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My Business is Circumference

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My Business is Circumference

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Art

by

Olivia Leiter

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Table of Contents

Introduction

"Theory itself is assumed to be abstract: something is more theoretical the more abstract it is, the more it is abstracted from everyday life. To abstract is to drag away, detach, pull away, or divert. We might then have to to drag theory back, to bring theory back to life."

-Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*

My work deals with movement, infrastructure and framing. I think about the sociopolitical through the micro and the physical: a car breakdown, a crack, a pipe leak. I value touching and feeling as modes of knowledge production, ways of understanding the world that privilege intimacy over distance.

Over the course of the last three years I have been making work alongside uprisings for racial justice, a global pandemic, and my involvement in labor organizing. These experiences directly inform ideas which circle around the work: rupture, anxiety, disorientation, and a call to collectively reimagine new forms of relation.

Notes on Circumference

Olivia Leiter

Notes on Circumference

Olivia Leiter

Joan Jonas, Songdelay film still, 1973.
Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI),
New York

In a letter to a friend Emily
Dickinson famously said "my
business is circumference"

Dickinson calls attention to a
circle's perimeter without which
it has neither shape nor meaning

What is the circumference of
a cup holder
a target
a peep hole
a knee
a drain
a waist
a house
a traffic light
a door handle
a crowd

Each circumference has a context

In his film *Conical Intersect* Gordon Matta-Clark cut a hole through 17th-century townhouses that were scheduled to be demolished near the Centre Georges Pompidou

The cut becomes a peephole into the structure of the building and the gentrification of a specific neighborhood

Circumference is about limits

Limits are always physical

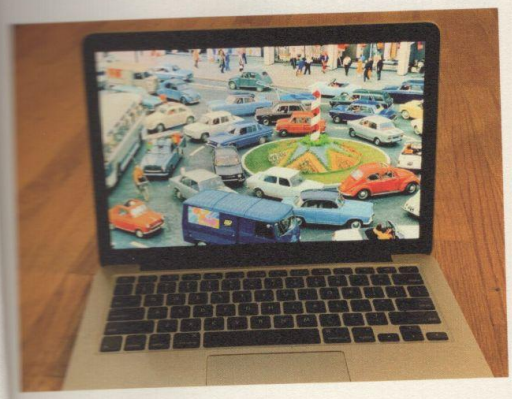
I don't see a glass wall until I bump into it and experience its limit

The characters in physical comedies are often out of place, encountering a world they rarely understand

In *The Art of Cruelty* Maggie Nelson writes that physical comedy depends on the body's vulnerability, even though it reassures the audience that no real harm is taking place

In Tati's *Playtime* the sterility of
architecture is offset by
collisions
crashes
honks
thuds
the clicking of a woman's heels

These are the sounds of physical limits



I am reminded of limits when things
around me break

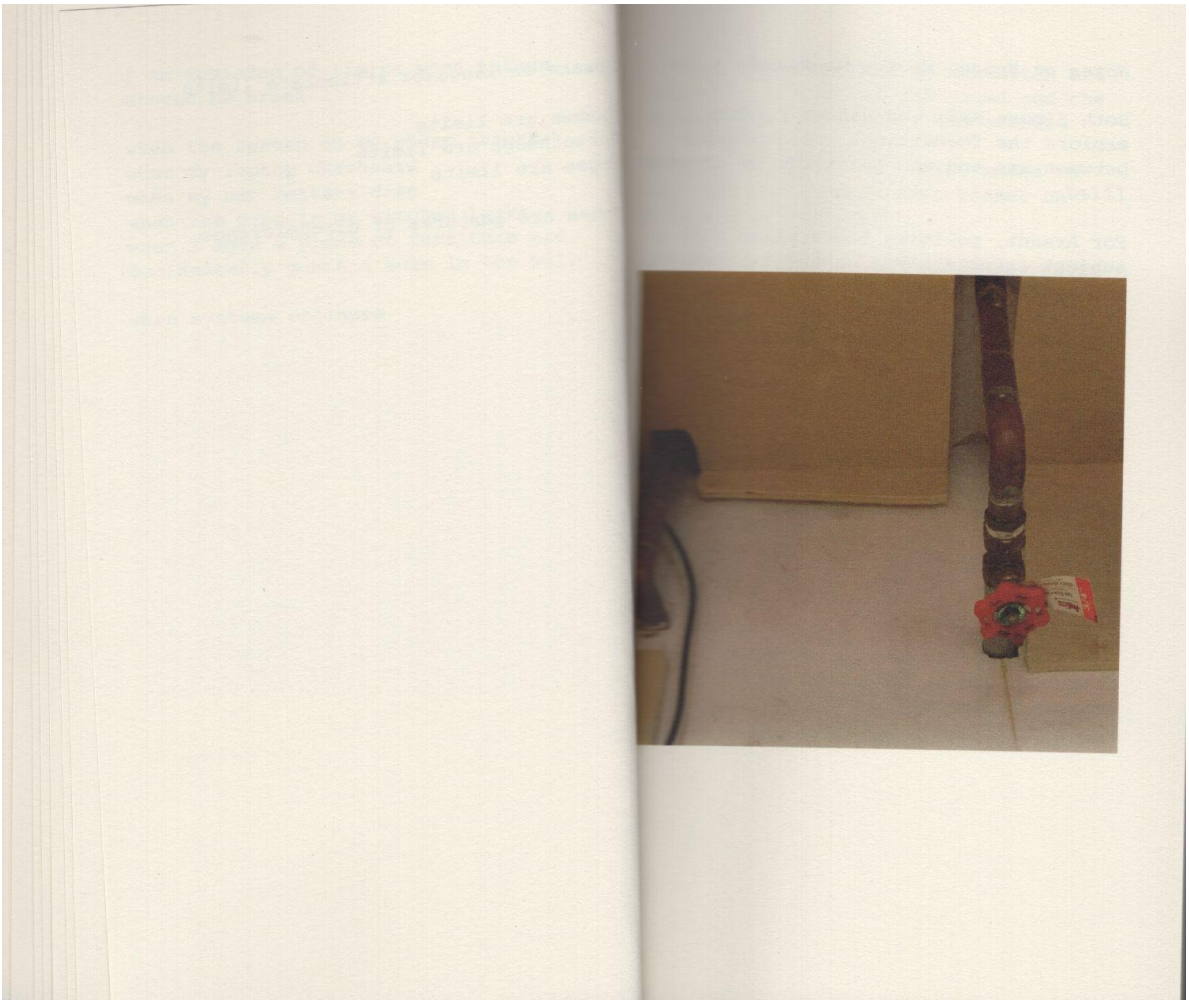
when the screen on my phone cracks
when my laptop overheats
when my car battery dies
when the pipe in my kitchen leaks
when I move a piece of furniture and
accidentally punch a hole in the wall

when systems collapse

Breaks in language articulate limits

Dashes are limits
Parentheses are limits
Pages are limits

These are gestures of circumference



Notes on Force, Moving Backwards

Both Simone Weil and Hannah Arendt explore the foundational relationship between war and the political in Homer's *Iliad*

For Arendt, politics takes place when a subject asserts force on the battlefield, on a public stage

For Simone Weil, the protagonist of the *Iliad* is force itself

Weil writes:

"The concept of force is central in any attempt to think clearly about human relations"

For Weil, men do not use force, but rather force uses men, turning them into "things"

The *Iliad* speaks to the overdetermined, tragic nature of force, an affront to the idea of progress

I think about walking in Manhattan and following the flow of the crowd and the uniform grid of streets and avenues

Then I remember when I first moved to L.A. and got a jaywalking ticket on Wilshire and Vermont

Walking is always tied to force: force that directs your movement and force that obstructs it

When I was 15 I walked down the wrong set of escalators in Old Navy

First I noticed everyone staring

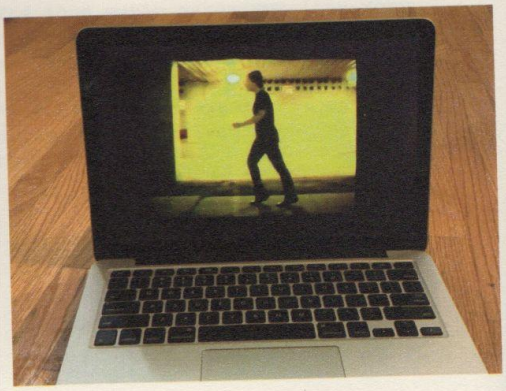
It took me a while to realize I was moving in the wrong direction

The mall produces a state of amnesia

The loud music makes you lose your bearings and the artificial lighting makes you lose your sense of time

This is why the experience of being forced backwards was especially disorienting

Klara Liden's work calls attention to the forces that organize movement through space



In *The Myth of Progress (Moonwalk)* the artist moonwalks through the empty streets of New York

Piano music plays on loop

She is being tracked—it feels like she is being watched by a security camera

The mood is melancholic

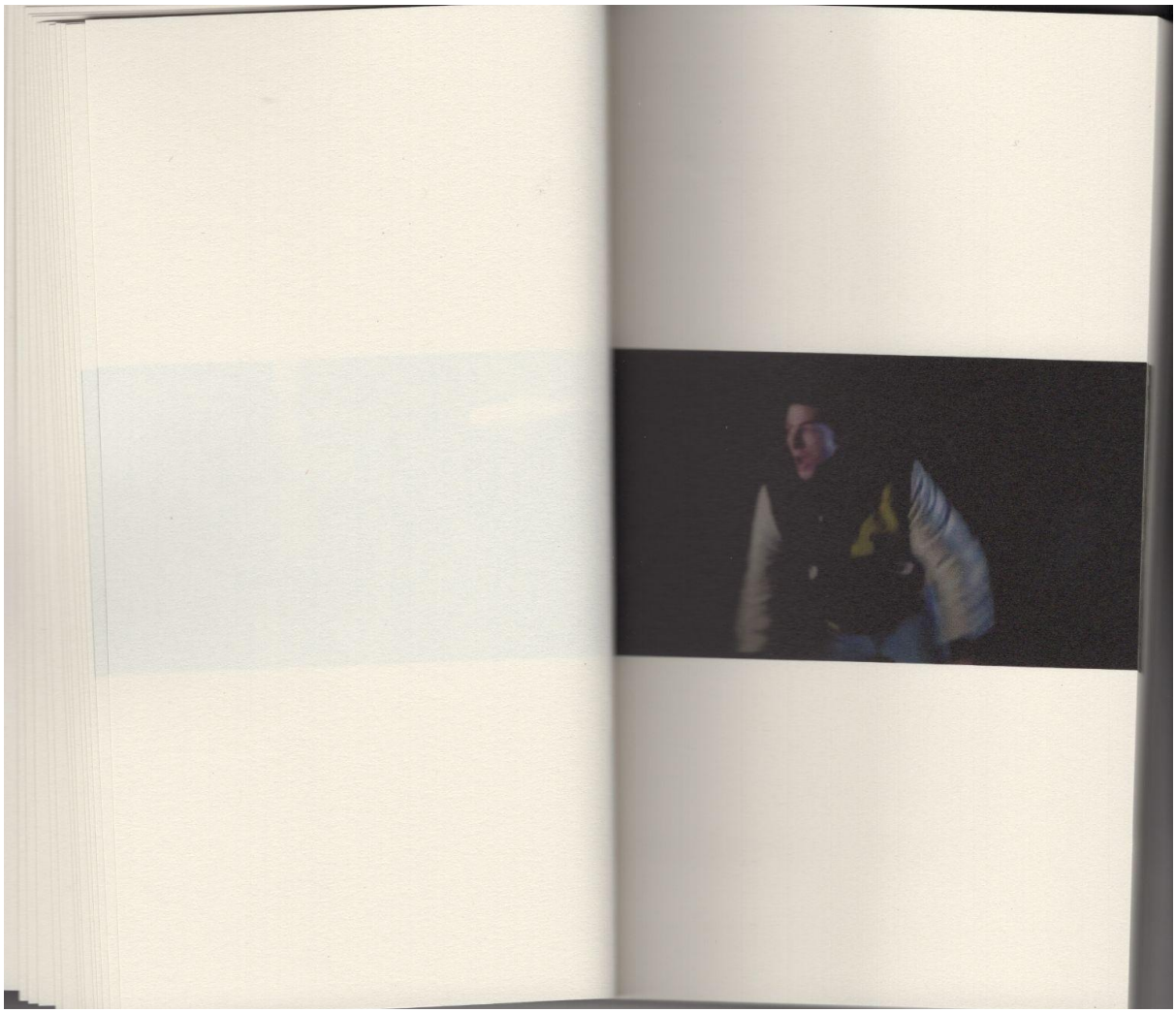
Steve McQueen's *Shame* includes a long tracking shot of Michael Fassbender jogging

