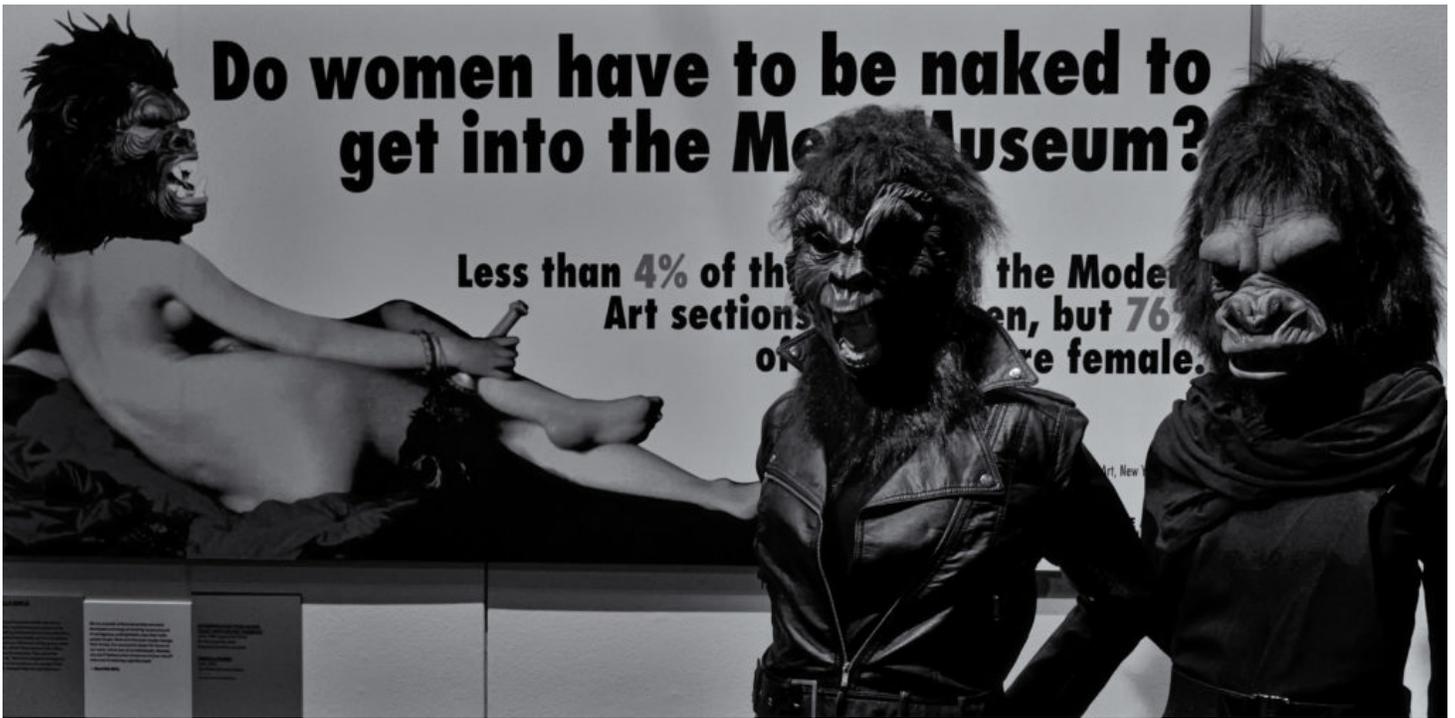


The Art World Reacts to Allegations of Sexual Harassment in Its Ranks

BY *Andy Battaglia and Alex Greenberger* POSTED 10/27/17 6:10 PM



The Guerrilla Girls at the Victoria & Albert Museum in 2016.

ERIC HUYBRECHTS, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

After news broke this week that *Artforum* publisher Knight Landesman and the magazine itself had been served with a lawsuit alleging sexual harassment over the course of many years, the art world has reacted with a mix of surprise and resignation. Some have expressed shock and dismay; others are more fatalistic about what they see as persistent patterns of behavior.

“As this news sinks in, I feel physically sick,” said Sarah Thornton, the author of the 2007 book *Seven Days in the Art World*, which featured a short visit to Landesman’s office at *Artforum*. “It brings back memories of harassment from men whose names I can’t even remember. Sexual harassment was all-pervasive and socially acceptable 20 years ago. For the short and long term goals of women’s rights, sexual tormentors in all spheres need to be named and brought to justice. This is a painful process. We may hear awful things about friends or learn how something that appeared amusingly perverse from a distance was actually harmful and gross up close. It’s a battle without victors, but it must be waged. Who else in the art world needs to be stopped from abusing their power now?”

Clearly the shifting social dynamics surrounding allegations of sexual harassment in other cultural realms—by Hollywood tycoon Harvey Weinstein, political reporter Mark Halperin, literary critic Leon Wieseltier, fashion photographer Terry Richardson—have moved into the art world. This week, *ARTnews* spoke with artists, curators, dealers, and writers to gauge reactions to news that is still developing. The responses have been prismatic, as suits a subject with many different manifestations over many years of history in an art world always in flux.

“When something that is such a topic in the world at large becomes that close-to-home, it’s a particular kind of shock,” said Catherine Morris, the senior curator of the Brooklyn Museum’s Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art. “My primary response was to admire women who are younger than me who have come together to address an issue that, in my experience, is so entrenched.” She posed a question in a tone of hopefulness: “What would the world look like if this didn’t happen?”

