Talk, Protest, Revolt

Some thoughts on feminisms, parenting in the art world, and 'Revolt She Said' by Louise Lever

by Frances Loeffler

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HUM's associate editor Frances Loeffler takes a close look at Revolt She Said*, a recent documentary by New Zealand filmmaker Louise Lever, which asks questions about progress in contemporary feminism. Loeffler considers the important discussion points raised in this film through the lens of being a parent and worker in the arts.*

In September 2018, images of Jacinda Ardern attending a United Nations General Assembly meeting with her baby of three months spread around the world. For those of us struggling to juggle professional and caring responsibilities—be it for children, elders, or people with disabilities—these images resonated, to say the least. At the time my maternity leave was coming to an end and I was getting ready to go back to work, filled with confusing feelings of excitement for the exhibitions I had coming up and real sadness (actually gut-wrenching devastation would be a more accurate description) at the idea of leaving my child. This image of a world leader who could (with a supportive partner at her side) successfully manage a position of national leadership and motherhood felt like a sign of progress, of hope. And it felt like New Zealand was at the forefront of something again—a leader in women's rights, as it had been in 1893 when it was the first country to give women the vote.

Except that it's not at the forefront. Or, it's complicated. Because despite the uplifting imagery, the statistics are grim. They show that New Zealand has one of the worst rates of sexual violence

towards women in OECD countries, for example. And for wāhine Māori, the situation is always worse. As environmental, Indigenous and human rights advocate Tina Ngata laid out in a recent article in *The Guardian*, they are at once globally recognised for roles in academia, business, justice and education, but are also underpaid comparative to non-Māori women, experience barriers to healthcare, and suffer one of the highest incarceration rates anywhere in the world. As Ngata puts it, "while the acquisition of the vote was a relative step ahead within a colonial context", for wāhine Māori the struggle to recover the spiritual and political power they had in pre-colonial times is incommensurable.[01] For Indigenous women in Australia (and the world over, too) it's the same story.



Many of these issues and more came to mind for me when watching Louise Lever's new film, *Revolt She Said*. Made over a time period of three years from 2017-2019, it premiered in Melbourne in October 2019 followed by its New Zealand premiere in March 2021, and has since been shown in festivals across the world, recently receiving a nomination for best documentary at the New York Independent Film Festival. A dense and dialogue-packed portrait of the messy, uneven, quarrelsome status of contemporary feminism in Australia and New Zealand, the film strings together a

number of interviews with figures from the world of journalism, art, writing and politics, such as journalist Alison Mau, psychologist Dr Pani Farvid, historian and writer Dr Jackie Huggins, writer and poet Quinn Eades, poet and playwright Courtney Sina Meredith, artists Judy Darragh and Archie Barry, and perhaps most impressively, former New Zealand prime minister Helen Clark.

From its brilliant opening sequence, which leads us into an imagined world of equality only to come crashing rudely back to reality, *Revolt She Said* is interspersed with fascinating and often humorous archival footage and a lively soundtrack, which contrasts to the raw and often emotional nature of what is discussed. The conversations take us from highly personal accounts of set-backs, struggles (including racist and misogynist attacks), through to the achievements of earlier periods of feminism, reflections on the #MeToo movement and the toll it has taken on many of the women who have spoken up, the benefits and shortcomings of social media today, and perhaps most urgently, the importance of a more inclusive and intersectional understanding of feminism (or—as Judy Darragh recalls Barbara Kruger saying—*feminisms*). Above all, what stands out from the polyphony of voices is a shared frustration at the lack of progress. If the World Economic Forum calculates that it will take 267.6 years to achieve gender parity (267.6 years!), then there is (as Helen Clark reminds us) obviously an acute need to keep advocating, to keep maintaining pressure, to keep jostling for change.

Alongside this, the messiness and complexity of the debates in contemporary feminism also come to the fore. It is Lever's ability to make space for this that gives the film real strength. She has no qualms about giving a platform to a range of voices from different generations and patiently allows each one to tell their story. A good example of this is her interviews with an older generation of Melbourne-based authors, such as writer and activist Chris Sitka, former teacher Sarah Yeomans, and writer Jean Taylor, which raise many of the disputes within feminism—including anti-trans ideologies. Some of the opinions heard here will be uncomfortable for many, but listening to these women speak about their struggles

in the early years of feminism is nonetheless illuminating, and may go some way towards understanding the context underpinning their views—whether you agree with them or not.

At the very least, taking some of these debates off social media into the more expansive and concentrated realm of a documentary film points to the importance of deep dialogue in order to move forward. This is especially important at this time when anti-trans policies are being written into law (you have only to look at the numerous Bills passed only this year in the United States, curbing the rights of transgender people)[02]. Right now, the power of coming together with force as one voice is more important than ever—it is literally a matter of life and death, if you consider the increasingly hostile environment for transgender people in many countries today. As Quinn Eades reflects in the film, it is painful to feel there are still those in the feminist community excluding transgender women, given their own history of struggle. The women's movement should be about solidarity and holding each other up. Or, as Courtney Sina Meredith succinctly puts it, "feminism can be a connecting platform".



Dr Jackie Huggins, co-chair of the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples. Film still from *Revolt She Said*, 2021 by Louise Lever. Image courtesy of Louise Lever.



Sarah Yeoman, Melbourne. Film still from *Revolt She Said*, 2021 by Louise Lever. Image courtesy of Louise Lever.

