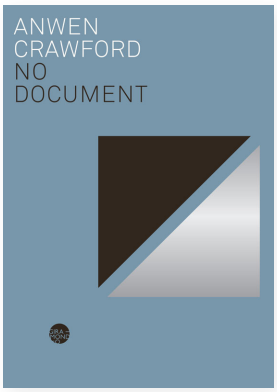
REVIEW: ALIX BEESTON ON ANWEN CRAWFORD

A History of Shapes



No Document
by Anwen Crawford

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She is a shape and the shape is an absence. The artist carves her own silhouette into the earth, a figure recessing in dirt, or sand, or grass or mud or snow. Sometimes this body that isn't a body is adorned with flowers or berries; sometimes it's lined with rocks or shells. On one occasion the cavity is filled with gunpowder and set alight, the flames lapping the air until they collapse, spent, into a pile of ash.

The Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta made more than 200 *Siluetas* in remote areas of Iowa and Mexico in the 1970s, and they are all gone. They are (were) ditches carpeted with moss, sandpits swamped by the tides, petals and pebbles scattered underfoot or on the wind.

They are (were) ashes mingled to soil. Committed to the art object's disappearance, constituting the art object *in* its disappearance, Mendieta's practice between sculpture, conceptual art, and installation confounds the art historian who wants to store – and restore – the past. Few people other than Mendieta saw the works in situ, and though the artist documented them in photography and Super 8 video – the forms in which we access them today – these mediated traces elaborate the works' effects of displacement and dispersal. The photographs and film works represent a presence becoming an absence; they underscore, rather than mitigate, the *Siluetas*' loss.

Toward the end of her 1999 study, *Where Is Ana Mendieta?*, the art historian Jane Blocker reflects,

> *Writing history about work like Mendieta's was like keeping a dead leaf in a box under your bed; it was like saving something that had already been lost. Had I pulverized the leaf, in other words, it would have been more threatening to history, more destructive to me, than it would have been to the leaf itself.*

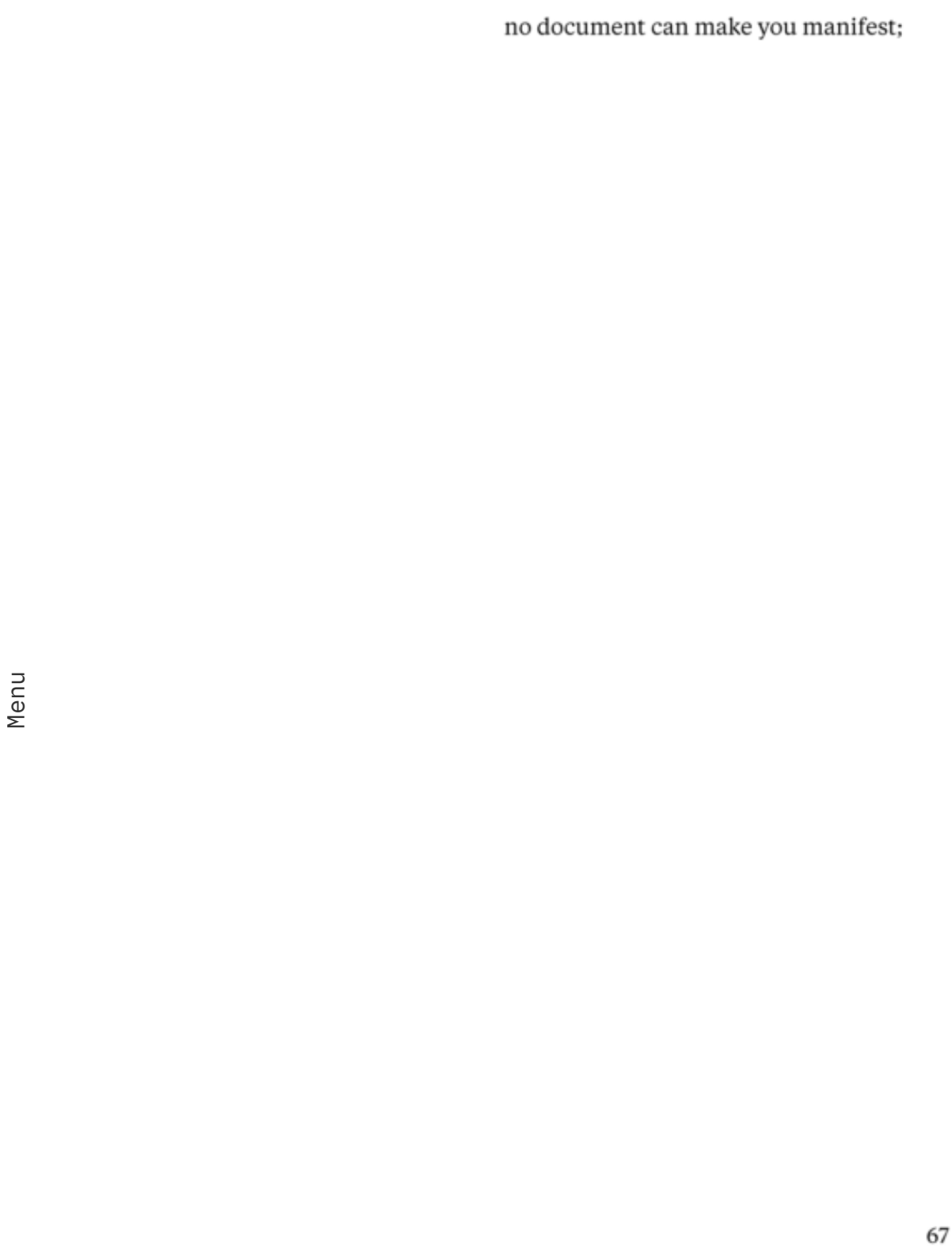
For Mendieta, art is the thing that is done not the thing that is kept, the death of the leaf not its conservation after the fact. And so, Blocker writes, Mendieta's work demands the impossible: 'it asks history to let go of the past'.

