

This text is an edited transcript of a conversation held at City Gallery Wellington on the 13th of October 2011. Participants Anne Noble, Lauren Redican, Nicole Skews and Megan Tamati-Quennell and were invited to discuss the photo, Election Day in New Plymouth, 1893.

Fiona Jack: So, as I mentioned to you all in my first email, I first saw this photo in Sandra Coney's book *Standing in the Sunshine*¹ with a caption that suggested this might be the first photo taken of women voting freely in a national election anywhere in the world. I thought this was such an exciting photo and the caption really caught my imagination – could this really be the first photo? George Herbert White is the name of the photographer on the card.

Megan: Do we know much about George Herbert White? I know of other earlier photo companies like The American Photo Company and photographers like the Burton brothers, but I don't know anything about White. I'm interested in early photography because of what it can tell you. When photography was invented it was during the same period that New Zealand was being colonised – the 1840s/1850s. That is interesting to me; thinking about what those photographs record – although this photograph on election day is later, the 1890s.

Fiona: We don't know much about the photographer, apart from the fact that he had been a music teacher in England and migrated to New Zealand in 1893 and purchased a photography business. There are a number of photos held by Puke Ariki that were taken by him, but we're not talking a huge volume of the likes of James D. Richardson in Auckland collections.

Megan: It's not a studio photograph, so what was his intent? We can't really know what White's intent was if we don't know much about him; like, was it something he had been commissioned to do?

Lauren: It's a momentous occasion. It would have been an exciting day to take a photograph as a personal record, or as a social record. This composition almost looks too awkward to be a commission though.

Fiona: It looks like it may have been shot from a balcony or a window perhaps. I wondered whether that may mean there was a spontaneity in the taking of this photo and that perhaps this scene was outside the studio window? Or maybe this was a chosen location and an intentional set-up. This isn't part of a large series of photos by the way: there are two very similar photos from this same angle.

Anne: So two glass plates?

Fiona: No, 4x5" negatives – although he did work on glass plates sometimes I think.

Anne: And the date, 1893. It involved a lot more effort to set up a camera and take a photo in 1893, so that signals a committed response to observation.

Fiona: So it's not spontaneous?

Anne: No this is not snappy. The effort to set up a view camera on the balcony or the roof points to the photographer as deliberate observer: heavy equipment, a large tripod to cope with the longer exposures needed, only three or four frames. While the angle seems strange it's not unusual, it's actually a good vantage point to look down on a street scene. It all suggests a planned photographic event. I've just been on a car journey from Palmerston North and I was

recalling the photograph in my mind. I had looked at it online – trawled all over it digitally – and I am amazed now that I re-look at it how much I had made up in the interim as I mentally recalled the things and the details in the image that really appealed to me. The particular thing that stuck in my mind was the dray being driven by two women. In my mind they had morphed into characters and they were completely sharp in my memory of the picture. I am really interested in how remembering pictures is an imaginative exercise. These two women were empowered – *driving*. They'd driven into town and they'd gone into vote, and whoopee, they were driving off home again. And they're a lesbian couple who are completely announcing [laughter] their being empowered women in this adventure of voting [laughter]. And they've clearly been involved as champions, leaders of this, and you know the celebratory sense of this 'drive away'...

Fiona: ...and you were driving through the valleys, sun bursting through clouds at this point... [laughter]

Anne: ...and then I had this vague sense of disappointment when I re-looked at the photograph here, because in fact they're blurred – you can't actually see their faces.

Fiona: That was the thing that I loved about it; the amount of movement in these two women racing away. I am used to women in photos from this era standing so still. This urgency creates such drama in this photo.

Nicole: My eyes went straight to the women and I thought, "oh fantastic, the women are lining up to vote", and then I looked at the line and there are no women in the line, that I can see. So to me that's quite interesting; it's like, "yup, you can vote, but you probably want to do it quite quickly, and in groups, and then leave because you don't want to stand in the big line of men".

Megan: Yeah, the only way you'd know it was election day is because of the caption provided. The caption is important because it gives us a context. I also looked at that cluster of women, but I looked at their hats. I kinda liked their hats [laughter], their gears, what they were wearing – the fashion of the day.

Nicole: I thought Sunday best, but that's probably their everyday isn't it?

Lauren: Have to be well presented all the time...

Fiona: ...especially to vote.

