This is a sketch, an essay in progress.

1. I saw 100 North Nevill Street at its opening, during the afternoon of Sunday, December 15, 2013, and again at sunrise the next day, which came at 7:46 am—the moon had set precisely 45 minutes earlier. Astronomical precision seems called for in describing the work, which consists of a single lens, fitted into an aperture in the side of a building that has been otherwise rendered impervious to sunlight. In this breathtaking, deceptive simplicity, the work seems akin to a scientific investigation with deliberately limited variables, perhaps one undertaken on the property of a landed noble. William Henry Fox Talbot comes to mind, studying his oriel window at Lacock Abbey. The Metropolitan Museum owns a print of this originary picture, which a curator or curatorial assistant describes as follows on the museum’s website:

Talbot’s first successful camera image, a photograph the size of a postage stamp, showed the oriel window in the south gallery of his home, Lacock Abbey. Although indoors, the subject was ideal: the camera could sit motionless on the mantelpiece opposite the window for a long exposure, and the bright sunlight pouring through the window provided strong contrast. The image on that first photograph, now in the National Museum of Photography, Film, and Television in Bradford, England, has, unfortunately, nearly faded from view. But using a slightly larger camera, Talbot photographed the oriel window again, probably that same summer. (He wrote, ‘some [pictures] were obtained of a larger size, but they required much patience.’) So many ideas well up for me at this comparison, which is also a study in contrast. Talbot had his estate to work on, while Leonard borrowed a property. Talbot, one of whose essential subjects was in fact ownership of the land, together with its buildings and dependencies (haystacks, abbeys, oriel windows), nevertheless helped bring into being a more mobile viewing subject, one formed to facilitate the flows and accumulation of industrial capital and in opposition to fixed, inherited territories. Such a subject, as Jonathan Crary argued in *Techniques of the Observer* (1990), would merge progressively with the viewing apparatus, becoming one with scopic machines tailored to a progressively parcelized body: “The collective achievement of European physiology in the first half of the nineteenth century was…an exhaustive inventory of the body. It was a knowledge that also would be the basis for the formation of an individual adequate to the productive requirements of economic modernity and for emerging technologies of control and subjection.” (p. 81) Crary contrasts nascent photography starkly with the camera obscura and its intellectual history in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: the apparatuses of Talbot and Leonard stand opposed in this account. Yet the great length of time, hours indeed, that were traversed to make that first surviving camera negative, seem to align Talbot and Leonard in a shared attitude of “much patience.” So too the fading of the first image, which we now disappointed Talbot, who expended much effort at a more permanent fixing of his recordings, before Sir John Herschel indicated to him the fixative properties of hypo sulfite (it was Herschel as well who coined the term “negative,” to describe the sheets of tonally reversed paper that Talbot had dubbed “calotypes,” or beautiful prints). In hindsight, both the fading and the tonal reversals seem unbearably lovely, keys to the sensation of magic that Talbot experienced, and Leonard after him. Back to the Met Museum blurb: “A person unacquainted with the process,” Talbot would later write, “if told that nothing of all this was executed by the hand, must imagine that one has at one’s call the Genius of Aladdin’s Lamp. And, indeed, it may almost be said, that this is something of the same kind. It is a little bit of magic realized.”

So: the camera obscura is not a camera, in Crary’s account; it is the opposite of a camera. But that first picture by Talbot, in its utterly existential need of hours’ worth of sunlight, seems quite close to her recent works, the camera obscura rooms but also the sun pictures. And yet no, I can’t pursue that rhetorical move—it’s impossible to draw a line connecting Zoe back to Talbot, to do so carries too many ahistorical implications of continu-
ity. How can work by an artist of our time, a high-school dropout and teenage runaway, an activist for AIDS awareness and gay rights, who has incorporated those political and autobiographical concerns into her work—an artist fundamentally preoccupied with dispossessions—be aligned with a gentleman inventor who presented his discoveries to the Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences, then applied for that most basic of capitalist claims, a patent? A man so concerned with possessions that even ideas became his material property? Plus, I really dislike explaining a given body of work by making recourse to “origins” of a supposed “medium.” It’s ahistorical, false at many levels. So Talbot and Leonard will remain close yet incompatibly distant, linked only through a reversal of values.