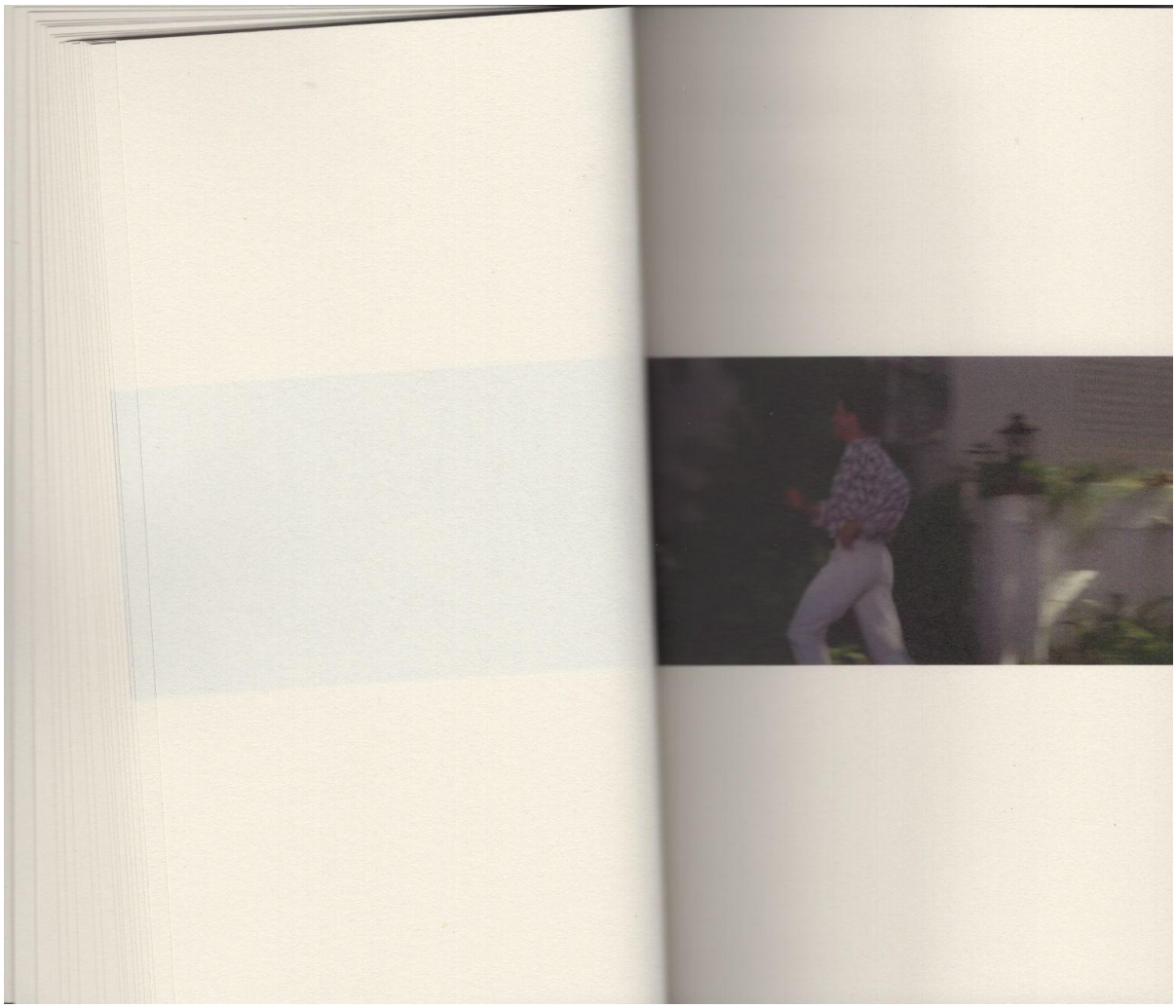
Both McQueen and Liden position their subjects in New York at night

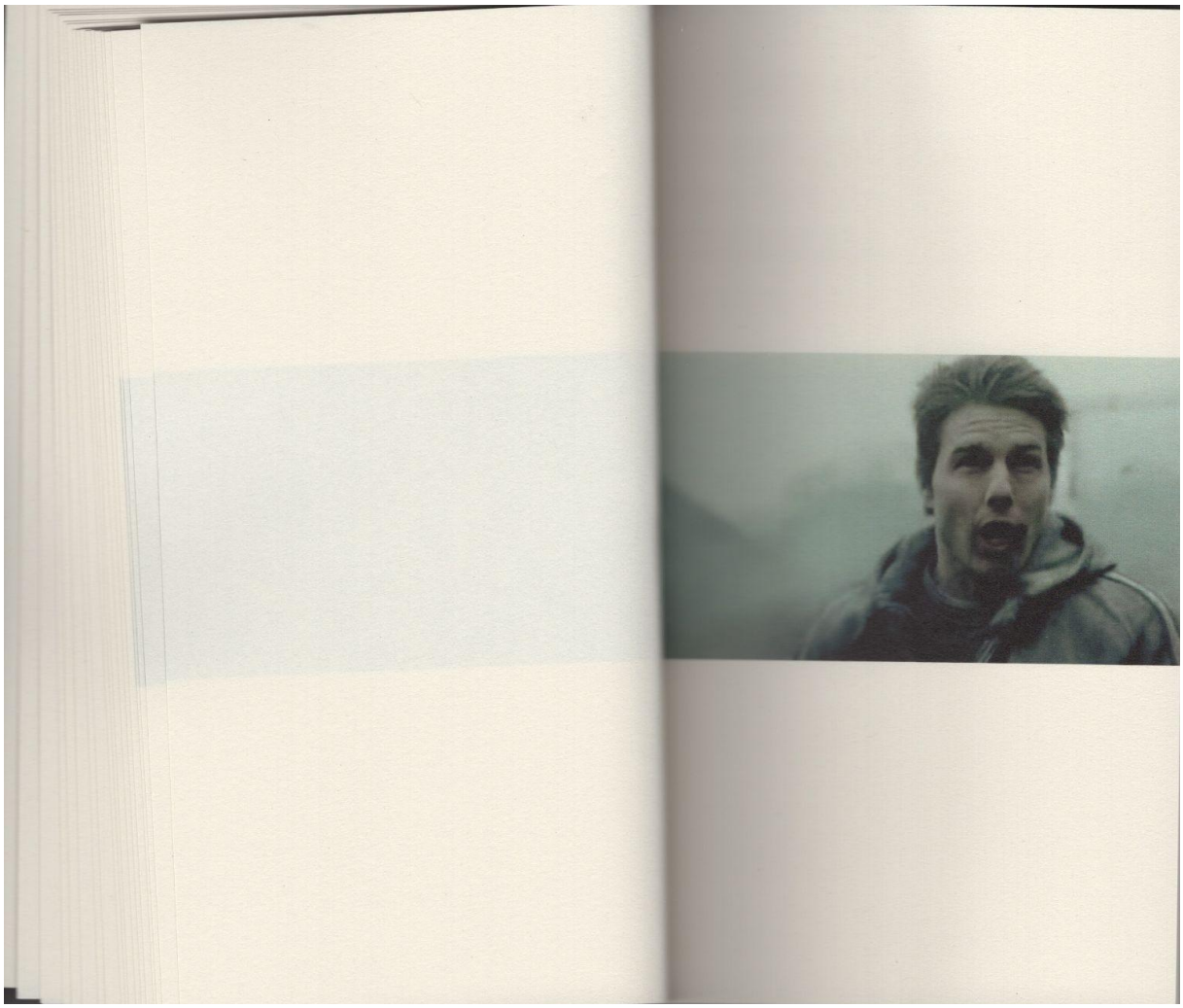
But in McQueen's shot the streets are busy: stores are open, taxis drive by

