

ZOE LEONARD INTERVIEWED BY ANNA BLUME

INTRODUCTION

Zoe Leonard and I met in New York City in the early 1990's. We were both members of ACT UP (The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), a group formed to fight the indifference of our government and society to the ravages of HIV disease. As with so many of us in those days, we were anonymous to one another. Details of personality or profession seemed extraneous. One day, as if whispering to one another in the trenches, we began to speak about books and poems that we had read. One thing led to another, and I found out that she was a photographer and she learned that I was an art historian.

Six years later we are still talking to one another, and that is what the following text has grown from. Zoe wanted in words something that could go with her images, not words to explain or speak over them. So we recorded, transcribed and edited together two conversations that we had, one on January 18th and one on February 15th, 1997. We move over a broad range, from her early to her most recent work. This book of words and images that we have made has been a labor of love. We begin in the middle of things.

Anna Blume

THE BEARDED WOMAN

Anna: Your work is often about people or things that are missing or silent, like your photographs of "Preserved Head of a Bearded Woman".

Zoe: That series of photographs, to me, is less about her, a woman with a beard, than it is about us, a society torn up over difference. How did this woman's head end up in this jar? Did she, while she was still alive, make an agreement to sell her body to science? Circus performers, like the tattooed man, sometimes sell their skin in advance of their own death. Did her family do that, did she have a family? How did her body end up in the hands of the people who decapitated her? And how did she end up in a back shelf on

top of a file cabinet in the Musee Orfila? I wrote many letters but I couldn't obtain information about how her head and neck and shoulders ended up in this condition. That is something I still want to know. The man that showed her to me seemed to know nothing about her. All he could tell me was that she was a bearded woman, that she lived at the turn of the century and that she had been a circus performer. None of the intention or transaction around her body is clear. For me, this piece is all about our society's discomfort with people who do not look the way we expect them to. It's about the lengths these "scientists" went to in order to distance themselves from someone who confused them. How willing they were to dishonor her. A woman with facial hair. So simple. Not so terribly unusual or shocking. But her treatment indicates that "they", whoever they are, had a very dramatic reaction to her and were willing to treat her badly; as a "specimen" rather than as a body, because of that discomfort. As a culture we have never been able to deal with difference, I find this tragic.

I have done other work that deals with women with beards. I've done some pictures with Jennifer Miller, a friend of mine, who is a performer and has a circus of her own, Circus Amok. She is a woman and has a beard. She is a phenomenal woman to talk to about gender and about representing oneself. We did a series of pictures which were take-offs on Marilyn Monroe's pin-up pictures. Jennifer posed naked in "sexy" poses with her beautiful body and full beard. She looks great. The pictures are both funny and confrontational.

Anna: Where do you see the difference between your photographs of Jennifer and the placement of the "Bearded Woman" under a bell jar?

Zoe: For me the difference is that Jennifer is alive and here. She's working with me to make decisions about her own image. She is a performer and she is performing these pictures. We are both interested in exploring ideas of beauty, strangeness and fear. We are allies and accomplices.

Anna: How do you think Jennifer's active involvement marks itself in your photographs of her? What mark is there that is not there in the "Bearded Woman" under glass?

Zoe: There is irony in these images of Jennifer. Irony and humor that she and I both control. The photographs are a kind of performance that allow us to disturb a familiar cultural icon.

We use the provocative female pose to get at something else. We are trying to go inside that cliché and transform it; to ask a series of questions. Jennifer and I are colluding. With the "Bearded Woman", I don't know how complicit she was in having herself decapitated and entered into the annals of science. Was she given money? Was there any exchange of ideas, as there is between Jennifer and I? The "Bearded Woman" remains nameless, she was not invited to speak for herself. Jennifer gets a percentage from the sales of photographs of her, her name is in the title, she is alive, she has veto

power. Her active participation in the making of these images is tangible, while the "Bearded Woman"'s identity and voice are conspicuously absent.

Anna: It seems that you want to have a conversation with the "Bearded Woman" and that you want your photographs to in some way serve as a medium for that conversation, to break through that glass or break through that silence, which is her death. Talking with Jennifer seems to be, at least in part, a way of bringing language back to the "Bearded Woman".

Zoe: I can't speak for the "Bearded Woman" or to her. But in the darkroom that first time I knew that I was another person, along with the taxidermist and directors of the Musee Orfila, that had control of her image. Someone had control of her head and now I had control of her image. That thought terrified me. This woman is not here, she can't speak. I can't look at her, because she's not here, but I can look at what we did to her. I didn't want to do to her what they had done to her. I didn't want to freak her; I wanted to de-freak her. What is disturbing in these photographs is not her or her beard - it is her decapitation, the pedestal and the bell jar. What is disturbing is that someone or some group of people thought that was acceptable. She isn't honored. She is in a dusty corner of museum that is not open to the public. None of our recognized rituals of honoring the dead are bestowed on her. No name, no grave, no plaque, just dismemberment and obscurity.

With these pictures I wanted to begin to construct a place of respect for her. When I printed the negatives of her, they frightened me. I felt something deeply painful in her circumstances and I was frightened of hurting her any further. I felt responsible for representing her now that her image was in my hands. I asked Jennifer Miller for help. That's how we met. Jennifer talked with me and helped me figure out this piece, From those discussions, I decided to show all five images of the "Bearded Woman" together. They take up the entire wall. The angles of each photograph are different as are the actual print sizes, but the size of her head and eye level are printed to remain constant. In that way, she watches you and follows you as you look at her. With five images of her in a row I try to get the viewer to spend more time with her. You can't just walk past, you have to take some time if you are going to look at all. I wanted to slow people down enough so that they would begin to question her presentation rather than her appearance.

Anna: Collaboration keeps coming back in your work in a profound way. You work with Jennifer Miller as a living person, but also you work with the inanimate or the dead. You have this desire to animate the inanimate and have some kind of conversation with people that are gone or never existed, or to have a conversation with silent objects through the work that you do. You collaborate with whatever you work with as a way to give the objects of your inquiry the same status of subjectivity that you have yourself.

Zoe: I never thought about it in those terms. Part of why I like photography is that it is a form of observation. Just walking down the street I am amazed by how much of everything already exists. There is so much beauty; there is so much cruelty. Part of the wonder of photographs is that, yes you are making another object, but the object that you are making is from something that is already there. There is an aspect of photography that is like hunting and gathering. Some people do performative work with photography, like Cindy Sherman, this is something else entirely. I go out into the world and find things, images or situations that strike a cord in me. Like any good hunter or gatherer I am grateful that those things are there. And, I recognize their autonomy from me even if they are inanimate objects like rocks, bones or stars.

THE FAE RICHARDS PHOTO ARCHIVE

Anna: In an obverse way the "Fae Richards Photo Archive" that you produced for the film "The Watermelon Woman", is similar to your work with the "Bearded Woman". The "Bearded Woman" existed, though we do not have her history. You use your photographs of her in a way to tease out the fact of her lost history, to engage us in that absence. Fae Richards on the other hand did not exist, she is an entirely imaginary woman whose history you have created through photographs. From what I know of her, she was a black woman who was to have existed in the early 1900's. She was a lesbian, a servant, and a performer. Had she existed we may not have known much of her, she might have just as likely been obscured, with only remnants left of her life. How did this very different though similar project come about?