Lauren: The women are dressed so nicely, but not one of them is sporting a husband! I imagine all these men who are lined up in front of them are married – I mean it would have been a time when everyone would have been. Presumably the women all have husbands as well; are they unsupportive of their wives actions? The image caption is such an exciting one, yet if this is a day of celebrating that women can vote, there's not that much in the way of 'togetherness'. There's three women standing all facing each other, and a dispersed crowd of men who aren't acknowledging them.

Fiona: Yeah, interesting.

Lauren: The empty space in this image says a lot. Of course I don't know how it was on the day, and one still photograph could only hope to offer a provisional reading of an event not a definitive one, but this empty space shows isolation or segregation much more than equality. It would

have been nice if the photographer George had offered a transcribed conversation with his wife alongside this photo! He might have been completely unsupportive of the whole idea. He might have thought he was documenting an outrage.

Nicole: Do you think that all speaks to the idea that these women were really radical? They're the radicals that no one wants to stand next to. It would be interesting to look at the statistics for that year and see how many women voted, now that they could.

Fiona: Women could vote prior to this, but only if they owned land. I read somewhere that about 80% of women enrolled and voted in this first election.

Lauren: Wow, this photo certainly doesn't show that 80% at all. It gives such a different reading of the day.

Fiona: Yeah, who knows what was going on. Maybe just strange timing for the photo.

Anne: The crowd in front of the building is all men. I wonder what it was like for the women who first walked through that door. You know they'd really broken ground, and this might not have been universally popular. What is going to happen to the world now we've let women in! [laughter] It must have taken a huge amount of courage, actually.

Nicole: The whole idea of the Christian Women's Temperance movement that Kate Sheppard was a part of wasn't just trying to gain the vote to have citizenship rights; it was also so they could vote for prohibition of alcohol. And I think it's important to remember that, because it wasn't necessarily driven solely by progressive thought: there was a big underlying religious and 'moral' reason.

Megan: There were a lot of issues then – I mean it's interesting that the photograph was taken in New Plymouth. Was New Plymouth important in the suffragette movement? Taranaki was full of tension, even at this time, I think. The land wars started in Waitara – just over from New Plymouth – and Parihaka was established in the 1870s in response to all of that. New Plymouth is an interesting town. I don't know enough about the history but I do know that at one stage they pulled down all the meeting houses that were in town, and that there was a ban; Maori couldn't come into town or within a certain radius of New Plymouth. None of that history is apparent in this photograph. I read up a little because I was wondering about Maori women and the vote. The suffragette movement was about giving women the vote, but I didn't know if it was all women or just European women. So I thought I should find out. I read that Maori women got the vote at this same time too. By 1890, after 50 years of European settlement in New Zealand, only 40% of the land was still owned by Maori people – and there was further legislation to continue to disenfranchise Maori of their land – so Maori women getting the vote at this point was important, to have some influence to try and maintain their land ownership.

Fiona: You wouldn't know that from this photo would you though; this is a very colonial looking environment. But I think at this point Maori elections were held separately.

Megan: It says in this little book that I got out² that by September 1893 all women gained the right to vote in general elections, and that Maori women with freehold property could choose between the European and Maori rolls. It says that 4,000 Maori women voted for the first time in the Maori electorates, and a further number chose to vote on the general roll. When did the Maori seats come into existence?

Nicole: 1867. My understanding was that previously voting was tied into land ownership and because of the communal nature of land ownership among Maori, they couldn't vote.

Anne: That the Maori seats were developed so early on reveals an extraordinary commitment to try and do things another way – however badly or well we did it at times. You know they're strong and interesting distinguishing characteristics of our history.

Fiona: Absolutely. I think I've always had a strong sense of pride about the moment in this photo; the idea that women won the vote first in New Zealand – especially when I lived in the United States. I would quite often either mention or quietly *know* that I came from this 'advanced' country that had given women and Maori the vote so much earlier than the country I was living in at the time. So I always had this lingering pride. I came back to New Zealand a few years ago, and I'm unsure how I feel about that pride – it wavers.

Nicole: It's interesting, yes, women could vote, but they could only vote for male candidates because at that point they couldn't stand to be a candidate for parliament themselves; and then in the few years that it took for women to be able to stand as candidates it wasn't until 1933 that a woman actually did stand and was elected to parliament. That blows my mind every time I think about it. So yeah, when I was younger I was really proud of this moment too; but the more I have learnt about it, and the more work that I realise we still have to do, the more critical I think I've become.

Fiona: I think about whether we are honouring that legacy? Are we carrying the weight of that as a burden, or are we complacent because we bask in the former glory of radical moments in New Zealand history?