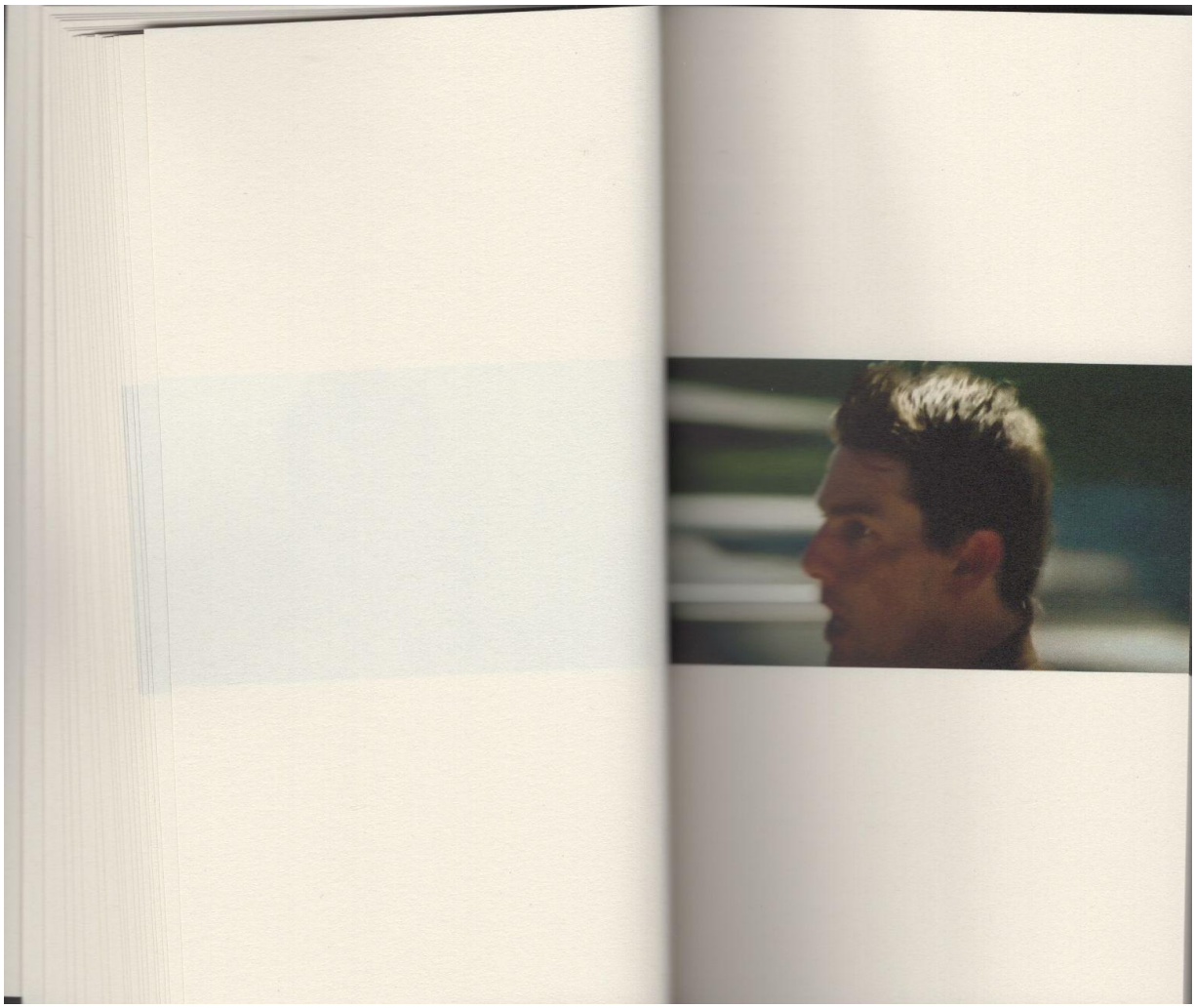
Unlike Liden, who doesn't seem to be going anywhere, Fassbender moves forward, his breathing accompanies the piano music as he jogs