What forms of writing can account for art practices that enact processes of decay and destruction without negating those very processes? Does the very urge to 'account' for such practices contravene their anti-preservationist ethos – which is often also an anti-capitalist ethos, the artwork pitched against the commodity? What would it mean to (un)write history as Mendieta (un)made art, not merely accommodating but actively cultivating dematerialisation? Can you write with fire, pages turning to cinders in your hands?

Anwen Crawford's remarkable new work of non-fiction, *No Document*, is many kinds of document, but one of the ways it can be read is as an attempt to discover a form of writing fit for ephemeral art practices – especially as those practices relate to, or become bound up with, experiences of vulnerability, pain, and mortality. Intricately structured across eight sections, *No Document* braids together a number of narrative or thematic threads. One of these concerns Crawford's artistic collaborations in the early 2000s with a beloved friend, who remains unnamed until the book's concluding note of dedication. Crawford contextualises this shared practice in relation to the art of Félix González-Torres – another Cuban-American performance artist, born only nine years after Mendieta – which, as Crawford notes, 'incorporates the possibility of its own dissolution'. Likewise, Crawford and her friend's works are 'made to disappear', and in disappearing to honour the act of making as part of the dailiness and vitality of their friendship: 'Nothing we made was meant to last. Nothing we made has lasted for as long as what we made by making together.'

When Crawford's friend, who lived with cystic fibrosis, dies unexpectedly of cancer, these collaborative works are laced with new pathos. Their disappearance can't help but refer to the awful briefness of the friend's life, the gulf between the *then* in which the works existed

and the *now* in which they don't as impassable as that between the living and the dead. 'There is nothing in the world that exists that I can point to now and say: *We did this*', writes Crawford. 'Only the documentation: the photographs of street walls, and billboards, and buildings vacated of purpose apart from as repositories of obsolete equipment.' *Only the documentation*, evidentiary remains that bear an outsized burden in the face of loss, at the same time as the paucity of documentation – its failure to be the work itself, its status as a shadowy supplement – is painfully affirmed. A solitary line, uncapitalised, appears at the top of a page near the midpoint of the book: 'no document can make you manifest;' Addressed to Crawford's friend in a second person intimate and belated, the sentence doesn't end but instead opens to nothing. The semicolon is a sheer cliff onto the stark whiteness of the page.



Anwen Crawford, *No Document* (2021). Page reproduced with permission.

