**Artists Working Now: Zoe Leonard**

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Lecture for Art Seminar by Paula Burleigh

The work of New York–based artist Zoe Leonard (b. 1961) exemplifies a tradition of photographers who have challenged photography’s traditional identity as an objective document. Perhaps counter–intuitively, Leonard has done so through often straight, un–manipulated photographs. Surveying her work from the 1980s to now, we will see how Leonard addresses questions that are central to the history of photography, from the complex role of place and the constructions of identity to the medium’s relationship with death and mourning. Most importantly, Leonard’s work reveals the strange power of pictures, capable of alternately absorbing and generating emotional investments, cultural biases, (mis)remembrances, and nostalgia. While Leonard is most widely known as a photographer, she actually works across media. To that end we will think about how the questions that drive her photography equally inform her practice in installation and sculpture.

**Key Themes:**

* Queer subjectivity
* Repetition
* Materiality
* The politics of display—issues of value, privilege, and power

**Text from *I want a president,* 1992:**

(note: lack of spaces and redactions are part of the original text)

I want a dyke for president. I want a person with aids for president and I want a fag for vice president and I want someone with no health insurance and I want someone who grew up in a place where the earth is so saturated with toxic waste that they didn’t have a choice about getting leukemia. I want a president that had an abortion at sixteen and I want a candidate who isn’t the lesser of two evil s and I want a president who lost their last lover to aids, who still sees that in their eyes every time they lay down to rest, who held their lover in their arms and knew they were dying. I want a president with no airconditioning, a president who has stood on line at the clinic, at the dmv, at the welfare office and has been unemployed and layed off and sexually harassed and gaybashed and deported. I want someone who has spent the night in the tombs and had a across burned on their lawn and survived rape. I want someone how has been in love and been hurt, who respects sex, who has made mistakes and learned from them. I want a Black woman for president. I want someone with bad teeth ~~and an attitude~~, someone who has eaten ~~that nasty~~ hospital food, someone who crossdresses and has done drugs and been in therapy. I want someone who has committed civil disobedience. And I want to know why this isn’t possible. I want to know why we started learning somewhere down the line that a president is always a clown: always a john and never a hooker. Always a boss and never a worker, always a liar, always a thief and never caught.