

The NextGENDERation network and (a) her-story of the creation of collective spaces.

The idea of a European network of younger scholars in women's, gender or feminist studies, was born at an ATHENA meeting at the University of Lund in June 1998, out of the discussion of 4 young ATHENA members, Diana Anders, Francesca Balbo, Mischa Peters and Esther Vonk. NextGENDERation became the name of this network, envisioned to bring together students or scholars or those interested in feminist theories and (knowledge) politics. The name reflects an important point of departure of the network, i.e. making visible – in the midst of neo-liberal hallucinations that wish to proclaim “equal opportunities” as a fact – that next generations of feminist scholars do exist, and for good reasons. Moreover, the name also refers to a proposed collective exploration of the different ways in which we are situated in our times, working through intergenerational perceptions and different kinds of (theoretical and political) figurations.

The subsequent exercise of network-building started its journey with two virtual meeting places: by the end of the year an email list was set up, which at present has almost 150 subscriptions, and a website was developed by Ingrid Hoofd. First real-life discussions were organised at the “Women's Studies under 35” seminar at the university of Milan in February 1999, to which some members of the NextGENDERation (NG) network were invited, and where they presented the network to others and got into contact with other groups and networks, like e.g. the Italian “30 something” group. A more general meeting took place at Women's Worlds 99, the 7th International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women in Tromsø, Norway, where a NG workshop was organised around issues such as the meaning of generations in feminism and the position of young women in academia. In the same summer, during a NOISE Summer School in Utrecht, some of us that had been present in Tromsø, organised another NG meeting. Interesting shared agendas and differences were increasingly feeding the space that we were trying to create. But, at the same time, questions of how to structure that space, and issues of representativity, became more urgent matters to consider.

At the NOISE Summer School meeting, the existing structure of a “board” was enhanced with the idea of “national representatives.” Blueprints for a structure, however, might not always materialise in the expected or planned ways, as became apparent the following year. In the late summer of 2000, the 4th European Feminist Research Conference took place in Bologna, and included a NG forum. With the great amount of preparation this forum demanded, it was a lucky coincidence that the members of the NG board studied in Utrecht during the previous semester, allowing for frequent real-life meetings. Gradually, the board turned into an “organising committee”, which more women joined over time.¹ Still, we had difficulties in mobilising the broader network in the preparations for the forum, which resulted in a shift of location of the preparation activities: these were taken up by locally embedded and active groups, such as the Italian “30 something” network and UNG.

Initiated by Natascha Unkart and Sonja van Wichelen, a local NG group in Utrecht – Utrecht NextGENDERation (UNG) – came out of the encounters at the Summer School and a subsequent strong need to continue to meet regularly. UNG² was active during one year, organising, among other things, discussions on issues such as the meaning of ‘generations’ in feminism, technology, armed (ethnic) conflicts and state violence, contemporary androgynist imaginary, etc. UNG's contribution to the NG forum in Bologna eventually took the form of a performance – in an experimentation with the boundaries

¹ Apart from the 4 founding members, following women got involved in the organising committee: Muriel Andriocci, Sarah Bracke, Ingrid Hoofd, Elisabeth Lorenzen, Monica Nylund.

² Women who have at some point participated in UNG: Diana Anders, Rutvica Andrijasevic, Francesca Balbo, Eefje Bosch, Sarah Bracke, Giulia Guadagnoli, Ingrid Hoofd, Ilse Lazaroms, Mischa Peters, Federica Riva, Barbara Schleicher, Chantal Soeters, Natascha Unkart, Ana Varela Mateos, Esther Vonk, Sonja van Wichelen, Lotte van Zandwijk.

of academic formats, we wanted to take images that somehow struck us as a point of departure, and build texts, as well as music around them.³ The forum in Bologna subsequently consisted of UNG's performance, a presentation by the "30 something" network, and a panel discussion introduced by members from both networks and joined in by the audience.

After Bologna, UNG was invited to do the performance at other locations: both in the academic world, i.e. at Utrecht University and at the Institute for Social Studies in Den Hague, and in an art/activism context, at the Cyberfeminist Working Days within the framework of Brussels Cultural Capital 2000. Our final performance in Amsterdam was an intervention at a discussion evening about young feminism in The Netherlands, organised by the Dutch feminist journal *Lover*.

