

Interview with Noa Giniger, Helen Verhoeven, Melissa Gordon.

17th February 2021

[MG] Im interested to hear you both speak about the context in which the subsequent meetings arose after the first meeting in 2010 at the Kunstverein. Because I remember the first meeting. You guys were both there?

[NG] I think so.

[HV] I looked for photos. I remember we all posed together. Didn't we all take some photos there? I feel like I remember.... sitting, standing, getting into position for it.

[MG] Probably.

[HV] I don't know who has them.

[NG] I remember also talking photos, also I remember at some point we shared photos. So, I might have it somewhere also.

[MG] Were you both in charge in starting the meetings after? They happened quite soon afterwards. Helen, I feel like you were in charge...?

[HV] I don't know if anybody was in charge. Sarah (Sejin Chang / Van der Heide) put the email list together but it was just – people would throw out ideas for coming to see a show or studio visit, right? We did this series of studio visits. I guess I was in charge, I initiated the arts walk thing and that had some communication around it and then the meeting where we all made editions and that we shared and exchanged with each other.

[MG] That's really nice. You were living in Amsterdam at the time?

[HV] I don't know if I was ever living in Amsterdam. When did it start?

[MG] In 2011 or 2010. Were you in New York?

[HV] I was in NY in 2009. And then, I actually I think I was in a group with Jen (Liu) over there too but it was before you initiated this, it was an art theory reading group on aesthetics or something. The Amsterdam group started right as I moved to Berlin and I think I was in Amsterdam a lot and just joined when I could. I was not living there but I was somewhere there enough to participate in some of it.

[NG] You always proposed to...as much as I know...you would often say, “Hey I’m coming...do you guys want to...?”

[HV] Yeah, exactly. So, a few times it was also just meeting for drinks or something, if there wasn’t any particular venue. And I think, I’ll repeat myself somewhat because I said this to you on the phone, in the earlier conversation. One of the things for me...was so nice about it was to get a chance to talk to people I saw around a lot and that I didn’t know before. And you know before there was this acknowledgement of each other as colleagues. Before that, you would look at each other and not know how to bridge communication or how to start a dialogue. Almost in an intimidated or competitive manner, that some people would just see each other at openings and not say hello and all of a sudden you realise you are just doing the same thing and you have a lot to talk about. You know? And even in particular between the Rijks and the Ateliers because they are these two different streams of communities...when I was living in Holland they didn’t cross over that much. I think everybody was so intensely involved in their own little bubble that, even though it was right next to each other, didn’t touch each other. So, I think it was super nice to interweave those two communities and I feel like successfully amazingly for the women in Holland of our generation – and you know we’ve talked about that before that it’s maybe a single generation – but nonetheless created a feeling of I don’t know, is community the word? It’s not so active, still, I don’t know, network isn’t right...I don’t know what the right word is. I would almost say like a union except that we’re not unionised against any system. But I still feel like it’s a place where you could ask each other for help and it feels open and supportive, somehow? I don’t know. But especially open, it was always easy, once it was established as a group it felt like it was totally OK to approach everyone in a really open way. You agree?

[NG] Yeah, I think you really describe it well. I thought about the word ‘bridges’ for some reason. Because I felt like, yeah there were lots of – totally agree enjoying the feeling of Ateliers and Rijks – it’s such a funny thing I immediately felt when I moved to Amsterdam

because I moved for the Ateliers, and it's like the Rijks are the cooler [ones] and then the Ateliers...you see there's friendships but you see there are different groups. And I think this is something I still find amazing about Amsterdam because there's such a small community, or small scene, put it that way? And yet it's constructed of so many little groups – and which are not groups – I do feel like there's a lack of solidarity in general in the scene... I don't know if the word solidarity is correct...that's why I prefer why I to brainstorm as we speak. But there is a lack of something. Which is confusing because it's so *gezellig*, so cute, so small...and yet there is a bit of everyone on their own and it's true that you see that people in openings but it felt to me often very flat still. Just staying there, saying, "Hi how're you doing yeah cool maybe go for a drink later." When we started meeting, I think that was the really nice thing because I really got to know people. And then the dynamic became more interesting in this sense because you start to really feel the character of people to better understand the art, to get a deeper look into things. And also, because I was lacking studio visits and I thought it was really nice to have this opportunity to go and see other people's work and then to have them in my studio and ...and, yeah. That was something I really missed.

[MG] It's interesting because your meetings: first, Amsterdam the only city that it happened; and second, it was a massive group of people. I also think what's interesting is it took a lot of trust for you guys to actually do this. In all the other cities there was a lot more distrust perhaps...I'm curious to hear you talk about that. Perhaps I could see why things didn't continue in other places because there was this notion that people couldn't trust others and you guys wholeheartedly welcomed...

