

*Interview between Sue Tate and Melissa Gordon in February 2021*

*Reflecting on their attempt to start a series of women artist meetings in 2005-2008*

[MG] Do you want to start, with your recollections?

[ST] For me the whole journey started in 2005. I was already on a trip to Berlin anyway, and my son, my grown up son, suggested I met up with you Melissa, because he thought we had some interests in common. We met in your studio. You remember? We started a cross-generational conversation about what it is to be a woman artist, what the issues are, relating to a history of feminism. And what that might mean.

And it was a really exciting possibility. It felt like, there's something to work on here. For me, I was concerned that, with the recent big exhibitions of feminist art like WACK, there was a risk that feminism was getting historicized. Being put in a historical box somewhere in the 70s/80s. It's over, we've done feminism. We're now post-feminist. I felt strongly that I would be a post-feminist in a post-patriarchy. There's more to this story. I was very interested in the idea of reaching a longer genealogy of feminism that cuts across the second wave seen as an episode rather than a defining time. And so, I think there were ideas we shared, do you think? How do you feel about that conversation in 2005?

[MG] One thing I'm thinking while hearing you talk is that this discussion seems so contemporary now. There's an interest in finding histories of feminism that have been overlooked outside of what has become a sort of canon. I remember talking with you about feminism and solidarity and feeling, 'would anyone even be interested?' It always felt...I don't know how to put it. It felt that we were, maybe, at the time, talking about things that didn't need to be spoken about anymore. I think that attitude was present in 2005.

It's interesting that you point out your worry about historicisation, because to me it was a history that I wasn't a part of. So, to me feminism was this history I was really curious about and I didn't feel excluded from it, because my mother always told me about it. It was more...it was a mystery to me. I was curious to participate in it. But I didn't know how to, because there was no mode of participating at that moment.

[ST] OK. But then, I suppose the next episode really in the story we're archiving, was when I came back to Berlin three years later in 2008. We met up again then and I was there partly, or largely, because it was the year of the Berlin Biennial. And I was interested particularly in Paulina Olowska, (with whom I'd done work with before), Susanne Winterling and Nairy Baghramian, all of whom

had work in the Biennial. Contemporary art that was about relating to women artists from a much earlier generation, from the early 20th century. And I thought that was really interesting. I'd been working on Pauline Boty who was a British pop artist who was working in the 60s, and who died in the 60s. And second wave feminism couldn't cope with her. Cut her out. And then contemporary artists like Paulina Olowaska and others were interested in her. I really liked that sense of a longer history. And then these other artists, like Susanne and Paulina and Nairy all working, inter-relating and getting into conversation with women artists from an earlier Modernist time. I really like the idea of a genealogy building, something contemporary artists could relate to. So the question became, where do contemporary women artists sit... what are the issues for them?

[MG] Did you also work with Lucy Skaer at all?

[ST] No.

[MG] She worked with Leonora Carrington around that time in 2007 or 2008.

[ST] Yes, there were lots of other contemporary women artists doing this, revisiting performance art from the seventies and reworking and presenting them again for example... at Tate and *Once more with feeling*. And so there were lots of projects of that kind going on.

[MG] It's interesting to think about contextualising this turn towards looking back within this impulse to revisit, re-enact. I remember that now. But also one thing I was speaking with a friend of mine about recently is: *could you do that now?* You know, this idea of incorporating other people's gestures into your own. Actually what you're talking about which I think is really important, is this idea of a long history. This hasn't maybe existed for long?

[ST] Absolutely. The paper I wrote for PERSONA, the journal that you brought out as part of this project, was exploring exactly that. And I was also theorizing the work in the context of Christine Battersby and Luce Irigaray. Both were suggesting that, in male-dominated history and genealogy, it's a male line all the time. They're both arguing that it would be very healthy for the present, not just looking back, to have a female line - that works with, interweaves with, wraps around the male line. But gives women artists in the now a different platform to work from. A sense of belonging to another history. It weaves with the male history that we all know about, the dominant history in the books and the exhibitions. I also thought it's an exciting historical moment. I had done a lot of research into how women artists were represented in exhibitions in London in the 60s - which was

incredibly badly, typically 3% in most group exhibitions. We were then in the 2000s, women were getting much better represented, which is fabulous (though still not in proportion to their numbers). What are still the issues for women? How do we get the confidence to occupy that wonderful space? For me, it's the idea of making a history that's useful in the present. Looking back in order to go forward.