No Document is forged in a void it cannot fill: a void it does and does not want to fill. How can you write a history of arts of disappearance, a history that lets the past run through its

fingers, when those arts become encircled in grief, overlaid by more dreadful forms of loss? This problem inheres in the case of Mendieta, too, whose own early death, and its horrific circumstances, makes it difficult not to see the *Siluetas* as open graves in a cemetery or chalk outlines at a crime scene, especially since Mendieta conceived of them as self-portraits. As Blocker points out in *Where Is Ana Mendieta?*, the artist's violent death has led many historians to cast her as a victim to be saved, restored if not to life then at least to visibility within art history. But such efforts sit uncomfortably against Mendieta's art practice, through which she styled herself as illegible and absent – and revelled in loss rather than staving it off. 'We need a history that does not *save* in any sense of the word', Blocker concludes; we need a history that performs its own making, written by those who recognise that they occupy the 'space of history' alongside their subjects.

It's this kind of project, it seems to me, that Crawford takes up in *No Document*. Although Mendieta is never mentioned in the book, the narrow depressions of the *Siluetas* appear on its horizon when Crawford describes the feeling of her friend's 'absence radiating as the belly of a beast might leave a shallow in the ground that traps the notion of its being there but not the thing in being there itself, in all its living heat'. He is a shape, in other words, and the shape is an absence. Crawford's moral courage consists of her willingness to reckon with suffering and death – her friend's, as well as the deaths of many others, human and animal alike – and still to let history get lost, to never pretend that the past isn't gone. 'I redeem nothing', she declares at one point, 'not in words, not any way.'

Between each of the sections of *No Document* is a single page featuring a rectangular box: a frame that contains nothing, an outline of another absence. Not merely breathing spaces for the reader, the empty frames appear as obstacles to writing, as if arresting the paragraphs, sentences, fragments, and other markings that ramify – extending, entangling – across the book's pages.

just once, if you had lived, the train I will have been on and yours will pass in opposite directions and a flash of bent heads; and the pylons outside, backs of houses, stubborn flowering weeds on the embankment. Or none of this at all, for your self irreducible was never and could never be contingent on my claims.

Outside my window / on Bidjigal country, the winter sun announces itself along the awnings and my neighbours' roofs, palely. I call this place Sydney, in English, which is my only language. Fence, pale, wall, boundary wall, moat, ditch, trench. Enclose, cordon off, hem, pen, corral. I am told I learnt the names of colours when I was young as you. *Silver*. *Aquamarine*. These words exactly.

But Alya – can we think the colour without naming it? Does silver exist before *silver*? Clouds, rings, foil, dolphins: these exist, but could they be silver in the absence of the word? And the word in which language? *Blaues Pferd*. I always thought that if a person could imagine a blue horse then it meant a kind of freedom, not just whimsy: the freedom to imagine remaking a world that makes my peace by your death. I have been made by what was done, by what gets done, what I have made, and I can't redeem one part of this.

Alya: I call myself into remembering that I have been always falling through this space, though you have passed from falling with me. There was you, and I will have been, and everything is possible and will remain so in the space that creates you and me – creates *we* – including the failure to remake a world where there is no place now that contains you.

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There isn't one photograph of us, facing the camera.

Retrospectively, it has become more obvious to me – though we were not unaware of it, then – that the artists we admired were, by and large, people who'd died young. Such an impulse isn't rare at age nineteen, but for you at least, an early death was neither an abstraction nor a romance.

The exocrine glands affected by cystic fibrosis include the bronchi, the intestines and the pancreas. *Exocrine* comes from the Greek: *krinein*, to separate.

And yet I cannot say you wholly died of this.

You loved the artist Gordon Matta-Clark, who cut into buildings – who split a house in half.

I change tense, and travel back across your death's border.

You love the artist Gordon Matta-Clark.

Wrote Franz Marc to his friend Paul Klee on 12 June 1914: *I'm still convinced that I won't paint my best pictures until I'm forty or fifty; I'm not yet ready in myself for this.*

I don't think I ever grasped the full implications of your illness, which was chronic and progressive, while you lived. It was easy not to think about.

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Anwen Crawford, *No Document* (2021). Pages reproduced with permission.

