

**This text is an edited transcript of a conversation held at ARTSPACE on Karangahape Road in Auckland, New Zealand, on the 20th of April 2010. Participants Fiona Amundsen, Cassandra Barnett, Rebecca Hobbs, Fiona Jack, Louise Menzies, Layla Rudneva-Mackay and Robyn Pickens were invited to discuss the photo, *Election day in New Plymouth, 1893*.**

**Fiona J:** So, this photo is possibly the first photo of women voting in a free national election anywhere in the world. On the catalogue card it says “Provincial council building on right, G H White, New Plymouth” which made me wonder if his intention was even to document the first day of women voting in New Zealand, or whether White was actually just photographing the building?

**Louise:** That was my first thought. What validates this as the first photo of voting?

**Cassandra:** There’s nothing we can see that reveals it as a voting day. We could say there’s people spilling out of that building which is a council building; they’re obviously doing something, but these days there would be so much stuff around announcing that it was polling day.

**Louise:** It looks like a meeting, there’s definitely something going on, but it’s not clear what.

**Robyn:** And there’s a lot of men there!

**Cassandra:** Are men and women both voting on this same day?

**Fiona J:** Men and women together, yes.

**Layla:** It must have been very intimidating.

**Louise:** There’s these three women wondering if they can join the line or not.

**Fiona J:** Even though it was the first day that women could vote, there was a much higher turnout of women voters than men in relation to registered voters. Eighty-six percent of registered female voters and only 70% of registered male voters polled that day.

**Layla:** Where are they all?

**Cassandra:** They voted in the morning? (laughter).

**Fiona J:** I asked Ruth Harvey, who is the curator of pictorial collections at Puke Ariki, whether she thought the focus of this photo was the momentous day, or whether he was photographing something else. Because it was shot from the balcony it has an aspect of the voyeur which is also odd. Ruth replied, “I think I can confidently say that White would have been photographing the polling day crowds rather than the building. It seems clear he was recording the turnout of voters, including the women in the crowd – to me it definitely seems he was recording the momentous occasion of the first time New Zealand women were allowed to vote”.

**Cassandra:** How do we know that it was taken on this day though?

**Fiona J:** We don’t necessarily, but that’s what the museum’s collection system tells us, so I guess it’s the same as any archival collection –you’re basing it on some kind of informed context. At some point it entered their collection with certain information and a certain date. There is another photo I know of that is also considered to be on that same day, but it’s in Otago, and I chose this one because in Sandra Coney’s book, *Standing in the Sunshine*, she mentions this as possibly the first photo, so it has sort of gone on record as a possible first. But there’s also much about this image that is so amazing to me.

**Fiona A:** Well it seems so random. There’s no really clear subject in the photograph. What’s he

pointing the camera at? There's no one thing that stands out to tell us 'this is the first voting day for women'. There's a multitude of things that pop out from it. There's something about the way it has been photographed from that height that really reminds me of the photographs of Louis Dagguere and the way he photographed the streets of Paris.

**Robyn:** Do you know the original context, Fiona? Was it ever published – in a newspaper for example?

**Fiona J:** As far as I know it's an amateur unpublished photo. Why would he be up there on the balcony?

**Cassandra:** Maybe he lived there? Maybe he lives above a shop that he owns?

**Fiona A:** It's just a better vantage point to be photographing a crowd from, and it also demonstrates the restrictions imposed by the bulky equipment of that time.

**Rebecca:** Even though this guy's an amateur, that's a really different amateur photo to the kind you see today. It's so formal in its composition, and that goes back to the big 8 x 10 camera and how long it took to set it up. Logistically it makes sense not to have an 8 x 10 in the middle of the street because you'd get bowled over or you'd draw a lot of attention to yourself. When I looked at it I wondered if it was a man or a woman who had photographed it. I thought about it in terms of scopophilia and voyeurism. It made me think of Hitchcock's "Rear Window", because of the camera position in relation to what is going on in the fore, mid and background of the image, and then I thought about how Laura Mulvey talks about the male gaze and women being the bearer of meaning, and not the maker of meaning. I often think about photography in relation to men and women, because throughout the history of photography women have always been present. Not so much in painting, filmmaking and sculpture.