2. Crary casts the shift from camera obscura to camera device (and especially the stereoscope) as proceeding from fixity to mobility, from a tangible world of stable objects to a scopic, virtual world of mobile subjects: “The notion of vision as touch [embodied in eighteenth-century discourse around the camera obscura] is adequate to a field of knowledge whose contents are organized as stable positions within an extensive terrain. But in the nineteenth century such a notion became incompatible with a field organized around exchange and flux, in which a knowledge bound up in touch would have been irreconcilable with the centrality of mobile signs and commodities whose identity is exclusively optical.” (p. 62)

I can understand that the stereo viewer, which requires that the observer bury her face in a device, and sacrifice her given, binocular vision for representations tyrannically organized according to monocularity, should mark a historical split with the camera obscura, at least those versions structured as chambers in which the observer may sit or move around. But the world is not fixed in a camera obscura, it moves, or rather, its representation moves as in the world outside. That observation does not negate the larger stability or fixity that attracts Crary—he points out that the camera obscura was seen as a model of truth by Diderot and Newton, whereas Marx, Bergson, and Freud are among many nineteenth and twentieth century thinkers for whom the camera obscura was a model of deception, the very picture of a ruse (p. 29). It all depends how you think about the relation of a projected image—upside down and backwards—to an image seen by our eyes directly—also upside down and backwards, but “corrected” in our minds. Movement, and also color and focus, are critically important aspects in an experience of the camera obscura. Here it is important to stress the particularity of Leonard’s camera obscura works: they are not confined to a wall, or a part of a wall, across from the aperture. The room is not a screen, it is a full room. Leonard purposely causes the projected image to fall on all surfaces of the inside space. Her lenses are relatively large, and she adds no “stops,” blocks or other framing devices to shape (to “manage,” in her words) the entering light. Nor does she paint some portion of the interior space white, to suggest a screen. Zoe is not converting rooms or buildings into movie theaters.

The Aldrich Art Museum, by contrast, built a camera obscura as a permanent installation in its renovated building, which opened in 2004, three years after the death of the museum’s founder, Larry Aldrich. “We wanted to embrace the context rather than turn our backs on it,” director Harry Philbrick was quoted in the New York Times; he made a point to build several landscape views into the design. Philbrick, a former artist, also created a camera obscura room at the front of the upper-level galleries, which the Times reviewer described as an “early photographic device” that “projects an outside view through a small hole in the side of the building onto the far wall of a darkened room.” (Benjamin Genocchio, “Thoroughly Modern, Thoroughly New England,” the New York Times, June 6, 2004) Philbrick’s view was, however, “managed” in that the back wall of his chosen space was turned into a screen, and the rest of the space was also prepared in such a way that the image would fall only on that back wall.

Zoe’s results are more enveloping than a conventional camera obscura, and also more diffuse. A large aperture means that the sun’s rays will not be highly collimated, or held in parallel; thus they converge only within a narrow stretch of the image, while nearly all of the projection—even that which falls on the surface directly opposite the lens—appears out of focus. This diffuse quality, compounded by the distortion of images traveling across ceiling, floor, and standing objects (e.g., support columns) does not impede our natural ability to recognize the scene in which we stand. It does limit our ability...
to study it, in a scientific or other analytical sense. Only some of Diderot’s words on the camera obscura, from 1753, apply to those by Zoe Leonard:

It throws great light on the nature of vision; it provides a very diverting spectacle, in that it presents images perfectly resembling their objects; it represents the colors and movements of objects better than any other sort of representation is able to do. (Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire des sciences, des arts et des métiers, vol. 3 [1753], quoted in Crary, p. 33)