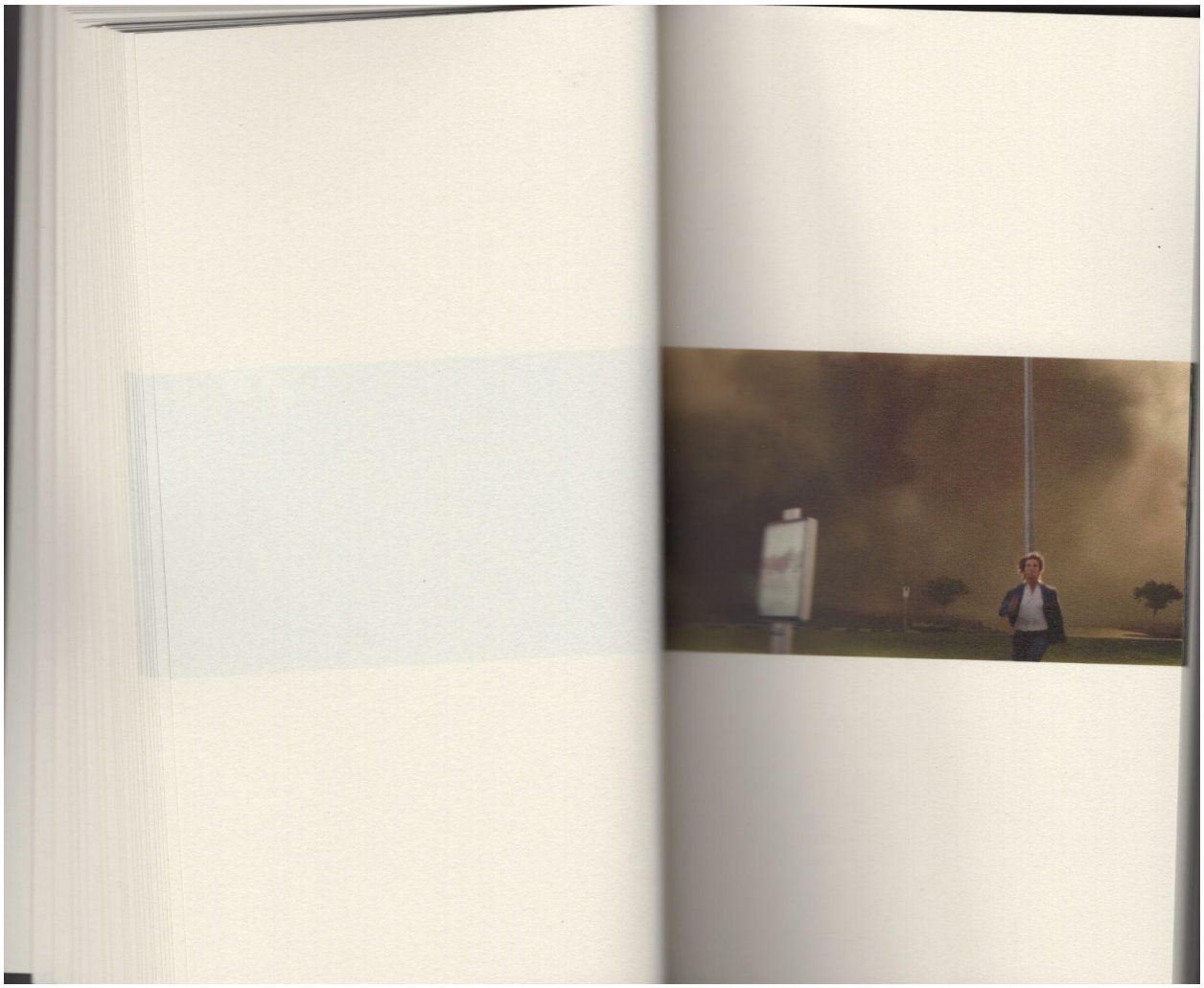
Moving Forward

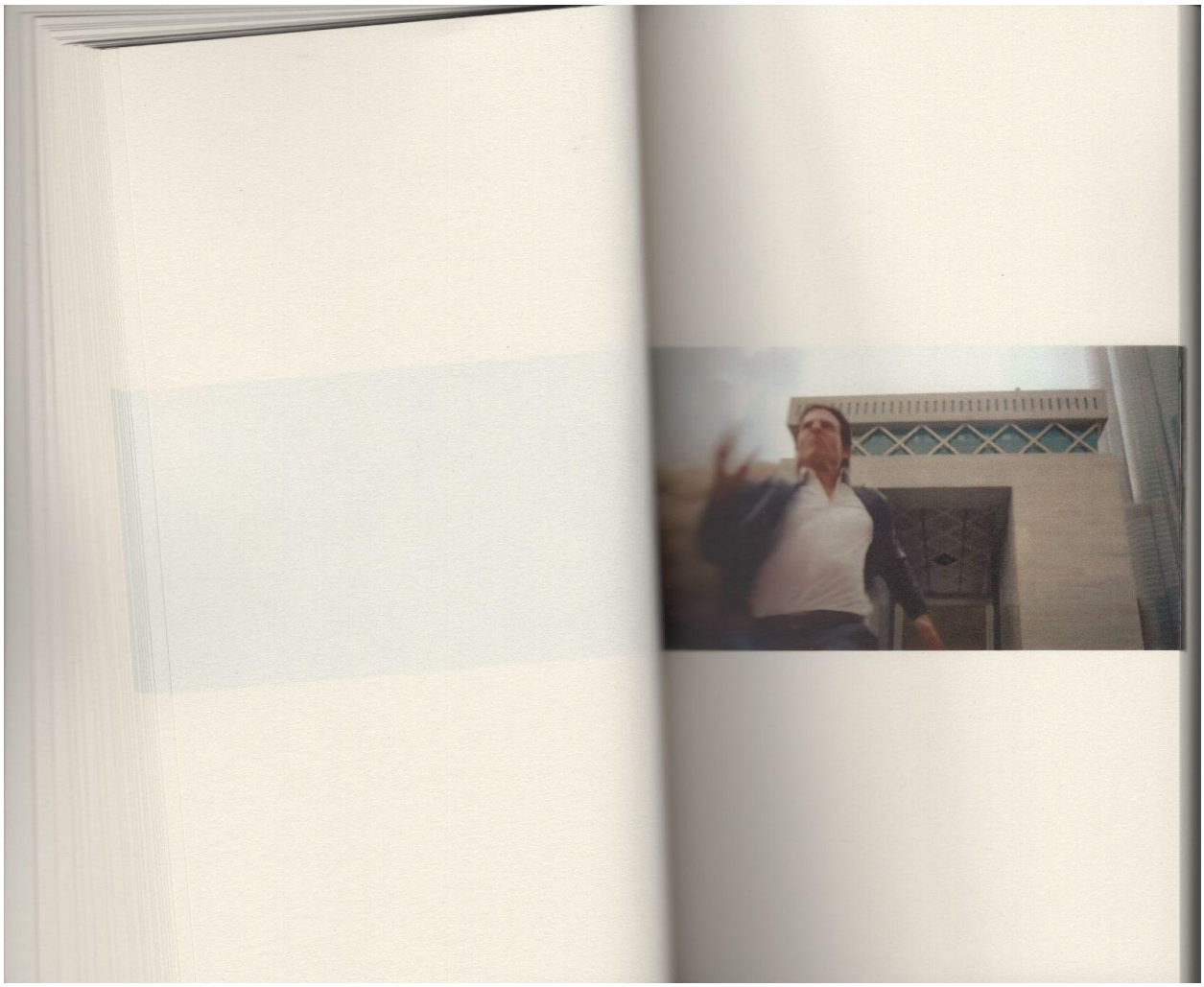


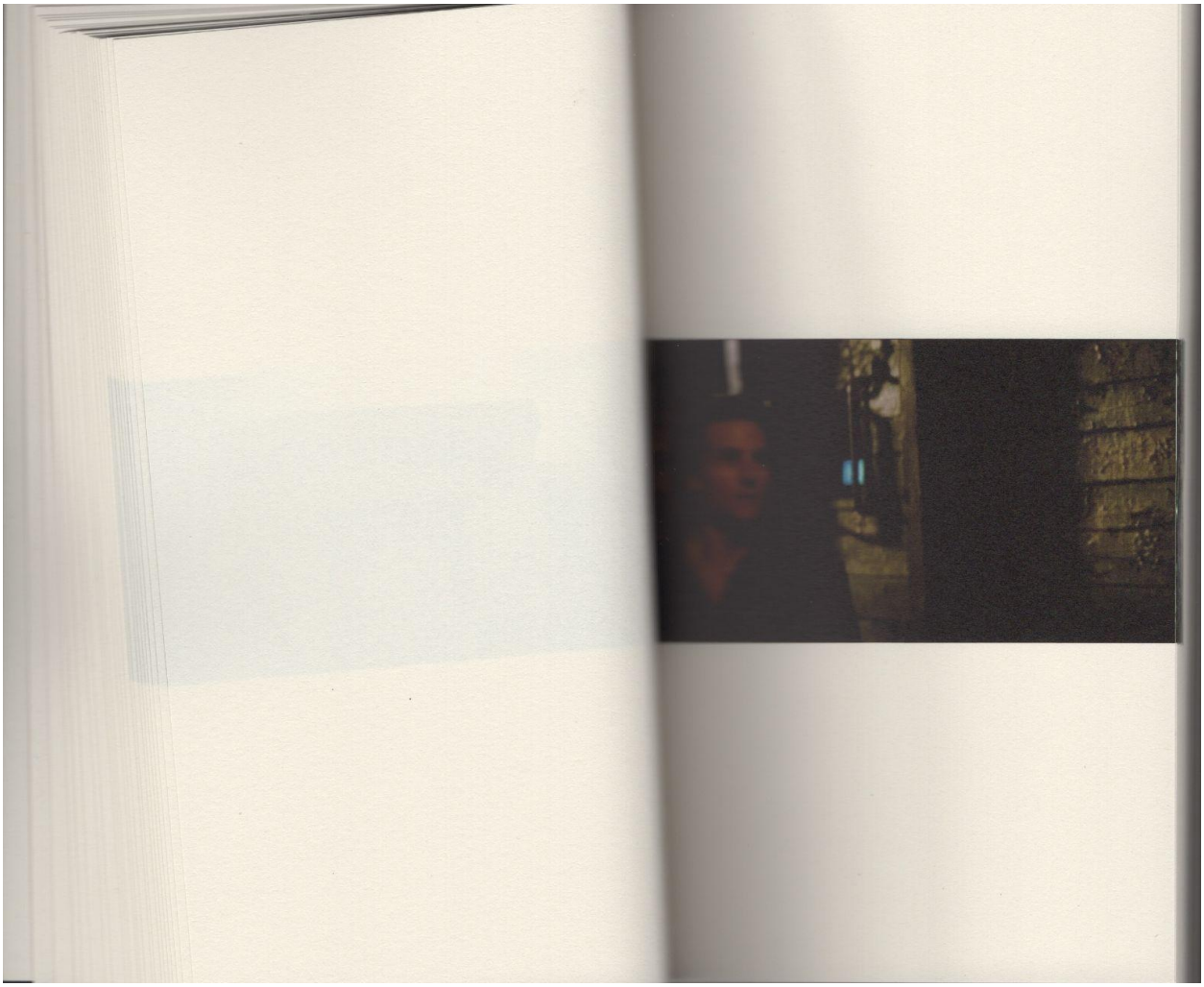


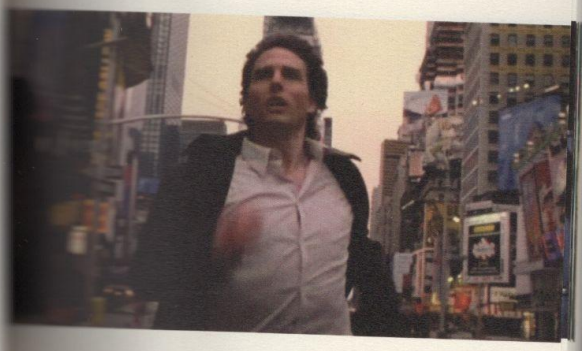


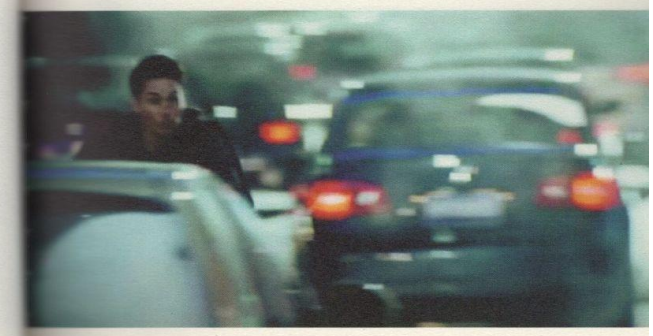


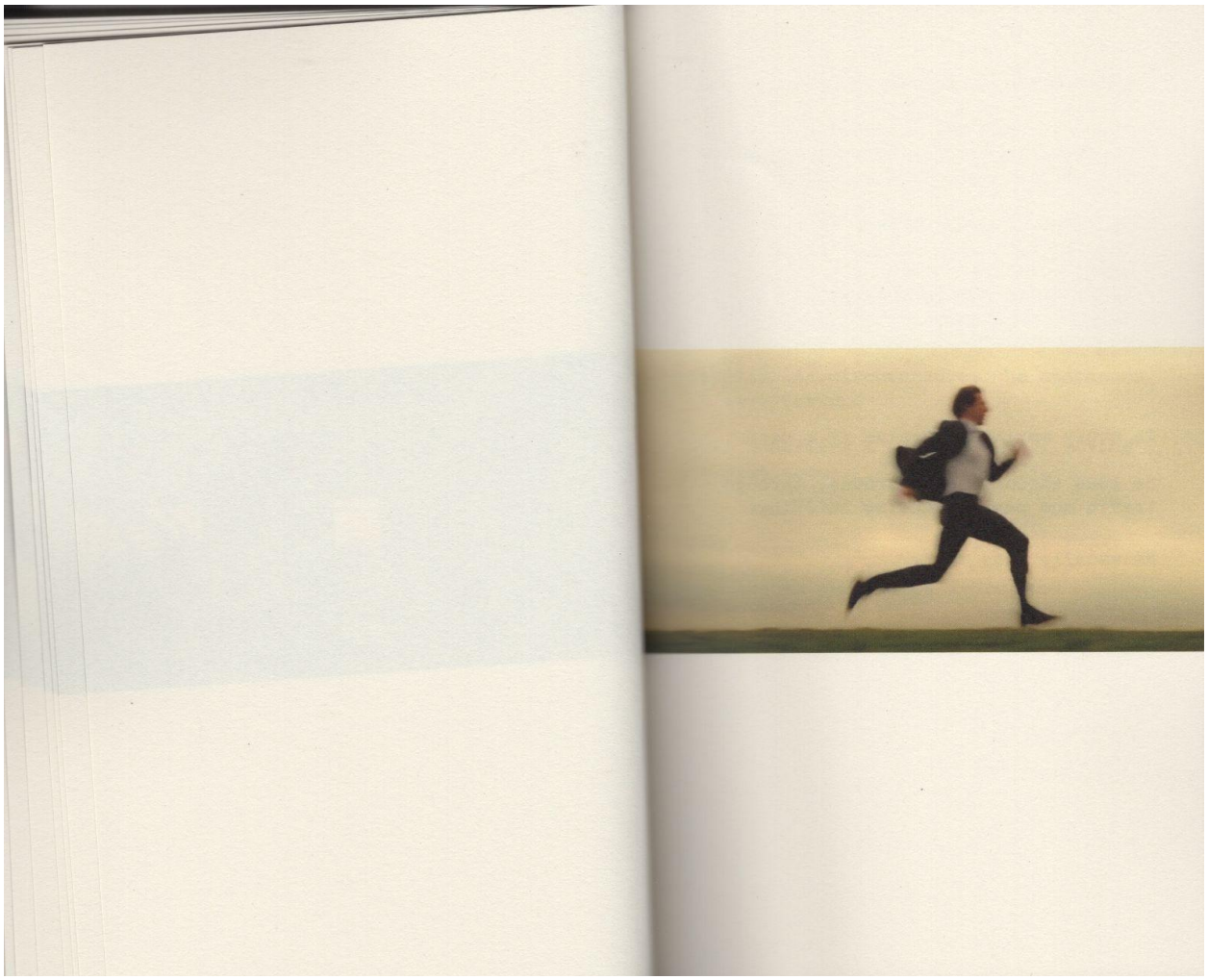












In every movie Tom Cruise is a hero

He runs through large crowds, through traffic and past exploding buildings

He usually runs alone

Despite his circumstances, he continues to move forward

This describes a specific way of moving through space:

Move forward
You're in charge
You don't need a safety net
You are an autonomous individual
Move forward
Don't look back

Looking Back

Don't Look Back was an exhibition at MOCA in 2016, where I was working as a security guard at the time

As a guard, I never walked forward

I would stand in place
talk to coworkers in between posts
lean against the wall
pace back and forth
count my steps as I walked around the perimeter of the room
stretch
squat
and occasionally sit when no one was watching

Don't Look Back was centered around the 90s

A large portion of the show focused on loss, the myth of progress, and the AIDS crisis

Sometimes we need to look back

This is what Douglas Crimp writes about in his essay "Mourning and Militancy"

Sometimes in the face of loss we can't always move forward

Militancy represses mourning

One of my favorite pieces in the exhibition was a large drawing by Toba Khedoori

Toba Khedoori
Untitled (seats)
1996
Oil and wax on paper
127 x 300 inches (322.6 x 762 cm)
© Toba Khedoori, Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles

Empty theater seats float in a large background which is yellowing and covered in scuff marks

All of the chairs are the same size and distance apart

Decontextualized and without an audience it is easier to locate the theater's form—it's circumference—and consider how it structures our movement through space

The subject is the structure, the container in which people gather

There is no forward moving subject

I got laid off from MOCA last month

I thought I had moved on but I keep looking back

I remember Pope.L's *Trinket* exhibition at the Geffen

A 16ft tall American flag was set into motion by industrial fans

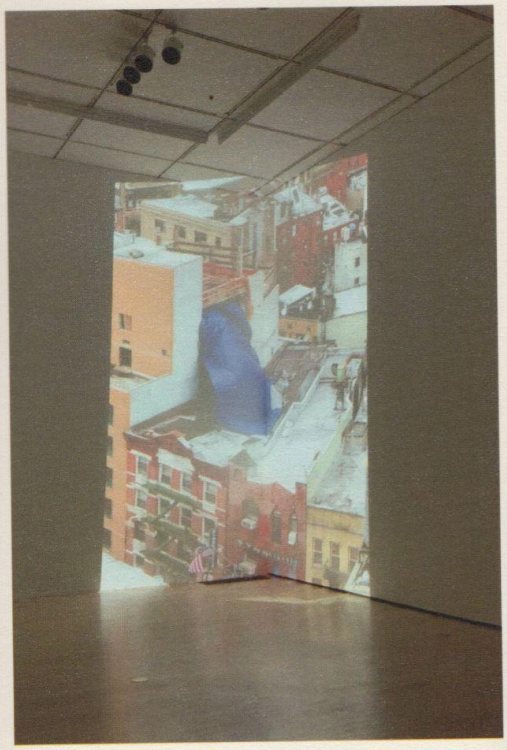
Prop lights illuminated the fabric

The flag tore apart over time

I listened to the fans all day for several months—it sounded like I was underwater