Listening to these honest and moving discussions I found myself reflecting on their relevance to the contemporary art world. The interviewees (most of them from the left-leaning rarefied worlds of arts, academia and politics) stay largely silent on the structural conditions of the art world. Of course, the film wasn't necessarily made for a contemporary art audience, but these questions nonetheless came to mind. Does Lever's connection to the arts give her a unique perspective on some of these issues? And how

forward-thinking even is the supposedly progressive art world in terms of gender equality? The landmark exhibition, *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, which started at the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, LA in 2007, was one of a number of exhibitions that have sought to put the work of women artists at the front and centre of museum programmes. Fourteen years on, however, the art world doesn't always feel like the most enlightened arena for discussions on contemporary feminism.

In fact, recent surveys show that works by male artists sell for far higher prices and make up the majority of museum collections. Women study art subjects more than men in higher education programmes, and they make up the bulk of staff in arts organisations, but they earn less and are underrepresented in senior and leadership positions.[03] In a great essay for *Hyperallergic*, curator Michelle Millar Fisher points to a fear of speaking up as being one of the problems that persist within arts institutions.[04] After all, these are labour issues and while the art world may seem to be an enlightened and progressive place, employees are bound by the same kind of discomfort and fear of losing jobs as any other worker. The art world is also renowned for its precarity, which doesn't help the situation. This is a particularly raw condition for artists but also technicians, educators, invigilators and other freelance or contract workers.



The ‘mother load’ is surely another reason these problems persist. If artists or art workers are parents (or carers of any kind—and statistics show that most carers are women identifying) the setbacks become even more pronounced. Small wonder that writer Hettie Judah’s recent online publication, *How Not to Exclude Artist Parents: Some Guidelines for Institutions and Residences* resonated with so many this summer.[05] A list of practical guidelines for arts institutions on how to place family-friendly flexibility at the centre of an artist-centred ethos, it draws on months of research by Judah and a 30-strong team of artist-mother advisors. As curator Chus Martínez also points out in an insightful article in *e-flux*, “everyone seems to manage”, but the managing is often done in silence.[06] She describes how we may be enraged that we are earning less. We may be struggling to make ends meet because of high childcare costs. We may be depressed at giving up career opportunities because we simply can’t make the family-unfriendly timings work (those 6:00 PM art events! Those residencies that don’t accommodate families!). But we rarely discuss it, even amongst ourselves and certainly not at an institutional level.

To provide a platform for these conversations, then, as Lever does for the current state of feminism, is perhaps a kind of revolt. And the need for revolt—for change—has only grown more urgent since the film was made. The unforeseen, world-changing event of COVID-19 has shone a light on many of today’s inequities, but also set us back in terms of progress. It has disproportionately impacted female-dominated roles in health and care professions, for example, with women having to take on the burden of working from home while also homeschooling during periods of lockdown.[07] Social media has taken some of these discussions into the open with force and violence, but Lever also makes a case for putting your phone down once in a while and getting out there—to talk, to protest, to revolt.

Footnotes

01. Tina Ngata, “New Zealand’s Māori women have more to contend with than ordinary sexism”, *The Guardian* (5 February 2021), www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2021/feb/05/new-zealand-wahine-maori-sexism

02. Five U.S. states, for example, have now signed into law bills that prohibit transgender athletes from participating in school and university sport teams consistent with their identities. For

further information see ‘Montana Governor Signs Bill Banning Transgender Students from Sports Teams’, accessed 26 July 2021: www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/may/07/montana-transgender-student-athletes-ban-bill

03. For further information and statistics see National Museum for Women in the Arts, accessed 15 July 2021: nmwa.org/support/advocacy/get-facts/

04. Michelle Millar Fisher, “Parenting and Labour in the Art World: A Call To Arms”, *Hyperallergic* (6 May 6 2019), hyperallergic.com/497512/parenting-and-labor-in-the-art-world-a-call-to-arms/, accessed 15 July 2021.

05. Hettie Judah, “How Not to Exclude Artist Parents: Some Guidelines for Institutions and Residences”, www.artist-parents.com/, accessed 22 July 2021.

06. Chus Martínez, “But Still, Like Air, I’ll Rise”, *e-flux* Journal #92, www.e-flux.com/journal/92/204117/but-still-like-air-i-ll-rise/, accessed 15 July 2021.

07. COVID-19 and gender equality: countering the regressive effects, July 15 2020 reporty by McKinsey Global Institute, accessed 26 July 2021 at www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/covid-19-and-gender-equality-countering-the-regressive-effects#

Biographies



Louise Lever makes films that prioritise minority voices and elevate women’s stories. Louise is committed to engaging audiences with ideas that matter and compelling stories. Her feature film *Revolt She Said* is nominated for Best Documentary in the NYC Independent Film Festival, and has been accepted into many festivals in North America, Australia and Europe. The film takes focus on feminism and its lack of progress, featuring former PM of NZ Helen Clark and other inspiring women. Her next film, titled *The Female Gaze*, explores the gaze and perspective in cinema, focusing on contemporary and key women directors and the important stories they are telling today.

Louise established We Are Volcanoes, a production company based in Auckland/Melbourne in 2021, with a focus on feature narratives, and is a passionate advocate for enhancing the roles of women both on screen and behind the camera. She is currently in development with two films, a documentary on the gaze in cinema and a feature narrative. She studied the Creative Leadership course with Sue Maslin in Melbourne who continues to inspire.



Frances Loeffler is a curator and writer. She has held positions at a number of arts organisations worldwide, including Oakville Galleries, Toronto, White Cube, London, and the Liverpool Biennial. Artists she has worked with include Senga Nengudi, Etel Adnan, Cosima von Bonin, Christian Marclay, Runa Islam, Haim Steinbach, Zhang Huan, Allison Katz, Pio Abad, Tamara Henderson, and Shannon Te Ao, among many others. In 2011 she was Guest Researcher at the Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht and in 2009 she was Visiting Curator at the research and commissioning agency Situations in Bristol. She is an alumna of Independent Curators International. She writes frequently for a number of other art journals internationally.

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