Megan: The contrast of history when you look at somewhere like Australia: the history of the settlement of Australia is completely different. So brutal. Aboriginal people weren't even regarded as humans until the 1960s. The States, same kind of deal. I think that's why New Zealand was regarded in the 1950s as having the best race relations – even if it was not true.

Fiona: Yes, but that's still very much the opinion in the wider world, though. Amongst people I knew in Los Angeles when I lived there I think most had this very glossy impression of New Zealand – in political, cultural and ecological terms – which we all know to be pretty untrue. But of course compared with the USA, we're totally radical [noises of agreement].

Anne: And that it can be so successfully contested, and that it be an ongoing conversation; I think that's testament to the spirit in which the idea of nationhood was created. However flawed, however disastrously enacted, there are things to look back on that are a bit like this image.

Megan: There were stakes put in the ground that meant you had a....

Anne: ...a marker to measure against...

Megan: ...and meant a different kind of society developed than perhaps developed in other places.

Fiona: There's such paradox in some of these moments isn't there. I've been spending a lot of time in Archives New Zealand and around the 1950s the letterheads saying *Native Department* start changing to a new letterhead saying *Department of Maori Affairs*; so there's this awareness

that the term 'native' is derogatory and that we were moving into a new phase of understanding, but we also know that in the 1950s there was still rampant land theft occurring, and other kinds of displacement. This systematic colonisation was taking place at the same time as we were reassessing our attitude – it's curious. The paradox is in this photo too really – it's an unusual photo.

Anne: You know there are some photographs of the storming of Parihaka that are taken by Pakeha photographer William Collis, who was standing on a hill looking down into the town. You can see the troops moving in and you get this great sense of....

Megan:what is about to happen – phew.

Anne: Exactly. I can't think that this was the best angle Herbert White could have chosen if he was only interested in photographing the polling booth. This photograph is much more about the street more generally. You've got *The Cheapest and Best Furniture Warehouse in New Plymouth*, which I quite like because there's a feeling of domesticity and there is a group of women standing outside this furniture warehouse. Are they there to vote, or are they there to shop, or both? Probably both [laughter]. And there's a lot of traffic: there's four carts, quite a lot of horses, there are people parked, resting, there's the getaway dray, there's people coming and going to vote – most likely. But it also has a lovely social feel about it, so I should think the photographer is interested in making record of this particular time and place, and a very considered one. There's lots of accidents compositionally that are quite nice. I love the word *ART* in the left hand corner.

Lauren: Would you call that an accident? Could that be a little framing thing? I want to believe that he framed it like this specifically; it makes it ten times more magical.

Anne: I also look over here at the other corner and there's *her kitchen*, almost, but it's a booksellers "H. Kitch" [laughs], so you've got these half words. I tend to think they're quirky accidents.

Fiona: We know that there was such a significant moment happening here that came after Kate Sheppard rolled the signatures out in parliament; the immense effort of the suffrage movement just to get to this moment, and we in New Zealand achieved this before any other nation in the world – in terms of a free general national election anyway. How do we think of that now when we can see this celebrated moment?

Anne: That's why I was so drawn to those two women driving the dray. There seems to be something very triumphant in their manner that really does speak to the memory of that time and place. They're active, and lend an empowered charge to the picture. I think with any picture like this, unless you really delve into the history of the time and place, you respond by bringing your partial knowledge of the history to reading it. There's something almost a little bit threatening in that crowd to me, but I only surmise that because I don't know the circumstances of the moment – I read into it and make it up. That's why this is a lovely project; because it's about responding to what we see.

Megan: You know, it looks like a tavern with a whole lot of men standing outside to me. I'm sure it's not – people are voting – but because there's such a lot of people gathered out there and because they're primarily male.

Fiona: Maybe it's because the rugby world cup is on. [laughter]

Megan: Nah, maybe it's because I've watched too many cowboy movies. [laughter]

Nicole: You know, Kate Sheppard is on our ten dollar note and she's quite 'held up' as being someone who was very important and progressive, but those women were hated and we don't really talk about that now. I think it's important to realise that the 'radicals' and the 'trouble makers' of politics and society so often end up being the heroes of the future, but we rarely own up to the fact that we made life hell for them at the time because they challenged the status quo. I have a copy of a sign that my grandmother had which was from the early days of women electioneering that was posted on the door of 103 Mean Street in Newton. It says: "Notice to Epicene Women. Electioneering women are requested not to call here. They are recommended to go home, look after their children, cook their husbands dinners, empty the slops, and generally attend to the domestic affairs for which Nature [with a capital N] designed them. By taking this advice they will gain the respect of all right minded people, an end not to be attained by unsexing themselves and meddling in masculine concerns of which they are profoundly ignorant".