I couldn't stop staring at the spectacle of a monument collapsing

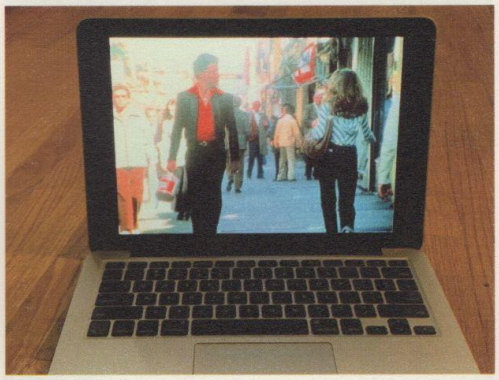
Pope.L's exhibition reminds me of the Lutz Bacher installation *Blue Wave*



Videos of a blue tarp hanging from a building in the Lower East Side were projected in two corners of the exhibition space

The background street noise filled up the room

I looked at the tarp
then at the city
I thought about missing New York
then about gentrification
I thought about the walls of the gallery
then about circumference
I thought about the forces that are imposed on a body
The tarp seemed to breathe, moving back and forth
I thought about blue
about Derek Jarman
about loss
about staring at something for a long time and listening
about looking back—



In the iconic opening sequence of *Saturday Night Fever* John Travolta walks in New York to "Stayin' Alive"

We watch him as he looks through the glass windows of a shoe store

The camera pans up from his feet to his face
He walks towards us
He turns backwards multiple times but only briefly to do double takes of women on the street
We watch him watching others
He stops to get pizza
He continues to walk towards us
He is a desiring-machine

At some moments, you are literally put in his shoes

This is the classic way cinema works: you identify with the person on the screen

John Travolta's character is aspirational

He's a 19-year-old Italian American paint-store employee from Bay Ridge with a Rocky poster in his bedroom

He dreams of crossing the Verrazano Bridge to Manhattan

He wants to move forward

Moving forward for Travolta means
achieving white, heteronormative success

You're supposed to identify with this

This vision of the hero is a limit

If you don't fit into that vision you are
constantly bumping up against it

Arthur Jafa says that viewers who don't
see themselves represented on the screen
have developed an "empathy muscle"

They go to films and don't see themselves
reflected so they are forced to displace
themselves onto the subject

There is a relationship between
displacement and Weil's conception of
force

According to Weil, we are dislocated

moving backwards
sideways
downwards
any direction that isn't forward

Foundations are shaky, unfixed

Displacement is the starting point for Chantal Akerman

More specifically, Akerman's work is about displacement from home

In 1975 she made *Jeanne Dielman*, a film about foundations being unsettled and feeling displaced in a static life

Two years after Jeanne Dielman Akerman made *News From Home*

Akerman has just moved to New York

Throughout the film she reads aloud letters her mother wrote her from Belgium

She's neither here nor there, off-center, shuffling through time

In a long tracking shot filmed from a car
I watch people waiting for the bus
stopping at the gas station
talking with their friends

The car stops at a light
The camera pauses on a man leaving a
store

The tracking shot continues
A man waves at his friends across the
street
People sit in their cars, on the street
corner
Sometimes I can't see anyone because a
taxi drives past

Throughout the film I hear Akerman's
voice but I never see her

This gives room for me to stand in her
place

I become dislocated too

In the final scene the camera slowly
moves away from the skyline until it
becomes entirely enveloped in fog

The film leaves us longing
distant
unresolved
feeling backwards

"Let's Collectively Move Backwards"

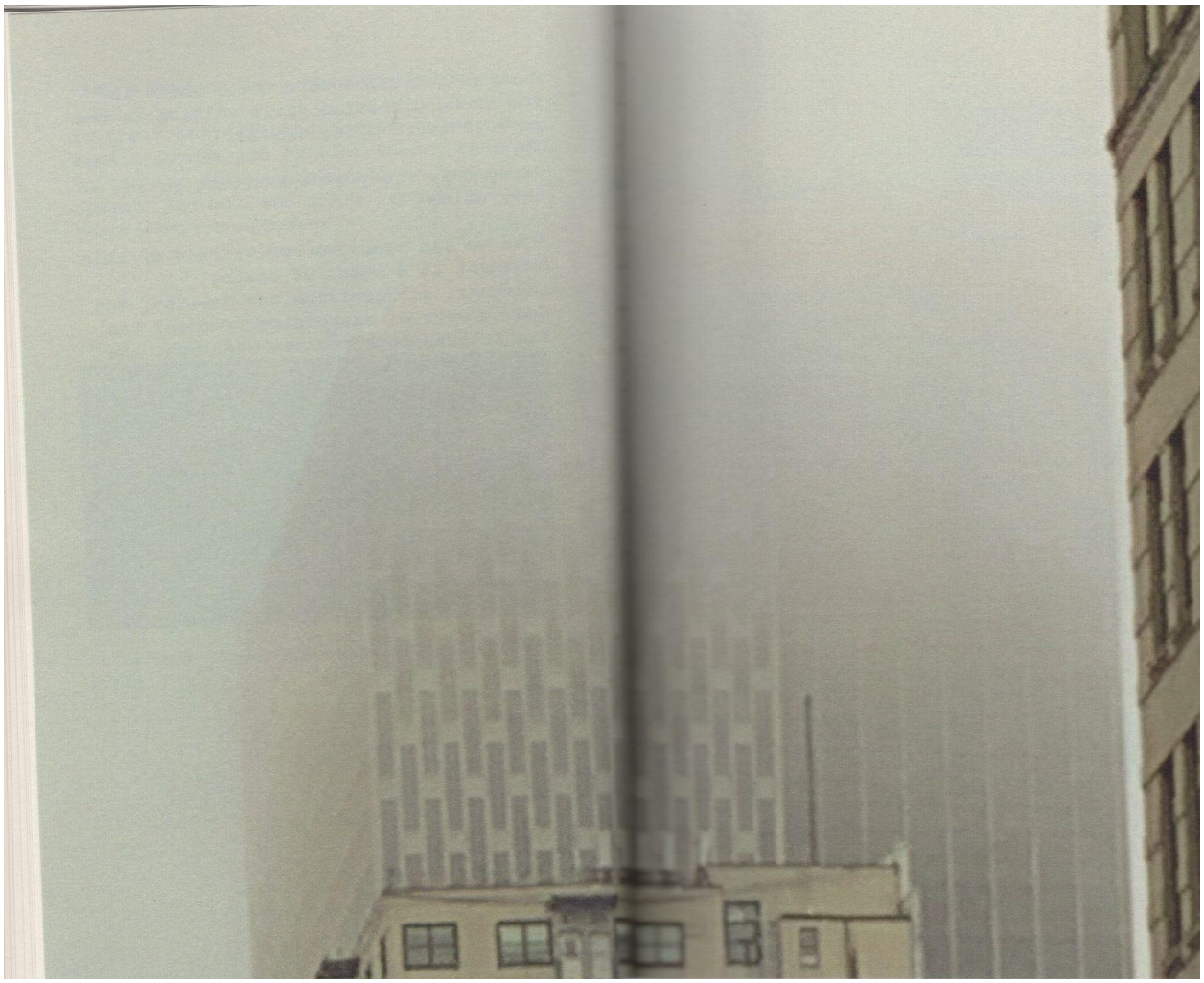
In their installation *Moving Backwards* Renate Lorenz and Pauline Boudry respond to feeling forced backwards by hate speech, borders and other recent reactionary backlashes

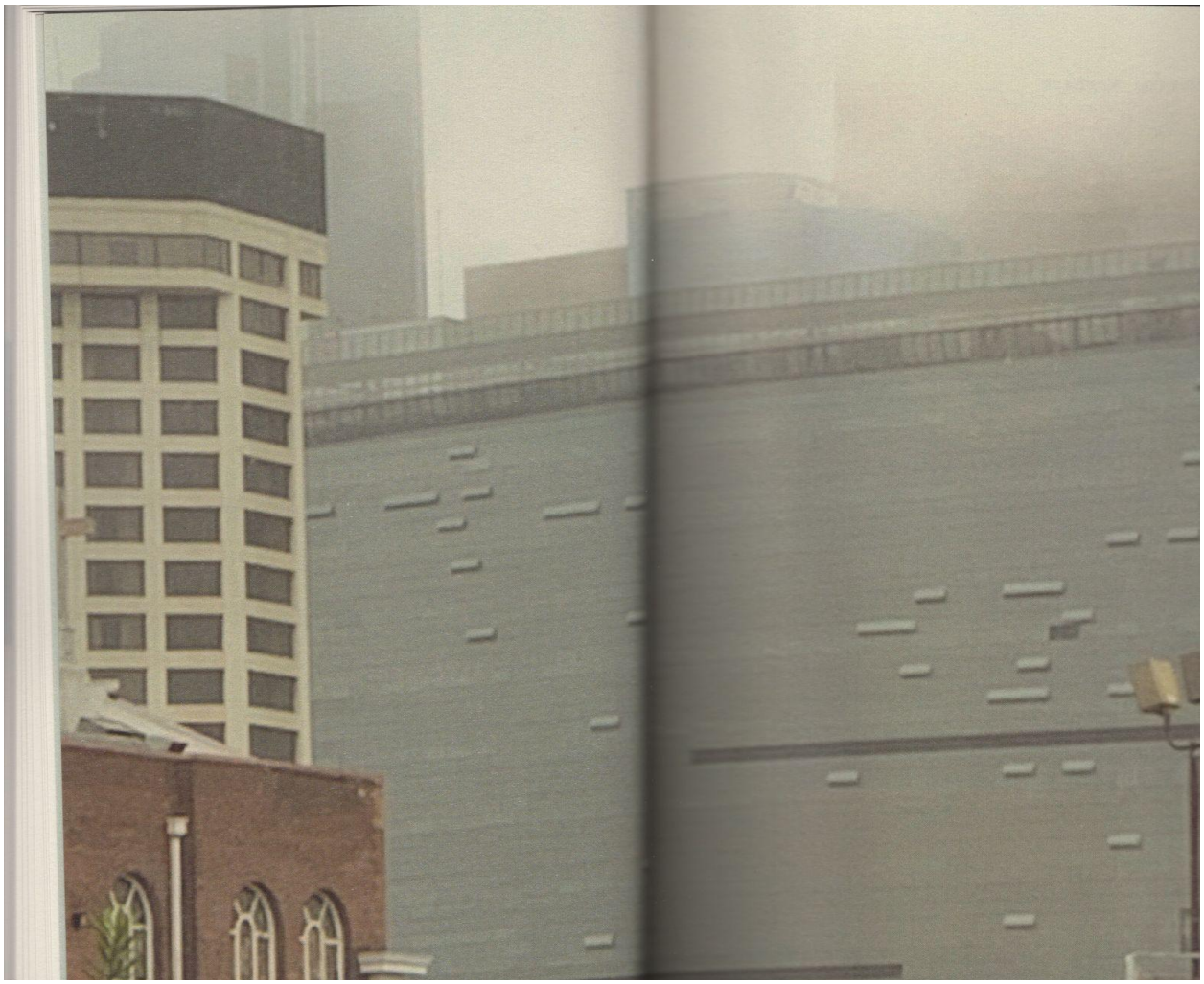
Still from *Moving Backwards* at JOAN, Los Angeles

