Figure 1a. Zoe Leonard, *You see I am here after all*, 2008 (detail). Installation at Dia:Beacon, Beacon, NY. Courtesy of the artist. Photo by Bill Jacobson, New York

Figure 1b. Zoe Leonard, *You see I am here after all*, 2008 (installation view). Installation at Dia:Beacon, Beacon, NY. Courtesy of the artist. Photo by Bill Jacobson, New York
Over the last two decades, the American artist Zoe Leonard (b. 1961) has emerged as one of the most visually attuned photographers of her generation, using images as a means of documentation, invention, remembrance, and critique. Regardless of the sites and objects on which she trains her lens—from piles of shoes to tangled tree branches—Leonard works from an implicitly queer and feminist perspective that puts pressure on both hegemonic modes of seeing and our ways of narrating them. Such concerns have animated my own work as a historian and critic of modern and contemporary art invested in understanding how forms of cultural difference productively deform Western conceptualizations of the aesthetic. On 12 February 2011, I spoke with Leonard about her practice and its implications for feminist approaches to vision, history, and the archive. Our conversation took place at the College Art Association annual conference in New York as part of a daylong series of events sponsored by the Feminist Art Project and organized by art historians Julia Bryan-Wilson and Johanna
Burton. Leonard and I took two of her works as touchstones for our exchange: *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* (1993–96), originally conceived as part of Cheryl Dunye’s film *The Watermelon Woman* (US, 1996), and *You see I am here after all* (2008), a gridded concatenation of vintage postcards depicting views of Niagara Falls.

Our conversation began with the latter work.

**Interview**

Huey Copeland: *I’d like to start by asking how your approach to photography in general and in your piece You see I am here after all in particular might be said to pose and answer the question of feminist form [figs. 1a–b].*

Zoe Leonard: *I am looking at how the world is ordered and thinking about how we organize our experience of it. In this work, the postcards are arranged by vantage point. The work is installed in a long space that is fairly narrow, so as the viewer, you walk past the work rather than having a frontal experience of the installation. As you look up and down, your perspective is reflected back to you. Your perspective keeps changing, but your eyes are always in line with the original vantage point of the photographer. For me, this piece is a lot about deconstructing our process of looking—each of us looking individually from our personal points of view, and also collectively, how our looking is constructed historically, socially, politically. A number of questions arise: How is something recorded? What’s the frame? How do the frame and the process of recording something determine its meaning? When I use a term like *vantage point* or *point of view*, I don’t just mean the physical space that I occupy but also my whole conceptual frame that I bring into the room along with my camera. Photography is such an immediate way of showing you my point of view: “This is how I saw it, I took this picture, and what I’m showing you is literally my perspective on something.” For me, these questions—“Where do you look from? What’s your process of looking?”—are inherently political. They are feminist questions*
because they are about power and agency, about where you stand in the world and what you can see from where you stand. I think this is a contemporary concern. Although I understand the relevance of the critique of the male gaze, I’m more interested in my own gaze, in considering the potential of the feminist gaze, the individual gaze, the queer gaze. It’s not that I don’t think it is important to deconstruct the male gaze, but I also think that continuing to focus on it gives it a lot of power, a lot of space. Maybe for women artists, the challenge is to ask, “What do I see? Where do I see from?” to recognize our own viewpoints, to engage with our desires, with our interests, and to examine the things that cloud or affect or determine how and what we see. That’s where I think the conversation can really start: when you are clear on what you see, then you can talk to someone else about their different viewpoint. For me, these questions are always in my work regardless of what the subject matter is.

I wonder if you could say a bit more about how you decided on Niagara Falls as the site around which you would accumulate this set of images. Although it isn’t a “feminine” subject or site, Niagara Falls has become loaded with all of these highly gendered, heteronormative connotations about nuptials and honeymooning. How did those connotations filter into—or fall out of—your thinking?

