

VISUAL ARTS / FEATURES / ARTICLE

Eileen Myles On Zoe Leonard's Presidential Manifesto

BY SCOTT INDRISEK | NOVEMBER 05, 2016



A view of Zoe Leonard's "I Want A President" as installed on the High Line.
(Timothy Schenck)

Zoe Leonard's "I Want A President" might have been penned in 1992, but its incendiary words are as impactful as ever — especially when they've been enlarged and put on display on the High Line, one of New York's most bustling tourist attractions. (You can read the full text [here](#).) This Sunday afternoon, a group of artists and peers — including Wu Tsang, Justin Vivian Bond, and Eileen Myles — will stage various performances related to Leonard's work. I spoke with Myles about the gift of uncomfortableness.

When Zoe Leonard wrote the original text that is now on the High Line, you were personally running for president. What did you learn from that experience?

I learned that if pressed any of us would know exactly how we'd want our country to run. A platform is an extension of the world we would live in, or do.

While we have failed to truly broaden the parameters of who can become president in this country, certainly things have changed since 1992 – we have elected our first African-American president and, barring major disasters, a woman will be in the White House for the first time by 2017. That said, do you think the larger political and cultural climate has truly changed in these two-plus decades? Or are the changes (like who we elect to represent us) more superficial?

These changes are only superficial if the people we choose to represent us are superficial. I think it felt very different to have a black president. Just as it would feel very different to have a sociopathic sexist as president. But still America is the context. It's a hapless job. There aren't more lynchings in America today and of course I'm referring to the shootings of black men and there isn't more sexual violence and I'm talking about sexual assaults on women. We have better information, more knowledge. But there are a very low number of convictions of cops killing black men and sexual assailants of women being adequately punished. That's where the P word comes in. We're living in a racist patriarchy still and white cops may kill with impunity and white men may rape and if they are well hung with privilege there is little more than a slap on their hand. We've got all the information now. It's more crucial than ever that we put a woman in the White House and feel what we've not felt before in our nation's history. We need a powerful witness and a woman with agency.

How would you say this text has been received in its latest iteration? It is on the High Line, one of the most heavily tourist-trafficked locations in the city. And printed on a tote bag!

I think people are excited even thrilled by Zoe's text. It's a gift to that family. There's humor and pathos and truth to her piece. That's a gift. If it makes them or you or me uncomfortable that too is a gift.

The final lines of the work – about clowns, liars, and thieves – have an uncanny resonance during the current election cycle. What do you plan to do if (deep breath) a certain clown actually wins on November 8?

I plan to deepen my commitment to speaking widely and proudly about the wrongs I see culturally. I plan to make it extremely clear that he is not my president and this is still my country and the people I stand with. We will change Congress. He will be impeached.

Zoe Leonard's "I Want A President" is on view on the High Line through November 17, barring the total meltdown of the United States on Election Day.