Kurdish guerillas wore their shoes in the wrong direction while walking in the snow to avoid being tracked

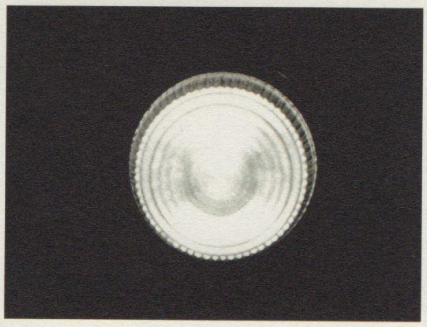
Using this story as a starting point they write:

"Can we use tactical ambivalence of this movement as a means of coming together, reorganizing our desires, and finding ways of exercising freedom? Can its feigned backwardness even fight the notion of progress's inevitability?"





Moving Nowhere



Godard's *Alphaville* explores movement in an alienated world

Signals dominate the film

Rooms are filled with blinking computers

Arrows send us left and right

Flashing lights send us in and out

But it's never clear where anyone is going

This is how I feel when I walk around IKEA

Projected arrows on the floor make me feel like I am going forward but I always end up lost

The arrows on Amazon packages don't lead you anywhere

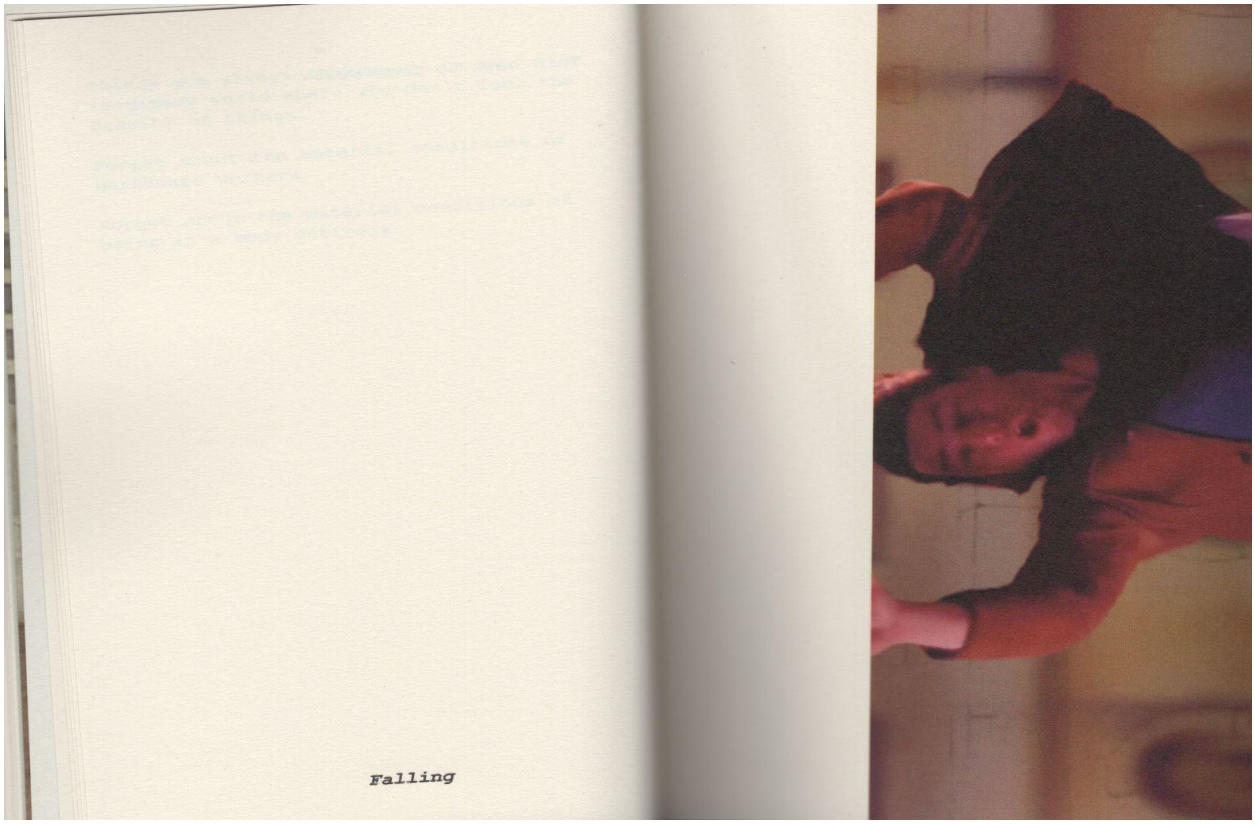
They float in space, weightless

Things are always looking up in an imaginary world where you don't feel the gravity of things

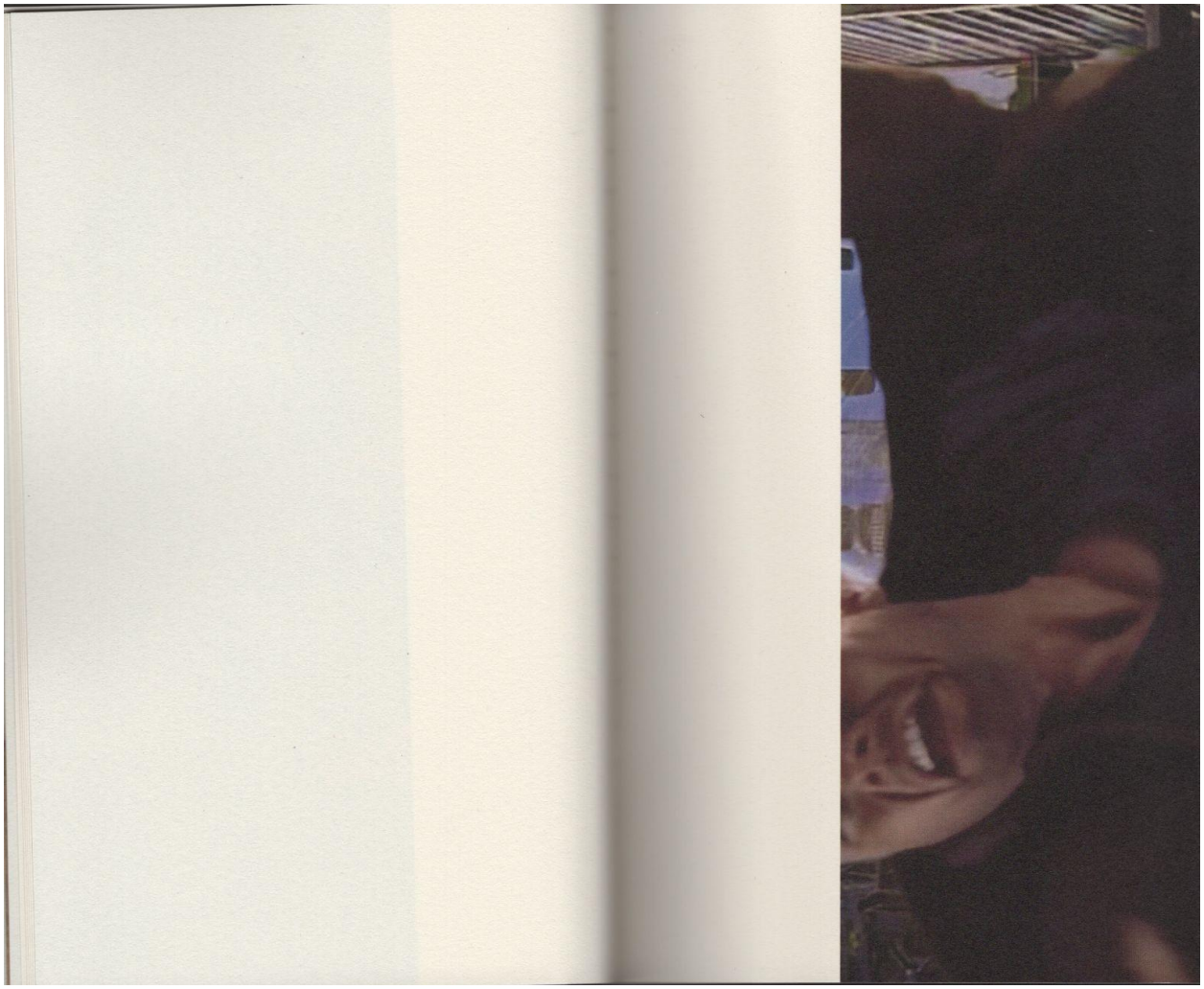
Forget about the material conditions of warehouse workers

Forget about the material conditions of being in a body entirely

Turn back to Tom Cruise



Falling



Even when Tom Cruise falls he still exerts force, always positioned in the center of the frame

In the last image he looks directly at us, breaking the fourth wall

In his writing about circles Ralph Waldo Emerson says:

"The poet is sovereign and stands in the center. There is no outside, no enclosing wall, no circumference"

But what if my business is circumference?

You find yourself in a structure and you
are always trying and failing to fit in

feeling the weight of things
stuck
falling

Last summer I had a job in a WeWork
space

Everything was engineered to feel
relaxing

Keurig machines
Explosions in the Sky
Glass walls

I kept getting lost

One day I couldn't find my office

Everything looked the same

Everyone in the surrounding offices
watched me walk past them over and over
again

I took deep breaths

"Grounding exercises" anchor you in the
present when you find yourself distracted
and overwhelmed

They allow you to take a break
Then you keep on going

In Klara Liden's installation *Grounding*
the subject walks through Wall Street

through corporate towers
government buildings
scaffolding
and plazas

She walks
falls—taking a moment of rest
and recovers

Then she trips on something and gets
back up

She falls and recovers over and over
again

It's exhausting to feel the weight of
the world but she heroically keeps
moving forward

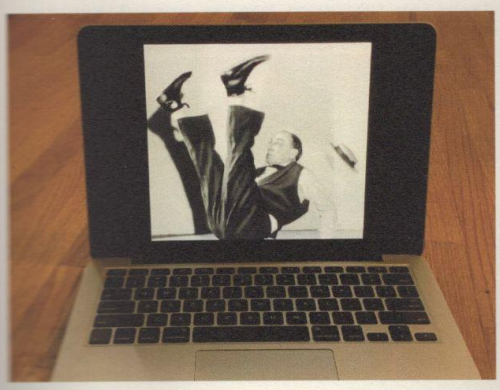
Why can't she stay grounded?

