

December 6, 2003

Changing face of feminism

Feminist art activists tour U.S. with book

Campaign for equality wearing monkey masks

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The Guerrilla Girls tour the U.S. with a book on stereotypes.

NEW YORK—Frida Kahlo and

Kathe Kollwitz recently sat for an interview. From the neck down, they were downtown chic, clad all in black. But from the neck up, they were angry, wily, animalistic and ferocious.

The two women weren't really the famed artists — both of whom are dead. They were Guerrilla Girls, activists who take the names of their favourite artists and hide their true identities by wearing gorilla masks. Kahlo was a Mexican artist who created portraits and paintings in the 1930s and 1940s. Kollwitz was a German expressionist printmaker and sculptor at the turn of the 20th century. The gorilla mask has become a symbol of sorts for the changing face of feminism, especially in the world of the arts. Guerrilla Girls have donned the masks since 1985 when they began hanging posters and speaking about women in the arts.

"All of our research has shown that culture, which so many people see as avant-garde, has always lagged behind other fields of society in terms of women and people of colour," said the Guerrilla Girl who called herself Kollwitz. From behind her mask, you could see little except her clear blue eyes.

"After all, if 50 per cent of the artists graduating from major art schools are women and only 10 per cent of the artists shown at a certain museum are women, then what happened? Why did they fall through the cracks?"

Kahlo and Kollwitz are currently touring the U.S. to talk about female stereotypes. The group recently put out a new book called *Bitches, Bimbos And Ballbreakers: The Guerrilla Girls Guide To Female Stereotypes*. The book follows the history of many female stereotypes such as debutantes, spinsters, biker chicks and Valley Girls.

The project came about one day when the Guerrilla Girls compiled a list of female stereotypes. The list mushroomed into a book, Kollwitz said. When the group thought about male stereotypes, they could only come up with a handful. It was stereotypes and the frustrations of trying to succeed as women artists

that gave birth to the Guerrilla Girls. In 1985, a group of New York artists started to notice that women were not getting as much gallery and museum space as men. They also noticed that the three major museums in the city — the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art — were all started by women and yet few female artists had their work exhibited in them.

Annoyed by the lack of representation, they put up posters around SoHo and the East Village — areas that were defining the New York art scene at the time — pointing out facts about women and the galleries that eventually fed the museums. The women wore gorilla masks as they tacked up the posters, and the movement began.

"What the anonymity does for us is that it lets everyone looking at our work focus on the issue and not on who we are personally," Kahlo said. "It makes it a lot easier for us to be a symbol."

The wearing of masks also calls attention to the fact that what they are saying is potentially dangerous.

Since Guerrilla Girls come from all aspects of the art world, from curators to painters, some members could lose their jobs for speaking out.

"A lot of people look at this cultural moment and think that things have changed for women and that they are okay," said Alison Piepmeier, assistant director of the Women's Study Program at Vanderbilt University. "But the Guerrilla Girls point out that things could be improved and they show this with actual facts."