This piece started out very differently in my studio. I was collecting postcards of many different waterfalls with the idea that I would put them all on the wall to create one visual mass. I had this idea about working with representation and abstraction at the same time: could I use an image as both an image and a mark? Could a group of images take up space in an abstract way but simultaneously remain images and have meaning on that level? Around this time, Lynne Cooke invited me to make a site-specific commission for Dia:Beacon and I said, “Well, I’m kicking this thing around in my studio and it wouldn’t really be site-specific, but maybe it could rhyme with the site in some way.” She came to the studio and thought that it could work, so I began thinking of the work in relation to the spaces at Dia:Beacon. I went on a num-
number of site visits, and each time I brought a bunch of postcards. A thousand wasn’t enough. I came back with two thousand; that wasn’t enough. I came back with three thousand, and so on. The first visit I brought all the cards I had in the studio, from various different waterfalls, but when I put them up, it just didn’t work on the wall, it wasn’t holding. I actually hadn’t intended to use the Niagara Falls images at all. I thought they were too cliché, and they were so different from all of the other waterfalls—they always stood out. But I didn’t have enough of the other cards, so I brought the Niagara cards as filler, just to try out the idea in the space. I was up on the ladder with a group of Niagara Falls cards and I realized that in the scale of the space, they were the only images that really held the wall. Up on this ladder, looking down the length of the room, I thought, “I’m doing this backwards. Instead of taking multiple places and trying to make them into one experience, I need to take one site and deconstruct it. Take one place apart and map it out on this wall.” It was one of those moments: I said to myself, “Okay, change course and get on eBay and start buying those Niagara Falls postcards!” This turned out to be the right decision for many reasons. As you say, as a society we have projected many different meanings onto the Falls over time. At different moments in history, the Falls have stood for power, the sublime, God, territory, and the mystical. Later on they came to signify tourism and adventure, and still later, they became a symbol for romance and the honeymoon—the honeymoon being the place and time that you were supposed to be discovering sex. When you read some of the text on these postcards, when people write about viewing the Falls from every angle and every vantage point—“Oh, this marvelous experience and we’re going here and we’re going there and we’re seeing this and it’s more magnificent than I thought it would be,” or “It’s less magnificent than I thought it would be”—there’s another kind of subtext. In the 1950s, the power of Niagara Falls also came to stand for the power of female desire. There is an amazing movie called Niagara [dir. Henry Hathaway, US, 1953]. It stars Marilyn Monroe and it’s about—what is the line from the poster?—“Marilyn Monroe and ‘Niagara’ a raging torrent of emotion that even nature can’t con-
trol!” The film reveals an incredible fear of the power of female desire, which could be beautiful, certainly, but the implication is that the nature of female desire is so inherently destructive that if it is unleashed, everyone is going to die!

And that gets visually enacted in the poster for the movie, which features an astonishing image of Monroe wearing a dress that looks like a thin sheet but is actually the Falls thundering over her. The image is supposed to lure you in through a complete conflation of femininity and the sublime that is, as you say, both alluring and terrifying.²

Yes, exactly. That was the cultural mindset in the 1950s and early 1960s—that any kind of overpowering visual or physical experience was bad and terrifying. So, the more I worked on the project, I realized that Niagara Falls was the ideal subject. It was the perfect site for taking apart how a place is photographed, how we look at it, and what we project onto it. It’s also a place that was photographed a great deal from the earliest days of photography, so these postcards also track the history of photography. From very early on, the Falls were photographed from a number of specific vantage points, and they have been photographed repeatedly from these same positions over the last 150 years. The cards inventory a small history of printed matter, printing technology, and photographic approaches. For me, the project was a way to bring together a history of documentation and to think about the hierarchy of viewpoints and the idea of an ideal viewpoint. The title, You see I am here after all, is taken from one of the postcards. It’s a single line written on the front of a postcard, signed by someone named Lulu. Something about that line struck me as sort of amazing; I think Lynne used the word “defiant” to describe it, and when I first showed her the card, she said, “Only a woman would say that.” For me, the sentence is also uncomfortable; I was embarrassed to say it at first, but I think that’s OK. I also loved that almost every word in the sentence is a deictic: you, I, here, and after all. Depending on who says the sentence, it means something completely different. Who’s the “you”? Who’s the “I”? Where’s the “here”? If you read it aloud it means something different; if you
just read it to yourself it means something different. For me, that phrase does two important things for the work. It implies or indicates the many different voices on the cards, bringing the history of this writing into the picture, all of these people communicating with each other. It also calls attention to the fact that looking is always an agreement between two people; it’s a correspondence. Much as a postcard is a correspondence between two people, looking is an interaction. It’s not a one-way thing; it’s an interaction between subject and object, between viewed and viewer. I liked the way that the title opens that up and complicates the meaning of the work.

I think it’s interesting that there’s this figure called Lulu who is clearly present in the work but somehow not there visually, all of which brings me to how this piece represents a shift, in a certain sense, from some of your earlier projects, particularly The Fae Richards Photo Archive [fig. 2]. In contrast to You see I am here, Fae Richards was about trying to fabulate a photographic history that actively pictured a subject lost to the archive. Despite these differences, scholars like Johanna Burton have written, I think rightly, about the reparative urge that seems to animate your practice. I was wondering if you could speak, then, about the shift from a work like Fae Richards to You see I am here? It seems as if there’s still that reparative urge in the newer piece, an attempt to give voice to those perspectives excluded from the archive, but now those voices don’t have to be announced in the same way. What I’m trying to get at is how you understand the differences between the earlier and later works, which seem to diverge on the level of content and speak to different exigencies in terms of what counts as a feminist artistic engagement.