Zoe: I never would have thought about that connection, but you are right. Both these pieces are about questioning history. Fae Richards is a character that Cheryl Dunye conceived. Cheryl Dunye is a filmmaker. Cheryl wanted to make a "documentary" about this "historical" character. She came to me with a raw, just-formed idea of Fae. She asked me if I would make an "archive" of her life to use in a film she was making. Over a period of a year I helped her flesh out Fae's character. On my own, I did some research into photographic history and the history of Hollywood and "race films". I spent time at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, and the Lesbian Herstory Archives.

I examined photographs from the 20's, 30's and 40's especially. I saw all the film stills from "Gone with the Wind", "Imitation of Life", and several race films - including Oscar Micheaux's work. I also looked at James Van der Zee's photographs and researched the lives of Josephine Baker, Hattie McDaniels and Butterfly McQueen. With Cheryl's help I then came up with a list of photographic ideas for about fifty images that would show the trajectory of her life, but still leave empty holes and questions. Cheryl assembled most of the cast for the photographs from among our friends. We put together a cast and crew of about forty-five people. We shot the photographs in two sessions, one in Philadelphia, one in New York. For me, it was the first time working with actors, lights, make-up and

sets. After two years of work, when the photographs were completed, Cheryl used them as source material in her film, "The Watermelon Woman". She also included some fake "newsreel" footage and "home movie" footage that I shot at the same time.

Fae is fictional, but what I came to love about her is that she could have existed. She is historically possible. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands of women that in some way or another approximate her: powerful, talented Black women who slipped through the cracks of history, lesbians that weren't seen as important enough to document or remember. Who were all those mammies in those 1920's movies? Who remembers or knows details of their personal lives? A Black woman like Josephine Baker couldn't stand to live in this country back then. When she performed at the Ziegfeld Follies she was not allowed to enter through the lobby, even though she was the star of the show.

This country was and is so racist.

At that time in history, when Fae was to have existed, Black people and White people lived in parallel universes. Because white culture was so dominant and had access to so much more money, we know a lot about white actors and actresses of that time. We know almost nothing about Black Hollywood. Fae Richards was in many ways trapped by the racism, sexism and homophobia of her time but she also bursts through those constrictions. She did what she wanted to do with her life. She becomes an actress, she has an affair with Martha Page. She lives in Hollywood and leaves when she grows too frustrated with the restrictions on her career. She leaves Martha. She moves back to Philadelphia and stars in race films. She gets involved with the NAACP. She performs in clubs, she hangs out with black artists, musicians and writers. When Liberty Pictures folds, she puts together a cabaret act and falls in love with June Walker. They grow old together and she dies. She lives, all told, a rich and wonderful life. But - the question is - how much more could she have done, how different would her life have been if Hollywood had not been so backward, narrow, and racist?

What we see of Fae Richards is precisely what we have not been allowed to see of other Black women from that period. I believe in her completely as a person and as a character. Working on the set, we all fell in love with her. Lisa Marie Bronson, the actress who played Fae, made her real for me, She made her elegant and tough. A number of these images are constructed to illustrate the racist stereotypes of that era, but she is not pictured only as a victim. There are many pictures that show her having fun, experiencing pleasure. She had money and fame. She is a powerful, sexy, intense woman, with a rich private life.

Anna: Making work for you is this kind of intervention against silencing. You address the process of erasure with a different kind of marking or trace through photographs.

Zoe: On a bad day, I feel hopeless and that nothing I do will make any difference. On a good day, I am reminded how important images are to people.

Anna: With the "Fae Richards Archive" you chose to print each image in a different way, to give each image a certain authenticity.

Zoe: The Archive is composed of snap shots from her private life, film stills and publicity pictures from her career, both in Hollywood and also her later race films. To produce these different kinds of images, I researched different photographic conventions and techniques of printing particular to the 1920's through the 1970's. I didn't want to risk working with antique cameras so I shot everything on my Nikon FM camera with a 50mm lens on 35mm TriX film, and did all the "aging" in the darkroom. These pictures had to look as though they were taken by many different people, over a span of fifty years. With that as our goal, I drew up printing instructions for each image with sets of paper and chemistry and then worked with eight other people to get the printing done. Each person had my instructions, but they also had their interpretation and methods so the images were more diverse than they would have been had I done all the printing myself. I didn't want my hand and eye to be completely dominant. When I shot the "film still" of "Jersey Girl", I used a very strong light on the face of the white actress to accentuate her whiteness, which was often done in Hollywood films from the 1930's. Even though Fae is in the foreground of this image she appears inconsequential, ignored by the light. Black people were often underlit and White women, in glamorous roles, were overlit. These are some of the ways I tried to understand and play with Hollywood conventions of representation. I also looked at pictures of Dorothy Arzner, a female director in Hollywood from the 1930's, who provided the historical prototype for Martha's character. Dorothy had a very obvious butch persona and Hollywood did not know how to deal with that. Sometimes, they tried to do this girl-director thing with her in dresses etc., but her style was so insistently butch that she ended up being photographed as a man. Women would usually be lit with a heavy light from above which makes their skin white, white, white, and all you see are eyes and lips, Men were lit from the side, making their features chiselled and accentuated.

Anna: This question regarding the Fae Richards Archive seems very similar to questions that you had with the "Bearded Woman". In both cases you place yourself within the territory of objectification made within the realm of images. As an image-maker yourself you are again re-charting across the narrow confines of previous traditions of representation that were complicit with oppression and prejudice.

Zoe: Sometimes you have to call up things you don't like in order to examine them. Say in a movie like *The Accused*, how do you make a movie about rape without making it sexually exciting? That's the problem. In order to make the project work we had to make some very racist imagery. Some pretty scary pictures. It was difficult for Lisa Marie. Some of the photographs were very hard to do, both for Lisa Marie, who played Fae and for myself. Lisa is a Black woman and I am a White woman. For some reason, from the first day Lisa trusted me and the project. Our challenge was: how do you make a project about racism without being racist?

I remember when we did one particular image where Fae is in a mammy outfit and she is kneeling on the ground praying. The picture is supposed to be a still from the film *Plantation Memories*. I didn't know Lisa Marie very well; I had just met her the night before and this was our first day of shooting. To do this shot I had to ask this grown Black woman to kneel down and pray with this fucking do-rag on her head. And she did it. She trusted me. She knew that we were trying to use these images to look at racism, to take it apart. And that this image was going out into the world with a context.

Anna: When you speak about Fae Richards, I have this uncanny sense that she did exist. With your work in general I get the sense that you are taking me somewhere plausible yet fragile.

Zoe: I do believe in Fae Richards. She is not real, but she is true. You can't find out everything about Fae from the images, but hopefully there is enough there to suggest her complexities. Its like when someone real dies, when you go through their apartment, a lot of their stuff is inexplicable. Once a person is gone all the questions can no longer be answered. There is not one definitive truth about their lives. I tried to make "The Archive" sketchy that way, battered and not all there.