Anne: Now that's why the dray-driving leapt out as a political act; you know, the driver, the mover, the getaway; the public defiance as driver, voter, empowered woman – in charge of their lives. Not milling around shopping [laughter]. You know, I wonder how many women would have stepped up to drive a dray. It would have been the norm for a woman to be escorted: their skirts to be lifted, to climb on, sit down, and be driven. So yeah, we forget the constraints, or the influence, or the strength of those conventions – and what women had to overthrow to actually have the courage to enter those spaces. I think that's why in this photograph this huddle of men is quite an ominous space because women would have had to have had a huge amount of courage to actually walk through it.

Fiona: There were male suffragettes too, but not every woman who wanted to vote would know a male suffragette or a supportive man to escort her there on that day I suppose.

Nicole: But I don't think you would be very popular as a male suffragette either; you wouldn't have wanted to show up there either, walk through that crowd with those ladies.

Fiona: Well, there may have been widespread support for this; 30,000 people signed the suffrage petition. We can't underestimate what that meant.

Nicole: Yeah, that's true.

Fiona: And maybe there was more of a sense of inclusion, for some, than we know: in the sense that regular people could talk directly to upper levels of government in an open way.

Anne: That lasted for some time. I remember deciding I wanted to interview the prime minister for a student project and rang him at home on a Sunday afternoon with a questionnaire and he answered the telephone [laughter].

Fiona: Which prime minister?

Anne: Keith Holyoake.

Fiona: Wow. Cool.

Megan: He would have been quite good though.

Anne: He was. We talked for about half an hour. I filled in my questionnaire and transcribed all my questions – about the Vietnam War.

Megan: Just rang him at home?

Anne: ...mmm. [laughter] At boarding school, no one interesting to talk to, so I went into the school phone booth, number's in the book, rang him. [laughter]

Fiona: That is such a New Zealand story, though.

Nicole: It so is.

Fiona: I'm just going to dilute this lemon juice drink – it's quite strong. [noises of agreement, inaudible chatter]

Nicole: In 1993 my grandmother got a suffragette medal, so she has this big booklet of all the papers and stuff from that time – all her women's rights stuff.

Anne: Who was your grandmother?

Nicole: Margaret Skews. She was the executive director of the National Party for ten years; which is hilarious because she doesn't consider herself a feminist, and I'm a crazy commie pinko as far as she is concerned – that she loves. [laughter]

Fiona: How much of an influence do you think that had on your direction in life?

Nicole: I think she got me interested in politics because I kind of grew up in National Party headquarters. My parenting was sort of shared between her and my mother – my mother was a solo mother – so I was definitely interested in the vibe of politics. It always felt like everything was always happening there, interesting stuff going on, but when I was a teenager and started getting interested in social justice it was clear that my path was not as blue as she would have liked. She tells me that one-day I will grow out of it. [much laughter]

Fiona: But does she not correlate her actions that won her that suffragette medal with yours at all?

Nicole: Interestingly, she doesn't think we should have a Ministry of Women's Affairs – she doesn't identify herself as a feminist. I think that she would see this [points to photo] as feminism and as relevant, but I think that her idea of discrimination – and I think that a lot of young women think this too – is that discrimination must be really overt, that it must be sort of Jim Crow laws; or really, really horrible examples of overt discrimination. So because of how she defines discrimination, she doesn't feel like she has had to face that many barriers in her life. What she considers a barrier and what I consider a barrier are very, very different things.

Megan: Is that just a generational thing do you think?

Nicole: Possibly. I do think she's also rare for her generation though. I don't think there are very many 70-year-old women who would say that they didn't face many barriers as women.

Fiona: I am assuming that you're both under 30 right? [question to Nicole and Lauren]

Nicole/Lauren: Yes.

Megan: She was talking to Anne and me. [laughter]

Anne: Yeah, why didn't you ask me that! [laughter]

Fiona: Do you consider yourselves radical among your peers?

Lauren: For sure. I've become interested in what constitutes *being* a feminist recently. It seems to encompass diverse – even polarized – philosophies. Sometimes feminism meets discrimination with discrimination, which brings us back to square one. Believing in equal rights for both men and women should be called commonsense these days shouldn't it? This is what histories of women wanted for us.

