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. 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 naiveté. 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 unspoken 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, perhaps 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 field. 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 area's assumptions of the single field, but outward to embrace history and the social sciences in even psychology and literature, and thereby, from the outset, can challenge the assumptions 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 phrase). “Well, if women really are equal to men, why have there never been any great women poets, (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 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, nowhere from “scientifically proven” demonstrations of the inability of human beings to wombs rather than penises to create anything significant, to relatively open-minded women than that women, despite so many years of near-equality – and after all, a lot of men had their disadvantages too – have not still achieved nothing 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 career, 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, or more recent scholarly studies on such artists as Angelica Kauffmann and Artemisia Gentileschi, are certainly worth the effort, both in adding to our knowledge of women’s achievement and as an intellectual exercise as such. 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’ art than for men’s, thereby postulating the existence of a distinctive and recognizable feminist 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 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
WHY HAVE THERE BEEN NO GREAT WOMEN ARTISTS?

Why have there been no great women artists? The question tolls reproachfully in the air. But like so many other questions, it falsifies the nature of the issue. There are no great women artists; there have been a few, few of the same. Are there any? Range and sophistication, range and intelligence, the ability of human beings are too relatively open-minded, and after all, a lot of men have things of exceptional significance and are up to the job, and nothing like to engage in the normal activity of the history and art, his own neglected, if modest point of view, like the ambitious, instinctive Gentileschi, or more recent scholars, and it looks behind the question, why, by attempting to answer it, the ground slightly and adjustment kind of "greatness" for women, instinctive and recognizable feminisms and based on the special驾驶的人 would 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 as including 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 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 obsession of misinterpretation and misconception; beneath lies a vast dark bulk of shaky idées fixes 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. Such ideas are related to unquestioned, often unconscious, meta-historical premises that make Hippolyte Taine's over-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 an 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 institution-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 an aristocracy?" One can scarcely think, before the antitraditional nineteenth century at least, 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 haute 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 lofter reaches of the upper classes. While the aristocracy has always provided the lion's share of the patronage for 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, 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 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 reading and the unfolding of imagination in young children, intelligence — or, by implication, what we choose to call genius — is a dynamic aspect rather than a static essence, and an aspect 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 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 as integral elements of this social structure, and are mediated and determined by specific and definable social institutions, be they academies, systems of patronage, mythologies of the divine creator, artist as he-man or social outcast.

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Notes
3. See, for example, Peter S. Walsh's dissertation, "Angelica Kauffmann, Gentileschi, see R. Ward Bissell, "Ar 1668); 153–68.
5. Contemporary directions — earthy new "from-emphasis on the individual gen s. White's Conferences and Careers: Inst 1968. Finkenauer and Pierre Francastel, in artists as part of a total situation r:
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 gain say 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

Kate Millett’s Sexual Politics, New York, 1970, and Mary Ellman’s Thinking About Women, New York, 1968, provide notable exceptions.


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 Nicholas 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.