradbury they would be targeting the MFA, she alerted the museum as a professional courtesy, a move perhaps not surprising at a time when curating is an increasingly professionalized field, but a subversion of the original guerrilla tactic. Yet the immediacy of the



*Not Ready to Make Nice: Guerrilla Girls in the Art World and Beyond*, August 21–December 15, 2012, Montserrat College of Art. Photo: George Peet.

protest was heightened thanks to social media: when the billboard rolled, Montserrat's tweet of a photograph of it parked in front of the museum was immediately responded to by @mfaboston, who as of this writing has more than 28,000 Twitter followers, with "@montgalleries @guerrillagirls but 33% of artists in our contemporary wing are women ...so we're improving!"

What does "improving" mean? As a privately funded institution, what is the museum's responsibility? The MFA's 1991 mission statement states, "the Museum nonetheless recognizes the need to identify and explore new and neglected areas of art. It seeks to acquire art of the past and present which is visually significant and educationally meaningful." It continues, "The Museum has obligations to the people of Boston and New England, across the nation and abroad. It celebrates diverse cultures and welcomes new and broader constituencies."

One hopes that this action reverberates beyond Twitter. Counting the works by women or of any group show, gives only a partial and very general analysis of the situation. A more nuanced examination is needed. Since 1989 our understanding of the complexity of gender identity has evolved. Beyond biologically male

and female, people identify as lesbian, gay, queer, bisexual, transgender, and so on, not to mention issues of race and ethnicity—more of a consideration than ever with the globalization of the art world. Questions to pose now include: How does the makeup of the contemporary collection reflect the art world? Which works are you counting? Are they major? For example, if the artist in question is a painter, does the museum own significant paintings, or just works on paper? What place do the works have in an artist's oeuvre?

In the age of the Internet, in the increasingly decentralized global art world of today, museums still play traditional roles: they preserve, they legitimize, they educate. They are important resources for art students and for professional artists; in other words, they play a critical role in the making of contemporary art. The advantages a museum such as the MFA or the Met have over an institution such as the ICA/Boston are the resources and ability to contextualize contemporary art across cultures and time. With significant holdings in a variety of areas, the MFA has the potential to do much more than get the numbers right.

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