Anne: I'm quite interested in that. Nicole, you've obviously got a very strong commitment to the idea of feminism and its importance and value today, and yet there is a current amongst a lot of young women that it's a label that carries a certain type of woman with it that is an unattractive stereotype.

Nicole: The 'hairy legged lesbian' that men so often go on about.

Lauren: Women go on about it too! I think this reluctance would have more to do with labelling yourself. Often I have issues 'being a woman' in the same sense. Not to say I find myself feeling like a man; just sometimes labels are reductive rather than productive.

Anne: As a woman who has worked in a few organisations in my life, I have always been aware of the covert sexism that operates to kind of diminish the power of women by preying on their sense of community and responsibility. In many organisations there are fewer and fewer women the higher you go, and among men and women there are different notions of collegiality. Women often feel like they have to do things on their own – through slave labour almost, through a sense of dogged commitment to the cause – whereas men nurture and protect each other for mutual advantage. Universities are not a bad example.

Megan: Really!

Fiona: It is all about it being so subtle though isn't it. I recently mentioned to a couple of men I work with – whom I respect greatly – that I often feel a sexist attitude from one of our colleagues. They were shocked that I would experience this, from this particular person. I insisted that I had seen it on many, many occasions: that it's quite real, it's significant, and that I feel like it sometimes impacts the way I operate there. These are capable, intelligent, sensitive men I was telling this to – not at all sexist – but they have obviously not picked up on any of this. It's so subtle they hadn't noticed.

Anne: Well, the first female professor of Fine Art in New Zealand was only appointed about 12 years ago. There's a politic there that is still objectionable. You only need look at the tiered structures within this so called meritocracy and you still find women dominant in the rank of lecturer, and men dominant in the professoriate. There are plenty of questions to raise – about the gender politics of most of our institutions, and about the politics of being within them. Even gender and equity policies struggle to address them. I sometimes wonder if women are not sufficiently committed to feminism, because actually we still need collective responses to

covert sexism and to find stronger, more effective ways to support the development of women within organisations. That's a contemporary feminist position we've got to claim with pride, with courage, and for that not to be defined as something unattractive. I often wonder about the loss of power of 'feminism' as a word when I encounter students who if you bring up the term 'feminism'...

Fiona: ...I'm not a feminist, but...

Anne: Yes! I'm not a feminist, but.

Fiona: I think that's why I love the boldness of your group, Nicole. That you've called yourselves the Wellington Young Feminists Collective. You haven't minced your words at all – it's just clear and direct – and from what I have seen about the group there is a huge diversity of ideas, images, and activity attached to it. It doesn't seem at all singular, which is what I would hope. But I think if we have a negative view of feminism it *is* singular. It's about remembering the multitudes within womanhood and community. That's why I like the directness of your approach.

Anne: Which says feminism is now.

Megan: Yeah!

Nicole: It's the covert that interests me. I think – to use an academic term – the 'first wave' is really an easy win: nowadays not many people would argue with the fact that the event in this photo was a really good idea. Then I think the second wave in the 70s about women making their own decisions about their career and their lives and their families and all that, retrospectively that's now also an easy win – most people would agree with it. But I think that what women are facing now is so embedded in our socialisation from day one that it's a lot harder to articulate, and it's a lot harder to get people to understand that it is actually discrimination and oppression, and that it's gendered. It's quite hard for women to feel that we can pull together. I think we are set up to compete with each other. It's about actually recognising first and foremost that those oppressions are there. Then breaking them down and realising that they are inherently gendered, and that feminism is not as scary as people think. That is probably the challenge that I felt a pull to with starting the collective. It hasn't been easy: people are like "ah, you've got feminist in your name", and I say "yeah, I *did* do that on purpose". [laughter]

Fiona: No apologies.

Nicole: Yeah, it's going to win us some friends and it's going to lose us some because there are so many young women who say they don't know how they feel about that word. I hope that we win more than we lose – well there's 970 of us.

Fiona: Wow, are there really? Cool.

Nicole: Yeah. Women and men – and people who don't identify with either of those labels – and I think that by just existing and not being man-hating or feminine-women-hating or getting aggressive to people who don't know enough about feminism – I hope that we are starting to turn some people. That said, anger is powerful and I respect groups who use that as a driver, but our mandate from the start has always been to help encourage learning and discussion for people at all stages of their feminist journey. We do still get angry at times though – usually as an entire

group – like at Alasdair Thompson. I also think that having ‘young’ in our name has been pretty political. I’ve been doing some work lately with the National Council of Women and they’re really interested in connecting with young women – but it’s not easy. Some older women turn around and go: “well, we’ve done all this for you, and now look what you’ve done with it”, and yet now they’re saying “none of the younger women want to have anything to do with us”. But we do – there’s so many of us that do – but we’ve got to bridge that gap so that they can hear our voices as well.