3. All this to say that the operations of the camera obscura should not be totalized; there are specific properties at work in those constructed/appropriated by Zoe Leonard that may not appear in other camera obscura constructions, just as, per Crary, writing on the camera obscura in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries does not match discussions of it in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I admire Elisabeth Lebovici’s reading of the camera obscura works as assertions of a queer perspective on the world, as it were: inversion, reversion, perversion. I had some idea to say as much with “radical reversionary,” a phrase from a 1988 essay on El Lissitzky by Yve-Alain Bois that I plan to use for a future talk on this body of Zoe’s works. Lebovici cites “radical juxtaposition,” a critical strategy she traces to Douglas Crimp’s memoirs, which address 1980s activism and 1980s art in New York side by side, in a dialectical fashion. (Portions of this writing were published in Mixed Use Manhattan, the show that Crimp curated with Lynne Cooke in 2010.) An aerial photograph by Leonard appears on the dust jacket.) I want to agree with Lebovici’s propositions, but I’m stopped by the treatment of the camera obscura in a categorical rather than specific fashion. “An archetypal tool for constructing representations,” Lebovici writes, “the camera obscura could exemplify here a potential to refuse, or better yet, to release our vital grip on our figurations, to defuse the image and unleash imagination.” (“The Politics of Contemplation,” n.p)

How does it do so here, precisely, in ways that no other camera obscura does? Or is the camera obscura an inherently queer apparatus, and only Leonard has brought its queerness out of the closet, so to speak?

4. Beyond the images, there are the shape and the materials. Leonard has emphasized the low-tech and the appropriated, acting like a squatter who has boarded up an available site to make it safer, warmer, cozier (another of my notes from the Whitney, equally applicable in Marfa: “Window blacked out with raw plywood”). In Available Light, the new monograph on Leonard from Dancing Foxes Press, Suzanne Hudson describes Leonard’s calculated opposition to the “tough guy art” that defines Marfa, from Judd to Chamberlain to Flavin. Hudson articulates this art-world “inversion” with precision and perspicuity in describing a visitor’s experience of 100 North Nevill Street:

Once habituated, figures reveal themselves from grounds, as meaningful incidents in the abolishing formlessness that the occurrences punctuate. Movement comes readily in the shapes of clouds moving across the forever sky, occasional pedestrian passerby, and trains passing—their Judd box-like cars suspended upside down as they glide across the long, dominant wall and those adjacent to it; it shows the camera to be alive to incident, even as the lens remains static, transmitting the present continuously. Despite their communication of instantaneousness, Leonard’s cameras have the canny effect of being asynchronous with what they project. Structural changes happen too slowly for us to notice them. (p. 125)

Suzanne makes clear what it is that Zoe has reversed in relation to Judd, for example: “Judd’s notion of permanence—a strict measure, in his words, against which works disposed elsewhere could be assessed—presumes the necessity of maintenance, even care, in the face of, if not punctual cataclysm, then the more benign if no less entropic passage of time. 100 North Nevill Street proposes instead the satiety of moments, one thing after the next.” (p. 127) Zoe accommodates rather than imposes. It’s a classic feminist trope, not at all confined to
the queer subject (not only to women), but certainly part of a great intellectual and aesthetic tradition of queer art. 100 North Nevill Street also proposes a subversion (more than a reversal, more than a turning-inside-out of Judd’s work on his own terms, principally the key one of “specific object.” Her camera obscura works cannot exist except in the spaces that she has chosen for them to inhabit. Their specificity is absolute and irreducible. Yet, as Suzanne and so many others have pointed out, they leave no trace, they have no permanent form; nor is the artist making souvenir photographs of the projected imagery they contain. These works permit an assessment of photography’s governing conventions precisely because they are “prephotographic,” in the sense argued by Crary (Hudson uses the term as well).