“I was shocked and very sad,” said Paula Cooper, a pillar of the New York art scene since her namesake gallery opened in 1968. “Every day you expect something to appear in the papers now relating to these problems, but it was very shocking that it was what it was. We’re all thinking about these things. There are so many contradictions in our society and the times are pretty awful in every way. I don’t know about the particulars, but when one person’s actions affect so many others, there are vast repercussions on people who are innocent.”

“I have great sympathy for *Artforum* because I’ve known them for years,” Cooper continued. “There are very admirable people there, so I hope it doesn’t harm them.” But her sentiment about the kind of behavior alleged was clear. “I grew up a long time ago, in a different period,” she said. “We all heard about casting couches. I haven’t heard about them in more modern times, but, you know, women are harassed in many ways. I personally have never experienced sexual harassment, but I can tell you if somebody put their hand on my buttocks for one second, it would be so quickly off of there. I’ve experienced other kinds of harassment: being treated without respect, especially when I was young.”

The artist Coco Fusco took issue with the silence that shielded misconduct for so long. “The art world is full of powerful people who act as if they were above the law,” Fusco said. “The art world is not into airing its dirty laundry. Most people keep silent because they fear retribution or because they see nothing wrong with a bit of ‘hanky-panky.’ ”

The artist and writer Micol Hebron, whose 2014 project *Gallery Tally* counted the number of women featured on *Artforum*’s covers (18 percent) and full-page ads (around 70 percent were for shows by men), said, “To deter and prevent future sexual misconduct will require a wholesale paradigm shift in our thoughts and actions. Sexual misconduct and abuse, like rape and war, are profitable. We have to learn to restructure our priorities when it comes to money and power—and relinquish our stronghold on the social systems that perpetuate financial wealth and moral bankruptcy.”



The project of preventing further sexual misconduct, Hebron suggested, will require rectifying gender imbalances in the art world. Magazines have a few duties, she said: “Put more female-identified, non-binary, and genderqueer artists on the covers. Pay more attention to the ads, and do not sell ads for more male artists’ exhibitions than female artists. Publish equal numbers of feature articles and reviews for female artists as for male artists.”

Micol Hebron, *Gallery Tally, Artforum covers*, 2017.

COURTESY THE ARTIST

Alexander Gray, whose New York gallery focuses in part on historic feminist art, said, “The art world is a microcosm of the larger world and remains a place where equality is not a given. As with Hollywood, there are fewer women represented and represented accurately, and men are still paid enormously more. Look at the numbers of women represented by galleries versus those for men. That broader economic imbalance reflects the power structures that allow for emotional and physical harassment. It’s heartbreaking.”

Johanna Burton, the New Museum’s director and curator of education and public engagement—and curator of its current exhibition “Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon”—suggested that gender is one of several issues in need of broader acceptance and understanding. “Any form of harassment in the workplace is unacceptable, though we know that such behavior is longstanding and pervasive,” Burton said. “The current situation at *Artforum* should be seen as part of a much larger structural problem in which women, people of color, queer and gender non-conforming people, and others are routinely subjected to behaviors they have been forced to accept at the risk of their own careers and livelihoods.”

Looking forward, she said, “We should use this opportunity as a community to insist on a code of ethics that does not accept this kind of behavior toward anyone. I fully support the women who have come forward with these claims and, again, hope that this is recognized not as an anomaly but instead an indicator of a widespread issue that goes beyond gender alone.”

Artforum has said it plans to assemble a task force of women to oversee the transition following Landesman’s resignation from his perch as publisher. Laura Raicovich, the director of the Queens Museum, said she was “relieved” by the measure—and added: “The recent revelations at *Artforum* only show how pervasive sexual harassment is in our society and how much work needs to be done to uproot it.”

Some are questioning what the right response to the news and the furor surrounding it should be. On Instagram yesterday, the art adviser Todd Levin wrote that galleries should pull their advertisements from *Artforum* for six to twelve months—“to register their displeasure in a meaningful, concrete way. They don’t have to boycott forever—just long enough for the magazine to undergo financial stress and understand what behaviors will not be tolerated.”

Unrelated to Levin’s Instagram post, 303 Gallery made a decision—after its 34-year history with the magazine—to halt advertising in *Artforum* “for a while,” director Lisa Spellman said, “until we see real systematic changes from the publishers and the board.” As to her own personal sentiments, Spellman pointed to an Instagram post on 303’s account that states, “Predatory behavior cannot be tolerated in our society, our industry, our spaces. ‘Testing boundaries’ when it involves inappropriate comments or physical contact is sexual harassment—no grey area there.” The image by its side? A Sue Williams painting from 1992 emblazoned with the words “The Art World Can Suck My Proverbial Dick.”



Knight Landesman at the Armory Show in 2015.

KATHERINE MCMAHON

ARTnews called several galleries today to ask if they would pull their advertisements from the magazine. Some said they have not yet made any decisions, while others, including Pace Gallery and Paula Cooper, said they plan to continue as they had before. “The recent allegations made against Knight Landesman are deeply troubling,” said Marc Glimcher at Pace. “This kind of behavior and abuse of power in the art world and everywhere else are inexcusable. However, we believe that the importance of *Artforum* as an institution goes beyond the alleged reprehensible actions of an individual. Pace Gallery will continue to support the writers and editors who make *Artforum* a vital platform for critical artistic discourse.”

For their part, the activist artist collective Guerrilla Girls made a point that they have been making for ages. “Almost all women, and many men and trans people have been sexually harassed and/or abused by rich and powerful guys in the workplace,” they wrote to *ARTnews*. “The art world likes to think of itself as above it all. Guess what: it isn’t.”

Sarah Douglas contributed reporting.