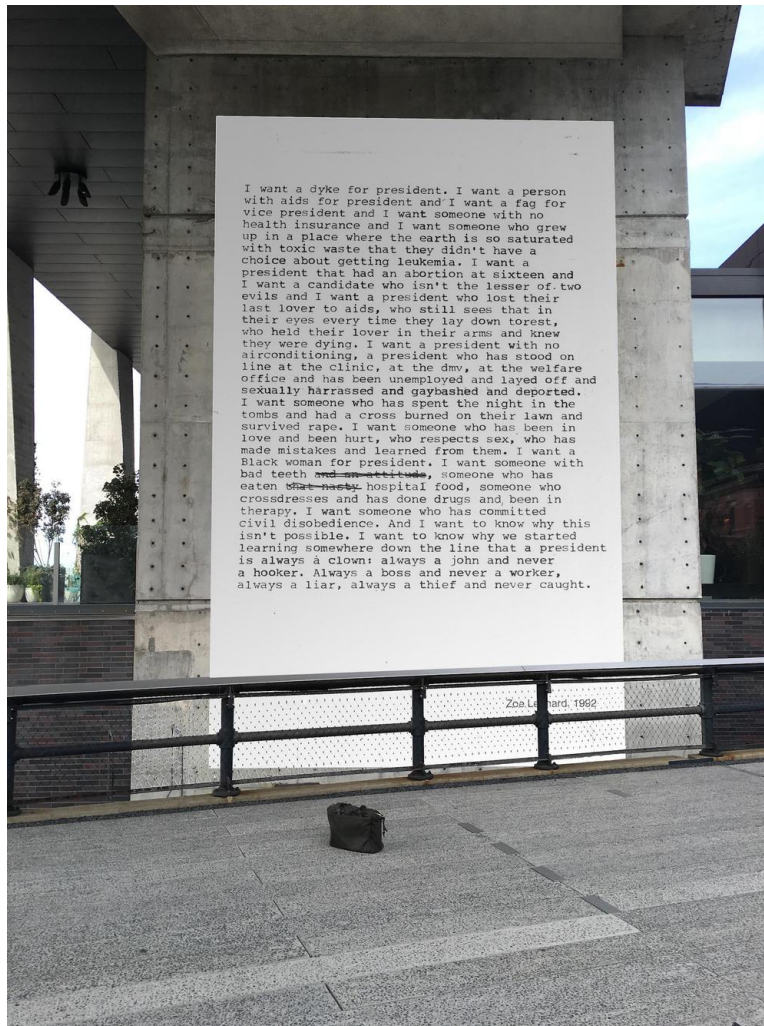


VICE

This Radical Feminist Poem Is Now a Giant-Ass Art Installation

By [Allie Conti](#)

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'I Want a President' by Zoe Leonard at the High Line in New York. Courtesy of the High Line Art

On September 11, 1991, poet and activist **Eileen Myles** sent out a letter formally announcing her run for president as an "openly female" candidate. This was in the midst of the first iteration of the American culture wars, an era in which George Bush gave **campus speeches** railing against the dangers of political correctness, despite the fact that the three main people vying to be leader of the free world at the time were all old white dudes with a lot of money.

"What scares me in politics, in public life, in 'leadership,' as it is presented to us is that it is all one face, grim and determined, it never changes," Myles later wrote to her supporters that November. In contrast, she offered up a "moody campaign."

As a gay artist with no assets or health insurance at the time, Myles was basically the opposite of that face. She was also the inspiration for the poem that's going to be blown up to 20-by-30 feet and **displayed on the High Line**—forcing tourists and New Yorkers alike to consider lines like "I want a dyke for president"—from October 11 through November 17.

"In Zoe's own words, the stakes are too high this year to fuck around."

The poem, "I Want a President," written by Myles's friend, the artist Zoe Leonard, was originally meant to be published on the back of a queer magazine that went under. Instead, Xeroxed copies were passed along to friends, who put them on their refrigerator doors, and then later replaced them with postcards after the art journal *LTTR* **printed** some in **2006**. There was another resurgence in the work's popularity when, during Sweden's 2010 election, a group of artists **held** a collective reading; other groups have since used it for **writing workshops**, allowing people to reinterpret the text as they saw fit. Given the way that the piece spread organically, it's something like a pre-internet meme—something shared, copied, and re-interpreted starting way before most Americans had internet connections at home.

Robert Hammond, the co-founder of the High Line, told me that he thinks of each line as a GIF even though they were written in 1992. As a whole, the piece is a manifesto on Leonard's desire to see an outsider—someone with AIDS or without air conditioning, a person who's had an abortion but has learned to live without money—as an elected leader.

Given that the piece sprang from the first wave of anti-PC backlash, it makes sense that its reemerged in 2016. As part of Dazed Digital's 25th anniversary, the online magazine decided to do several pieces about freedom and what it means in a world of Brexit and Donald Trump. Editor Thomas Gorton told me he wanted to work with performance artist Mykki Blanco, and so he asked himself, *What would Mykki's presidential manifesto be?*

The result was a video of Blanco **reading the poem**, which was uploaded to YouTube and, according to Gorton, racked up something like 3.5 million views in two days. The video also got picked up on various music sites, including Pitchfork, which means that Leonard's message is probably reaching a **young male** demographic that it certainly eluded before. It's gone viral again—the apotheosis of that being its impending installation on the High Line, where it'll be seen by hundreds of thousands of visitors over 37 days.

Eileen Myles currently **endorses** Hillary Clinton—someone who's hardly disenfranchised. But Melanie Kress, assistant curator at High Line Art, says that the poem based on Myles's 1992 campaign shouldn't dissuade anyone from voting for the current Democratic nominee.

"While there is a great power and beauty to calling loudly for the kind of leadership you truly yearn for—a kind of leadership that extends far beyond what we are told our available options are—it's also important to acknowledge the limitations of the system within which we all live," says Kress. "In Zoe's own words, the stakes are too high this year to fuck around."

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