PHOTOGRAPHIC WORK FROM THE MID 1980'S TO EARLY 1990'S

Anna: In the work you did five or six years before the "Bearded Woman" and the Fae Richards Archive, the aerial photographs of cities or the images of the Atlantic, you seem very far away in comparison, looking and documenting from a distance. These earlier photographs from the 1980's appear to be about a certain kind of locating, as if you had arrived here from someplace entirely foreign and were looking on land and water or cities for the first time. It's not even clear from the images that a human being took them, they have a tinge of warmth that comes from subjective looking, but they are also so removed and curious, like someone looking not knowing the names of anything. All this foregrounds formal aspects of your work which have come back over the years even as your work changed.

Zoe: As always, I think the work is instinctive. It is not planned. At that time, I photographed things and images that were beautiful to me. I was attracted to photography, but not so much the fine arts tradition of photography. I loved, and still love, looking at aerial reconnaissance pictures and science pictures and snap shots, photographs that were taken for reasons other than "art". I wasn't so interested in looking at the perfect light in Edward Weston's "Pepper". These photographs had a different reason for being. They have a rawness and beauty to them. I love to travel so I found

myself in airplanes a lot. Later on I actually took some piloting lessons and flew in small planes and helicopters.

Anna: The Niagara Falls images are listed in the catalogue as from 1986/90. What does that four year span mean for the production of a photograph?

Zoe: Many times I take a picture and I don't work with it for a long time. Or I look at it and print it a little, and put it away and later print it some more. It might take a year or four years or five years for me to understand, not even necessarily in words, but for me to understand internally, why this picture needs to be finished and what form it needs to be in, and how big it needs to be, or how dark it should be, or what paper it should be on. Right now I am working on two images from 1978, one of the back of my grandmother's head, and one of my mother in the back seat of the car. I liked the images back then, but I didn't know what to do with them.

Anna: When you date a work you give it the date you took the photograph and then add on dates as you print it again over time in different editions, as if work fluctuates in when and how, it has a life.

Zoe: It's a convention in photography to use the date when the photograph was taken and then the date of the print. You may have posthumous prints or prints done later in life. For me what those dates tend to sandwich is the latent time of that image in my mind. The moment I take a picture is one date and the moment I might understand it and print an edition of it is another, so I give both dates.

It is important to me to do my own printing. I do all my own darkroom work, except for a few color images that I have been working on lately and the "Fae Richards Archive" which I printed in collaboration with eight other people. I am very particular about the quality of my prints. I am not necessarily a good printer, but I am a very particular printer. I know what I want and I know how to get it. I'm not pristine or good in the technical sense, but I have a very strong flavor.

Anna: Many of your photographs, by the time they are exhibited have holes in the corners, or the corners are worn from being handled. I've often seen you move final prints in your studio or constantly move them while working on an installation, and this handling leaves a trace of use that is not often permitted or welcome with a final print.

Zoe: I love photographs, I love to handle them. I love that it's a work on paper and that it is a drawing with light and it happens on this emulsion surface. To me there is an interesting territory about the perception of photographs. People often seem to be under the illusion that they are real, that a photograph is a real moment. I think that is

ridiculous. For me its not reality; it's a subjective view. It's a picture. I go out and I see things my way and take my photograph among all the millions of photographs that can be taken. I take this one. The reason why I leave the dust and the holes and the mistakes in my final prints is I want to invite people to understand that a photograph is a work on paper. It's an object. It's not reality. It's not truth. It's a work on paper, and I made it. This is my truth. And my truth is no more true than anyone else's. I also love how tactile a photograph is; their physical presence is very beautiful to me.

In the photographs from the mid-80's, I was interested in how human beings leave things behind. We go about our business and that leaves a trace. I was interested in looking at our traces, seeing them from above. I was interested in what the traces we leave say about us as a people. Our architecture, our roads, the very small pieces of land left untouched, the way that farms look from the sky, the way that Turkey or India looks from the sky compared to Europe or America.

Then I got into photographing maps. I was interested in who decided what was important, what got mapped. There are political maps, geographic maps, there are weather maps and street maps. There is, again, a misconception that a map is an objective tool for learning or navigating. But, actually the way that you choose to map something will determine how you navigate. You determine their focus. So, I was looking at our planet and the way we describe it. It seems vague to tie it all together because it's so basic and so big, but I was questioning what these different maps were and what information they contained. I am still doing this work. Different subjects, same terrain. It's about the power of looking and the power of subjective truth. The camera stands in for the eye, for me.

Anna: This makes me think of your photographs of the bullfight. The bullfight is so obviously a social form that is about mapping our relationship to gender and our relationship to animals. The matador shifts from being a man to woman as he approaches and seduces the bull. He is one person in relation to an animal that hundreds of people are watching from above.

Zoe: It's incredibly violent and antagonistic and there is a winner and a loser and something is getting killed.

Anna: The bullfight is a map of sexual relations and relations of war or relations of pleasure, and looking. That you intuitively knew that the bullfight existed within this sequence of aerial images, of the way we mark or the possibilities of looking, is where you are able to take desperate fragments and arrange them in such a way that they stimulate thought, thought about things that are really familiar, but that we don't take the time or have the perspective to care about, like clouds or water or city planning.

Zoe: I wanted to look at the surfaces of things. For a time I used to hang the water next to a map, because there was a map that had almost the same shape as the image of water.

What is the information that is available on these two surfaces? Do you see the streets or do you see the wrinkles of the paper, do you see the shadow, do you see the potential for what's beneath the surface?

In a way, I think that work from the 80's is the hardest to talk about. Probably because it really contains all of the biggest questions that I want to ask as an artist and it does it in the least verbal manner. There is not a whole lot to grab onto in terms of content or subject matter to talk about. They are slippery images. They contain the nugget of what I seem to be drawn to, the questions I seem to be drawn to: Why do things look the way they look, what is it that we make and what is it that we leave behind? Those photographs are about looking and they are about seeing, they are about perception. Back when I was doing those aerial pictures, I remember the first time that I included the window frame. I realized: that's me, that's my frame of reference. I realized that I was ready to come inside and start photographing my life a little closer and that where I had been heading with all that work was that window frame. And saying, okay, this is who is seeing this, this is what the world looks like to me. It was no longer just saying it's a map out there or a place down there. I was frustrated with how distant and abstract and empty my work was starting to feel. It felt too far away from my daily life. The window frame of that airplane came into the picture at a time in my life when I was dealing with a lot of very tangible horror in my own life because of AIDS. I was beginning to become an activist and realizing that I just could not keep doing these ambiguous, beautiful, pictures anymore. I needed to do something that had the same kind of vitality that I had in my personal and activist life. I was frozen for about a year, and then in one season I did all the fashion show pictures and began the wax anatomical models and all the medical history work. I was like, okay, the plane is going to land and I'm going to start looking at this shit right around me. And I'm going to start looking at it from the point of view of someone standing up not someone flying. Looking up the skirt, looking down on the model they are all done from my eye level. All the stuff that I learned about perspective and point of view, I took all that technical stuff and I applied it to things that were current.