We've learned a great deal from all these encounters and experiences, with their different forms of positive feedback and criticism. We took the time to let them sink in and started to engage seriously with the difficult questions of how to shape or structure a network such as NG. During the process briefly described above, the "organising committee" had indeed very much become a "virtual reality." Instead, we found that the dynamics involved in this attempt of network-building, and the kind of communities or collectives it draws upon and creates, were to a great extent connected to the activities of locally active groups. In order to be able to enhance these existing dynamics through a broader network, the network itself needed to be grounded in these more local dynamics, we figured. Moreover, "spinning the webs" between such groups was a much more contingent, coincidental and "viral" type of activity than our previous structuring attempts allowed for. Hence, we started looking for more appropriate ways of imagining and shaping such a network – rooted in needs for more transparency and accessibility. Needs for a more sustainable network that is capable of incorporating – in a multitude of different ways – previous experiences and activities, while it spreads in different directions.

At present, NG's website is being reshaped in response to those needs. We have started to write the "herstory" of the network, from our own situated knowledges, precisely in order to make it accessible and appropriate-able.⁴ A mission statement (see below) spells out NG's points of departure and its feminist politics, including a 'do-it-yourself' instruction of how to get involved in the network. And crucially, the new website will dedicate most of its space to all the locally or thematically organised groups affiliated with the network, indicating how to reach or join them. Let me just mention some working groups: in Lund, a group is preparing the NG activities at the 5th European Feminist Research Conference in the summer of 2003. A new thematic working group, Rethinking University, emerged out of concern with the European higher education policies and their impact on women's studies in particular. And at the European Social Forum, the NGO branch of the globalised resistance against neoliberal globalisation, a NG workshop is organised to address the "missing links" between the feminist productions of knowledge (in and outside the academy) and the globalised movements of resistance. You can find the new website at our familiar address, <http://www.nextgeneration.net>. And while you're there, don't forget to get yourself involved!

Sarah Bracke, for UNG (Diana Anders, Rutvica Andrijasevic, Ingrid Hoofd, Ilse Lazaroms, Chantal Soeters, Natascha Unkart, Esther Vonk) in August 2002.

³ The texts of the performance in "Dossier NextGENDERation from the Fourth European feminist Research Conference" in Rosi Braidotti, Esther Vonk and Sonja van Wichelen (eds.) (2000) *The Making of European Women's Studies*, volume II, ATHENA, Utrecht, pp. 139-160.

⁴ Of course, more activities are part of this her-story than I could account for in this short article. Moreover, my account is marked by my particular engagement in NG and UNG.

The NextGENDERation network: Involve Yourself.

WHO? The Next GENDERation network is a European network of students and graduates working in various fields of women's, feminist and gender studies (whether these are institutionalised in centers or departments, or not).

WHAT? The NextGENDERation network wants to stand for a type of feminist knowledge politics, deeply concerned with the democratisation of higher education. This concern relates to different, although interconnected, dimensions. The *access to higher education*, and the way in which power mechanisms such as gender, ethnicity and class structure this access on different levels (with horizontal segregation according to disciplines, and vertical segregation according to academic hierarchies), are of primary concern to us. The *production of knowledge* is a second dimension on which our attention is focused: the brands of critical and situated knowledges produced from feminist, anti-racist, post-colonial and anti-heterosexist points of view have already began to transform the old curricula and canons. We are committed to continuing this transformation. Both of these dimensions are related to a vision of what the university, and higher education in general, stands for. From our feminist perspectives, we start from a critical distance towards the classic conception of the university as an ivory tower. At the same time, we don't buy into the current neo-liberal ideals of higher education as a training-place in function of the needs of the labour market. We are invested in a vision of the university as a place for the production of critical and socially relevant knowledge, and want to work towards that ideal in our specific historical time and space. *Another university is possible!*

HOW? We work in an autonomous and decentralised way. The idea of NG emerged among a number of young scholars in the context of an ATHENA (a thematic network for women's studies in Europe) meeting. Meanwhile it has traveled in several directions and contexts, through a viral type of feminist politics that we cherish. This means local NG groups look quite different, may or may not be primarily academically-based, and are engaged in different issues, although we share strong feminist, anti-racist, anti-heterosexist and post-colonial standpoints. We have the common space of an email-list to keep in contact, exchange information and ideas about current or possible future projects, and build a stronger European network.

Do It Yourself NG: how to start a NG group?

1. get some friends or colleagues, working in the field of women's, feminist or gender studies, together
2. discuss the issues that you are confronted with as (young or non-established) feminist scholars in your particular situations
3. see if you need or can organise around some of the these issues (whether it's organising a discussion group, a concrete action or intervention in your university/school/women's documentation center, a conference, writing a text, etc.)
4. keep in contact with other NG groups, so we can exchange and discuss what is going on in different locations; in order words, subscribe your group/activities on the email list.