I guess for me there are ways in which these works are very different, yet there are also certain things that keep cropping up in my work, like the idea of the archive or the fact that I often use multiple images to make one work. The Fae Richards Photo Archive—like a lot of my work—started on a very instinctive level and then I slowly found a form for it. The work began when Cheryl Dunye, the filmmaker, approached me. She wanted to make a documentary film about a woman who never actually existed, a character named Fae
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Richards. She asked me if I could make evidence of her life, an archive of her life. I said, “Yes, let’s do that,” so it really started from that problem: to figure out how to fill out that form. Perhaps what’s most interesting for me about that piece, and most radical about it when I look back, is that we were interested in the ways that Fae Richards is real. Fae Richards is fictional, but her life is historically possible. The work consists of a number of photographs that would have been taken over the course of this woman’s life. She was a singer and an actress and then later did some political work with the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. She was queer, and she had a relationship with a white film director, a woman. Her life has a very lively trajectory. First, we wrote a timeline of her life, and then I staged and photographed a number of different events from it. The first step was to imagine when this person might have been photographed, and then to decide how many of those images might have survived. It’s an archive full of holes and absences; it’s not complete, in the way that no “real” archive would be complete. There might be a lot of pictures of one birthday party and then nothing for five years. That’s the form of the piece. What was exciting for me was the decision to make her a complex character. In many ways her life was determined by the political realities of her day—she was hampered by racism, sexism, and homophobia—and yet she had a great life. She was beautiful. She had love. She had a lot of joy, a lot of pleasure. She had intelligence and she had agency; she made choices. In the photographs, you see someone who maybe didn’t get to be as big of a star as some of her white contemporaries in Hollywood—she always had to play the maid—but at the same time you see someone who is having a full life. You don’t feel sorry for her—you feel pissed off that her talent couldn’t be fully recognized in a larger forum, but this isn’t the story of a downtrodden person. We made this character someone inventive who found ways to enjoy her life. And that feels radical and important.

One of the things that I find so compelling about this work, and your work in general, is the attempt to ethically fabulate a history, to get at some reality that is otherwise occluded. The effect is something that I aim to do in my
writing in some small way: to enter into a space that allows for an engagement with the facticity of racism and sexism and classism and homophobia as they exist on the ground, but that also opens up something else and gets us to a different set of possibilities that we wouldn’t have come upon if we were just hemmed in by what was available to us.

Yes, the way you described that is interesting. And it brings up the other interest, or challenge, in making these photographs for Cheryl. Certain histories are so vastly, wildly, crazily underrepresented that there’s this wide-open field—so much is unknown. But by looking at certain real histories—factual, documented histories—it was possible to imagine and create a historically possible person, someone who could have lived: fragments of Richards’s story were taken from the lives of Dorothy Arzner, Butterfly McQueen, Josephine Baker, and many others. I loved the challenge of imagining a person who’s fictional but who is also kind of real in a way. That is, she could have lived, though even if she had we probably wouldn’t have known about her. This work points to invisibility. It points to all of the people we don’t get to know about because we’re really busy knowing about Jackson Pollock, which is not to say that he’s not great, but to call attention to the fact that there’s this incredible yawning, continuing, exhausting invisibility of all the other kinds of makers and artists that are women, that are black, that are poor, that live in countries that don’t have the kind of art market that we have here. It felt so amazing to just go in and imagine this person. Fae Richards is a star. This work started out as material for Cheryl’s film Watermelon Woman, but the project became an artwork unto itself—I think partly because the project got so big, but also because the photographs have their own kind of logic and completeness independent from the film. Cheryl ended up only using the photographs briefly in the film, but it became clear to me that they constituted something on their own. I worked hard to develop Cheryl’s initial idea and make the archive believable. It was a technically challenging work to make: every decision about how I photographed it and how everything was printed was made so that the project could be read as work from that time. It’s a facsimile and we knew it would only work if it could “pass.”
For me, what you’ve said has resonances with Hilton Als’s book *The Women* and with the work of scholars like Saidiya Hartman who are trying to come up with different ways of narrating the past.¹ I also think that your art is an incredible spur for us as historians and critics to do the work of finding these subjects and bringing those different narratives into the frame.