**Louise:** You mean in the image, or in the production of it?

**Rebecca:** In the production of it. And so I started thinking...well, why wouldn't this have been taken by a woman? Obviously the image has been presented to us in terms of gender – in that we were asked to think about it in those terms.

**Fiona J:** It's an interesting thing to wonder. White's name is on the record, and we know White is a male, but even before I knew he was a man I assumed the photo was taken by a man. My default assumption for a photo from that period I suppose. Hmm.

**Fiona A:** I like the really relaxed guy with his horse and cart. That's what draws me in to think about the image as opposed to its supposed status of being a photograph of the first women ever to vote.

**Cassandra:** He's hungover (laughter).

**Fiona J:** I don't trawl through hundreds of Victorian photos on a daily basis, but I do have an image in my mind of women from that era always being still and poised in photographs. There's something about them being blurred in this photo, or moving with an urgency that I don't associate with this era of photography so much.

**Fiona A:** That notion of urgency, that's what you bring to it. I mean, I could read it as...

**Rebecca:** ...a long shutter speed (laughter).

**Cassandra:** But because of that slow shutter speed, and because of the conventions of what

photography was used for, we see portraits, we see framed tableaux, we see these various composed shots; we don't see these street scenes. If we did, we'd be seeing movement like that a lot. And it's there in the Dagguere, and I'm sure that there are quite a few others...it's just that we don't seem to see them as often because that wasn't the interest at the time.

**Louise:** I think that we often expect the past to be quite different to how our own life is. But maybe it's quite similar in a lot of ways. The details are different, but a lot of the experiences people actually have in their lives...I wonder how different it really is. When I go and vote I already know my political position when I get to the polling booth, and am aware that everyone else is arriving there with a certain idea about what their ideology might be too, what it means to even do that. I kind of imagine that stuff was going on for these people.

**Robyn:** But it must have been so momentous, that first time, finally winning the right to vote. It's something we take for granted now, without even thinking about it, all the years that the suffragettes fought for that right.

**Fiona A:** Or not. Depending on their position. I'm sure not all women at that time were suffragettes.

**Louise:** No, not at all.

**Fiona A:** So where are they? Are they those women to the left of the image, away from the voting action who are like "those bloody women"... (laughter).

**Fiona J:** So what does this mean now, for us? What does it mean to think about now, this moment in New Zealand, as a legacy to look back on? Another significant aspect of this moment is that when women got the vote in New Zealand, it was white women and Maori women all at the same time, which is quite unusual in world history.

**Cassandra:** I can't see any Maori there.

**Fiona J:** At that time there were separate elections for Maori in New Zealand, but there was a big turnout from women in that election, too. Maori men and women were voting for separate candidates until a while later.

**Louise:** But it was also a white women's movement, right?

**Cassandra:** And it was mainly to stop men drinking, wasn't it? The Women's Christian Temperance Union became the suffragette movement, to stop men drinking.

**Fiona J:** Yes, all over the world. But a white women's movement...not here. Maori women were very vocally involved in fighting for the vote for women. By this point there were such a lot of women and men involved in this struggle for so many different reasons. Kate Sheppard's suffrage petition of 1893 that is now held at the National Archives has 30,000 signatures on it. That's huge. On one long roll, it was apparently marched into parliament and the whole thing was rolled down the aisle, and that was how it was announced to parliament. Such an extraordinary moment that must have been.

**Fiona A:** So performative.

**Fiona J:** Yeah, and amazing that that document sits in the National Archives.

**Fiona A:** Thirty thousand signatures? All wanting the vote?

**Fiona J:** Yeah...they're all on separate pieces of paper, sent from all over the country and then

she glued them down apparently. Wow. And of course it's years before Suffragettes won the vote in most other countries. Well, there are discrepancies there. There were some states and non self-governing nations that won the vote for women a lot earlier than New Zealand, but it is widely acknowledged that New Zealand was the first country to give women the vote because it was the first self-governing nation to do so, which is an important distinction I suppose, but also a little bit hazy. So we could say it's the first photo of women voting in the world...in a sense.