In my life as an activist I was dealing with sexism and homophobia in medicine, so I went to medical museums and looked. Those anatomical models are history. They are our inheritance. I wanted to see evidence. I wanted to find roots of these problems, the proof of these problems. Start untying the knot.

ACTIVISM AND DOCUMENTA IX

Anna: As an activist you worked collectively making mass-produced images or using your body in demonstrations. In 1992 you made a poster which was literally a portrait of a woman's vagina that read, "Read my lips before they are sealed". It was so simple and shocking to see a vagina referred to as something that could speak for itself, rather than something to always be looked at or fawned over.

Zoe: Gang made that poster. Gang was an art collective and I was a member. All of us were in ACT UP, and I guess we were sort of inspired by Gran Fury, by the possibility of making propaganda that was beautiful and inciting and incisive. It was a way to channel, I think, our talents as artists through our anger as activists, and come out with something that would exist outside gallery walls. Something that would unite art and our need to create change in the world. Suzanne Wright (a friend and member of Gang) and I came up with the idea for that poster.

Anna: The phrasing was a parody on Bush and his promise not to raise taxes when he was running for President. "Read my lips. I won't raise taxes ... "

Zoe: "Read my lips before they're sealed", it's a pun. It was made in response to the "gag order" which actually forbade clinicians or places like Planned Parenthood to even say the word abortion. If somebody went to Planned Parenthood to get advice, they were not even allowed to speak about abortion as an option.

We were thinking about the whole idea that we were losing control of our bodies, losing control of our speech, and that the government was coming closer and closer inside our homes. And for women, it was actually that the government was entering our bodies, and so we got this idea to use the orifice of the vagina. I think it was one of our most successful posters. We also used that same image and basic layout for the back of an issue of the magazine Social Text. We thought it would be funny and sexy and shocking and direct. It got people to do a double take on the street. The reason why that image and those words, "Read my lips before they're sealed", worked so well, is that it united the concerns of abortion and control of our own bodies with the concerns of freedom of speech.

Anna: So you were linking freedom of speech with freedom of expression of a woman with her own body?

Zoe: We were linking it and we were also responding to the way that it was being linked in prolife, right wing, crazy rhetoric and censorship. And so we used the vagina and the word lips to make this connection to how our bodies were being censored, our voices were being censored, and people weren't being allowed to get information they needed. Not only were they trying to criminalize abortion, they were trying to criminalize talking about abortion. Although it was made in response to the gag order, it got at the heart of our battle in AIDS, gay rights, feminist activism: the right to self-determination and personal choice.

Anna: What happened when these posters went out on the street? Did they come down, did people write on them?

Zoe: Torn down, immediately. And the ones that stayed up were scratched at, often people just tried to scratch away at the vagina.

Anna: On the street vaginas were threatening. Whereas you would buy Playboy or Hustler, and in the privacy of your home or some bathroom somewhere the general public felt safe with such images.

Zoe: I think the poster antagonized some people. Jesse Helms, the most vociferous opponent to abortion within the U.S. Senate at the time, railed about our poster on the Senate floor. We'd expected that kind of response. But what surprised us was that it caused a bit of a furor among certain women, feminists. I remember lots of women talking to me about it and being upset about it. They felt protective of this image on the street. I understand that, no matter how liberated and powerful and strong we are, women still feel threatened on the street.

I remember a couple of women saying that the poster made them angry. Others thought we were encouraging pornography. Certain people felt we were increasing tension by placing this vulnerable image on the street. We were trying to own this image, much in the same way that we decided to own the words "fag" and "dyke" and "queer". That owning our image, owning our bodies and owning our representation is radical. That is how you make freedom. Freedom has to be made. It has to be taken.

Anna: What other groups were you involved in at the time?

Zoe: I was a member of ACT UP for a long time, and I did work with WAC and WHAM. In terms of art collectives I worked with Gang and Fierce Pussy. Fierce Pussy was an art collective that I co-founded with my friends Suzanne Wright and Nancy Brody. It was an all dyke, all girl endeavor. Joy Episalla was in that, and Carrie Yamaoka, Pam Brandt, a bunch of us. Alison Froling joined later. We did many different projects. Some of us were artists, some of us weren't. The projects had a lot of range. Our first project was just a list of words: dyke, muffdiver, bulldagger, etc. We just made three lists, typed up the words, xeroxed them and wheat pasted them on the street. All very fast.

Then we did a series about childhood. We did a whole series of posters, where we used each other's childhood pictures with captions like, "Find the dyke in this picture.", "How many dykes in this picture?", "Are you a boy or a girl?". We did a billboard in Vienna where we used a picture of my second grade class with words typed across the top that say: "How many dykes in this picture?". It implicates the teachers as well as the students.

Anna: It also, at least in this country, confronts the idea that homosexuals are somehow toxic to children. And it somehow brings the question to it, that homosexuality can be in the child as play or a dream or fantasy, not something ominous or outside.

Zoe: That's something we wanted to address.

Anna: I loved seeing those images on the streets in New York. I didn't know you at the time, and I remember seeing them, thinking, "This is so beautiful": It made me feel at ease with the fact that memories of my homosexuality go as far back as my memories of myself, and it felt very sweet that way.

Zoe: Good. For us it was a chance to rewrite our own experiences, and to claim them. I think we felt that the whole child-homo thing is too scary for people. We weren't even going to try to respond to the social dialogue around that, we were just going to create our own, and to do it with a little bit of humor and a little bit of charm. These are our pictures, this is our life. We can do whatever we want. We weren't appropriating anyone else's image, or accusing anyone. We were just telling stories, telling jokes. Our stories. For instance, there's one little picture of Carrie as a baby and it says "Muffdiver". There's one of Jean Carlomusto as a baby, laughing in a cotton dress, and it says "Dyke". There are pictures of us in our strollers and there's one of two girls playing in a backyard: real suburban, little tube tops, and it says, "She had recurring dreams about the girl next door". They're our own memories. Things happened organically with that group. Things were very personal.

Everything was low budget. We'd get an idea, people would bring their snapshots in, we typed everything up on this old typewriter, and then we'd just glue everything up and Xerox it. No production value at all. We never spent a penny. In fact, Joy and Carrie used to make Xeroxes for free at work.

Anna: From the Gang poster of "Read My Lips", how long after that did you do the Documenta installation?

Zoe: Not long, probably the next season. It was a long, involved, winding road that brought me to what I finally did at Documenta. I had only done one site-specific piece before. I had never responded to other works of art. I had never worked inside a museum like that.

Anna: When you chose that room, was it a requirement to work with those paintings, or could you have had them all taken out?

Zoe: I could have done whatever I wanted ...

Anna: So you decided to keep the paintings in and work with them?

Zoe: The paintings were what made me want to work in those rooms. The paintings and the wallpaper. I didn't know why, but I knew that there was something in those rooms for me. There weren't a whole lot of really good paintings. Mostly they were pretty trashy, regional, second-rate paintings - very bourgeois work. There were a lot of naked women, and a lot of naked women with clothed men. There was a lot of "Diana, The Huntress", and a lot of very bourgeois portraits of women. There were a couple of portraits of men, and there were a few landscapes and war scenes and I took those out. What was left was seven rooms of women.