The boxes are spaces in which writing should be but isn't, and they register Crawford's concern with history as a site of disappearance in a different sense. For though some artists

make art that spurns its documents, or at least holds its documents at a distance, in many cases art works vanish against the will of their makers – censored or stolen, ruined or discarded. Crawford contemplates political regimes such as the Nazis, whose officials confiscated works they deemed 'degenerate' and then destroyed or sold them off – or simply lost them, as in the case of Franz Marc's 1913 oil painting *Der Turm der blauen Pferde* [The Tower of Blue Horses], missing since 1945. She wonders how many of the works in the permanent collections of British museums were stolen from their owners by the agents of empire; 'there is no inventory' of this theft, she notes dryly.

No Document relates the stories of these lost objects and absent inventories to larger protocols of undocumentation, historical unwriting, through which 'some deaths count, while some are only counted. Or not counted.' Crawford asks us to see negative space as negation, an unmarked tomb in which animals and some people – dissidents, refugees, the colonised and the minoritised – are emphatically unmourned. The empty frames are a rendition of the borders and walls that preoccupy Crawford from the book's opening pages, where the forking branches or woven threads of her prose incorporate the relocation of abattoirs to the city limits of Paris and Sydney in the nineteenth century alongside the designation by the Australian government in 2001 of Christmas Island as an 'excised offshore place' for imprisoning asylum seekers and refugees. Violent acts of partition, exclusion, and concealment multiply across *No Document*, emerging as the signal gestures of colonial-capitalist society as it abides in '*excision time*'. This is a term Crawford picks up from the Migration Amendment (Excision from Migration Zone) Act 2001, referring to the hour at which John Howard's government removed Christmas Island, Ashmore Reef, and the Cartier Islands from the Australian 'migration zone' – essentially denying the right to apply for citizenship to those who arrived in these territories, who were themselves newly defined as 'offshore entry persons'. At the end of *No Document*'s first section – on a page facing the first of the book's rectangles – Crawford describes Sydney, and by extension Australia, as an endless series of borders: 'Fence, pale, wall, boundary wall, moat, ditch, trench. Enclose, cordon off, hem, pen, corral.'

Crawford implies, though she doesn't quite articulate, the troubling confluence between the disappearance of art that is made to disappear and the disappearance of art – and of lives and deaths – through repressive practices of excision. Does the artist who privileges the embodied activity of creation by letting the work go, incorporating within it the possibility of its dissolution, also play into the hands of the state? After all, as Crawford well knows, the politicians and the police may be only too glad not to let your art stand. I realise in writing this that my phrasing, *not to let stand*, echoes Crawford's. A line that appears just before the reference to the Migration Amendment Act gives the 'general meaning of *abattre*', French for abattoir, as '*to cause to fall*, or *to bring down that which is standing*'. This is one of a series of single-sentence paragraphs that suggests – but again without exactly stating – the inexact but incontrovertible equivalence between the deathly functions of the slaughterhouse and the forms of disappearance with which Crawford's friend becomes associated, as both are imbricated in the life of a city that can't stop tearing things down. The next paragraph describes one of the provisional structures her friend made:

> *You build a walkway out of salvaged planks and it moves at jeopardising angles through a house that is afterward demolished for a carpark.' And then: 'The places we went, which are gone: this is a loss on top of you. I mean a loss additional.*

Direct and eloquent, its frankness leavened with keen irony, Crawford's writing nevertheless produces meaning largely through association and accrual. Its losses add up. Without resolving the tensions between losses chosen and losses compelled, Crawford finds ways to use white space both to thematise the space-time of excision and to intervene in it. At several points she appropriates misleading, scare-mongering, and callous remarks made about asylum seekers by John Howard after the Tampa affair in 2001, along with others made by shock jocks David Oldfield and Michael Smith following the sinking of the vessel known as SIEV-221 off Christmas Island in 2010. The text of these remarks becomes the raw material for a number of erasure poems, in which all but select phrases are submerged in white space or replaced by long dashes. Interspersed with other sections of prose or reiterated in variable forms, these erasure poems repudiate the censorial practices to which they refer. Crawford's redactions emphasise national identity as a fiction of inclusion founded in and maintained by its exclusions: all the truths it doesn't tell, all the people it abandons at its shores.

