

LINDA NOCHLIN

WHY HAVE THERE BEEN NO GREAT
WOMEN ARTISTS?

WHILE THE RECENT UPSURGE OF FEMINIST activity in this country has indeed been a liberating one, its force has been chiefly emotional – personal, psychological, and subjective – centered, like the other radical movements to which it is related, on the present and its immediate needs, rather than on historical analysis of the basic intellectual issues which the feminist attack on the status quo automatically raises.¹ Like any revolution, however, the feminist one ultimately must come to grips with the intellectual and ideological basis of the various intellectual or scholarly disciplines – history, philosophy, sociology, psychology, etc. – in the same way that it questions the ideologies of present social institutions. If, as John Stuart Mill suggested, we tend to accept whatever *is* as natural, this is just as true in the realm of academic investigation as it is in our social arrangements. In the former, too, “natural” assumptions must be questioned and the mythic basis of much so-called fact brought to light. And it is here that the very position of woman as an acknowledged outsider, the maverick “she” instead of the presumably neutral “one” – in reality the white-male-position-accepted-as-natural, or the hidden “he” as the subject of all scholarly predicates – is a decided advantage, rather than merely a hindrance or a subjective distortion.

In the field of art history, the white Western male viewpoint, unconsciously accepted as *the* viewpoint of the art historian, may – and does – prove to be inadequate not merely on moral and ethical grounds, or because it is elitist, but on purely intellectual ones. In revealing the failure of much academic art history, and a great deal of history in general, to take account of the unacknowledged value system, the very *presence* of an intruding subject in historical investigation, the feminist critique at the same time lays bare its conceptual smugness, its meta-historical naïveté. At a moment when all disciplines are becoming more self-conscious, more aware of the nature of their presuppositions as exhibited in the very languages and structures of the various fields of scholarship, such uncritical acceptance of “what is” as “natural” may be intellectually fatal. Just as Mill saw male domination as one of a long series of social injustices that had to be overcome if a truly just social order were to be created, so we may see the unstated domination of white male subjectivity as one in a series of intellectual distortions which must be corrected in order to achieve a more adequate and accurate view of historical situations.

It is the engaged feminist intellect (like John Stuart Mill’s) that can pierce through the cultural-ideological limitations of the time and its specific “professionalism” to reveal biases and inadequacies not merely in dealing with the question of women, but in the very way of formulating the crucial questions of the discipline as a whole. Thus, the so-called woman question, far from being a minor, peripheral, and laughably provincial sub-issue grafted onto

a serious, established discipline, can become a catalyst, an intellectual instrument, providing basic and "natural" assumptions, providing a paradigm for other kinds of internal questions, and in turn providing links with paradigms established by radical approaches in other fields. Even a simple question like "Why have there been no great women artists?" can, if answered adequately, create a sort of chain reaction, expanding not merely to encompass the accepted assumptions of the single field, but outward to embrace history and the social sciences, even psychology and literature, and thereby, from the outset, can challenge the assumption that the traditional divisions of intellectual inquiry are still adequate to deal with the meaningful questions of our time, rather than the merely convenient or self-generated ones.

Let us, for example, examine the implications of that perennial question (one can, of course, substitute almost any field of human endeavor, with appropriate changes in phrasing: "Well, if women really *are* equal to men, why have there never been any great women artists (or composers, or mathematicians, or philosophers, or so few of the same)?")

"Why have there been no great women artists?" The question tolls reproachfully in the background of most discussions of the so-called woman problem. But like so many other so-called questions involved in the feminist "controversy," it falsifies the nature of the issue at the same time that it insidiously supplies its own answer: "There are no great women artists because women are incapable of greatness."

The assumptions behind such a question are varied in range and sophistication, running anywhere from "scientifically proven" demonstrations of the inability of human beings to give birth rather than penises to create anything significant, to relatively open-minded wonderment that women, despite so many years of near-equality — and after all, a lot of men have had their disadvantages too — have still not achieved anything of exceptional significance in the visual arts.

The feminist's first reaction is to swallow the bait, hook, line and sinker, and to attempt to answer the question as it is put: that is, to dig up examples of worthy or insufficiently appreciated women artists throughout history; to rehabilitate rather modest, if interesting and productive careers; to "rediscover" forgotten flower painters or David followers and make out a case for them; to demonstrate that Berthe Morisot was really less dependent upon Manet than one had been led to think — in other words, to engage in the normal activity of the specialist scholar who makes a case for the importance of his very own neglected or minor master. Such attempts, whether undertaken from a feminist point of view, like the ambitious article on women artists which appeared in the 1858 *Westminster Review*,² or more recent scholarly studies on such artists as Angelica Kauffmann and Artemisia Gentileschi,³ are certainly worth the effort, both in adding to our knowledge of women's achievement and of art history generally. But they do nothing to question the assumptions lying behind the question "Why have there been no great women artists?" On the contrary, by attempting to answer it, they tacitly reinforce its negative implications.