It was a long process with many fits and starts before I understood how to tie all those different images together. It really went back for me to years of going to museums. As a kid and still now I wonder, "Where do I fit in to this set -up here?". There was both too much and not enough.

Anna: Fit in as a viewer, or fit in as a person who is going to make images?

Zoe: Both. That we as women are over-present as objects and under-present as makers. And that our sex is over-present as something to be looked at, and under-present as something we experience. I'm not saying those paintings are wrong. All those guys who made those paintings, they're not wrong, they're not bad, they did what they wanted to do. They painted what they wanted to see. But I want to do what I want to do. That's what is missing: women making art, and women being represented by themselves. I wasn't interested in re-examining the male gaze; I wanted to understand my own gaze. I mean, who knows who these women were: the models, the sitters for these paintings? They may have had kids, they might have had lovers, they jerked off, they might have been comfortable and happy, some of them might have loved these paintings, some of them might have commissioned these paintings; it's complicated. My first plan was to respond to it in a complicated way. I was going to bring in the photographs of the "Bearded woman", and the photographs of the "Mirrors", and all these different images. I worked on that premise for almost a year. And a week before I was supposed to go to Kassel to install, I was monkeying around here in my studio, and I looked down and I saw the print for that Gang poster on the floor. I looked at it, and I thought, "Oh my God. That has everything in it". It's the most aggressive image and the most passive image. It's the thing that people are most afraid to look at, most afraid to talk about, most eager to look at, most eager to talk about, and it is the very thing that's both missing and overly present in all those paintings. It focused everything. I was trying to get myself and the audience to be more honest. What are you seeing? What do you really want to look at? How does all this make you feel? Are you nervous? I was trying to expose the undercurrent. And I did it, actually, all very blindly.

Anna: Was it blindly or intuitively...?

Zoe: Both. Blindly and intuitively. I just groped. Groped and groped.

Anna: You made a conscious decision, however, to photograph more than one woman. You could have produced just one "crotch shot" literally throughout the whole show, but instead you chose to photograph several different women.

Zoe: Well, I thought that would be too obvious and that it would be too rhetorical, it would be like "The Omnipresent Pussy". What I was after was something more subtle and varied. There isn't an omnipresent pussy, there is not an omnipresent female experience. Either as an artist, a viewer, or an object.

Anna: You can't homogenize it.

Zoe: Exactly. I photographed six different women, and I used perhaps a dozen different images. And some of those images were repeated more than once. There were nineteen photographs in all.

Anna: After Documenta you went to India, and when you came back from India, you moved to Provincetown. On some level you were making a decision to leave New York. From India or Provincetown you couldn't have the same relationship to collective activism that you had had in the City. You seemed to need a different kind of time and space in your daily life.

Zoe: It was a big change in my life. I was missing something in my life. My life was all about stress and responding to crises. I wanted more air, and I wanted something more elemental. I think I also needed time to heal and to mourn the friends who'd died of AIDS. You know, I think that's something we're all still experiencing.

Anna: When I first met you I only knew you as an activist. Later, when we would talk about art or being an artist you pulled away from that word, from the whole idea as if to say, "I just do what I do". You were almost defensive about this title "artist". You were very identified as someone who does things in the realm of representation, but to be inside the idea of an artist just did not seem comfortable to you.

Zoe: I think at that time I felt almost guilty making art, because people were dropping like flies. They still are. And I felt that making art was this incredibly indulgent thing,

and the work that I was making felt so far away from the reality of what was happening. I remember one time having lunch with David Wojnarowicz, and I had these small work prints of clouds with me. And I was showing them to him and I was almost crying. I was like, "David, what the fuck am I doing?" Because I'd finally been offered my first show in Germany. All my life as a kid into my adulthood I wanted to be an artist. I'd assumed I was an artist. I started doing photography when I was sixteen, and I was finally being offered shows, but I somehow couldn't enjoy any of it because I felt like, "Who am I to have these pictures of these cities from the air and I'm going to Germany to show them, and meanwhile, we're protesting and shutting down the floor of Wall Street". Who was I to say, "I can't go to Albany to shut down the capital because I'm going to Germany to do my art show". I felt guilty and torn. I felt detached - my work was so subtle and abstract, so apolitical on the surface. I remember showing those pictures to David and talking things over with him and he said - I'm paraphrasing - "Don't ever give up beauty. We're fighting so that we can have things like this, so that we can have beauty again". You know, we were all just too busy for beauty. We were too angry for beauty. We were too heartbroken for beauty. I felt like an asshole with these picture of clouds, but David was right. You go through all of the fighting not because you want to fight, but because you want to get somewhere as a people. You want to help create a world where you can sit around and think about clouds. That should be our right as human beings.

STRANGE FRUIT

Anna: There was a question back then, on some level it's still a question: how can the strength of your experience translate into your work? Can you get that need for intervention into the things that you make? It seemed to have been a conflict before '92. With Documenta you crossed some line or created a bridge between activism and your visual art. With the "Read my lips" poster and the Documenta installation, activism and fine arts collided, beautifully and successfully. And then you retreated to be by yourself in a very isolated part of the East Coast, up to Provincetown during the winter, a place where most people go in the summer. Later, you went even further when you moved to Alaska for nearly two years. A body of work that came out of that is the sculpture of over two hundred pieces of sewn fruit. These pieces of fruit appear to me to be on the other side of that bridge between activism and fine arts. In part they are about the mourning and about the loss of our friends from AIDS.

Not only did we lose them, but in a sense we didn't have to lose them. If we lived in a world that had really cared about faggots and prostitutes and drug users, something would have been done. When I saw the sewn fruit on your windowsill, I could see it as the debris and the residue of that sense of loss. Even though they are really small and frail, I felt they were still a kind of intervention. They were a different kind of banging at the door of the NIH (National Institute of Health), or carrying our friends' bodies through the streets. And it seemed, also, in terms of your production as an artist, that what was in conflict before was not necessarily in conflict any longer. You had found a way to be

inside your work and inside your sense of the world you lived in; the two were somehow welded together.

Zoe: It's interesting to me what you say about activism, because to me this is not an activist piece. I don't know how it will function in the world, but for me, activist work is about putting stuff out on the street, about creating propaganda. Or, about doing direct action. Probably the biggest difference for me was that activism, by its nature was always very loud and very verbal. It was sincere, but it was very external and exterior, about going out and finding the right way to say something.

Finding the sound bite, getting arrested, working with other people. The fruit is very, very silent. The fruit came from a deeply private, nonverbal, even nonvisual place. It is me alone in a room with my thoughts and thread. It was sort of a way to sew myself back up. I didn't even realize I was making art when I started doing them. I had no intention to make art. I had just come back from India and was impressed with how each scrap of paper, each bit of wire was used to its maximum, to the very end of its possible useful life. I was tired of wasting things. Throwing things out all the time.

One morning I'd eaten these two oranges and I just didn't want to throw the peels away, so, absentmindedly, I sewed them back-up. Then much later I remembered a sculpture that David Wojnarowicz had made. A loaf of bread he broke in half and stitched back together with this thick red embroidery thread. That silky embroidery thread was almost like blood, it is almost like the bread was bleeding.