Fiona: Are you saying you perceive a gap between your generation and that older one – that there’s a generation in-between where nothing much has happened?

Nicole: Yeah, I think the second wave women – the 70s, who did fantastic work – really want to connect with women now who are identifying themselves as feminists, but I think that the issues from those different waves...

Megan: ...I think they are different.

Nicole: Exactly, and I think so many young women would love to connect with women who have a history of fighting similar battles – or just battles in general – but there’s still these weird feelings of fear and judgment, or reprimand, from the older feminists. Maybe understanding that their elders didn’t agree with what they thought was important at the time either would mean they would listen – actively listen – to what we have to say.

Fiona: Do you think – and I might pitch this question to Lauren – does anyone want more wine by the way? [Noises, chatter, etc.] I’ll formulate this question while I pour. I’ll preface this by saying that I have done work in the past about the idea of a tipping point; the concept that it can be quite hard for a lot of people to commit to a protest or a certain kind of activity or position if they have uncertainty about an issue – that the issue has to be somewhat clear in order to give rise to a particular level of activity – and that perhaps that kind of clarity is a bit harder to come by these days with PR machines and mass media, spin-doctors, whatever it is. To commit to an idea with an awareness of all the difference within that idea is really hard. You mentioned before about things not having a solid meaning and I wonder whether that might be what creates the reluctance to commit to a singular idea?

Lauren: Definitely, though I’ll start by saying I’m yet to finish university, so perhaps I’m yet to experience a tipping point. This reluctance seems completely symptomatic of my generation; maybe because of the way you develop growing up with the internet in your pocket – literally and metaphorically. This all-encompassing connectedness really influences contemporary approaches to information, originality, authenticity and truth. For example, my parents talk of having to wait weeks to get a specific book from the library that’d been published decades before, and I’ve never quite had this relationship to literature – this sounds so outrageous to me. The democratisation of information shifts that powerful ‘author’ position doesn’t it? You can find anything on the internet, and then find it again in the same place either changed very slightly – or being disputed altogether. All information is immediate; everywhere but also nowhere.

Fiona: Ahh, right, so everything disputed the minute you learn about it and you’ve never known another way?

Lauren: Mmm.

Fiona: That’s so interesting; I hadn’t really thought about the idea that your generation has had nothing *but* that. Quicksand. Online newspapers are even like that huh – I constantly catch them changing things. It can be the same photo or headline, but they’ve changed the introductory sentence an hour after it was first put up there. So it’s a story – but then a while later it’s a slightly different story.

Nicole: They got a call.

Fiona: Ha ha, yeah, totally. Scary. The most discussed one of this week was an article in the New York Times about the arrests of Occupy Wall Street protestors on Brooklyn Bridge which shifted in a two hour period: shifting the blame away from police. And then there’s what’s left out altogether; if you only read the New York Times online you wouldn’t have known there was an occupation in Wall Street at all for the first few weeks. [noises of agreement]

Lauren: And how does that manufacture your disbelief?

Fiona: Well, you really have to work hard to formulate an informed position on something I think. I’m not talking about being singular, I’m talking more about taking a stance on an issue with an acceptance of complexity and contradictions – to push through that and to take action.

Megan: But is it about having a label so therefore you have to fit a particular mould? Being singular? If you’re ‘X’ then that’s how you behave, where you sit philosophically, a set of rules that you have to follow – if you take on that label. Avoiding the label, because everybody is a multiplicity of things.

Lauren: For sure, but hey, I’m still interested in that question; what constitutes being a ‘feminist’? This wasn’t discussed. What does this mean for you Nicole?

Nicole: I think it’s different for everyone. For me it’s about believing in gender equity, and breaking down the norms that we’re socialised into from day one. It’s okay to fit the mould, but it’s not okay that there’s a mould in the first place. It’s also about realising that those gender norms and expectations hurt everyone –but they’re more harmful to women – and a lot of those norms exist to take away women’s power, and to reinforce the power of men. To me there’s no bigger signal that people are terrified of women and women’s power than feminism being a dirty word.