[HV] That happened right away I think, no? I mean, I must say. I know a few people who never came or who joined but never...so I think some people who were not so easily trusting just didn't end up being part of the group. So, maybe it was a bit self-selective in that sense of people who were comfortable.

[MG] You guys were talking about each other's work. I think that's fantastic.

[HV] But also in a respectful way. I don't mean...it felt like it was not going to become really aggressive or ... it seemed to. I don't know. Did I tell you this? I don't know I feel like I maybe mentioned this last time, but maybe not, that I had had once a – it's a bit on a tangent–

I was part of a crit group in New York, around the same time right before I moved to Berlin, and I continued to be part of the crit group but it was always at 9 at night so I would have to FaceTime in at 3am in the morning, ten years ago, pre-pandemic. It was even, one computer screen there...

MG That's crazy!

[*Laughter*]

[HV] Except that there once they had done a studio visit, was mixed-gender but predominantly male, and they had started to crit my work. And they had picked up a work of mine from the gallery without talking to me about it. And then they had the painting there and I was in Berlin, you know, late at night. And they were *so* harsh and just like...attacked it, you know, as this...group and me – the gender part made it even more awkward and ridiculous – and me as this woman really far away on the screen, not there, not having chosen the work and then being just...kind of brutally challenged but in a not nice way. Anyway, I think everybody has some sort of art school experience like that.

[MG] Yeah.

[NG] Also very American! That reminded me. In the States they do that! I'm sorry, Melissa, you started saying something.... As you were saying that, Helen, I was thinking about the fact it was also actually experience the female vibes in our group in that sense, and maybe we had this discussion, I don't remember...if we had more discussion indeed what does it mean to be a woman in the arts or female in the arts, or whatever it is what you feel yourself. Because I felt like, that's when I felt lack of solidarity. Because I think – and here again it might be also something a little bit cultural. There is something also here at least when I meet more Dutch women, is that pride of not to admit that something can be difficult for you as a woman. It's like, "We can do everything", which is true but it's still like, I think it's very confronting to see that in the Netherlands there is a ceiling, actually. Because it's all about equality. Because it's all, like, not so strong here in so many ways. And yet there is a ceiling and I feel that the ceiling is – now that I feel that people want to talk about this ceiling but I don't feel like we were talking about it at that time or at least not enough. Until now, it's out there it's already spoken. Because it's a world thing being spoken.

[MG] That's true.

[HV] I think that was part of it, I guess I remember you, Melissa, were posing the question, "Is feminism something to be talking about still, or again?" Right? Somehow you had given this question at the beginning. And I think the answer the group in a way decided, let's talk about art instead. Or we are women artists and let's talk about our work and we're making work and that somehow, or course, very much, many years pre-Me Too, so I think it was looking at it from a very different position. But when you mentioned a glass ceiling, I think I wasn't thinking about it. It also felt like anything was possible. It felt like there was actually a lot of female artists of our generation doing well and it seemed a lot of doors were open. I didn't live in Amsterdam for that many years or have my younger art student years there, so I didn't have all the experiences you normally have at an art academy with your male teachers and all those kinds of things that are coming out now, especially in Amsterdam in the past year.

[MG] Has that changed, do you think?

[HV] Has it changed since this year or in the last ten years?

[MG] Have your feeling about having open doors and potentials, do you feel that that situation still exists? Or do you feel differently about the potentials now?

[HV] I don't know if I understand, since recently or since ten years ago?

[MG] Since ten years ago.

[HV] I think, I cannot judge anything that's happened since Me Too in Holland because I've hardly been there, especially in this Me Too moment the past six months in Holland. I think Noa would be better to answer to that, I would say compared to ten years ago, I think...everywhere in the world I think this stuff was considered just part of what you have to deal with and what's normal right? This kind of sleaziness, the attempts at, I don't know, what kind of sexual energy to add to a professional or potentially professional conversation, I think that was definitely there, you know? Also, with... I wouldn't even, it's not anything

where I would point out names or people because I think it was so much of the normal cultural, still. And I think we weren't talking about it because nobody knew until a few years ago that that was something that could ever be different. I think, I was not so busy with it, I think in my work...that is a big topic in my work but in a way that it was part of everyday life in art academies and the art institutions, I think was maybe taken for granted and maybe also not interesting to focus on for everyone? I don't know. It didn't seem like there was anyone who was so strongly feeling like, "Oh let's talk about injustice," at the time. Gender injustice, I mean.