We simply cannot allow ——————————————————
——————————————————

asylum seekers

irrespective of the circumstances, irrespective of ——————————
——————————————————

——————————————————————————————————

—————— stocking ——————————

——————————————————————————————————

———————————— density ——————

a sinking boat

the Taliban

trying to sail to Christmas Island

——————————————————————————————————

the people ——————————————————

We don't turn ——————————————

——————————————————————————————————

———————————————————— easy ——————

Eleven days before you died, SIEV 221 ran aground on rocks just off the shore of Christmas Island. Forty-two people survived. Forty-eight people were drowned. The then Opposition Immigration Minister, Scott Morrison, suggested that the cost of funerals should not be borne by the Australian government.

It was the day after Christmas when you died. A flash of tinsel can still pull me back inside that summer's strange tonal saturation. I got sunburnt at your funeral; I thought I saw you sitting in the distance at your funeral.

That people who are not residents of this country, ——————
——————————————————————————————
———————————— now we've got to pay ——————
——————————————————————————————

———————————— grip on taxpayer's money ————————————
—————— And it's wrong, isn't it? Isn't it wrong?

Making excisions against excision, Crawford works to unwrite the documents of the nation-state. *To cause to fall; to bring down that which is standing*. This strategy casts *No Document* as a

kind of leaked report, its writing not so much blocked by the empty boxes as overflowing from (or in spite of) them. Crawford, whose wider art practice includes zine-making, is inventive at the level of mise-en-page, the physical arrangement of text and other graphic marks, and this makes her writing highly supple in its meanings. In fact, whereas she produces white space as a zone of loss, as in the placement and punctuation of 'no document can make you manifest;', such open-ended constructions also notate her writing – and the history it engages – as always incomplete, available for revision as well as extension.

For this reason, perhaps, I found myself gravitating toward the book's white spaces with pen in hand, and most of all to the rectangular shapes, their pristine blankness seeming to invite my own marks and part-sentences. I don't imagine Crawford would mind me scribbling in her book, but in any case, she, by her gap-riven form, shares with the reader the work of drawing things together, determining how one paragraph, idea, or section relates to another. Making sense, that is, of the semicolons and commas that often appear in the place of periods – and reaching, like them, across the white space to the clauses to which they might attach themselves. *No Document* dreams of a sentence that opens itself to all other sentences, enjoining them much as a semicolon does, holding clauses together without ranking or hierarchising them. You can put up as many borders as you want, the book seems to say. You can cordon off a section of a page, or partition an entire island. But ideas – like people, animals, and much else – are still connected, will still connect.

The document that doesn't appear in the empty frames may be, specifically, a photograph. 'There isn't one photograph of us, facing the camera', Crawford writes to her friend, and in the absence of this image she searches for its substitutes. Above her desk she keeps two photographs: a postcard reproduction of Robert Mapplethorpe's 'Two Men Dancing', in which 'two men – still so young, almost boys – are shirtless, perhaps naked (the image is cropped at their waists), and each wears a plastic crown'; and 'a torn photocopy' of a nineteenth-century daguerreotype, a portrait 'of two young girls, touching hands'.

In their youth and intimacy these couples figure the bond between Crawford and her friend. Holding hands, pressing together chests and torsos, their bodies form more shapes that are absences. This time, though, the shapes are circular, a linking of skin on skin (a comma not a full stop, a curve not a break). In their closed dancing position, Mapplethorpe's two men embrace one another; the *v* of their bodies, extending to their point of their clasped hands, is compacted by the gesture of the man in the foreground, who rests his head on his partner's shoulder. Neither man looks to the camera; complete in themselves, a closed circuit, they have no need of us, and in their sculptural beauty they seem eternal, their waltz without end. This effect is especially poignant given how they, like Mapplethorpe's other gay male subjects in the 1980s, appear to us under the shroud of the AIDS epidemic and its culture of mourning.

The circle emerges in *No Document* as a shape of communion, a form of enclosure that does more than contain. At the S11 protest against a meeting of the World Economic Forum in Melbourne in 2000, Crawford learns of a tactic used by Chilean activists during the country's military dictatorship:

> *Form a circle: it takes less people that way to block a space than it would to block the same with a straight line. … Our Chilean comrade said, as we circled in the rain:* We must be a blancmange, encircling the state.