A pratfall is a staged tumble frequently performed in physical comedies

A pratfall can be more broadly defined as any embarrassing mistake

You slip on water

You spill some coffee on your shirt

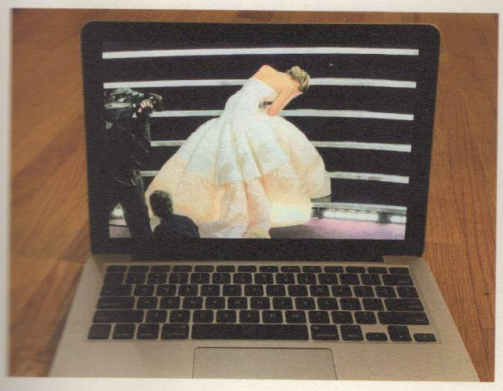


I learned recently about the "pratfall effect"

If you're perceived as highly competent, you will become more likeable when you make a mistake

If you're not perceived as competent, the opposite will occur

Jennifer Lawrence became more likeable when she tripped at the 2013 Academy Awards



When I was 7 I got my foot stuck in a manhole

I worked at a cafe last year and accidentally spilled coffee on a customer

I tripped down the stairs

I left my keys at home

I tripped on my way out the door

I almost fell for an online scam

I misplaced my wallet again

I dropped my computer and it won't turn on

I fell and my back went out and I don't have health insurance

Somehow slapstick doesn't seem so funny anymore

Fraiming

There's no center in Cady Noland's work
no moving forward
only framing

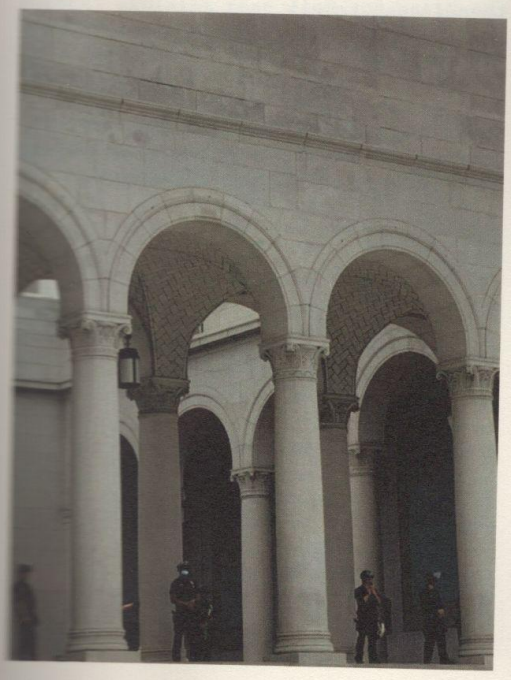
Our infrastructure is built around
circircumference

freeways
fences
borders

Borders contain, delimit

You're either in the frame or you fall
outside

Cady Noland, Untitled, 1997/1998, MUSEUM MMK FÜR MODERNE KUNST, photo: Axel Schneider



Cary Wolfe writes about circumference

Violence is foundational to the law for Wolfe just as force is foundational to the *Iliad* for Weil

According to Wolfe, exclusion is built into our legal framework

To be a subject with rights implies an "other" that is not considered a subject at all

Wolfe says this is inevitable

In order to be deserving
someone has to be undeserving

In order to possess
someone has to be dispossessed

In order to be "pure"
someone has to be "impure"

In order to be innocent
someone has to be criminalized

In order to be in,
someone else always has to be out

Harun Farocki's work is about framing, about who falls outside and who is kept hidden

Farocki explains that cinema has always been attracted to prisons

Who is the spectacle for?

In his film essay *Prison Images* Farocki combines surveillance recordings from maximum-security prisons with clips from films by Genet and Bresson

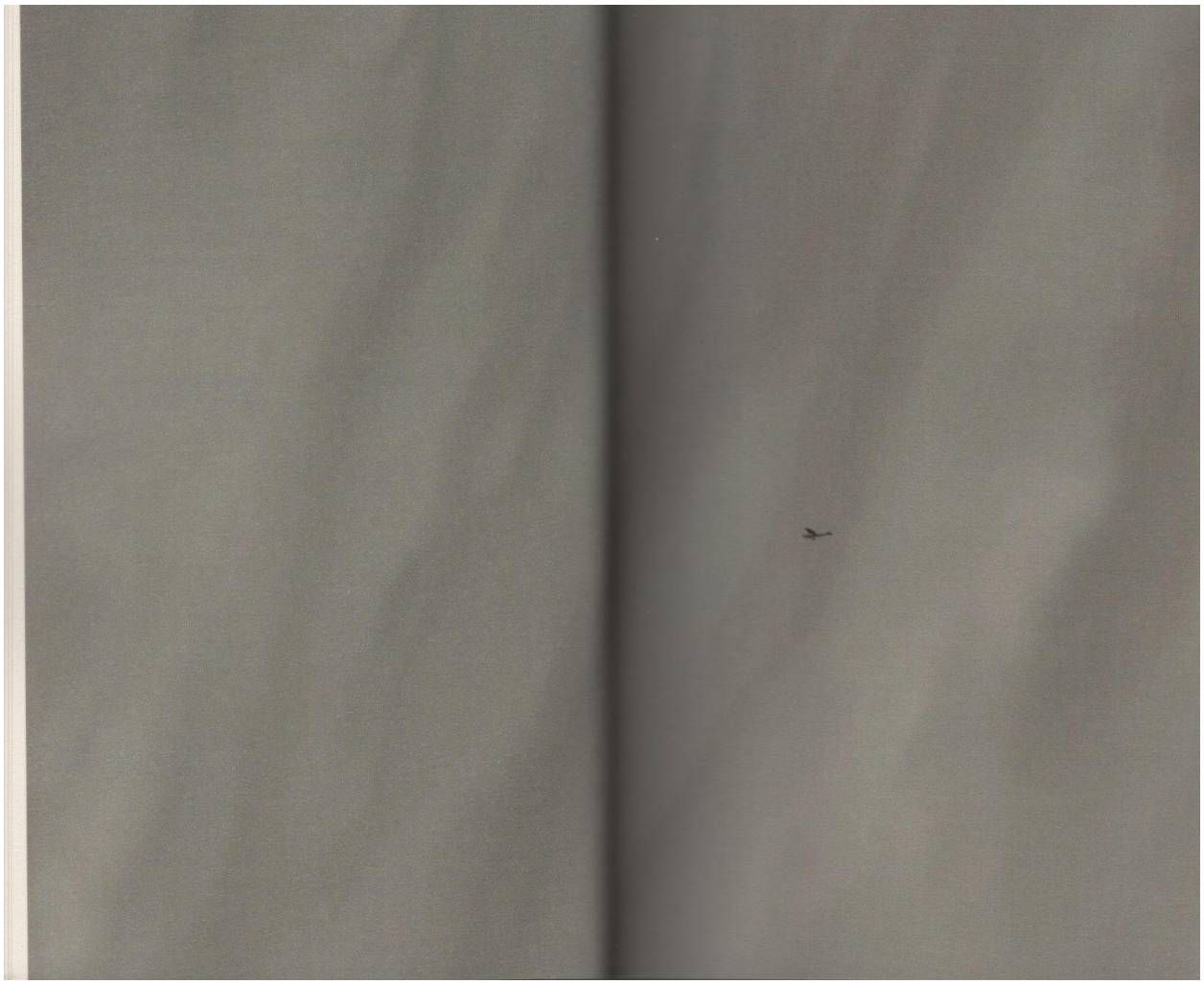
When I watch Genet's *Un Chant d'amour* I think about framing

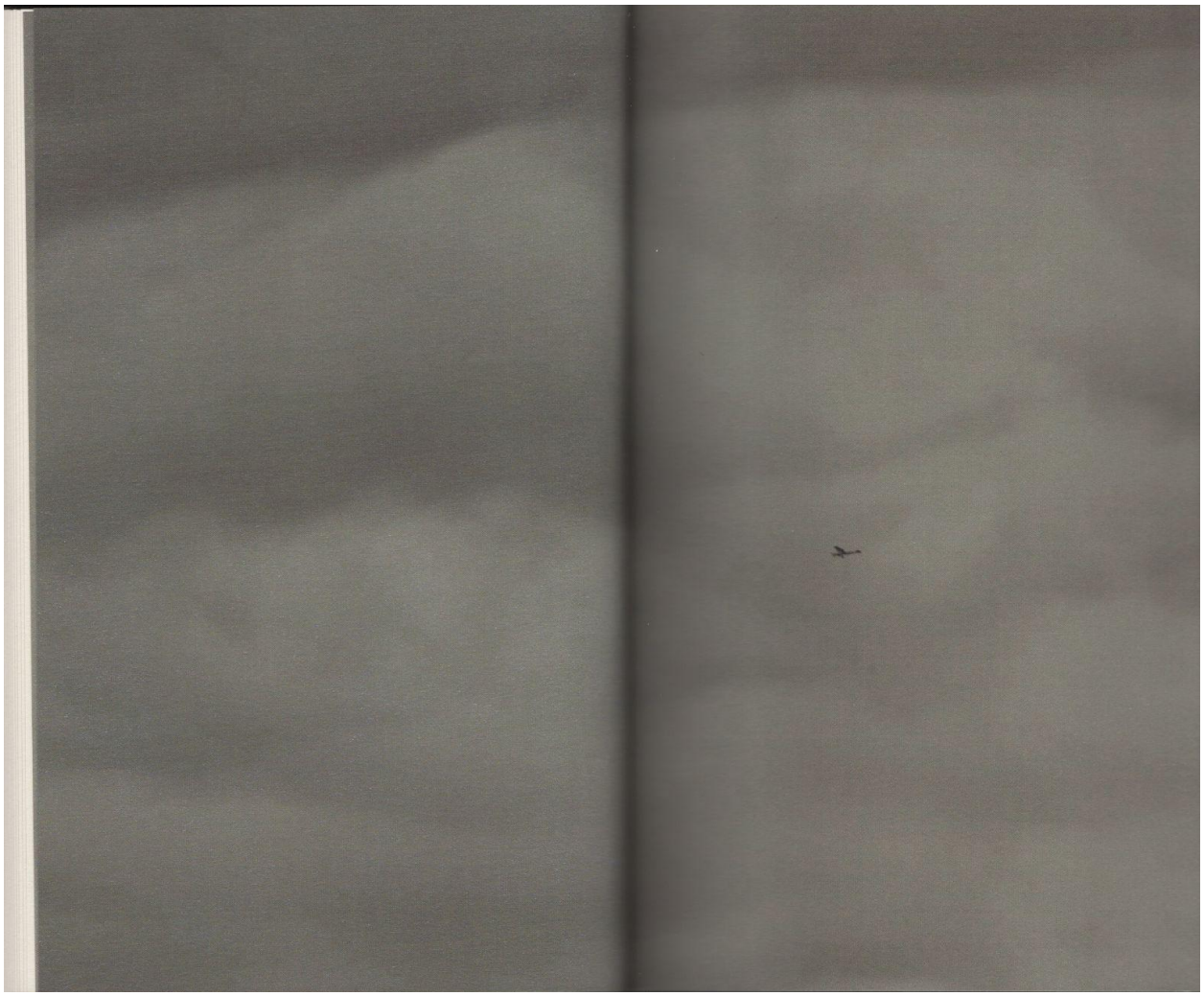
Genet gets close to his subjects
The framing is intimate
The guard looks at inmates in their cells and sees them masturbating
The peep hole frames voyeurism
Inmates rub against the wall
The wall frames both desire and confinement
Inmates blow cigarette smoke through a hole in the wall
The glory hole frames desire and touch
The circle becomes an act, a threshold

