

Conversation with Melissa Gordon, Jen Liu and Meredyth Sparks on 14th January, 2021
Discussing the series of Women Artist Meetings in New York in 2010 and 2011

[MG] So, lets start by looking back: Jen you said you were re-reading our emails from ten years ago?

[JL] Yeah, I started with the very oldest one. I got through some of the emails from 2010. It seems like a lot has changed. And it appears to me, in retrospect, that the art world and the culture world in general was in a massive stage of gaslighting. It was really intense, reading about the questions that were posed and the content that was posed. Amongst the initial readings you had posted, there was an article about the post-racial moment of Obama...

[MG] I think Lisa Tan actually sent that.

[JL] And then, Sara Greenberger Rafferty – I don't know if you guys remember this – read during the second meeting we had, the invite text for [a group show called] *Girls Just Wanna Have Funds*. What was going on ten years ago? Where people were like, “Hey, you know what? Racism exists?!” Or they were like, “Also, women have been shit on? What?!” And then there was someone else who says, here's an interesting article, a review about bad boy artists! That would not be OK now. Not OK! So, it's interesting to consider the origins of this group as being a form of redress not in a discursive moment but one in which all these conversations that happened, that historically inspired them, were completely gaslit.

[MG] We were terrified of feminism. Or not as people, but it was like, “Oh, we wouldn't, there's feminist art, but...” I don't know, maybe you guys remember differently. Or not rather feminism as a general term but the discussion of value structures being accepted and being accepted for who you are. All of those things were still, “Yeah, well... we shouldn't really bring this up. It's controversial.”

[JL} Meredyth, I don't want to dominate the conversation, but I have some thoughts about that historical moment. I really would love to hear what you have to say, though, I don't want to monologue.

[MS] I was writing my testimonial for the site, and I apologise for not sending it yet. It became rather personal and I got cold feet, you know. I needed to step back a bit. There's still so much raw feeling around the discussions from ten years ago to now– Jen you

mentioned this – so much has changed in ten years and it seems like some of the things we were preoccupied with at the time are almost irrelevant at this point. Looking back at the title of the initial invitation, “A conversation to know if there is a conversation to be had,” I thought that was so perfect at the time in that what you were pointing to was the tentative nature of having this conversation. We all, the people who came, we all knew there was a conversation to be had... But, were we going to do this again? Are we really going to continue to re-hash things that have not been changed or still need to be worked on? From my perspective, no one even wanted to talk about feminism at the time, especially in an art context. Correct me if I’m wrong, maybe other people were having this conversation, but I had put it to the side a little bit. There were so many times when I had to write an artist statement, I would mention feminism and it wouldn’t be received very well. So I tamped it down. I had the idea of trying to sneak it in through the back door, as they say. So, we were not confronting it directly but still taking...all the lessons we had learned and all our life experiences...and still addressing feminism but not overtly in this way. Then, all these cultural reckonings happened, movements like Me Too and Black Lives Matter... that took me out of my theoretical cloud and brought down to “Here I am, here we all are, in this physical body. Violence still being done to the physical body.” I think I was trying to ignore this aspect of feminism but it was brought to the forefront.

[MG] Are you talking about how you feel now, or about ten years ago?

[MS] Now. I went to school when feminism was being academicized and the focus was less about activism. It isn’t easy for me to reconcile these two aspects of feminism: concrete and worthy goals, like equal pay and confronting sexism in the workplace and on the other side, more theoretical approaches to deconstructing gender and systems of power. When I think back, I remember being irritated with people who wanted to, during the meetings, talk about their daily grievances, about the slights they had and encounters with curators. It bothers me that those things still have to be addressed. And, I’m recognising now...that these things still have to be addressed. Does that make sense?

[MG] Yeah, totally. You don’t think it was worse then...?