[MG] So what were your conversations like then? The studio visits. You started by talking about the studio visit on Skype at 3AM, so I'm curious to hear what some of the studio visits were with the Women Artists Group in Amsterdam.

[HV] Right so that was the different group I was just describing, the New York group. In contrast I would say the studio visits that I was part of were...I think part of what was nice about it was that people were super interested in each other, there was a genuine interest in understanding each other's practice. So maybe the studio visit was as much for the visitors as for the artist kind of hosting the studio visit you know? I think. I don't know how much you remember, Noa. I guess part of that was feedback but it was also about really like an honest look into each other's practices. What would you say about that?

[NG] I think it was really, that's getting to know each other in so many different ways, from so many different angles. And that was so beautiful, like when you are very curious what other people's apartment looks like and not just in pictures, so you walk in there, suddenly... so, I think that's how I felt it, first seeing someone's studio is amazing. Stepping in to someone's studio, seeing how their table looks like.... Doesn't matter if they've prepared or not, it still puts the view from the window. Of course, what they're working on but also this...humbleness of how people talk about their work. It just felt very...for me it was a feeling of belonging which was what I wanted from this group was, was this link to Amsterdam – it doesn't matter if the artists, where they're from – it was that we live here or we're linked to this city or we have our studios here, or we exhibit here and that was this intimacy. And from that to have, you know, maybe some, of course, some contact or relations got a bit deeper or much deeper or new discoveries and that's, I think, is very special. That was very, because we were all no longer students, so it was another level of conversation, of

course, it's another level of consulting with each other. Sharing common problems or private problems about each other's work or...practice or career...Personally, for me, it just made me feel less alone. Like, you suddenly see that someone who I consider her career more advanced than mine, I can hear her talking about that experience she had with her gallery or with the curator and you're like, "OK I'm not alone, it doesn't only happen to me." I think that was, for me, a huge thing to have at the time. To have this feedback together.

[MG] That's interesting, because for me that was like the whole point of the project, to not feel alone.

[HV] I was going to say... what did you say was the point of the project? You said belonging? Oh, yeah. I remember... I think, generally, artists, in so many art communities artists are, in a way, in this disempowered indebted position towards the institution or the gallerist or the critic or the curator, and that you don't really know any steps you can take...For me, I've always been a bit mystified what proactive steps are actually effective for a career, if it's like writing people or partying at the right places. Or these kinds of things, if they really matter. I never really know what you can actually do, in the end for me, the only thing I can really do is go back to the work, and commit to my work. But in extension of that, actually, I think that being in dialogue with your peers is part of that and is something you can do and somehow, I mean, I use the word 'unionise' in a light-hearted way because there was no, it was not a political platform at all. But I guess in the sense that it had that feeling of empowerment, always feeling like the single artist in a bigger situation where you're just, I don't know, like, having to be thankful when something is offered to you and otherwise a bit without much means, you know? And I felt like even though as a group we didn't do much to move ourselves or each other forward in any outward way, but nonetheless our conversation with each other, I felt was empowering and strengthening, as *not* being an isolated disempowered loner as an artist. You know?

[MG] Do you think there was any effect... in terms of the way the Mondriaan Fund now operates in Holland, I think it's quite advanced, in terms of there being contracts for work done. You know, Holland has actually come quite far and is one of the preeminent countries of, I would say, the waged rights of artists. Do you guys feel that...

[HV] – we did that?

[Laughter]

[MG] I can't, I mean, for example, people knew there was a women's artist group out there talking.

[HV] I don't know!

[NG] I don't know I had it in my CV for a while because the ... Because, there were some of us – no names – were more cynical about it, I think. And then I remember mentioning to one – no names – and she was like, “Pffff”, and I was like, “OK.” I felt so stupid about it. I sort of liked it! I sort of liked how, there is this group even though it's meaningless in any career matter. It's interesting though, Melissa, you talk about the Mondriaan Fund, I find and of course it is because it's public money that Mondriaan Fund would have been much more advanced if they stopped asking to spend so much time explaining how I'm going to promote my work and how I'm going to show it, and who is going to show it and see it, and how many people are going to see it ...these questions that are very clear that are bullshit...Or definitely they make it more clear to everyone that it's bullshit, it's ...something they do because it's public money. I think this is a little bit – though I am getting grants from them, so I'm very grateful – but it makes me feel like, yeah, like I have to answer questions that I...that just dry my creativity. But that's a side note about the Mondriaan Fund.

[MG] I think, it's kind of interesting you guys have talked about it as a union, and actually, it is a very unique thing that's happened. It might seem like you're maybe putting more on to it, but I think the thing is...

