

Taschen under Fire

By Amalie Kristine Frederiksen



Ditte Ejlerskov & EvaMarie Lindahl *About: The Blank Pages*, Malmö Konsthall, 2014.

When the exhibition *About: The Blank Pages* was officially opened at Malmö Konsthall yesterday, it served as a reminder that the struggle for gender equality in art history should also concern itself with the popular publications, as represented by the German publishing house Taschen and their series *Taschen Basic Art*.

The artists EvaMarie Lindahl and Ditte Ejlerskov were able to ascertain the extent of the problems with the publisher's perception of art history when they heard, during a conversation with Taschen in 2010, the following remark: "Female artists cannot be geniuses."

– The remark served as an attempt at justifying why only five out of the total of 97 monographs published by Taschen are about female artists, says Ditte Ejlerskov to Kunstkritikk.

Based on this tragic-comic statement Lindahl and Ejlerskov decided to take action themselves, injecting some gender balance into Taschen's male-dominated version of art history. Over the course of the last four years they have worked in collaboration with librarians, researchers, art historians, and critics to prepare a complete list of female artists qualified to be part of the *Basic Art* series on an equal footing with the 92 men already featured there.

– It was important to us that the list would reflect the Taschen selections and meet their criteria while remaining as objective as possible. That is also why it has taken such a long time to compile the list. As it is, the list might just as well have been made by Taschen; we've just helped them along a little, you might say, adds Ejlerskov.



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Lindahl's and Ejlerskov's list reaches all the way back to the 16th century and includes names such as Marina Abramović, Judy Chicago, Barbara Kruger, Camille Claudel, Louise Bourgeois, Barbara Hepworth, Eva Hesse, Ana Mendieta, Hannah Höch, Bridget Riley, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Meret Oppenheim, Agnes Martin, and Hannah Wilke. The list of the 92 women, accompanied by a friendly and humorous cover letter, was sent to Taschen just before the exhibition in Malmö was officially opened.

About: The Blank Pages is presented in Mellemrummet (literally “The In-between Space” or “Middle Room”), which is adjacent to the museum bookshop. In the Mellemrummet space Lindahl and Ejlerskov present all the missing books in the series side by side with the existing ones. The books representing the “new” female artists have covers that look just like those adorning the original publications. However, the pages in the artists’ creations are blank. Commenting on the location between the bookshop and the exhibition space, Ejlerskov says:



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– We want to engage the people who actually buy these mainstream publications. Instead of presenting them with various statistics that illustrate the problem, but don’t actually make a real difference in people’s minds, we want to shock them – to stage an intervention in their habitual perception of the world. The work only exists in the moment a potential buyer begins to leaf through one of the blank-leaved books.

Given that this action will quite unavoidably shed an unfavourable light on Taschen and the industry represented by that publishing house, the artists entertain little hope that Taschen will adjust their presentation of art history anytime soon. Indeed, they are happy to simply refresh and perhaps expand the discussion about equality in art. But, as Ditte Ejlerskov adds:

– Of course we would like to see Taschen accept the challenge, filling in the blank pages of the books. To have them realise how embarrassing their project are. The best thing for us would be if they sued us, for that would really spark a discussion about who creates and shapes art history.

The chance of a trial is not outside the realms of the possible, for the artists have quite deliberately copied the publishing house logo and graphic design in order to accurately mime the colourful and visually appealing book covers that find their way into thousands of homes across the world every year.

The exhibition is on at Malmö Konsthall now and ends 15 June 2014.



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