Another attempt to answer the question involves shifting the ground slightly and asserting, as some contemporary feminists do, that there is a different kind of "greatness" for women in art than for men's, thereby postulating the existence of a distinctive and recognizable feminine style, different both in its formal and its expressive qualities and based on the special character of women's situation and experience.

[. . .]

The fact of the matter is that there have been no supremely great women artists, as far as we know, although there have been many interesting and very good ones who remain insufficiently investigated or appreciated; nor have there been any great Lithuanian jazz pianists, nor Eskimo tennis players, no matter how much we might wish there had been. That this

should be the case is regrettable, but the evidence will alter the situation; nor will there be no women equivalents for Picasso or Matisse, or even, in very recent years, there are black American equivalents for the "hidden" great women artists, or if there are, as opposed to men's — and one can't say. If women have in fact achieved it, it is as it is.

But in actuality, as we all know, there are a hundred other areas, are stultified among them, who did not have the great ones, above all, male. The fault lies not in our empty internal spaces, but in our failure to include everything that happens to us in symbols, signs, and signals. The miracle is that women, or blacks, that so many of us have those bailiwicks of white masculine.

[. . .]

The question "Why have there been no great women artists?" is a subject of misinterpretation and misunderstanding about the nature of art and its significance in general and of human excellence in all of this. While the "woman problem" involved in the question "Why have there been no great women artists?" is a subject of intellectual obfuscation beyond the subject of women. Basic to the question about the making of art in general, as well as the conscious or unconscious, link together Raphael and Jackson Pollock under the banner of scholarly monographs devoted to the study of one who has "Genius" — a mysterious power somehow embedded in the artist, unquestioned, often unconscious, and a product of the race-milieu-moment formulation of the artist's sophistication. But these assumptions are an accident that the crucial question about the making of art has rarely been investigated, or that a subject which, fairly recently, been dismissed as unscientific, like sociology. To encourage a more socially oriented approach would reveal the monograph-producing substructure of the art world, only recently been called into existence.

Underlying the question about the making of art — subject of a hundred monographs — is a mysterious essence, rather than a simple Genus or Talent, which, like murder, is a function of the circumstances.

in intellectual instrument, probing other kinds of internal questioning. "radical approaches in other fields" — "can, if answered merely to encompass the accepted history and the social sciences, in itself, can challenge the assumption that women are inadequate to deal with the means of their own or self-generated ones."

at perennial question (one can, of course, make appropriate changes in phrasing — "There have never been any great women artists" or "There are few of the same?")

question tolls reproachfully in the face of the problem. But like so many other questions, it falsifies the nature of the issue. "There are no great women artists"

range and sophistication, running the gamut from the inability of human beings with their minds to relatively open-minded wonder — and after all, a lot of men have done things of exceptional significance in

work, line and sinker, and to attempt to find examples of worthy or insufficient art is quite a rather modest, if interesting and useful, task. But to make artists or David followers and make art as really less dependent upon Man's hand is to engage in the normal activity of the artist. From his very own neglected or minor point of view, like the ambitious *in* *Review*,² or more recent scholarship on Artemisia Gentileschi,³ are certainly not the men's achievement and of art history. The assumptions lying behind the question "Why have there been no great women artists?" are, by attempting to answer it, they

digging the ground slightly and asserting a different kind of "greatness" for women — a distinctive and recognizable femininity — and based on the special characteristics of

extremely great women artists, as far as we know, and very good ones who remain to be found. Even any great Lithuanian jazz pianists might wish there had been. That there

should be the case is regrettable, but no amount of manipulating the historical or critical evidence will alter the situation; nor will accusations of male-chauvinist distortion of history. There are no women equivalents for Michelangelo or Rembrandt, Delacroix or Cézanne, Picasso or Matisse, or even, in very recent times, for de Kooning or Warhol, any more than there are black American equivalents for the same. If there actually were large numbers of "hidden" great women artists, or if there really should be different standards for women's art — as opposed to men's — and one can't have it both ways — then what are feminists fighting for? If women have in fact achieved the same status as men in the arts, then the status quo is fine as it is.

But in actuality, as we all know, things as they are and as they have been, in the arts as in a hundred other areas, are stultifying, oppressive, and discouraging to all those, women among them, who did not have the good fortune to be born white, preferably middle class and, above all, male. The fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education — education understood to include everything that happens to us from the moment we enter this world of meaningful symbols, signs, and signals. The miracle is, in fact, that given the overwhelming odds against women, or blacks, that so many of both have managed to achieve so much sheer excellence, in those bailiwicks of white masculine prerogative like science, politics, or the arts.