Fiona: This separation that’s in the photo still exists I think: it’s just a glass ceiling. I couldn’t cite any stats on it, but we have roughly 70% female students and 30% male in any given year, and yet if you look at the spectrum of shows happening out of this generation of artists graduating it’s probably roughly – well it appears to be – about the reverse statistic. Or at its best 50/50. How does that work?

Lauren: So I’ll be facing that reverse statistic when I finish my degree next month.

Fiona: I guess so. It’s not to say there aren’t plenty of women having shows – just not 70%, from what I can see.

Anne: Not 70% women professors either!

Fiona: Ha! Absolutely not.

Megan: To go back to this photo; when I looked at it I thought of an aunty of mine, Marge Rau Kupa – who lived in New Plymouth, in Raleigh Street. She has passed away now but she was a phenomenal person. I don't know if you met her when you went to Parihaka, Anne? She was the most amazing woman. She didn't talk much about how hard it might have been for her, but every now and then she would say something; frame it by saying she was very proud of people like me – and other younger Maori women – in the roles we have (working as a curator etc.) because she said at the same age she only had the option of working as a cook for the Pakeha as that was the only job available to her. I look at this photograph and those kinds of things also resonate with me. Aunty Marge's experience of life – which is different from my experience.

Anne: But it's a philosophy of *being* that women subscribe to, and I am probably guilty of this myself, where service is a powerful reason for being. My mother had her family in the 50s/60s and was the wife of a surgeon; never worked, but – *but* – hugely capable, intelligent, woman who rose to lead organisations that are all about service to the community...

Megan: ...and she would have also supported her husband.

Anne: Yes, and she could have been prime minister she was that remarkable – she *is* that remarkable. Her sense of personal power and her ability to see the big picture – understanding the need for things to happen – and then the commitment to drive things forward. I think this was a position that women took up; not to sit at the top and direct, but to actually drive and create mechanisms for change. The things that she created are, to me, extraordinary when I think about what she did and how she did it: the humour, the creativity, the energy, the personal power that was never about recognition for herself. My favourite photograph of her was taken on the day she received her QSM [Queen's Service Medal]. She's quite a large woman, and in the photograph she's receiving the award from Dame Cath Tizard. She's shaking Cath Tizard's hand and smiling graciously, and it looks like Cath Tizard is receiving the medal. [laughter] "Yes, mother, that's you", that about sums it up. [laughter] You know; the size, the scale, the bigness of her is just there.

Megan: I watched my mother do the same thing. My mother was a nurse, then she married and didn't work any more – but she did everything for my father. Was always at home when we came home after school, or if we came home for lunch. She made all our clothes. She was a district nurse and she always liked working with old people. She loved going into people's homes, and she would say that sometimes with those oldies the only people they saw was the district nurse, and the meals on wheels person. And she did other things like teaching people to read – lots of community service kind of work.

Anne: Service and community. They're drivers, but they're often not valued as qualities of leadership.

Megan: It's about leading from the back. My great grandmother used to say that while the gentleman is up the front talking, the real leader is down the back standing with the people.

Fiona: Funny that we all have these strong matriarchs in our families, eh. My mum is a powerhouse; she never stops giving. I also have a great-great aunt who was an important suffragette – a Red Clydesider – in Scotland. I didn't know she existed until quite recently: she was never talked about. I contacted the communist society there recently and they told me there

is an unpublished biography on her held in an archive.

Megan: Wow, that's so fantastic.

Fiona: Yeah. I guess I didn't really think about it when inviting you all here that we all would all share this thing of having such strong women in our families. Lauren, do you too?

Lauren: Yeah; I've always been close to my mother. She comes from a family of seven sisters who were all – and still are – really close. I've got quite an amazing family of women. So that's seven girls and one boy that my grandmother bred – what are the chances. Because of their living conditions they all have this incredible feeling of repulsion towards being wasteful.

Anne: So when you say waste...

Fiona: ...you're talking about survival aren't you, with that many children.

Anne: Well it's a conservation politic, which is actually a very powerful one.

Lauren: Yeah; in conserving things, and also in really practical matters. This has been instilled in me from day one, that it's an important ethic. I can go: "bam, mum that's so you in there somewhere". [laughter] Some things can be so directly passed down.

Fiona: Yeah, we're such a product of everything that has trickled down, huh.

Nicole: That notion of stuff being expected of you – the supporting of the husband or the family or whatever – is something that I am watching a lot of my contemporaries negotiate. I can speak for myself – my partner is a man – and his first exposure to feminism is me [laughter], and he is just *the* most open-minded guy, but there's things that both of us expect that are absolutely gendered.