**Louise:** But I wonder if it's more important for our community locally than for the world, and that's why it means something for this image to be reproduced here rather than somewhere else, because it's something that New Zealanders feel proud of.

**Cassandra:** Or at least it can be quoted when you want to cast New Zealand in a certain socially forward-thinking light.

**Fiona A:** Yeah, and it is – New Zealand has this list of liberal one-liners: first to give women the vote, nuclear free, etc., etc.

**Louise:** I wanted to include Tze Ming Mok in this conversation, because when you emailed me about this project, I happened to reading a blog entry of Tze Ming's where she writes about getting a bikini wax for the first time in her life, and she's in her 30s, and it's pretty amusing. At one point she references her New Zealand heritage and um, (laughs) and she kinda quotes the reputation of New Zealand women overseas which she attributes to suffrage as us being kind of slutty and wearing comfortable shoes. I thought that was a great legacy for suffrage. .

**Fiona J:** Is that a common perception?

**Louise:** Well, I mean, I can ask her for her sources.....(laughter). Didn't those statistics just come out in the news that New Zealand women have one of the highest number of sexual partners globally, like, we sleep around (laughter). We're liberated, you know.

**Fiona A:** There's something about feminists and shoes, too. I asked my year one students what they think being a feminist involves and they said comfortable, sensible shoes, and hairiness.

**Cassandra:** Are we all wearing sneakers? (laughs).

**Fiona J:** Pretty much. Germaine Greer has written lately about high heels and an idea that throughout history women have risen to these moments of power, and in those moments something has always come in to destabilise that power, be that not being able to walk (laughter), breathe due to corsetry, or touch anything due to gloves or long nails...

**Fiona A:** ...and RTDs (laughter).

**Louise:** New Zealand invented them too (laughter).

**Fiona A:** In terms of teaching year one theory, the feminist lecture always brings up a lot of antagonistic discussion about what it means to 'be' feminist. It's especially ironic as, in an art school, most of the students are young women and yet they're so openly anti feminism.

**Cassandra:** Yeah, it's a dirty word... "I'm not a feminist, but..."

**Layla:** Also reality TV shows, the stereotypes of women – *The Bachelor*, *Playboy*, *Wife Swap*...

**Fiona J:**...*Farmer Wants a Wife* (laughter).

**Robyn:** Yeah, I haven't seen them, but even just the ads... if I'm watching *Family Guy* or something

(laughter)... they're so disturbing, unbelievable.

**Rebecca:** The bizarre thing is that it's not scripted, or they are not told to perform like that. But the makers do choose stereotypes, so it is scripted in that way – in that the decision-making and editing is a formula.

**Layla:** Versions of the different ideas of femininity are chosen for the show...and then they fight it out. As we watch it we're observing which type of woman 'gets the man'. It's so weird.

**Cassandra:** But there's also a wave of people claiming themselves as feminists and reclaiming high heels and short skirts and looking fabulous. It's ok to look fabulous, isn't it?

**Fiona J:** I love high heels.

**Cassandra:** Yes, it's not about those bad anti-feminists who wear high heels. We're way beyond that.

**Fiona A:** But when women do reclaim their femininity through what gets labelled as a kind of embellishment they get slandered in the media. Think back to when Christine Rankin was appointed to the Families Commission and how outraged politicians and the like were. The main criticisms pointed to her short skirts, which showed off too much leg, her full cleavage and her multiple marriage partners, as opposed to her ideological standpoint. In fact all her 'embellishments' were presented in a way that they polarised and tainted her political position and therefore made her appear as 'inappropriate' for the job, regardless of what her actual political position involved. This is totally outrageous as it shifts the emphasis from the politics per se to the person's dress sense and whether it is too 'sexy' – I just don't see this kind of personalised assault on male public figures.