[JL] I think there’s more guardrails now. Or if nothing else, the media exposure machine is more alive than it was back then. The thing that I’m curious about is, we were all generally of a similar age. And we were all, for the age we were at, fairly successful. Up until that point

[laughs] - professionally and art world-wise. But we had all come up as fairly young people into one of the biggest art world gallery booms that the world had seen, particularly in the lower- to mid-markets. So there are specificities and complicities that we can see [in retrospect] – and we should be seeing [the discussions] as a mirror image of ourselves at that time. That is what made the conversations a little more tough, or a little more awkward, let's say? For instance, if we were a bit younger, if we were in school - I remember having lots of conversations [about feminism] in school, when I was at Oberlin of course - that's easy! Oberlin in the nineties! At CalArts in the late nineties it was easy to have that conversation once you were put through the wringer - and the galleries, there was this huge crash just before we got there...[but in 2010] we were still on the off-ramp from this hardcore fucking horrible time, everyone was a terrible collector, everyone was a total sexist dick. I felt like I was surrounded by them, I had spent the last 10 years with them. So that kind of economic setting enabled the very worst impulses even if some of these curators, writers, or whatever, knew better. Had even been better, at some earlier point in time. Particularly in the nineties. But by the time it got to the 2000s, everyone was being a dick.

[MS] They were making money?

[JL] Yeah, they were! And they were having a big old fun time. But it was all off-ramp in 2010, everyone was freaking out, or already had, and was trying to figure out the next thing. So we were facing our own complicity and our own micro-aggressive pile of frustrations from the past many years, facing all this garbage even though we'd hit the goal posts we'd set for ourselves when we were teenagers. We got that thing, and it was still fucked up.

[MG] It was worse then.

[JL] Or much, much, worse. I think that's what resulted in, I don't know if I'm distilling this correctly, Meredyth, but there was this certain pettiness that was hard to get over. We had so much to vacate personally, every single one of us. It was hard to get to these bigger, more elegant conversations when there was just so much grievance, and it was all everyday aggressions and tons of micro-aggressions.

[MG] Plus also the aesthetics of feminism. The aesthetics of having politics that weren't like these grand things but personal things, were seen as incredibly awkward. For example, hearing you guys talk has raised this memory in which I had kind of forgotten which is that

when I started with a gallerist, she said “I think your work is great, I’m just really not into the feminism thing.” This was in 2008. And then whiplash, 8 or 9 years later, I was encouraged to try to harness feminism as a theme more concretely in my work.

[JL] That’s what it was like! People were such dicks! Fuck!

[MG] Within the trajectory [of female artists in the mid 2000s] we are speaking about is a complete lack of the ability to support a group of people who had no history in that world... It was like, we all got brought into the gallery world, we were invited into that situation. But no one supported us. Because there was nothing, no history that looked like us. So, we were expected to perform something. Like magic, essentially. And when that didn’t work, when the magic didn’t happen...Basically [the thinking was] “Let’s buy a hundred young cheap artists and maybe we’ll get one Laura Owens.” But, how did Laura Owens become Laura Owens? She became Laura Owens because she *worked with the best gallerists who supported her!*

[JL] Despite collectors, let’s say that.

[MG] Yeah I don’t know. I think also underneath all of the feminist meetings ten years ago is us, as a group, trying to figure things out for ourselves, but from a position of kind of being thrown to the dogs. Like: here’s your chance, if your work doesn’t sell or get shown its because I guess the bet on you wasn’t correct, not (like with many young male artists)- look at this hot thing, then when there is some success, it is followed by a lot more attention and they are encouraged to push prices up and this creates a boom. The support comes from all sides. Maybe people would say we didn’t need to be supported, that that is not really the role of galleries, which is also fair enough. But I think there’s a whiplash that happens in that scenario, when artists are taken into galleries as outsiders, expected to perform something magical, and kind of left to rot if there isn’t interest. And that could happen to people now, too, and I worry about that, I worry about this idea that things aren’t supported. They’re used. You know what I mean?

[JL] You mean, people are used.

[MS] Typecasting.

[MG] Typecasting, yeah.

[MS] So, in terms of these grievances, that's the part that was the upsetting to me when I go back through my mind at the time, my reaction to other people, airing their grievances. I think I was more closed-off, and not willing to entertain those conversations because I felt like I had had enough of those conversations and I thought why should any of us have to invest so much energy on it? I'd rather talk about other artists and what they're doing and how their work's interesting and how they use feminism in certain ways, what can we take from that. Instead of focusing so much on the day- to-day. A gallerist said to me at one point, "You know, Meredyth, you're much smarter than I thought you were. I really thought you were going to just make this eye-candy or whatever, and the ideas behind it are..."