Fiona: I have to admit I kind of love that stuff in some ways; the girl stuff, the guy stuff. We are we what are sometimes, eh.

Anne: To get back to the photo – and what this photographer was seeing and thinking – we're stepping back to another time when photographing the everyday was a rare activity. In this time and place everyone has a camera, or a cell phone with a camera, and everyone thinks of themselves as a photographer. So there is a shift. As a photographer I love the process of separating myself out from the world and moving through it as a maker of images; I just have this love of focused looking – when I have the time. Moving in to observe and order the world, and then seeing it played back to me through this wonderful medium, which is photography. Today, everyone is a photographer, and to varying degrees they put their mind and being into the position of observer and maker of images. This is something we have to cherish and value. We have to bring it all in and recognise its value; all of the pictures on cell phones, all the potential ways individuals can record their observations add to the ways we have to comment on the world – to reflect on. In 1893 Herbert White didn't have his camera in his pocket; he sought out a place to position his monster of a piece of equipment that shot one negative at a time, and because of this he looked in a much more considered way. One hundred and twenty years later we are reflecting on that moment. In the world today we have to grapple with millions and millions of photos. Universities, art schools, photography departments and people who are photographers have the business of actually trying to embrace the democratisation of

photography and find ways to ensure that we have legacies as strong as this [points to photo] for the future – because there's a risk that everything will be seen as so ordinary and mundane that it will disappear.

Fiona: That's so related to what you were saying earlier, Lauren, about everything being replaced or reconsidered day after day – one image gets replaced by another, in perpetuity.

Lauren: Copy paste culture.

Anne: So what are the markers of this time and place? We've got an election coming up post a Rugby World Cup – which the National party will be using as a shoe-in.

Fiona: What are the visual markers?

Anne: Yes, what are the visual markers that will actually sit somewhere for us to refer to about this time and place? Very few digital images will likely exist.

Lauren: And if all digital images did still exist, what would images mean to future generations? This picture has such a different value than a jpeg – a different relationship to value altogether.

Fiona: Do you think that's because there's one of it? Well, there were actually two taken that were very similar, but nothing like the volume there would be now.

Megan: Digital cameras are so throw-away – the photos able to be deleted so easily – so the role of the photographer who creates a more considered image is probably more important. There are lots of photographs now, but it is not like before – you don't keep them in the same way.

Anne: We have strangely fewer albums, despite the proliferation of photographs.

Lauren: Facebook. [laughter] We're the most photographed generation ever.

Fiona: When I first saw this photo, Sandra Coney's caption surmised that it was the first photo of women voting; that's a staggering concept. The only reason we can imagine this could be true is because there are only two – or thereabouts.

Lauren: Yeah, today there would be a million, literally, from every angle, with every different camera, and we'd delete most of them – touch up the imperfections on Photoshop.

Megan: The thing with Facebook and digital images is that you can delete the ugly ones; you could never self-edit like you can now.

Fiona: But an ugly photo of you could travel around the world 80 times before you even know it exists – ick. But then, it's what we have now, so we learn how to cope with it; we find a new way of understanding this sheer volume of images.

Anne: The great risk to photography as a powerful medium to record, document, and influence our understanding of history has to do with the particular political and economic environment we are in, whereby any space in which a photographer might operate is deemed commercial space. So there's this creeping sense of risk to the world by 'loose' photographers [laughter], who might actually locate something observable that could upset the commercially acceptable way the world is seen and understood.

Lauren: I wonder what sort of photo of this event would surface if it'd been photographed in today's photographic conditions; what sort of 'loose image' would we be exposed to? This particular angle reminds me of CCTV; we can sometimes have 24 hour access to these with online webcams, or they get archived.

Nicole: Well you know there's a digital archiving department of Archives New Zealand now. I am so fascinated by what they choose to archive.

Anne: Now that is a responsibility for art – to help create the archives of the future.

Fiona: I'm kind of loving that as we come to the end of this conversation the room is almost dark – we haven't turned on the lights.

Anne: It's very nice.

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Fiona Jack, *Election day in New Plymouth, 1893 (28 November 1893)*, adhesive wall vinyl and booklet stack, 2011.

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(Endnotes)

¹ Sandra Coney, *Standing in the sunshine: a history of New Zealand women since they won the vote*, Auckland, Penguin, 1993.

² Tania Rei, *Māori women and the vote*, Wellington, Huia Publishers, 1993.