**Cassandra:** Speaking of how we feel today about the great liberation of women – motherhood and work are still a huge contradiction, and now we try to do both but it's not like the social system has changed sufficiently to support that.

**Layla:** No, it hasn't. And we try and do both, but for the most part we are the only ones trying to do both.

**Cassandra:** Exactly. We just do more and more.

**Fiona J:** Well, what would be the ideal scenario then?

**Cassandra:** Good question.

**Fiona J:** We've come to think of a short period of maternity leave and then the right to take some unpaid time off as a good scenario. Our three months versus some European countries that offer over four times that. I mean there's an urge, a need, to stay at home for a time right?

**Layla:** But there's also such a pressure to go to work, to have a career. It's in the art world too, right? The pressure of choosing career, or children?

**Louise:** I feel very aware of that.

**Rebecca:** Me too. I made a decision in my early 20s that I was going to concentrate on making art and not have a family. That was the choice I made and I've stuck with it so far.

**Louise:** Motherhood still isn't really valued as a career, is it?

**Layla:** No. And you can't predict what motherhood is going to be like, whether you can do both. Some people can, some people can't; it's dependant on many, many things.

**Louise:** I think a career is just a version of finding a way to express yourself, isn't it? Isn't a career a path of work?

**Robyn:** Well we have to work. We have to do something. We have to choose something.

**Layla:** But aren't we talking about work combined with an idea of success?

**Cassandra:** Yes...and there you have a 'career'.

**Robyn:** I'm suspicious of 'success', and this idea of striving towards something. The force of globalisation and the capitalist urge for production is being foisted onto every domain. I'm interested in this idea of work diminishing, and having more freedom, because perhaps in the act of striving for something I am becoming imbricated [becoming part of] in a structure or systems that I don't particularly agree with. Zizek, for example, makes a case for 'doing nothing', and other theorists talk about exodus, leaving the structures behind. I'm not necessarily saying that this is the 'answer', but it is interesting to compare with the dominant model of feverish doing that is considered the norm.

**Louise:** But there can be a freedom through work if you are connected to what you are doing. Work's not the baddie. It's your relationship to it that you have to find.

**Layla:** Work is not that to a lot of people, it's survival. We're privileged to be able think of work in that light.

**Rebecca:** I want to talk about the idea of class and economics, in terms of privilege, and the way we see career as opposed to work.

**Fiona J:** This idea of privilege and class is here in this photo too, in the sense that women had the right to vote all over the world in many, many countries well before 1893, but only if they owned land. Which is an extraordinary idea to think about now.

**Robyn:** Which countries?

**Fiona J:** All over. Some states in the US, New Zealand, Australia, others. Many decades before this, too. You're right in that class discussion there. Only having the right to vote if you own land... as if to say you're invisible otherwise. Of course that rule also applied to men at some points too.

**Robyn:** We're encouraged now to see life as an equal-opportunity playing field. Anyone can do it; anyone can get there – as long as they work hard enough. All are equal in the pursuit of the dollar.

**Louise:** The celebration of the self-made person...

**Robyn:** ...who rose from nothing.

**Rebecca:** But we all know that's bullshit (laughter). One of the things I found interesting about this image was that it made me reflect on what things are like now, to look into where women don't have the vote at the moment in the world. If this image has any real importance it is its relationship to those things that it made me want to go and have a look at, and to think about.

**Fiona J:** It's a long list, right?

**Louise:** Well, and local issues like the high level of domestic violence against Pacific women going

on right now.

**Fiona A:** So why are the generation of students coming through now so anti-feminist with all of this going on?

**Robyn:** I reckon TV has a hell of a lot to do with it. Honestly, if you turn it on it's all the same, and there are no strong role models for women. Not that I probably watch enough to fully gauge.

**Fiona A:** but then there are also examples where there are strong TV role models for women; what about *Greys Anatomy* for example (laughter), or *Nurse Jackie*, or *Private Practice*, or even *True Blood* – these shows have plenty of empowered strong female characters who defy stereotype. Lisa Simpson...there you go! (laughter). She's a strong, empowered young woman.