5. Yet along with her squatters’ materials, Zoe has also used a purpose-built lens in each case to focus the rays—she has not simply made a hole in one wall. This is crucial. The lens gives specific form to the piece, while also making a material link to Leonard’s long career in photography. The implications and effects of such a decision must be weighed more closely. If the reference to Judd is precise, so too must be the references to photography. Talbot is a lovely, but limited and misleading, point of comparison. Which photographers, then, or which photographic works, should I choose to help illuminate the choices made at Nevill Street? There is always the option of considering other works by Zoe, and also certain categories of production within the discipline: street photography; documentary; photography and film. Yet I am not interested to pursue these, at least not for the moment. What I want to explore—also because I don’t know enough about it yet—are connections to a use of photographs not just in, but as, live performance. The fading of the image in Talbot could serve as a starting point, although again, I hate to reach back to putative origins for legitimacy. Such a move here could be justified only by arguing another reversal: whereas Talbot sought at all cost to fix the image, there are moments of resistance to fixity that seem especially important to explore. I started to look at these moments with a show on Conceptual art (2011), in which I argued that photography took its place at the center of contemporary art through analogy with other forms of art: photographs could look or function “like” books, paintings, sculptures, or film. They could also “look like” photographs, I argued; but at that point, the photographic object exploded; it grew and scattered, either dissolving into the object it reproduced “at actual size,” or taking manifold and changeable shapes as wall-filling installations composed of dozens of pictures subordinated to a protean whole. What if the photograph took no fixed shape at all? I suggested this extreme in discussing a work by the charismatic, elusive 1960s-’70s art figure Emilio Prini. Given a stipend by his gallery, Prini produced some two thousand prints of just two to three photographic images, one of them showing a camera. He had the gallery store the prints, but never could determine how they should be shown. Another work by Prini, Paperweight (Fermacarte), was composed of photographs made from a live performance involving an (equally indeterminate) lead sculpture, which Prini and associates manipulated and photographed. (You can see the lead in the foreground of the illustration here, and in the back at left, a picture of a camera similar to the one used in the “unfixed” gallery piece.) First shown in excerpts in 1969, the several photographs for Paperweight were subsequently enlarged and mounted on over-life-size stretchers, with the stipulation that the stretchers be joined into forms or stacks that must change at every presentation of the piece. Another example of this fluid approach was given in 1971 by Japanese critic and photographer Takuma Nakahira. Invited to show in the Paris Biennale that year, Nakahira chose to create his piece in situ. For the duration of one week, he walked the streets of Paris taking pictures of shop signs, pedestrians, vegetable stalls, and acquaintances. Nakahira had Debord and Godard in mind, but also his colleagues in Provence, the short-lived but quite influential constellation of photographers and writers gathered in an eponymous journal in 1968-69. He printed the photographs at night, using a cleaning bucket to develop and fix them, then pinned up a selection the next morning, titling the amorphous result Circulations. As in these camera obscura works, the images spilled from walls to floor, to an adjacent table, flooding the exhibition space; when a neighboring artist hung a painting, Nakahira made room for it but also took photographs of it to include in his own sprawling undertaking. Photographs as performance either take no fixed shape, or no shape at all. They are constitutively ephemeral, not because their images fade or are fragile, but as a hypostasis of those fundamental photographic conditions—which are also the fundamentals of mortal life. But I don’t want this realization to join up with Barthes’ “that has been” (cela a été), with an idea of photography as defined by instant pastness or instant memories, wounded (when successfully constructed) by the prick of a punctum. Maybe I am more inclined toward the “ghost image” of Hervé Guibert, who wrote in 1981 not of finding his mother’s image, but of trying to make that image, as an aspiring photographer, only to learn at the end of an emotionally exhausting session with her that he had forgotten to load film in his camera—an apparatus newly given him by his father. (Ghost Image, Univ. of Chicago Press, 2013, pp. 10-16) The scenario is Oedipus inverted, subverted and, of course, queer. And the result is, once more, an extreme of the photograph as performance, a staging that can be pictured only in language. Whereas Zoe reaches with her obscure chambers for the prelinguistic. Or not.

Matthew S. Witkovsky is Chair of the Department of Photography at the Art Institute of Chicago.