[HV] – It may not be for – it may – like you said, it may not have been everyone's cup of tea, you know? So, there were people who maybe never showed up. Either because they were cynical or afraid or they showed up and then didn't want any more part of it. But, nonetheless a lot of people did get something out of it, it did come back, it did continue to grow and, in fact, even though it's like we were saying a bit dormant for a while, I actually think it's... I actually believe it's enough of a foundation that we can keep it for the rest of our lives, if we want to. I feel like I could email that group in 15 years or in 25 years and there would be still be a conversation. The conversation would be able to continue, you know? I think

that's...so in that sense it has a function even if it's not really an active thing, that I still think that that's a network that I can – I don't know if "falling back on" is the right word – but I can it's still, a potential resource or support system or exchange of sorts, you know? And, of course, now everybody has a thousand social networks and Whatsapp groups. Yeah. But I guess, because this one was all in person, it had a different character.

[NG] Yeah. And it's also, the fact that we're actually on email which somehow functions for me much better than...because I don't get notifications when I get an email, so for me emails are only when I open my email...I feel like this is a slower thing. And I like that we're a group that's using email for this matter. I don't have a Whatsapp that buzz all the time with messages and also because I think it's true it's somewhere since you could feel the sincerity of each other, for each other. And if someone wrote, "Hey I have an opening," or "I do this," or "I do that" or "I'm looking for a studio" or "I'm leaving my studio and do you know someone." It's, that's may be why I use it as a group, also union. It's like, it's something I knew I could, if there's some issues I feel like, I don't know if I know someone who's looking for a studio, it's more likely I would send it to this group and not necessarily to... Somehow, it was strong enough to know – that's why I like the word foundation, there is something there that's strong enough to hold anything I put on it. And whoever wants to can answer. That's the nice thing about it. Maybe that's why it's nice that it's not a Whatsapp group, because you don't know who read it. Whoever wants to read it can answer...

[MG] Did anybody new join? Did people outside of Amsterdam come in?

[NG] We had someone from Switzerland, from Zürich.

[MG] Yeah. Eleonora.

[NG] Yeah, I don't know, did she used to live in Amsterdam?

[HV] There were people joining...quite a bit later. I think, have you been in touch with Sara? She was the one in charge of the email group, right?

[HV] I don't know what that list is exactly, do you know how many people are in the group?

[NG] She actually gave me the list at some point because...I asked her...when she left for Brussels... I thought it would be nice to have someone here that has access. She was funny about it at the beginning...she was like, “Why? Why?” And I was like, it would be nice to have someone local in Amsterdam because she left, and she gave me I need to see if I have the password or something but she did send us the list of everyone. I’m supposed to also have access.

[MG] This has been great. This is also, like, what we’ve talked about is fantastic and I think it encapsulates what happened, you know? Because I think, it’s sort of a mystery to people who weren’t there, and I think the way you guys have spoken about it is really...fantastic actually. It gives an insight into what...

[HV] I think when a few people set the tone, you know, when you talk about the dynamic. It’s also when you teach, if there’s somebody in the class who is you know kind of an alpha personality, who’s really enthusiastic or who’s really cynical – that it sets the tone. I think somehow, maybe that was you in the first meeting too, setting the tone, that somehow, we had... Because I do know there were people who, like you said, were sceptical or cynical or even, you know, had a conflict with one other person or a history with each other or a kind of fear...I don’t know. I know that was there for some individuals that did or didn’t come – but that was not the tone, you know? That was maybe a little on the side, and I think a lot of people put that aside, or a lucky dynamic of the group that people didn’t have, you know? Didn’t have a reason to be afraid of each other or something. A lot of that stuff comes from fear, I think.

[*Dog barking*]

[NG] Olivia, come here.

[MG] Maybe one last question. I’m curious to know...

[NG] I just wanted to add on that...that I think, it’s maybe also because... part of why – I think you said it once, Melissa – there it was different from the other and sort of like nicer and –

[MG] Maybe.

[NG] I'm against using the word *gezellig* because I don't want to use that. But I think it's because we, I at least for me, you also miss something like that. You want to have the critique; you want to have the honesty, but you also want to have it in a way that is constructive. That is not just for, not just because teachers, indeed, they just want to hear their voice. That's how it sounds sometimes, they just need to say the final word...it was more like, it was very vulnerable. I think, I remember, really like, because there is this tension to between wanting to be seen, wanting to talk and consult and show and then at the same time being vulnerable about it. And I think, there was a lot of sensitivity or at least there was a lot of balance within the... Even if someone would be a bit more upfront there would be someone else that would be like... So, it was shifting all the time – you could say per meeting – but also as a whole it was just, there were so many different characters that it somehow just balanced itself.