A gelatinous, jiggling dessert in its rounded mould; shining plastic crowns ringing two men's heads; bodies bound in dance and protest, love and solidarity: like Crawford's excisions against excisions, the circle is a barricade against barricades, an enclosure against enclosure.

We might also think of Crawford's method of writing as a kind of circling, her topics touching like girls holding hands in the daguerreotype – even as those girls become linked with, and serve as proxies for, Crawford and her friend. The book is framed as a kind of séance, or else a protest, in which the dead and the living commune: 'I gather / I am gathered in the ghosts round', Crawford writes early on. Or later: 'I write this for us to assemble.'

There are, of course, dangers to such a richly associative and integrating perspective. To make things contiguous with one another is to risk leveling them; to substitute one figure for another can be to collapse the two, and so to make unethical assumptions about the commensurability of experience. Crawford is sensitive to these issues, and her assemblage is, in her words, a scene of 'differentiation', where togetherness depends on the distinction between self and other. In some of the most moving (and, I think, ethically perilous) sections of the book, Crawford writes a letter to Alya Satta, a two-year-old girl who was one of the 353 people who drowned when SIEV-X, an Indonesian fishing boat en route to Australia, capsized in international waters on 19 October 2001. 'I call myself into this space with you', Crawford begins, but this is not a fantasy of encounter that would deny – or redeem – the fact of Alya's death. It is instead a space cleaved *in* the appalling absence of the child; it is a measure of the reality that 'there is no place on this earth now that contains you: you in yourself, irreducible and irreplaceable':

> *What is this space? Our movement through it is a falling without landing, and the space has always existed. … I call myself to the attention of being in this space, which is our differentiation, where I become me, and you you. … And we have fallen together in our separateness that makes all possible; fallen through the space that makes a* we *possible, because there can be you and can be me.*

It's true that Alya's death becomes caught up with the many other deaths *No Document* marks and mourns. *I mean a loss additional*. Yet the ethical and emotional force of the letter derives from its insistence on Alya's incommensurability with the author and with all others – and its elaboration of what Jane Blocker might recognise as the 'space of history' inhabited by both subject and historian.

Composed of myriad singularities, Crawford's circles, gathered and gathering, reflect something like what the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy calls 'being singular plural': the idea that existence is always both particular and relational, and that to be together, therefore, doesn't mean being the same. *We have fallen through the space that makes a we possible. There can be you; there can be me*.

Yet the circle can also be a bind. As the book progresses, Crawford expresses a deepening sense of frustration and despair at the failures of art and social movements to reshape the world. Growing up in the 1990s, 'too late for Cabaret Voltaire / the Cabaret Voltaire / Nanterre / Franklin River / Freedom Rides', and living through the entrenchment of perpetual war in the opening decades of the new century, Crawford is haunted by the television's 'infernal loop of the planes hitting the towers' and by dreams of Super 8 film fed through projectors 'in perilous loops, until it burnt'. She sees herself 'inside a loop / of ghosts', but their presence indicates the failures of the past, 'each revolution / apparitional' – phantasmal, unreal. The loop is film stock on fire and picket lines dispersed; in each case, the revolutions fail.

'I felt a kind of craziness that nothing could be done to stop the war', she writes near the book's end. In these final sections we see, for the first time, a fence actually brought down – but this event is equivocal in its effects. Crawford describes her participation in a 2002 protest at the immigration detention centre at Woomera, in South Australia, during which the protesters breached the perimeter fence and a number of detainees escaped. The following day, Indigenous elders visited the protesters' camp: 'They were angry. Vulnerable people were now possibly at large and at risk on Kokatha country.' At this painful assembly, where 'hundreds of us gathered, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal', Crawford confronts another barricade, a 'history lodged between you and me'. 'We had acted as if this place were ours to act upon', she realises. But 'nothing is unoccupied'; 'no land / no document' is without a past.