[MG] They said that about me too! They said, she's so smart. This was like a code word for: she's got her own ideas, I guess.

[MS] Yes! And it's a back-handed compliment. "For a woman, you are smarter than you should be...." You know, I remember meeting Lucy at the meetings and thinking, she's amazing because she's an intelligent artist [and that's sincere- not a backhanded compliment!] and she's not putting on a show for anybody. Her whole presence was just like: 'this is who I am. I'm not going to dress up for you.' She just...delivered it.

[JL] But, Meredyth, I think we also have to be clear that other than Lucy or Mason, at that meeting we were a bunch of straight girls. Ten years ago there were very clear distinctions in terms of challenges, and ways to present oneself. Or if it's as true now as it was ten years ago, it was more visibly acute. I think that conversations around gender and feminism were going pretty strong outside of straight girls' circles.

[MG] And going around different, more political topics too. I wanted to ask you guys, could you talk about the meetings that happened after the initial meeting at Dexter Sinister, did they happen really soon afterwards? Was it a similar group of people? What do you remember was discussed? We don't have to do a full inventory.

[MS] I was thinking that they actually did, it was maybe 2011, or 2010...towards the end of the year...

[MG] April 2010 was the first meeting at Dexter Sinister.

[MS] OK. Jen, do you remember, I know we had meetings in 2011? Probably we had a handful of meetings? All said and done, maybe six meetings?

[JL] Yeah, I think that they were good conversations. There was a lot I learned from them that was really helpful, in terms of organising conversations. And it's interesting to think back on who did show up. There were many points of future bearing fruit that I would have never expected... initial points of contact between myself and some person who I'd never met before, who I came to know. But in odd ways, not linear. I don't think we ever found exactly what we were supposed to be talking about, although I think that there was an ongoing conversation about art history and re-evaluating what that could or should be. That's all I remember. I'd like to review the emails more closely. In all the years since then, I have come to terms with the fact that I'm the kind of organiser that doesn't necessarily organise things that will live 20 years, you know? They'll live maybe five....somehow there's a deficit, some energy goes into it, and then it's filled. And then we can go on with the other stuff. Lacking any urgent applied outcome, the conversations were still amazing to have. Any conversations that we have, whether we organise them or not, integrate themselves into our practices, into who we are and how we live. But I don't think it was sad when it died. And it didn't live very long. I liked the conversations I had, I grew from them, I also treasure the conflicts that I had, that these conversations would precipitate. [Laughs] I know that that's very non-specific.

[MG] That's great.

[MS] We talked a lot about current artists. I remember we talked about Mai-Thu Perret. We discussed her work. I think we ended up having two or three artists to discuss in a meeting. I remember somebody wanted to talk about Laurel Nakadate...

[JL] And I was like no! Then I was like, OK. [Laughter]

[MS] Of all the people, we had to talk about her! But also, thinking about the magazines, LABOUR and PERSONA were a big deal, during these initial conversations, and I don't quite remember why other than the fact that we were talking a lot about having this public persona, like an art world persona, versus ...who we were really were? It's really strange, actually, now I have looked back on it and I'm not quite sure if this is another masking action

that we were doing, that we were trying to position ourselves in someway. It was almost like, we're not just artists making work we also had to think about our outward...character...Do you remember anything about why we were so hung up on persona?

[MG] There was a discussion that Lisa Tan brought up about the aesthetic of West Coast lesbians, like Ellen DeGeneres, this business wo-*man* kind of thing, and I remember that being a discussion. – I'm sorry I have to yell at my children quickly. I'm sorry! *GO TO BED I CAN HEAR YOU!* –

I remember that discussion and people were like, How to be? ...self-presented. But I also think what's interesting is that a lot of that ended up in the magazine, about being people's relationship to other artists too. It's interesting to hear that you guys had conversations about other women's art, because I think we had all been expected to have a relationship to this certain hierarchy or canon or a certain set of things that were happening in the art world, and all of a sudden we were like, "No, we can have different relationships to different histories to different artists." We were discovering that at the time. Maybe I'm wrong.