[MG] Absolutely. It also reminds me that the thing that you introduced me to, when you introduced me to Irigaray, was this idea of *being* between the lines. I remember that always stuck me with me. You're not operating on one thing or another thing, but you're operating between things. In a lot of my research, I keep finding examples of women artists talking about this in-between-ness. I found a talk by Laura Owens where she talks about the in-between. And Amy Sillman. It is still really present. Even in successful women's dialogue about their work, this notion of not being in one place or another is present. And then I also think, to follow on from what you were saying that I remember: at the time, we were saying, women are doing well right now. In 2008, you know women were being found. There was a lot more galleries. At the time there was a lot more successful artists, than there maybe even are now! There were a lot of women getting shown and a lot of women selling work. And we were like wow, yes.

But then, one thing I remember feeling myself and wanting to talk with other women about was: what can you talk about in this space that you're given? What can you address? What are you allowed to talk about? What are you not allowed to talk about? And how seriously are you taken? In that space that's been given to you by someone else, a curator, often times male or a gallerist...

[ST] And what we found ourselves hitting was a certain reticence about being open about feminist perspectives, about being open about being a woman. I remember it, being with curators and artists in Bristol who were anxious that if they stressed that the artist they were curating was a woman, the exhibition might be devalued and they didn't want to give that artist a problem. You know? And I think that became more a thread in our conversations, do you think?

[MG] Absolutely! I think in 2005 or 2008, talking about being a woman was, like you said, a devaluing thing, an embarrassing thing. Why would you bring that up? Why would you bring that somebody's attention? Because everyone was trying to do was rise above that. Was [trying to work] in spite of that.

[ST] In spite of that! Isn't that sad?

[MG] Yeah! It is just so funny, right now. Even in one of the interviews I've done for this website I say I did my in a studio visit in 2007 I was told my work was interesting except for the feminist aspect, and then the same person said I should package that feminist aspect better in 2018. I think this is very interesting because it brings up a lot of the expectations of how women artists have been expected to perform in relationship to their own subjectivities ....It's codified actually.

[ST] Yes, that's really interesting. I'm surprised to hear that, but it's really interesting. So what we were trying to do at the time was to work with that reticence, and to think how we would go forward. So after meeting in Berlin, Paulina Olowska got interested in being part of the developing of whatever it was that we wanted to do. You and I had been thinking about calling it a colloquium. Perhaps a one-day event. We didn't want a conference. We didn't want a hierarchy of people giving papers and everyone else listening. We wanted more of a conversation. That was always the thought, that it was a mutual thing. We were thinking a 3-day event that we'd sort of develop and that felt daunting. I was keen on maintaining it as cross-generational and linking art historians and feminist art theorists with contemporary practitioners. So we were juggling a load of different ideas. Paulina got keen on maybe offering her space in Poland for perhaps a residential place to meet...we looked at funding opportunities, we were playing with all sorts of ideas weren't we?

[MG] We tried the Fullbright Grant, EU grants. We didn't get anywhere...

[ST] And I was trying to work through my institution which is University of the West of England. That didn't get off the ground. Which is interesting. It says something about the time as well. That it wasn't the right topic at the time. I do remember we had a meeting on the South Bank in London where you and me and Paulina talked for about four hours in the sunshine and I went home and one half of my face was red and the other half was pale. Our conversation has been so intense! It was a fabulous conversation, but I think what came out of it was that we all wanted slightly different things.

[MG] That's interesting to remember.

[ST] But it had been a good process. To work out what was actually going to work, what was actually useful.

[MG] I think from what I remember Paulina was more interested in the social aspect of this maybe. And I was interested in...I don't know...I think...from my memory...I wanted to see the women who I saw active in the art world talk about their relationship to feminism.

[ST] And to an art world to which is still male-dominated. It's changing a lot...Which is great But, wanting to part of that change. Being able to articulate it. Because that was the feeling when we started out. Helen Legg, who was then the curator at Spike Island in Bristol, absolutely wanting to make sure that women were represented while being reticent about using the language of feminism and therefore not having a language.

[MG] Yeah. This was super helpful for me. At De Ateliers (2003-2005), I had two teachers - Marlene Dumas and Rita McBride who said to me, you can make work about feminism. It's OK. And then when I met you, I was doing it but the language of feminism was still actually in a way embarrassing for me. And it was through talking with you that it was...I do remember...I remember you saying the word seminal is referring to the notion of sperm and genius....and I was like oh, OK!....and then I thought this is the language I need to know! And I've been reading a lot of Anne Carson recently. You look back through how these histories of how languages and rituals and relationships develop. And you're absolutely right. I actually think this is still a problem now.