Over the year that I was in Provincetown I started sewing these things, obsessively, by myself. At first, it was a way to think about David. I'd think about the things I'd like to repair and all the things I'd like to put back together, not only losing him in his death, but losing him in our friendship while he was still alive. After a while I began thinking about loss itself, the actual act of repairing. All the friends I'd lost, all the mistakes I've made. The inevitability of a scarred life. The attempt to sew it back together.

This act of fixing something broken, repairing the skin after the fruit is gone strikes me as both pathetic and beautiful. At any rate, as intensely human. You can try to fix it, but the fruit is gone. And yet, we need repositories for our grief. We need eulogies. And relics. Monuments and mementos.

This mending cannot possibly mend any real wounds, but it provided something for me. Maybe just time, or the rhythm of sewing. I haven't been able to change anything in the past, or bring back any of the people I love who have died, but I've been able to experience my love and loss in a measured and continuous way; to remember.

Once the fruit is eaten, I sew it closed, restore its form. They are empty now, just skin. The fruit is gone. They are like memory; these skins are no longer the fruit itself, but a form reminiscent of the original. You pay homage to what remains. We bury the body of the person we love, the person is gone but we bury their body. We have their memories, their clothing, we have their books, and we hang onto these things. It's both a preposterous and beautiful thing to do, and we're drawn to it, like animals, we don't have a choice but to do this.

Anna: Once you began sewing the fruit, you changed its status from food to "Stillife". By literally thinking and moving personal sensations of loss and memory through this substance, you transformed it from nourishment of one kind to nourishment of another.

Zoe: At a certain point I did realize that the sewn fruit had become one big piece; a sculpture. In order to have it go out in the world and be sold or whatever, Paula had suggested that I preserve it. Christian Scheidemann, a very talented and sensitive art conservator, worked with me over the last couple of years to see if it was possible to arrest the decay of the fruit at a certain point without changing their appearance. He came up with a successful solution, but when I saw it, I knew it was wrong. The very essence of the piece is to decompose. The absurdity, irony, pain and humor of it is that we attempt to hang on to memory, but we forget. All elements wear down in time, change form.

So, I've decided to keep this group of sewn fruit together, as one piece, to decompose in its own time. It's very fragile; some of the older ones are already starting to crack and go. I would love for this piece to have a room somewhere where I could install them and then leave them be. Just let them decay.

I asked Christian to preserve about twenty-five of them. That way the preserved ones serve almost as photographs of the piece. In ten years, when the rest of the fruit have turned to dust the preserved ones will be remnants of the larger piece. Actually, it was you who first used that phrase about this piece, which I love. You said to me, "In a way, you're still doing photography. These sewn fruit skins, they're like photographs of fruit". The way that a picture of someone is not the person. It looks kind of like them, but it's not them. And these are like photographs, because it looks kind of like a grapefruit, but it's not a grapefruit anymore.

Anna: The title "Strange Fruit" that you used for your catalogue, does it come from the Billie Holiday song?

Zoe: Well, partially. "Strange Fruit" is a song about racism and lynching - that "strange fruit hanging from the poplar tree" is a lynched body. About loss and violence. Its also a pun - "fruit" meaning "fag". My friend Gregg Bordowitz suggested the title.

Anna: The installation you first did in your studio in April 1995 and the book "Strange Fruit" which you made at the same time, they are both like visual poems. You move from scars to things that are somehow the residue of scars, the things that resurface after loss. There is a sense of loss in the installation and then at the same time a trace of an attempt to fill in the space that loss has carved out in our bodies or minds. What frames the installation and the book are images of a particular tree, a living thing which appears to have everything: the roots, the trunk and the fruit. All the other images and objects in the book and installation are fragments, teeth, scars, wigs - but the tree has everything.

Zoe: I chose the image of the tree deliberately. I love this particular tree because something is lost there as well. Wasted. This is a tree with its leaves already gone, but the fruit is left frozen on the limbs. The fruit was never picked. This tree in all its beauty is a kind of cripple. So, this is an image of a tree whose fruit was neglected. It's open to you to see what is "strange" in this picture.

I like giving people images that have space for ambiguity, space for people to bring their own psychology and experience to the image. To fill it in themselves.

Anna: So even in this image of the crabapple tree, this very symmetrical balanced image, there is something lost or missing. What you have made visible in your photograph is the very thing that was missed, not seen.

This all reminds me of specific events or associations in our own history, the lynchings of Black people in the poplar trees and that ridiculous story of George Washington chopping down the cherry tree. It is in part a story about a little boy wasting something precious. It's such an irony that our "great" forefather, our first president, the only things that just about everyone knows about him is that he cut down a cherry tree and had wooden teeth.

Zoe: Maybe that was the tree's revenge.

Anna: That would be historical poetry. Another part of history that comes to mind is the 1864 military massacre of a Navajo village in the Canyon de Chelly on the great plains, when the soldiers were instructed to cut down five thousand peach trees, as if killing the Indians was not enough, they had to kill the trees that were part of their sustenance, trees that had witnessed thousands of years of Navajo life and now death, they too had to be killed. I remember how that affected you when you read about it in "Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee". There is something about the wounds that we have or the things that we obscure or destroy that interests you. You catch us where we are most apt to over-project images of discrimination or where we completely miss beauty. You make work about gaps within a story that have not or cannot be told completely. When you begin to document fragments or traces of things, however, you start a kind of speaking and something gets said that otherwise would have remained silent or hidden.

Zoe: What you're saying reminds me of a section of your thesis where you write about the wooden statues of saints that those soldiers mutilated. Something about that story seems important to both of us.

Anna: That is a difficult story. In the town of Cotzal in the northern highlands of Guatemala, Indians talk about the images of saints in their church, how one day in the mid-1980's a group of soldiers from the local base came in to hunt subversives. They couldn't find any, so in frustration they began to randomly kill members of the town.

Abruptly the soldiers stopped their killing of Indians and with no warning went into the church and there smashed altars and cut wooden limbs off the bodies of wooden saint images.

After the soldiers left, the Indians of the town gathered the images and placed them back in the church. They made no attempt to repair the broken limbs; they left them as fragments and continued to pray to them that way. In a way, it was the arrangement of fragments which gave the images efficacy to heal something of what had just happened, and had been happening for centuries.

Zoe: What struck me about that story is that the soldiers knew that to hurt those statues was to hurt those people.

Anna: Under different circumstances, in different ways you also tend to leave the edges and the pieces, or at least expose the gaps that have always been there, or have been shot through us.

Zoe: In the book "Strange Fruit" I placed images like the hanging effigy or my mother's scar next to pictures of the fruit of empty skins of fruit sewn together, someone's underwear without their body, a message written on a wall "Mari, I'm sorry", my prosthetic teeth I used to have to wear, dolls, wigs and costumes, they are all about a way of looking for beauty in the places where we have been hurt by violence and neglect. A place where expectations fall apart.