[. . .]

The question "Why have there been no great women artists?" is simply the top tenth of an iceberg of misinterpretation and misconception; beneath lies a vast dark bulk of shaky *idées reçues* about the nature of art and its situational concomitants, about the nature of human abilities in general and of human excellence in particular, and the role that the social order plays in all of this. While the "woman problem" as such may be a pseudo-issue, the misconceptions involved in the question "Why have there been no great women artists?" points to major areas of intellectual obfuscation beyond the specific political and ideological issues involved in the subjection of women. Basic to the question are many naïve, distorted, uncritical assumptions about the making of art in general, as well as the making of great art. These assumptions, conscious or unconscious, link together such unlikely superstars as Michelangelo and van Gogh, Raphael and Jackson Pollock under the rubric of "Great" — an honorific attested to by the number of scholarly monographs devoted to the artist in question — and the Great Artist is, of course, conceived of as one who has "Genius"; Genius, in turn, is thought of as an atemporal and mysterious power somehow embedded in the person of the Great Artist.⁴ Such ideas are related to unquestioned, often unconscious, meta-historical premises that make Hippolyte Taine's *milieu-moment* formulation of the dimensions of historical thought seem a model of sophistication. But these assumptions are intrinsic to a great deal of art-historical writing. It is no accident that the crucial question of the conditions *generally* productive of great art has so rarely been investigated, or that attempts to investigate such general problems have, until fairly recently, been dismissed as unscholarly, too broad, or the province of some other discipline, like sociology. To encourage a dispassionate, impersonal, sociological, and institutionally oriented approach would reveal the entire romantic, elitist, individual-glorifying, and monograph-producing substructure upon which the profession of art history is based, and which has only recently been called into question by a group of younger dissidents.

Underlying the question about woman as artist, then, we find the myth of the Great Artist — subject of a hundred monographs, unique, godlike — bearing within his person since birth a mysterious essence, rather like the golden nugget in Mrs. Grass's chicken soup, called Genius or Talent, which, like murder, must always out, no matter how unlikely or unpromising the circumstances.

[. . .]

As far as the relationship of artistic occupation and social class is concerned, an interesting paradigm for the question "Why have there been no great women artists?" might be provided by trying to answer the question "Why have there been no great artists from the aristocracy?" One can scarcely think, before the antitraditional nineteenth century at least, of any artist who sprang from the ranks of any more elevated class than the upper bourgeoisie. Even in the nineteenth century, Degas came from the lower nobility — more like the bourgeoisie, in fact — and only Toulouse-Lautrec, metamorphosed into the ranks of the marginal by accidental deformity, could be said to have come from the loftier reaches of the upper classes. While the aristocracy has always provided the lion's share of the patronage and the audience for art — as, indeed, the aristocracy of wealth does even in our more democratic days — it has contributed little beyond amateurish efforts to the creation of art itself, despite the fact that aristocrats (like many women) have had more than their share of educational advantages, plenty of leisure and, indeed, like women, were often encouraged to dabble in the arts and even develop into respectable amateurs, like Napoleon III's cousin, the Princess Mathilde, who exhibited at the official Salons, or Queen Victoria, who, with Prince Albert, studied art with no less a figure than Landseer himself. Could it be that the little golden nugget — genius — is missing from the aristocratic makeup in the same way that it is from the feminine psyche? Or rather, is it not that the kinds of demands and expectations placed before both aristocrats and women — the amount of time necessarily devoted to social functions, the very kinds of activities demanded — simply made total devotion to professional art production out of the question, indeed unthinkable, both for upper-class males and for women generally, rather than its being a question of genius and talent?

When the right questions are asked about the conditions for producing art, of which the production of great art is a subtopic, there will no doubt have to be some discussion of the situational concomitants of intelligence and talent generally, not merely of artistic genius. Piaget and others have stressed in their genetic epistemology that in the development of reason and in the unfolding of imagination in young children, intelligence — or, by implication, what we choose to call genius — is a dynamic activity rather than a static essence, and an activity of a subject *in a situation*. As further investigations in the field of child development imply, these abilities, or this intelligence, are built up minutely, step by step, from infancy onward, and the patterns of adaptation-accommodation may be established so early within the subject in-an-environment that they may indeed *appear* to be innate to the unsophisticated observer. Such investigations imply that, even aside from meta-historical reasons, scholars will have to abandon the notion, consciously articulated or not, of individual genius as innate, and as primary to the creation of art.⁵

The question "Why have there been no great women artists?" has led us to the conclusion, so far, that art is not a free, autonomous activity of a super-endowed individual "influenced" by previous artists, and, more vaguely and superficially, by "social forces," but rather, that the total situation of art making, both in terms of the development of the artist-maker and in the nature and quality of the work of art itself, occur in a social situation, an integral element of this social structure, and are mediated and determined by specific and definable social institutions, be they art academies, systems of patronage, mythologies of the divine creator, artist as he-man or social outcast.