**Cassandra:** Oh my god.

**Fiona J:** Yeah, I don't remember myself, or anyone at my high school, having such a strong reaction against feminism like I see in so many students.

**Cassandra:** It wasn't so uncool.

**Fiona J:** No, it was just another thing in the world that was something you thought about.

**Fiona A:** It was also girl power. It really was empowering.

**Fiona J:** Yes, and now...our undergrad student body is aged 18 to 25 roughly and I am seeing a real reaction against feminism that I have not seen before in my teaching years.

**Fiona A:** Absolutely. It's happening now. It wasn't happening five years ago, as much. But generally there's a political apathy that's happening now, and feminism is part of it.

**Louise:** I had some students last year who were totally into it. Let's not discredit that. Feminism was never a mainstream movement. (lots of noises of agreement)

**Fiona J:** Absolutely, I have a lot of strong female (and male) students who are keen and committed, I certainly do; however in general there is clear avoidance of this issue. I think that people feel that if they get stigmatised, it sticks.

**Fiona A:** I think they also feel that there's no need to be feminist any more. "We've got it all, we've got the vote, equal pay, etc., etc."

**Louise:** We think we do.

**Rebecca:** But we don't, statistically.

**Fiona A:** But on face value, there's a kind of thinking amongst the students I teach that women can do whatever they want; that women no longer have to fight for rights...

**Fiona J:** Yeah, that's in general here though, huh, a political apathy. I really felt that when I came back to New Zealand after living in Los Angeles through the Bush years. That was a dark and difficult political situation, but wow, was it an incredibly active one. There's people fighting every minute of every day, and I came back here and....UH! It was like there was this big rock sitting in my lounge and I kept kicking the rock and saying, 'come on, move!' (laughter)

**Louise:** Was that the tv? (laughter)

**Fiona J:** Haha. No, it was a political apathy blob.

**Louise:** Yeah, it's super interesting, that situation. Where it's supposedly progressive and comfortable here, and nobody has anything to say.

**Robyn:** There's the sense here often that nothing's happening, politically, for me at least. And yet there is so much to be done.

**Fiona J:** I also sometimes see a kind of 'suffocation by political correctness' syndrome, in terms of discourse and action.

**Fiona A:** I think so. I totally agree with that.

**Cassandra:** This fear of being wrong. (noises of agreement)

**Layla:** Is that our size?

**Cassandra:** I think it's more culturally embedded in our past somehow.

**Layla:** This idea of ourselves as forward thinking?

**Louise:** Well yeah. Of course there are these moments when it seems New Zealanders have been able to take a stand, like the nuclear thing.

**Robyn:** Well I think Layla's right though about the size and impact we actually do have on the world stage. We're not a major player, so although it's good we're taking a stand, or putting a piece of legislation through – really, internationally, does anyone really care? Without any contextualising of these so-called triumphs we can become a little smug...

**Louise:** Are these big generalisations though?

**Layla:** Well there's a whole part of New Zealand that none of us know about, and it really needs to be spoken about, and politicised. None of us really know about it. And why don't we know?

**Fiona J:** One aspect is about empowering people to tell their own stories. And partly why I feel so conflicted about this in myself is because it's so complex. Just today I had a student put a work on the wall and it was problematic in lots of ways – it did all the things that post-colonialism taught us to be careful of doing in constructing images. I gently tried to talk him through some ideas of how this image might read, at the same time as being incredibly careful to not make him run for the hills and not make 'political' work ever again. That can so easily happen – students start to make work about something they feel passionate about, and they get criticised because of 'mistakes'. The mistakes are there for the making; we've all made them. I guess I was just so aware of the vulnerability in that situation, that if he got criticised or undermined, he may not ever want to take that risk again. But at the same time, it all needed to be talked through. I have worked with students over the years who say they have been encouraged not to make work about the complicated issues around them, and that to me relates directly to a political correctness, or an idea of making sure we approach things in the most reasonable way. And, you know, maybe he didn't feel reasonable about it.