Anna: With the fruit you went inside the whole phenomenon or element of missing. In an obverse way, so much about representation for us is about going to the movies, going to the museum, going to watch television or listen to music, often not as a way to engage with different emotions, but to escape from other emotions. In your letters from Alaska the movement of the sun in the sky, or temperature, or light, seemed so completely elemental to you. The fruit got you inside missing and Alaska got you inside weather, inside how much food one would need to survive for a winter. There quantities of sustenance, quantities of elements became everyday things for you. How much wood did you need that day to survive? And, you had to know the different densities of woods to know what to use when and how. It wasn't just a kind of casual calibration, it really meant whether you survived or whether you didn't. You went inside the very elemental basics of everyday life when you went to Alaska. It's almost as if you wanted to slow down, like blowing up a picture over and over again, or some kind of process of slowing down to be close to things that are everyday, very elemental, like time and weather.

Zoe: I got to see the outline of myself against a different backdrop. And in doing that, by changing the backdrop, the contours of my own body and my own mind began to be sharper to me. Living up in Alaska has done a lot for me as a person and, I hope, as an

artist. Much of it has to do with this elemental quality you talk about. If there's one thing that I got from living up there it is that certain elements are absolute. I am such a New York City girl, I'm such a city kid, and because of that I have this idea that everything can be bargained with. Time can be bargained with: Oh you're running late, you take a cab. You need to mail something and you're running late, you send it priority. If it's really late, you Federal Express it. If the Federal Express office is closed, you fax it, if it's too late for that, you phone it in. You know, there's always a way to bargain with time, and when things get difficult you can take a taxi and get food to go. And being up there in Alaska, the elements are so extreme, there's no bargaining with them. You can't argue with a storm, you can't argue with distance, or time, or weather. If you're twelve miles away from something, you're a day's walk away. You can't make things be closer.

At a certain temperature your body is just so much meat. Your body will freeze at a certain temperature no matter what your will says, no matter what your desire is, no matter what your intent is. No matter how good of an artist you are, no matter if you're a nice person or not, you live inside a certain chemistry. That was one of the main things that I learned. It was beaten into me and made clear to me.

You live within the seasons. You eat what's available at different times of the year. You do what's appropriate. The sun becomes your clock. You still have a will within that, desires, a style of your own, but you take your cue from the darkness and light, the temperature, the available game and plants.

As a photographer, one of the most remarkable things that happened there, living in a place where the sun literally did not rise for two months, was what it did to my sense of light. I love natural light. I've always used available light. But really this winter for the first time, I understood what "sun" is. For the first time I got it. I understood that I live on a ball that is rotating and hurtling through space, and that the sun is this other ball and that we have this relationship. Also, that the sun is life, it's everything. The day that the sun actually rose in February. It was February 18th when it actually cleared the mountains behind Eagle, it was like being high, it was like being on a drug. It was just the most amazing thing.

Anna: How long was it out for?

Zoe: Four minutes.

Anna: Four minutes? That's all?

Zoe: That's all. I was sitting inside actually. I had my fire going, it was warm in my cabin, I had a tee shirt on, and I was writing at my desk and I felt a presence behind me. I turned. I had a little white curtain over this one window, and the curtain was glowing. It was bright orange. I was looking at it and the first thing I thought was "Fire. The curtain's on fire. The cabin is on fire". And then it hit me -, "That's not fire, that's the sun!". I went running outside in my tee shirt. It was at least thirty below and I was in my

tee shirt and long underwear and bare feet, and went running out of my cabin and just stood there with the sun on my face for the full four minutes. My arms outstretched, just soaking it in, and then it set four minutes later and I went back inside.

Everything was about being outside. I got to understand angles of light, and how much color is inside light. We notice, yes, at sunset there's color in light, or at dawn, but that there's color in light all the time. And that color seems to come more from the light than from objects. I'd never gotten that before. But there in the winter, the objects are mostly monochromatic. Snow, and then dark spruce trees, and dark deciduous trees without leaves; it's a very black and white landscape. I would watch the sun assign color to things. The white mountains turn gold, blue, green, pink, salmon, orange. The ice changes color.

Anna: Going there and living this day to day existence, what kind of work were you producing and what kind of work comes out of that? I mean, work that you make, visual work?

Zoe: I don't know yet. I took very few pictures. I was so overwhelmed with everything that I didn't know how to begin to put it in my camera. I did certain things. I photographed a lot of animal tracks, and I photographed some of the mountains, and I began to photograph the sky a bit my last year there.

Anna: How long were you there for?

Zoe: I was in Eagle for a year and a half, and the year before that I'd spent six months outside Palmer, working on a farm.

I continued to sew fruit whenever I could. Oranges and stuff don't grow up there and neither do bananas, but when I could get a hold of them I would sew. Friends would send me fruit and other treats. Chocolate, liquor, vegetables. But, especially fruit. I always asked for that.

Anna: What about the trees you are working with as sculptures?

Zoe: It is something I have been thinking about for a long time. I did my first mock-up in my greenhouse in Eagle, of this sculpture I'm making of a tree. I've made another mock-up of it since I've been here in New York. I hope to make the full-scale sculpture soon in New York or Vienna.

Anna: You say it's a sculpture of a tree, what's it made out of?

Zoe: A tree.

Anna: So it's a sculpture of a tree made out of a tree, like an orange made out of an orange? Are those branches that you used for trunks, or trunks that you used for trunks, or does it matter?

Zoe: It's sort of a composite tree, it's a trunk that's been cut into sections I can handle. And then branches from that tree and from other trees are sort of hammered on and taped together. It's put back together like a little kid's clubhouse, really crooked. I've been gathering leaves for two autumns now in Europe, in Alaska, and in New York.

Anna: I remember you were putting them in wax.

Zoe: Yes, I boil them in wax. I dry them first and press them to retain their color, and then boil them in this wax to preserve them. And then they are attached to the tree with clothespins.

It started as a piece about somebody that I loved a lot, and it was about wanting to make something stay when it's gone. You know, putting the leaves back on the tree. A similar impulse as with the sewn fruit, but it wasn't about someone who died. It started from there and then it just grew into this other thing. It took on its own life as an art object. A tree is a very basic image. A tree is everything. Sky and earth. Change and stability, home, shelter. It is wood and fire and beauty. It is food. Fruit. This is about nature and our culture's relationship to nature. Our fear of it and our need to contain it. The way that we find it necessary to manipulate seasons and time and change and death. We can't leave anything alone. Even the way this word has become this little catchword, "Environment. Oh, I care about the environment". We're so incredibly far away from what that means. It's like, "Oh, the environment: recycled paper towels".

In Alaska, I began to understand what it is to haul your own water. I felt like I understood economics and economy for the first time, the relationship of my labor to my comfort. My labor to my survival. I had to haul this many gallons of water to put this much water in my body, and I had to hunt this animal and skin it to feed my body. I didn't resist this at all. I liked burning wood because I liked seeing how much energy I had to use to have this heat. I finally got it. "Energy", "conservation", these words made sense. I don't know what it would be like if I had to live that way for twenty or thirty or forty years, and I might just be like, "Screw it. I want central heating". But I really liked that rhythm in my life, and I liked the sense of stability it gave me.