[JL] Yes.

[MG] Do you think so, too Meredyth? I need you to say yes! [Laughter]

[MS] You mean historically or something? Meaning, deep dive into...

[MG] Like we had all been talking about this thing, that feminist art was this thing that happened in 1972. You know? But actually, we were realising that there was this much longer bigger history of people, not just women, but all kinds of people that just weren't in this main line. We were starting to ask 'how do we have relationships to different artists', basically. Historically, and contemporarily and amongst each other. Instead of everyone being in their own little boat on the ocean.

[JL] In general, I agree. More specifically on the question of persona, just now I was trying to look back on what was on the covers of ArtForum throughout 2010 [browser search happening]. It's very informative. Persona came out of what was in the air, what people were preoccupied with at that moment in time. I think it's useful to keep in mind that we are and continue to be a product of the discourses of our time. People were talking about persona, and the deteriorated interpretation of a pop feminist art mode - Laurel Nakadate was

both a model but actually more like a cautionary tale. Still, there were all these people playing characters. So when I think back on it, it was an organic way to frame our concerns.

[MG] And then, can you guys remember, there was a few meetings, and then Meredyth did a launch in Elizabeth Dee Gallery ?

[MS] Yeah, and then I...I think that was in 2011, it was all sort of happening right then. You did the first magazine right after the initial New York meeting, I believe.

[MS] The launch was fine. I was happy to have it, you know, I had the space at Elizabeth Dee Gallery. I had a show up at the time, so I just planned some events around that. The launch was one three events. But I do remember being disappointed that it didn't seem like there were a lot of women from the meeting that attended the launch, you know. But we did some some readings out of it and I had Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* playing in one of the rooms.

[JL] Didn't you have the writer about...the Baroness?

[MS] Yes, Irene Gammel. She wrote the biography of the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven So she came in and talked about...

[MG] She came?

[MS] Yeah, that was good.

[JL] Yeah, she did a reading.

[MS] She gave a talk about the Baroness and she was great. She was totally great. I remember Jen asked a probing question...

Do you remember, Jen?

[JL] I do not. I have a terrible memory.

[MG] Be careful...you are holding the ship of memory together, Meredyth. What was the question, I want to know!

[MS] I remember, you asked, Jen, you wanted to know whether the Baroness was even interested in being recognised as an artist or being part of the art world at the time. Would she even care to be remembered in this way? I think you were getting at this idea that, was it really that important to her to be part of an institution? The way that Duchamp is.

[JL] Indeed. Or being an artist in the wake of...

[MG] What was her answer? Do you remember?

[MS] She said yes. She said that the Baroness was very much interested in being remembered for her achievements. She wrote a memoir that went unpublished but I think she gave it to Djuna Barnes.... That she definitely felt...slighted, left out of the conversation.

[JL] Yeah.

[MG] Ugh, that's awful. So, then, you both organised meetings around that time in 2011 and did it culminate in the launches that you did, Meredyth? Were the launches at the beginning, of the series of meetings?

[MS] I would say we had two or three meetings during 2011, because I remember there was a lot of back and forth about the summertime meeting, people going away. I think we met in June of 2011. And I think we might have met one other time in the fall. Before the launch at Elisabeth Dee. Jen and I were scrounging around for places to meet. When we first met, I remember meeting at Elisabeth Subrin's place a few times. Does that sound right, Jen? I feel like that was...I know we met at Mika Tajima's place once. I do remember we met... But Elisabeth Subrin's, I remember meeting there several times.

[JL] We basically kept it going for quite some time, into 2012.

[MG] It seemed to be some sort of fallout at the end, some sort of split, I remember someone telling me there was a very emotional confession and the group didn't meet again or something like that.

[MS] Well, I know what you're talking about. I think I might have mentioned that to you, but I'm not sure that was the reason we stopped meeting.

[MG] I think it's important... I remember that, back in the day, talking about real sexual violence and harassment was deeply uncomfortable for everyone...I remember being like, OK, well we all want to support you. I wasn't at this meeting. I remember when things like this would come up, and sometimes it was like "OK we are here to talk about *professional* things" which is awful. Which came out of discomfort and embarrassment. I say it also to relieve you also of some sense of ownership over that. From my memory, that was a common...and I don't know why? Why did we think that these awful stories had to be kept out of a professional conversation?