[ST] It is, yes. Absolutely, what was interesting was that Paulina had the idea of calling it Aktualna which apparently is Polish for 'becoming she' which is a nice thought in itself, because of the in-between thing. Maybe we are in a historical transition period of becoming. And that would fit with Irigaray's notion of the need to develop a female subjectivity which is Other, but not subsidiary to, the male who is Other to the female. A mutuality in each being Other to the Other. So you have a real dialogue, a genuinely equal dialogue between two subjectivities. So, I like the idea of the becoming-she. But we didn't progress with that, I think Paulina didn't feel the project was right for her, which is fair enough. And then I think it was you who developed a new title : 'A conversation to know if there is a conversation to be had.'

[MG] In 2008 we were meeting in Berlin and we must have met in London that summer, in 2008.

[ST] Oh yes! Right, so it was that summer.

[MG] I think we were really hot on the trail of this thing...we wanted to do something.

[ST] We did, we really did.

[MG] And I remember actually moving into a studio in Brussels at WIELS, we moved to Brussels from Berlin. I remember spending a lot of time in this studio writing and thinking about this project and one of the people who ran the residency was Lucy McKenzie who knew Paulina, I must have talked with her about it. Anyway, it must have gotten cancelled in late 2008 or early 2009. And then in early 2009 I applied for a job in America because I decided I would like to start teaching. In part because I had a bad feedback experience in my residency at WIELS and felt like, no I think I can do this and I think I can do this in a positive manner. And I sort of wanted to gain that voice. So I applied to this artist residency also had teaching. The rest of 2009 I was in Brussels and I don't think we worked on our colloquium that much at that point. Then in early 2010 I went to America and I found out is that part of the job was that I got a free car rental. And then also a gas card!

[Laughter]

[MG] So I was like, wait a minute, I could just drive to New York with this free car and gas card! Why not drive forty hours? Why not, let's do this thing. This is my chance. I also convinced the people from Dexter Sinister which was this very, very, very, popular hip place at the time. I promised to give Stuart a ride back down to Tennessee because he wanted to make a whiskey. And actually, it's next year that the whiskey will be finished (2022). Which is a really nice part of the story. So I promised him that I would give him a ride back to Tennessee if we could take his space. And I thought I had to do it in a space that's very popular. You know what I mean? Because somehow I've always been aware that you have to legitimize things. And then, I wrote to every single practicing female artist, I went through all the lists of the galleries, and I wrote to them all. Through their galleries. And what was amazing was, I wish I could compile [it], [but] I don't think I could make it public, I wish I could compile all the responses. Because they were great, like from Kara Walker to Trisha Donnelly to anybody that I wrote to got back and they said, you know I can't make it or whatever but this sounds great.

[MG] And I was so encouraged by that because I think part of doing this for me, was maybe a process of legitimizing, I think it's like a process of being so curious to know, because it was so private at the time. People's politics were so private and it felt like something that should not have been private. It felt repressed actually. Even if you think about, if you were looking at Kara Walker's work and of course it's political. But it was not being about spoken about in a politicised

language. The art language was like ‘Calm down those politics’. And to make everything into art history. Maybe that’s the shift that we’re seeing now too.

[ST] Yeah. Yeah. I guess that shift into, so your first conversation .... Was it in New York?

[MG] Yeah.

[ST] And you were really going with it. Hats off to you, after all the different discussions we had over a number of years you made it happen! And many congratulations. And I think it’s interesting what you just said, actually. Whilst I’m really interested in this cross-generational, long history idea, it’s got to work in the present and I think what you identified, and were absolutely right to go with, was that you needed to start in the now with practicing artists and see where that took the language, see where you could open up a way from that reticence. And I think I had an idea that I could just expose the long history and that would be a job done! It doesn’t really work like that! So, I think what you’d done, I would suggest also the conversation you had, has contributed to the discourse, it has made it possible for feminism to be a spoken thing again. Because all those things add up to a discourse, don’t they?

[MG] Yeah!

[ST] I think slowly, slowly, slowly, you know? I think loads of people have been involved in it.

[MG] Absolutely.