[. . .]

Conclusion

I have tried to deal with one of the problems, for true, rather than token, equality, I have based upon which the question "Why have there been no great women artists?" is posing the validity of the formula of women specifically; and then, by questioning the validity of the formula of history itself. [. . .] I have suggested that women to achieve artistic excellence, the potency of their so-called talent, not great, women artists throughout history, does the existence of a few superstars and groups. And while great achievements are difficult if, while you work, you must doubt and guilt and outer monsters of mind, have any specific connection with the

What is important is that women artists, without making excuses or apologies, it is not, however, an intellectual as underdogs in the realm of art; reveal institutional and intellectual barriers, destroy false consciousness, take part in true greatness — are challenges that take the necessary risk, the leap into

Notes

1. Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, New York, 1968, provide notable exceptions.
2. "Women Artists," Review of *Die Frau* (American Edition), LXX, July 1858; see this review to my attention.
3. See, for example, Peter S. Walch's dissertation, "Angelica Kauffmann, Gentileschi," see R. Ward Bissell, "Artists" (June 1968): 153-68.
4. For the relatively recent genesis of this idea, see M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1961); Maurice Z. Shroder, *Icarus: The Myth of the Poet* (1961).
5. Contemporary directions — earthwork, from emphasis on the individual genius to A. White's *Canvases and Careers: Investigations into the Direction of Art* (1969) — set up a fruitful new direction of investigation. Gombrich and Pierre Francastel, in *The Artist and the World*, see artists as part of a total situation re-

Conclusion

I have tried to deal with one of the perennial questions used to challenge women's demand for true, rather than token, equality, by examining the whole erroneous intellectual substructure upon which the question "Why have there been no great women artists?" is based; by questioning the validity of the formulation of so-called problems in general and the "problem" of women specifically; and then, by probing some of the limitations of the discipline of art history itself. [...] I have suggested that it was indeed *institutionally* made impossible for women to achieve artistic excellence, or success, on the same footing as men, *no matter what* the potency of their so-called talent, or genius. The existence of a tiny band of successful, if not great, women artists throughout history does nothing to gainsay this fact, any more than does the existence of a few superstars or token achievers among the members of any minority groups. And while great achievement is rare and difficult at best, it is still rarer and more difficult if, while you work, you must at the same time wrestle with inner demons of self-doubt and guilt and outer monsters of ridicule or patronizing encouragement, neither of which have any specific connection with the quality of the art work as such.

What is important is that women face up to the reality of their history and of their present situation, without making excuses or puffing mediocrity. Disadvantage may indeed be an excuse; it is not, however, an intellectual position. Rather, using as a vantage point their situation as underdogs in the realm of grandeur, and outsiders in that of ideology, women can reveal institutional and intellectual weaknesses in general, and, at the same time that they destroy false consciousness, take part in the creation of institutions in which clear thought – and true greatness – are challenges open to anyone, man or woman, courageous enough to take the necessary risk, the leap into the unknown.

Notes

1. Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, New York, 1970, and Mary Ellman's *Thinking About Women*, New York, 1968, provide notable exceptions.
2. "Women Artists," Review of *Die Frauen in die Kunstgeschichte* by Ernst Guhl in *The Westminster Review* (American Edition), LXX, July 1858, pp. 91–104. I am grateful to Elaine Showalter for having brought this review to my attention.
3. See, for example, Peter S. Walch's excellent studies of Angelica Kauffmann or his unpublished doctoral dissertation, "Angelica Kauffmann," Princeton University, 1968, on the subject; for Artemisia Gentileschi, see R. Ward Bissell, "Artemisia Gentileschi – A New Documented Chronology," *Art Bulletin* 1 (June 1968): 153–68.
4. For the relatively recent genesis of the emphasis on the artist as the nexus of esthetic experience, see M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, New York, 1953, and Maurice Z. Shroder, *Icarus: The Image of the Artist in French Romanticism*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1961.
5. Contemporary directions – earthworks, conceptual art, art as information, etc. – certainly point away from emphasis on the individual genius and his salable products; in art history, Harrison C. and Cynthia A. White's *Canvases and Careers: Institutional Change in the French Painting World*, New York, 1965, opens up a fruitful new direction of investigation, as did Nikolaus Pevsner's pioneering *Academies of Art*. Ernst Gombrich and Pierre Francastel, in their very different ways, always have tended to view art and the artists as part of a total situation rather than in lofty isolation.