[MS] I agree...

[JL] People still have a problem with it. It's...just one of those things. It obviously started changing around #metoo, which was after this moment. Not to give us too much credit, I don't think we had the linguistic tools to deal with it. Or the political tools. No matter what our backgrounds were, rape was still a no-go zone [in professional conversation]. Or sexual trauma and abuse, and even intergenerational trauma - those things were not on the tip of peoples tongues. Not a thing you'd talk about, people would just freeze. It's telling that in late 2020, early 2021, people are still like, "Oh my God there is a TV show about a woman who gets raped and her life goes on". It's like, dude, what the fuck man.

[MS] What TV show?

[MG] It's *I May Destroy You*.

[JL] Point is, whether or not you like it, the way people talk about things is a really apt temperature gauge for where we're at [societally]. And in the art world then, no way! Nuh-uh! We can't really expect more than from ourselves than what the world was ready for at the time.

[MG] Another thing I wanted to mention...the groups started off fairly white, fairly middle class and fairly mid 30s, apart from Elisabeth Subrin who was an older New Yorker... I wanted to ask, did the group stay that way? As far as you remember, did it expand into different generations and different social networks and different backgrounds or did it stay similar?

[JL] And different races.

[MG] Yeah

[JL] I think there was a bit of an attempt. I don't know. [Sigh]

[JL] It's hard to get around the fact that feminism has historically been a deeply exclusionary resistance movement – and it continues. It's hard to separate the person from bigger social patterns. But I'd say, overall, [the group did not expand in diversity]. Also, there were certain internal hostilities. For instance, one of the ongoing issues I had with a co-organizer was how sanctimonious she was, exclusionary. A fellow non-white friend spoke up [at one of the meetings, about the exclusion of BIPOC women in film], to which this co-organizer said, "I categorically disagree with this," while I actually agreed with my friend. Afterwards the co-organizer was furious that I hadn't held my friend's feet to the fire for her hostility to men or something like that, and I was like, well fuck you white girl. And then there was another person I invited, this same co-organizer cock- blocked it, this person is wonderful and was ready to give a presentation, and the co-organizer was like I hate her, you can't. Or, she would always couch it in "I have serious conceptual disagreements," and I was like, well actually, you can't get along with girls.

[MS] What Jen's talking about was several years after the initial meetings. I don't remember what year that was: Jen and I were back together to do this project. We organized a four-part discussion and we had a curricula of sorts. We had topics and reading material. I think actually that was really helpful. Before, our meetings were much looser because we would just say, "What are you interested in?"

[JL] So I sympathise. Meredyth, it was telling that it was five years later, 2015. The idea of having more structure - informed by academic structures, not that it was an academic structure but it was informed by that - and the idea of generating knowledge, were more developed. That was really nice. And I do have to say that when I speak about some of the things that have come to fruit later, they came from this time.

[MS] And those discussions were informed by the previous discussions. We had a discussion on the misattribution of artworks, which is always an interesting topic, but *quaintly* I remember we read something about this essentialist feminist perspective against transgender

females... Whether they were, had paid their dues kind of thing. Do you remember this, Jen? And it was kind of surprising. You know, [the idea that] if you haven't lived as a woman your whole life, and you have had the benefits of being a man for a number of years and then you've become a woman, can you understand the struggles that woman have gone through. That was the question that the article was talking about.

[JL] It was around the same time that all that stuff was happening with the [Second Wave] feminists, greater events happening outside of New York City that had to do with that....feminist convention...

[MG] The International Feminist Convention happening up the road!

[Laughter]

[JL] The Feminist Olympics? Yes, the International Feminist Convention...from which trans feminists were disinvited.

[MG] It's good to remember these things. That this is ongoing discrimination within feminism that must be addressed head on.

[JL] So, that's a thing.

[MG] This has been a great recollection. Thank you both so much.

[MS] Still very much a discussion to be had – “What are we doing?” Actually, I would love to do it again.