**Robyn:** And there are other ways to communicate that unacceptability, or reluctance, not just verbally.

**Fiona J:** Yes, that connects to the whole idea of political apathy to me. The fear of committing to something. These women in this photo were clear on what they were fighting for. It's about clarity. Undermine an issue slightly, lose your constituent's foothold in clarity, and you've lost them. You've

lost their willingness to leave their house on a Saturday morning and join a protest, because their commitment to the issue is now a bit wobbly. A lot of people need real certainty about something to be motivated to take action, and certainty about issues is hard to establish these days.

**Robyn:** Yeah it wasn't until I lived in Melbourne that I became much more politically engaged and got involved in indigenous land right movements, because I guess there were quite a lot of clear and pressing objectives and very extreme prejudices in many ways.

**Cassandra:** Isn't it actually love for people that motivates us to protest. If the people that we love are hurting, or being disadvantaged, or impoverished, we act. There are things I care about because I've thought about them, but there's another kind of caring that doesn't come so much from thinking. If you feel connected enough to a community, and it could be a virtual community, a dispersed community, or all those ways we think about community, but some way or another you feel like it's your community and it's suffering, then that's going to motivate you.

**Fiona A:** I totally agree. Having just been in Hiroshima, I spent all this time in the Peace Memorial Park (where I was photographing) and the most moving part was seeing this elderly guy cycle up to the cenotaph at 6 in the morning and get off his bike and get out his beads and start praying, and the realisation that he would have been about 5 when the bomb was detonated and he could have lost his entire family. Experiencing that man's prayer made me realise the 'hurting' in a way that no ideological thinking could ever do – it was motivating. And later that day when I was back in the park, I signed a whole lot of petitions because I felt moved, I felt connected to those people.

**Fiona J:** I can see that it's one kind of political motivator, but definitely not the only one.

**Louise:** Are we romanticising the idea of political involvement?

**Cassandra:** I just have to keep going back to the idea of re-igniting care for people: a large number of people, or people close to you. I think it starts not from caring about political ideas, but caring about people...

**Fiona J:** ...and animals, and environment. Or maybe, like Louise said, these are romantic ideas of helping. Like how people are always fixated on the idea that the idea of real crusading aid work is most noble in Africa, whereas there's plenty of help needed here, too.

**Rebecca:** Speaking as an Australian, and the idea that New Zealand rests on its laurels, I've noticed that. New Zealand has this external image of having good race relations but statistically, practically, and logistically, this external appearance doesn't match up with the experience of living here. Take the statistics of prison demographics as a case in point. I also find it a little bit annoying when Australian race relations are compared with New Zealand's. It's a defunct comparison. Oh yeah...Australia's worse, but so fucking what! It closes the topic down, doesn't open it up for critical analysis and change.

**Fiona A:** There's also a lot of racism here. A friend of ours who is Hungarian talks about the open racism he experiences in this supposedly liberal, racially accepting climate.

**Louise:** But I think Auckland's a pretty special place sometimes, the different communities that coexist here. There are other places where a situation like this practically wouldn't be possible; there'd be a lot more violence.

**Rebecca:** As we sit here staring at this image, this guy in the buggy looks more and more like a

porn star (much laughter and then inaudible speculation about what he might be doing).

**Fiona A:** Well, I don't know though. I don't think it is necessarily easy for these communities to 'co-exist'. Imagine what it is like to be Asian in various parts of Auckland.. parts that are white-dominated, and I'm not referring to Remuera!

**Rebecca:** Talking about political correctness like we were before, someone had a big rant at me on the weekend about how fucked up New Zealand is because it's so PC....ok, so there's a bit of political correctness floating about. But being politically correct and aware is way more interesting than not, or way more productive. You know shifts in thinking happen in cycles, we always forget, so it's really important to remember the positive social changes that people have achieved. So, yeah, we're hampered by a bit of political correctness, but is that so bad?

**Fiona Jack, *Election day in New Plymouth, 1893 (28 November 1893)***, adhesive wall vinyl and poster/booklet stack, 2010

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