I would rather have clean drinking water and air that isn't polluted. I would rather cut wood and haul water and work hard physically than to live with cars and pollution, and stores full of junk that I don't need and don't want.

Anna: Alaska has in it a form of correspondence, that you could get to a place where what you did is what you had, what you bought is what you ate. The amount of wood you hauled is the amount of wood you had to live on, and that in New York City, to get any correspondence whatsoever, is almost impossible. The labor we do is so alienated from how it supports us. What seems equally interesting is that you chose to live in an environment where your everyday experiences and your visual interests, were collapsed into each other. It really didn't matter if you were making photographs or sculpture there, somehow you were living your works. You have internalized the process of making things by just how you live.

Zoe: That's an interesting statement, I hope that's true. I think it might be. I felt really active as an artist in Alaska, even though I produced almost nothing while I was there. I felt so engaged in physical labor, and I made a lot of things. I fixed my sled and I made beaver mitts and I made mukluks and I baked all my own bread and made jam and canned salmon.

Anna: And you sewed. You sewed quite a bit.

Zoe: Yes. The satisfaction I got was so immediate. I made mitts and then my hands were warm.

Also, the last few years of spending such a huge amount of time alone, I've had a chance to examine my life. I don't know if that makes me a better person. I don't know if that makes me a better artist, but I feel like it's part of the process of growing up. Part of the process of trying to look honestly at what it is I want to make, what it is I might have to offer. To be less afraid of the impulses and the objects that are inside me, to work harder to manifest them. The land also taught me about discipline. Up there, I had to be very disciplined with myself. That's not over. I'll go back up there for sure, absolutely.

PHOTOGRAPHY AS MEMORY

Anna: I've always wondered about the recurrence of prosthetic things, like the false tooth or the wigs and models, in your work. They are objects that you seem attracted to maybe because they mark something that is missing.

Zoe: I never thought of it that way, but you are very right. I think that is what I've been trying for. Loss and replacement. An object standing in for something else. Or symbolizing something. With the false tooth, that was mine. I had to wear it. When I was a little kid my brother accidentally knocked my front tooth out. So throughout my

childhood I had to wear a number of these contraptions until I was old enough to get a bridge. I never really thought of it in relation to the wigs or dolls or anatomical models which in a way are prosthesis as well. The wigs and dolls and anatomical models have a lot to do with the way I watch people look at beauty and look at themselves trying to match-up to some idea of beauty. Or even "normalcy". I am very interested in this idea of beauty, personal beauty and also beauty in art. I am baffled by our forms of decoration. Our particular American twentieth century way is completely baffling to me. The idea of plastic surgery, the kinds of make-up. The photographs from the Museum of Beauty, the "Beauty Calibrator" and also all the photographs of anatomical models seem to be more about pain than pleasure. They are about feeling that you are just not good enough the way you are born. There is no sense in these objects of anything joyful in the body: of running and playing and fucking; just being. Those objects reflect something of this idea that you must undergo pain in order to deserve love or acceptance. That one must overcome the body, conform in some way. Maybe it goes beyond that, beyond beauty. Maybe we just can't accept having a body at all.

Anna: When it comes to bodies or surfaces of things you often look to the place where we are scarred. You return to what is marked or missing, and then you trace how in our daily lives we attempt to cover or fill the gaps. There is that one photograph that you did of the male doll which so simply exposes a certain inevitability in us, in our unthinking, unconscious selves that leaves all the gaps without closure or explanation.

Zoe: I found the "Male Fashion Doll" in a pile of dolls just like him in a flea market in Iowa. He's such a little drag queen. He has a little girl's face and he has a body that looks the way a little girl's body is usually rendered in plastic, completely sexless and pink. But, then somebody drew a little tiny moustache on him and called him a "male fashion doll". He made me think about the bizarreness of this thing we call gender.

Anna: What kind of photographs are you working with now?

Zoe: This new group of photographs - well, there are a few different aspects. First, there are the ones you've mentioned: the prosthesis, the dolls, wigs, limbs, heads, etc. objects about replacement, loss, fiction, substitution: the objects we make. Some of these images are violent, like the effigy, or confusing, like the "Male Fashion Doll". But in a subverted, small way. They are odd, or twisted without being dramatic or outright horrible. Then there is a second group. Words scrawled across walls and rocks. Words scratched into bathroom stalls. Things people need to say. Anonymous, directionless words. Yet, vital and passionate in content. Sometimes even violent. They have a hollowness, they hang suspended between the speaker and the object "Mari, I'm sorry", "I love you", "Suck me", "Blow me", "I love pussy". Declarations, pleadings. We see part of the story, but we have no idea of the players or the outcome.

Then there are the people themselves. I've been printing a couple of old negatives from 1978, 1984 and 1985. My mother and grandmother in a car, Simone on the beach, Jordan in my hallway. All taken in a half-light. All negatives I'd originally rejected because their photographs weren't "present" enough - they have an off-kilter beauty. The subjects are introspective and oblivious in spite of being photographed.

Together these three groups constitute the body of photographs I will show in Basel and in Vienna. Taken together with the fruit, and the tree, I hope they begin to describe moments that are difficult to understand. Not the perfect moment, but rather the imperfect moment. The moment before, the moment after. The loss, the turning away, looking back. I am interested in the retrieval of these moments. In some sense, at this point in time, I am approaching photography as memory.

Anna: There is a particular series of photographs that I love that we haven't spoken about, the series of the two little girls in the Natural History Museum.

Zoe: A writer I know, Ray Federman, once said to me that every writer has only one story to tell. And that often there is one book where he tells it best. I'm not sure if that is entirely true, but I am amazed at how my early work does carry the kernel of so much of my later work.

What interests me about the little girls in the Natural History Museum is that those seven pictures, taken in 1984, contain so much of what I did later. We have these elements: girls and looking. Two little girls looking at the "evolution of man". Skeletons of monkeys, of men, of humans making the transition to upright walking. So, again, we have history. History and its presentation. As with the "Bearded Woman" and "Fae Richards", the anatomical models and "Chastity belt". The two girls are looking at the exhibits, looking at each other, looking at me. The younger girl is more engrossed in the exhibits. She is focused on them and also points things out to her sister. The older sister looks at me more and performs for the camera. This conflict between observing and performing appears often in my work - especially in the fashion pictures and later with the Jennifer Miller pin-ups. Lastly we have women in the museum. The museum being what it is - our most eminent cultural institution and girls finding their place in it. The exhibit: "The Evolution of Man". Two girls trying to understand, finding a way in. Watching and performing. Later I return to this terrain with the "Bearded Woman" and the wax anatomical models and especially with the Documenta installation.

So much of my photographic endeavor is laid out here. Formally and technically as well - a series of seven images as one piece. The light is a half-light. I use available light, and it was very dim, so the film is pushed to 3200ASA and the result is grainy and imperfect. The pictures are rough and too dark, unclear. The prints are grayish, with dust and hair evident on the negatives. Also these pictures are quiet and reveal themselves only slowly. There is a story here, but we only see fragments. The photographs are not abstract; there is certainly a narrative, but it is partial and broken.