

Interview with Noa Giniger, Helen Verhoeven, Melissa Gordon.

17<sup>th</sup> February 2021

[MG] I'm interested to hear you speak about the context in which the subsequent women artist meetings arose after the first meeting in 2010 at the Kunstverein. Were you both at the first meeting?

[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 us sitting, standing, getting into position for it.

[MG] Probably.

[NG] I remember talking photos, also I remember at some point we shared photos. I probably have it somewhere on my computer...

[MG] Were you both in charge of starting the meetings after? They happened quite soon afterwards from what I understand. 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 to come and see a show or do a studio visit, right? We did this series of studio visits and I guess I initiated the arts swap thing. That had some communication around it to set the parameters for the editions and to organize the meeting where we all shared and exchanged work with each other.

[MG] That's interesting to hear it was ad-hoc. Were you living in Amsterdam at the time Helen?

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

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

[HV] I was in NY in 2009. I also was in a group with Jen (Liu) over there but it was before you initiated this, it was an art theory reading group on aesthetics. 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 somehow there enough to participate in some of it.

[NG] You always proposed to come together as I recall. You would often say, “Hey I’m coming to Amsterdam do you guys want to meet?”

[HV] Yeah, exactly. So, a few times it was also just meeting for drinks or something, if there wasn’t any particular event. One of the things that was so nice about it, was that it gave me a chance to talk to people I had seen around a lot didn’t know. It created a space in which to acknowledge 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: people would just see each other at openings and not say hello. Within the context of the group all of a sudden you realised you were actually doing the same thing and had in fact a lot to talk about. And this was especially true for artists from the Rijks and De Ateliers because they had 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 they were right next to each other, they didn’t touch each other. So I think it was super nice to interweave those two communities. I think there are actually an amazingly large number of active women in those two communities - and in fact in the dutch art scene of our generation in general. Maybe the group is a bit limited to a single generation, that must be said, but nonetheless it created a feeling of, I don’t know: is community the word? It’s not so active to be called a community but network isn’t right either...I don’t know what the right word is. I would almost say it’s 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. The relation between Ateliers and Rijks for example, – it’s such a funny thing, I immediately felt it when I moved to Amsterdam in 2006. I moved here for De Ateliers, and it’s like the Rijks were the cooler [ones] and you see that there are friendships but also that

the artists are apart. And I think this is something I still find strange about Amsterdam because it's such a small community, or a small scene, and yet it's constructed of so many little groups. I feel like there's a lack of solidarity in general in the scene... I don't know if the word solidarity is correct... maybe a better word would come as we speak. But there is a lack of something, maybe connection? At least that is how I felt at the time. Which was confusing because it's so *gezellig*, so cute, so small here... and yet there is a feeling that everyone is on their own. And it's true that I saw people in openings but it felt to me often very flat, still. Just standing there, saying, "Hi how're you doing yeah cool maybe go for a drink later." I was lacking studio visits post De Ateliers 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. So when we - the Women Artists group - started meeting, this was special because I got to know people outside my direct circle. And the dynamic became more interesting in this sense because as I started to get to know those artists and to better understand their world, I also got a deeper look into myself and my own art.

[MG] It's interesting because your meetings: first, Amsterdam is the only city that it happened where a concrete group formed for a long time after the initial meeting; and second, it was a massive group of people (Noa you said it's 40 people now). I also think what's interesting is that it took a lot of trust for you guys to actually do this. I'm curious to hear you talk about trust. 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 showed up 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: people who were both interested *and* comfortable with this are the ones who returned.

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

[HV] But in a respectful way. It felt like it was not going to become really aggressive. I don't know. This is maybe a bit of a tangent... but I was once part of a crit group in New York that I kept meeting with once I moved to Berlin ... but since the meetings were always at 9 at night in New York I'd have to skype in at 3 am in the morning. And this was at least ten

years ago, pre-pandemic; when online meetings were not exactly common! What was even weirder about it is that they were all together in person and just I was there on the one little computer screen propped up on a chair.

MG That's crazy!

[*Laughter*]

[HV] The group was officially mixed-gender but it was predominantly male, and on the day that my work was to be critiqued, it was in fact all men. They had picked up a work of mine from the gallery without talking to me about it. And they had the painting there and I was in Berlin, you know, late at night listening to their 'feedback'. And they were *so* harsh and just like...attacked it, you know, as this authoritative male group. The gender part made it especially awkward and ridiculous: me as this woman really far away on the screen, not there, not having chosen the work and then being just...kind of brutally critized. Anyway, I think everybody has had some sort of horror art school crit experience like that.

[MG] Yeah.