I think a lot of what we experience in the world does get constructed for us. There are habits, and there are forms or places where the money gets spent and where the energy gets put, and those things get a lot of attention. But we don’t have to comply with that. You can look at whatever you want to look at. That’s what we can do as artists and thinkers and historians—just as people! And we can also look at the artists we really want to look at. We can ask to see more of their work and push for those shows to be curated. Of course, we live in a certain kind of society, and capitalism determines a lot of what gets seen. But we’re us and we can come here and look at each other, and that’s a good thing. Do you want to add to that, Huey?

Yes! *Preach, sister!* The only thing I would add is that it’s by looking to other sites that are not privileged that you begin to develop a different kind of optic. So even things that are omnipresent can start to appear differently and we can begin to understand something about the deep structure of how those appearances are administered and produced for us. I think that awareness of one’s own desires and how they’re shaped and produced opens onto other libidinal economies to work with and against.

Actually, we made a book of *You see I am here* that provides several other “different optics” or potential readings. I made a work after it, a text composed of messages from a number of Niagara Falls postcards. The text engages with the possibilities of multiple voices.² But visually, in that space? God, I don’t even know how to describe the level of optical lunacy that was involved in getting that piece up on the wall. I mean, it’s four thousand postcards spread over 147 feet of wall, and you can’t really be wrong by a millimeter because that will travel . . .
The idea of multiple optics and voices might lead us back to the topic of thinking about Niagara Falls as a feminist form, and also trying to think about the archive as a kind of feminist form.

I think the archive is a form we can take on and make feminist. Fae Richards was about taking on the preexisting form of the archive and, by extension, the whole idea of the academy, of how history is ordered and who gets the last word—what gets saved, what gets collected, how it gets presented, what disappears, and what gets lost in that process. I love the idea of the guerrilla academy, of being able to take on the forms that are preexisting in the world and to make them work for us. In a way, that relates to what Gertrude Stein does with form. Stein asks about the world and our ever-changing individual experiences of it, yet it’s always the same experience of living. The form in which she poses the question is in itself radical.

This reminds me of conversations I’ve had with Gregg Bordowitz about Gertrude Stein: he argues that she “writes with the drives.” There’s something about that description that resonates with You see I am here. There are words that recur in Stein’s writing in a circulatory movement, as in “a rose is a rose is a rose,” a phrase that’s getting at a particular object but that loops around it, denaturalizing the thing through its linguistic repetition. It’s not so much the object of the drive but the completion of its circuit that propels the writing and desire along. I think the same thing is true of your work: the accretion of all these images in You see I am here is about trying to understand not just the images in their singularity but the imperative to construct the same image over and over again. In bringing them together as a kind of archive, we can think about what that kind of ocular drive, in fact, is.

Absolutely. I think the other thing I would add is that Stein never lets you get past the writing to just the story. You’re always kept in the act of her writing and the act of your reading. That’s something I’m interested in doing in my work: I constantly re-present the frame to ask you to look at the act of looking. Yes, there is a subject, a story, or a narrative, but there’s also a consciousness
of the whole frame and of language, and the fact that language can never quite jump over and substitute for experience. There’s always a gap, the difference between my experience and yours. And that gap is a problem, but it’s a really interesting problem. It’s where a lot of life happens: you and I trying to explain, to describe, that gap to each other.

Notes
2. On this score, see Ann Reynolds, “Curving into a Straight Line,” in Leonard, *You see I am here after all*, 154–74.
5. Zoe Leonard, “This is where I was,” in *You see I am here after all*, 8–21.

**Huey Copeland** is associate professor of art history at Northwestern University. His work focuses on modern and contemporary art with emphases on the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in the Western visual field. A regular contributor to *Artforum*, Copeland has also published in *Art Journal, Callaloo, Parkett, Qui Parle, Representations,* and *Small Axe* as well as in edited volumes such as *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*. His first book, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America*, was published in 2013 by the University of Chicago Press.
Zoe Leonard lives and works in New York. An artist who works primarily with photography and sculpture, she has exhibited extensively since the late 1980s, including solo exhibitions at Camden Arts Centre, London (2012); MuMOK, Vienna (2009); Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich (2009); Reina Sofia, Madrid (2008); Dia:Beacon, Beacon, New York (2008); the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio (2007); Fotomuseum Winterthur, Switzerland (2007); Philadelphia Museum of Art (1998); Kunsthalle Basel (1997); Secession, Vienna (1997); and the Renaissance Society, Chicago (1993). Major group exhibitions include Documenta IX (1992) and Documenta XII (2007), as well as the 1993 and 1997 Whitney Biennials. She is a founding member of the artist collective fierce pussy.