How are we to make sense of the complexity of the book's moral vision, which encompasses fatalism and hope, stagnation and possibility, like an eye or a camera adjusting its focus? The key, I think, is the quotation Crawford pastes above her desk – in her line of sight – between the Mapplethorpe photograph and the daguerreotype: '*Concrete decision in favour of the victory of light in real possibility is the same as countermove against failure in process.*' The source of these words isn't named, but they come from *The Principle of Hope*, a major work by the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch. First published in Germany in three volumes in the 1950s, *The Principle of Hope* was written in the context of an ill-governed, divided, and repressive culture, and against a nihilism ascendant after two World Wars. It was taken up by the Parisian student movements of 1968, which were spurred by Bloch's notion of 'militant optimism', a critical or educated hope in utopia. In moments of decision in history and in the present, Bloch believed, there is 'undecided material' in which we can glimpse other worlds that are (were) possible: the 'Not-Yet-Conscious'. Utopia, then, is not abstract or immaterial. Revealed

'in what exists and what is in motion', it is the grounds for tangible, socially produced action in favour of the hoped-for world, 'the victory of light in real possibility'.

As it happens, Crawford cites Bloch in a parenthetical aside to an essay in these pages about the art of David Wojnarowicz:

> *(*Hope? *Jesus. Well, exactly. It's hard to use this word without wheeling in deferral to a power that's eternally deferred in its arrival. Still I cleave to Ernst Bloch's procedure:* Its meaning is Not-Yet, and the task is to grasp it thoroughly*.)*

The recursions of Crawford's prose, a *deferral deferred* and a *wheeling arrival*, strike me as rather Blochian, and *The Principle of Hope* seems to serve as a model for *No Document*'s qualities of recursion, not to mention its polemical aims. Like Bloch, Crawford rejects both strict optimism – which assumes the world is inherently receptive to change – and blanket pessimism – which assumes the world is an unchanging thing to which we must submit. *No Document* shares with *The Principle of Hope* an orientation toward the past as a terrain of real possibilities through which we can reimagine the future.

Hence the book's temporal play. As Crawford writes to her friend, 'I change tense, and travel back across your death's border'. Stealing across time's thresholds, she repeatedly locates herself in the present tense of the past – saying *I am here* not *I was here*. This isn't a bid to restore the past but rather to remember it as a flow of moments in existence and in motion, in which today's ghosts once dreamed of different futures.

By occupying an impossible position both before and after the future is set – in which the future is posited as both a secret and a memory – Crawford conceives of history as a space of hope and its disappointment, a circle as well as a bind. In this sense, the absence in which *No Document* is forged is the absence of utopia, the no place (yet). It is the blank space of *then and there* we might begin to fill *here and now*. These phrases come from a quote that I keep above my own desk, from *Cruising Utopia*, a book by the queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz. Another brilliant person who died before his time, or so the saying goes, Muñoz also gravitated toward Bloch's utopian thinking, which serves as a touchstone for *Cruising Utopia.* (Incidentally, across his career Muñoz devoted his extraordinary critical acumen to the art of Robert Mapplethorpe, Félix González-Torres, and Ana Mendieta, among many others.) Here is the quote:

> *The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a* then and there*. Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds.*

Several of the small number of photographs in which both Crawford and her friend appear were taken one night in inner-city Sydney. The two of them have come upon a blank billboard – another empty frame – which, Crawford tells us, 'was still lit up at night, an

empty screen, an unexposed piece of photographic paper, long side of a container, no flag of any nation'. 'The thing to make was shadows, we decided; a mark but not a mark.' So Crawford and her friend craft disused oil tins into the shape of flying birds, carry them up two ladders, and hang them by wires in front of the lights 'to cast the shadow of the idea of flight onto the billboard'. Photographed from street level by Crawford's friend's partner, their backs turned away from the camera, the two friends' bodies also throw shadows, joining the birds in the idea of flight. Working together, they make marks without leaving them. Working together, they cast shapes of absence. And with bare materials in their hands, wire and tin and snips, they too are (were) temporary fixtures, somehow untethered from the world as it is, bound for some other place. *A victory of light in real possibility*.

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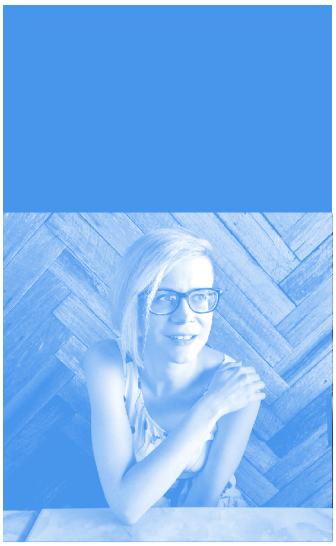

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