[NG] As you were saying that, Helen, I was thinking about the female vibes in our group in that sense, and maybe we had this discussion, I don't remember: what does it mean to be a woman in the arts or a female in the arts, or whatever it is that you feel yourself. Because I sometimes felt like, and that's perhaps what I read as a lack of solidarity, that I was missing hearing more about the difficulties for us as women in this scene. It's like, "We can do everything", which is true but I also think it's very confronting to see that in the Netherlands there is actually a glass ceiling. And it's confronting because a lot here is as-if about equality. And yet there is a ceiling. I feel that now people want to talk about inclusive and exclusive but I don't feel like we were talking about it at that time or at least not enough. Until now, because it's out there, it's already spoken. Because it's a worldwide 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 came up with was: let's talk about art instead. Or: we are women artists and we are making work so let's talk about the work! That was, or course, very much 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 that at the time. I 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 nor did I 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 in Holland. I wasn't there to experience all the things that have come out about the Dutch art institutions this past year.

[MG] Has that changed, do you think?

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

[MG] Has 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 cannot judge anything that's happened since Me Too in Holland because I've hardly been there, especially in this Me Too moment of the past six months. I think Noa would be better to answer to that, I would say compared to ten years ago, I think...everywhere in the world this stuff was considered just part of what you have to deal with and what's 'normal', right? This kind of sleaziness, the attempts, the kind of sexual energy added to a professional or potentially professional conversation, I think that was definitely there. With advisors, curator, directors and so on, but for me it was not anything where I would point to specific people. It was so much a part of the normal culture at the time. 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 in a public conversation but it *was* a big topic in my work. But that sexism was part of everyday life in art academies and the art institutions was probably just 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. I guess we also knew that this kind of discussion was considered trite and annoying and a bit of a nuisance – especially to men, and it might have made us hesitate to focus on it?

[MG] So what were your conversations like then in the group? 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 in Holland were great...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 hosting the studio visit you know? I don't know how much you remember, Noa. I guess part of it was feedback but it was also about having an honest look into each other's practices. What would you say about that?

[NG] I think it was really about getting to know each other in many different ways and from many different angles. And that was so beautiful. Like when you are curious how other people's apartment looks like and you are invited to walk in there. And that's how I felt stepping in to someone's studio, seeing how their table is arranged, the view from the window, and of course, that included what they're working on. But that wasn't the only focus. It's this...humbleness of how other artists talk about their work that gave me a feeling of *belonging* which was something I was also looking for with this group, - a link to Amsterdam. It didn't matter where we were from. The connection was either because we lived here or we'd lived here before or we had our studios here, there was this intimacy we shared. And from that common ground, some contact or relations got a bit deeper or much deeper or new discoveries. And that is very special. Also because we were all no longer students, it was another level of conversation - consulting with each other, sharing common problems or private problems about each other's practice or career. Personally, it made me feel less alone. Like, I suddenly saw someone who I considered her career more advanced than mine, talking about the 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." That was, for me, a huge thing to have at the time. To have these feedbacks together.

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

[HV] I think, generally, artists in many art communities are, in a way, in this disempowered indebted position towards the institution or the gallerist or the critic or the curator. And they don't really know what steps you can take... For me, I've always been a bit mystified about what proactive steps are actually effective for a career, if it's 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*. So 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 something you *can* do too. I mean, I use the word 'unionise' in a light-hearted way because it was not a political platform at all. But in the sense it had this feeling of empowerment. You often feel small in this much bigger art world machinery where you're, like, having to be thankful when something is offered to you because otherwise you are without much means. I felt like even though as a group we didn't do much to move ourselves or each other forward in any outward way, our conversation with each other felt empowering and strengthening; the opposite of being an isolated disempowered loner artist.

[MG] Do you think there was any effect... in terms of the way the Mondriaan Fonds now operates in Holland, I think it's quite advanced, in terms of there being contracts for work done. You know, the Netherlands 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 mean, for example, people knew there was a women's artist group out there talking!

[HV] I'm not so sure!

[NG] I don't know, I had it in my CV for a while because I thought it was so cool! And I know they were some of us who were more cynical about the group, but I sort of liked how

there was this group even though it's "meaningless" or how to put it... cannot be counted as a career achievement?

[MG] I think, it's interesting you guys have talked about it as a union, and actually, it is a very unique thing that's happened. It might seem to you that you're maybe adding more value on to it, but I think what you have done, to create a working group of women artists for over ten years is quite important ...