[MG] And I think, what was so interesting, actually, the job I did in this project was actually not really hosting the meetings. For example, in the first meeting, I remember a lot of the conversation was about people saying, ‘I’m a feminist but not a feminist artist. These things are different. Personally, I’m a feminist, but as an artist I’m an artist’. And I also remember people talking about you know here we are, we’re all working hard in this world and we’re completely excluded – completely, 100% – even Marlene Dumas was not selling work at the high level that she is now at that point. You know what I mean? At that point there were so few successful female artists. And even those few were not even in the top 100. There were literally no women in the top 100. We didn’t exist in the upper echelon. And the conversation in those meetings asked: we all know that we’ll never be ‘up there’ so then what is the point, why do we even participate in that economy, why don’t we remove ourselves from that economy? Which I thought was really interesting and I

still want to address [that] and I think [it] is starting to happen. And I think my job was also to engage in interpersonal relationships, and how people treat each other. What I did do was listen and then tell people in the next meeting what people had spoken about. And then listen and tell people. That's been the thing that's happened the most in this whole project, is like being a traveling projector of other peoples thoughts. When I made the magazines I asked 'what are you interested in' to the contributors, and then I told the other contributors. And that to me is something that is important. That's the job that all women artists should be doing for each other.

[ST] Because there can be, to my mind, a distinction between feminist art work and being a feminist artist. With the latter, you are working with, thinking about and negotiating what is currently a very gendered field; as you were saying, there's a whole economy that is slanted in a certain direction. You can share those thoughts, you can support each other. And some of the issues were about children, whether it's OK to tell your gallerist that you're pregnant. I remember someone saying you really don't want to tell your gallerist that you're pregnant. That is terrible suppression, isn't it? That shouldn't be the case, should it? That just shows how the whole field is still structured around a male experience of life. If you have a fear about expressing something as basic or innate as that...

[MG] That has definitely changed.

[ST] So, I think what you did do was move the conversation away...you don't have to make 'feminist art'. Some people want to make feminist art but you can be a feminist artist and not make art that's specifically, pedagogically feminist. You can still be a feminist artist in, for example, showing solidarity with other women artists in the gallery system.

[MG] Yeah, the change that has happened is that when you meet someone now...it's automatically assumed that they believe in women's rights, you know what I mean? But then I think what's interesting, what's changed, maybe I'm wrong but I'm maybe in the younger generation there's a feeling that people should now prove what they've done also. I think there is a lot of...you have to declare that you are doing things. Where is the work? Where is the declaration of your political beliefs? I think that's happening a lot. It's really interesting as someone who is slightly older to have witnessed this shift from first a total inability to address questions of identity: in a way there almost was a pride that 'you cannot make me talk about that in a public realm,' and this shifted to acknowledging that this is a discussion that is you know, you don't need to wonder if somebody is anti-feminist, and it has now evolved to the point of, declare you're position. I think if everyone is

forced to declare something public then what's also so interesting in a lot of the people that I've dealt with over the past ten years is that it's often times what comes up is like a completely subjective thing that sort of like you say it's not feminist art it's just this sort of... you know asking Marie Lund, who is in a lot of the early conversations and she's been really involved and she's now running a lovely feminist-inspired project. She's running a library from her studio, in Copenhagen. She's opened her studio to the public where she's invited different women artists to make a library selection and she does launches and readings... These are not small gestures, but they are targeted. So much of the response that's been gathered in all of these projects is not always to deal directly with the questions of feminism: it's always been about women's experience of the world. That's so interesting because that's the thing that's not there. People's political allegiances are like kind of always been... set... you didn't really ever encounter many anti-feminists. There weren't a lot of them out there. There were a few but... it's not maybe the most interesting conversation to engage with 'in' or 'out'...

[ST] It's about being in the world, the world giving you this space to be a woman, in all the dimensions that might mean in your work in your ...sense of confidence, in the permission to be a mother, and a partner and all those things ...they are specific to being a woman artist... a different career trajectory maybe, questioning issues about parenthood and how you negotiate that. Time, exactly, and space. And that's why, seeing you sitting in this enormous studio, it's just wonderful! If you think back to the feminist art of the seventies a lot of it was about making things on the *corner* of the kitchen table and sending it to each other as post cards... this sense of a very constrained space, as well. And that's opened up and that's absolutely wonderful. But there's further to go, isn't there, and I think these conversations have added to that journey.

[MG] The further to go is also a total change in the fabric... of... it has to be a total change in the fabric of the world we live in. I think we're seeing it. I think what's really great about doing this interview, about putting this first on website, is that this notion of cross-generational and a diverse group of conversations between [women of] diverse backgrounds

[ST] And then that notion of a long history, that gives that notion of a genealogy, that practicing artists now are not just breaking new ground... there is a long history and I hope that that gives a sense of belonging in a culture, in a world culture. Obviously, that will be inflected very differently, in different cultures. That would be really interesting to see, wouldn't it?

[MG] Absolutely.