[MG] That's really interesting actually. I wonder, over the years did you feel like people's relationship to – because it sounds like you started off by sort of going, “OK we're not going to talk about feminism as a problem we're just going to talk about each other's work.” And each other. Get to know each other. But I'm curious to know if, as time went on, certain discussions maybe happened... Maybe also practical, but could be seen as reflecting on...

[NG] I do think so. I have this feeling – I remember we were talking – and I don't know why I have Jennifer Tee in my head, and I think it was somehow related to her but I don't want to be quoted because maybe I'm wrong. I think she had an experience with something... but I think it was something more particular for someone. But I don't know if we were...I don't think we used the word *feminism*. Just maybe because what I said earlier, no one really wanted to use this word as if this word was maybe would take the conversation somewhere else? But talking about...being female in the art world. Yes, I do think there were conversations about it. Definitely, probably never the main topic. I don't know. Maybe. I don't remember. Maybe I need to see photos.

[HV] Sara's work for example was very much on the topic, right? When we did the arts walk and she made the work where she turned all the male artists into female names? And printed it on a scarf? So, I think through people's work, you know, I think enough people were

dealing with issues to do with gender. And I think when you feel like the space is kind of a safe space with other women those kinds of topics come up.

[HV] I was going to say that it's curious in a way it feels like... like it has not been updated yet. I don't want to say it's dated but it hasn't been updated in the sense that we haven't spoken since Me Too. You know?

[NG] Totally!

[HV] It's kind of like, a paradigm shift that we all individually went through and we haven't dialogued about it with each other at all yet. You know?

[MG] That's interesting.

[HV] Yeah, and now it would be completely unimaginable that you wouldn't address it, you know? It almost seems odd now to say we weren't busy with that. Yeah, of course, in a way it's clearly like pre-

[NG] It wasn't that long a time ago.

[MG] I know! So crazy. The changes that have happened in the past few years. But I think what's really interesting is that I've always felt since the beginning that...the notion of being a female artist is something very particular. Because it doesn't quite fit to a waged category, do you know what I mean? It's sort of, it's situated outside certain economic. The sort of power and value dynamics are very different and how we relate to each other, it's a very particular kind of world. I think it's really interesting that you guys managed to develop something that's very much needed.

[HV] No, but I think in that sense, maybe it felt at that time that the most feminist thing to do was not to worry about the question of feminism. Maybe, to some extent, that is part of that decision I think that we wanted to talk about the work as a kind of position of... you know? Which, I think, was in a way the furthest you could get maybe with feminism pre-Me Too was this feeling of, "We just take ourselves as equals, take our opportunities and work and take ourselves seriously as human rather than female artists." You know? I know a lot of

women who didn't want to be in women art shows and whatever. Not to be coined "female-artist" but just "artist". I think part of the conversation then when it seemed like the sexist discrepancies and cultural norms were not seeming like they were going anywhere, you know? And it was not like, I don't know. It was definitely a longer conversation of course, but I think, you know, when you realise there's something to push against then, of course, now, yeah. That conversation has obviously changed. For me, I think personally. It's also...interesting, that you know the lot of the content of my work was, in a way, not the main conversation, and all of a sudden it comes so much the main conversation, you know, when there are aspects of my work ...that have to do with sexuality and power dynamics. That also makes another reason why having artist talks with each other would be good. That, in a way, I feel I'm not comfortable with the way I was talking about my work anymore, when all of a sudden everyone's talking about something...from a new perspective. Anyway, I'm a little bit on a tangent.

[MG] No, it's interesting.

[NG] It's interesting, when we talked about it...When you introduced my work, I was like I'm feeling so...I don't know now, I don't know if I could do it with that group, after all, still. I haven't – no I can't just jump there. But I would, I think it would be also nice to refresh with people because I think whoever is in this group should just be happy to be in the group. That's the thing. It's not about, be in this group because there is a group and I'm a woman and maybe that's good for my network. I think it should be like, it's not a group about network –the network comes later – let's put it this way. About being in a group because you do want to be part of the group, whatever that means. Whether that means also having arguments and having conversations and having some tense... but it is part of that and not just to be there, indeed, just to say, "I'm in this group," and then like...

[HV] But it was always open, right? I think it was kind of always open, if anybody heard about it and wanted to join, they were added to the email list, no?

[NG] I think so. I think they have to... It felt like...like you said earlier, there were some people who were there and not active – so at some point you're like OK, of course you can also be there and be not active, you don't have to be active but it's just nice to know that

whoever's in the group is there because they want to be there...it's not something you have to do for anything. It's a funny group in so many ways.