[HV] – It may not have been everyone's cup of tea. 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 part of it. But, nonetheless a lot of people *did* get something out of it, *did* come back, and so it continued to grow. In fact, even though it's been a bit dormant for a while, I actually think it's alive. I actually believe there is enough of a foundation there that we can keep it for the rest of our lives, if we want to. I feel like I could email this group in 15 years or 25 years and there would still be a conversation. The conversation would be able to continue, you know? I think that's true. So in that sense it has a function even if it's not really an active thing, I still think that it's a network that I can – I don't know if "falling back on" is the right word – I can still use it as a potential resource or support system or for an exchange of sorts, you know? And, of course, now everybody has a thousand social networks and Whatsapp groups. But I guess, because this one started in person, it has a different character.

[NG] Yeah. And it's also, the fact that we're actually on emails which somehow functions for me much better ...I feel like this is a slower thing. And I like that we're a group that's using email for this matter. We don't have Whatsapp that buzzes all the time with messages. And also because I think it's true, 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." That's why I like the word *foundation*, there is something here that's strong enough to hold anything I put on it. And whoever wants can respond, so it's a group made out of many voices. That's the nice thing about it but off-course also what makes it more complex to navigate.

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

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



[MG] Yeah. Eleonora.

[HV] There were people joining...quite a bit later. I think. Have you been in touch with Sara? Sara van der Heide. 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 when she left for Brussels... I thought it would be nice to have someone here that has access . We are around 40 at the moment.

[HV] I think a few individuals can really set the tone when you talk about a group dynamic. It's also when you teach, if there's somebody in the class who has an alpha personality, who's really enthusiastic or who's really cynical –it sets the tone. I think that was you in the first meeting too, setting the tone. Because I do know there were people who, like you said, were sceptical or cynical or even had conflict or some history with one another. Or had a kind of fear. I know that was there for some individuals but that was not the tone. It was maybe a little on the side, I think people were able to put that stuff aside. Or maybe we just got lucky with the group dynamic? Somehow we were not afraid of each other. A lot of problems come from fear, I think.

[NG] I think it's because we, or I at least for me, wanted to have the critique; wanted to have the honest feedback, but I also want to have it in such way that it stays constructive. It was more like... it was also vulnerable. There is always this tension between wanting to be seen, wanting to talk and consult and show and then at the same time the fear of rejection. And I think, there was a lot of sensitivity or at least there was a lot of balance within the group. Even if someone would be a bit more upfront there would be someone else that might be softer. So, it was shifting all the time – probably per meeting, depending on the composition - 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. I wonder, over the years did you feel like people's relationship to feminism changed? Because it sounds like the group began by with, "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 and get to know each other. But I'm curious to know if, as time went on, if certain discussion, which might have been practical but could also have been reflecting on feminist politics?

[NG] I do think so. I have this feeling – I remember we were talking – and I think it was something more particular for one of us, she brought it up, and I don't think we used the word *feminism* but it was related to a particular incident and being a female in the art world, and that had led to more reflections.

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

[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.

[MG] That's interesting.

[HV] Yeah, and now it would be completely unimaginable that you wouldn't address the feminist question directly. It almost seems odd now to say we weren't busy with it. Of course, it's clearly 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 economy which is spoken about in feminism. 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 you're your group managed to develop something that's very much needed.

[HV] In a sense, maybe it felt at that time that the most feminist thing to do was not to worry about the question of feminism. Maybe that was partly what motivated the group's decision to talk about the work instead. It seemed perhaps the furthest you could get with a pre-Me Too 'femiist' position: "We just take ourselves as equals, take our opportunities and work. Take ourselves seriously as human rather than female artists." 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". Anyway, at the time it seemed like the sexist discrepancies and cultural norms were not seeming like they were going anywhere. But when you realise there's something to push against then, of course, you do. The conversation has obviously changed. For me, I think personally too. A lot of the gender content of my work was not really reflecting a mainstream conversation. Then, when all of a sudden it was, I had to re-think how I talked about sexuality and power dynamics within this larger discourse. That is actually a good example of a reason to have the artist talks with each other: you can talk things through to find a new perspective. Anyway, I'm a little bit on a tangent.

[NG] It's interesting, when we talk about it...to introduced my work with our group, after all, this time! I can't just jump in there... but I would, I think. It would also be nice to add people. It's not about being in this group because there is a group and I'm a woman and maybe that's good for my network. The network comes later – let's put it this way.

[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 we have to... It felt like...like you said earlier, there were some people who were there and not active. And of course you can be there and you don't have to be active but it is important to know that whoever is in the group is there because they want to be part of it...it's not something you have to do... And maybe also open this point for discussion - hear what is missing in the actual format for those who are more quiet?