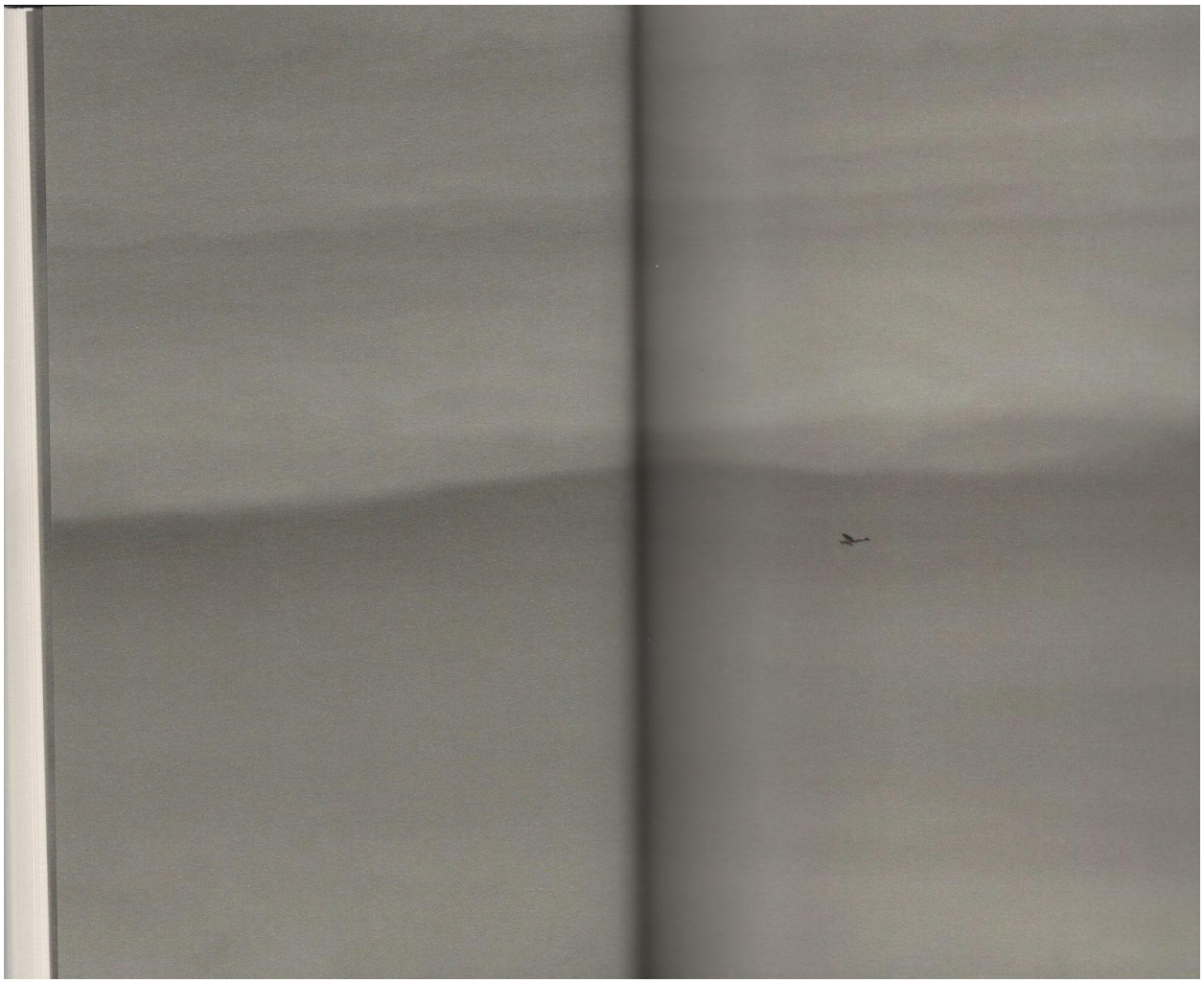
When I watch Farocki's film I think about reframing through montage

I think about the surveillance camera as a frame
I think about the detached, machinic gaze as a frame
about the omnipresent frame
about watching and not being seen
being watched and always being seen
I think about framing as control and containment

If you're always in the frame are you ever moving forward?





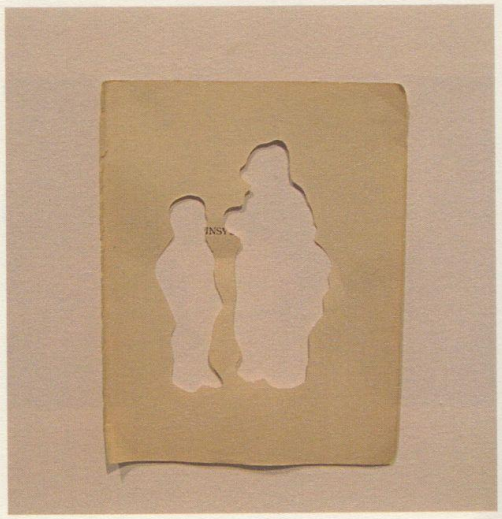


Tom Cruise is always in the spotlight

What happens when Tom Cruise walks off the stage and there is only circumference?

In my first college sculpture class I cut a pair of figures out of a children's book

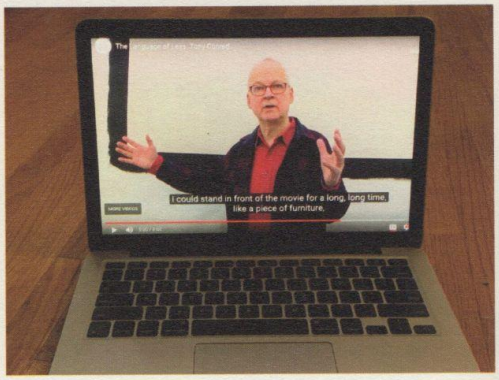
The pages were yellowed and crinkled



My teacher told me:

"it seems like the individuals have disappeared but it's actually the background that has lost its substance"

Then he introduced me to Tony Conrad's *Yellow Movies*



A few years later I guarded one of
Conrad's *Movies* at MOCA

I would stand in front of it for hours

I would look at the black line, scaled
to the dimensions of a movie screen
Then I would think about what's outside
the line
the ripped, crinkled seamless paper
drips of paint
the walls
the stairs to the breakroom
the front doors
the box office
the building walls

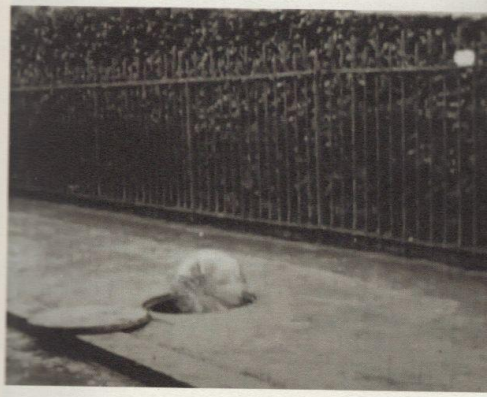
Why stop there?

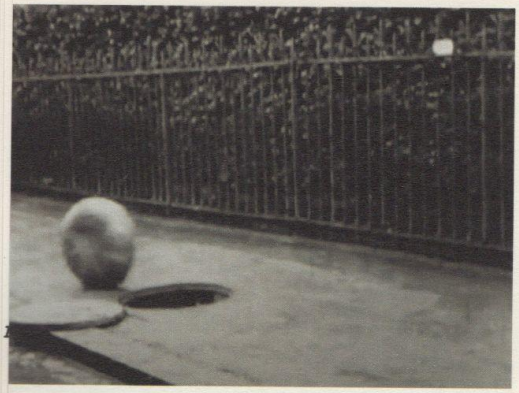
The frame kept expanding

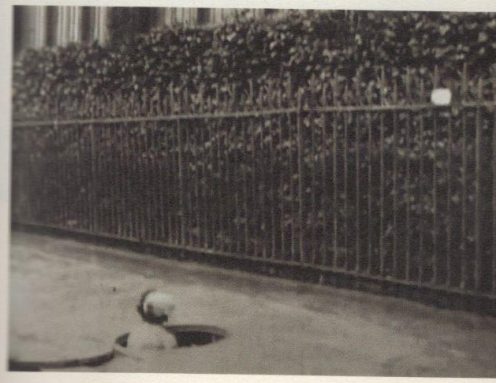
I kept looking

Then I dropped my pencil and I was
reminded of circumference

Bumping



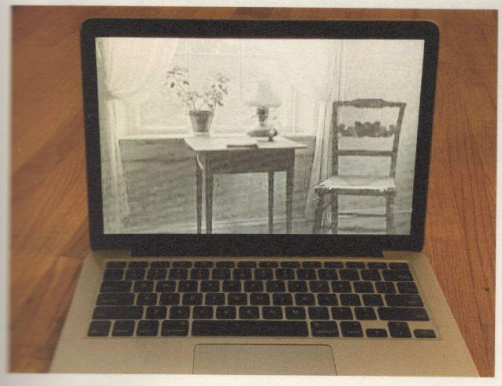




Emily Dickinson never bumped into people

She would talk with visitors from the
other side of a closed door
correspond with friends in writing
and look out her windows at people
walking by

unseen but seeing



I remember the feeling of being
jolted forwards when I got rear ended
last month on Sunset Boulevard, bumped
back into the weight of things

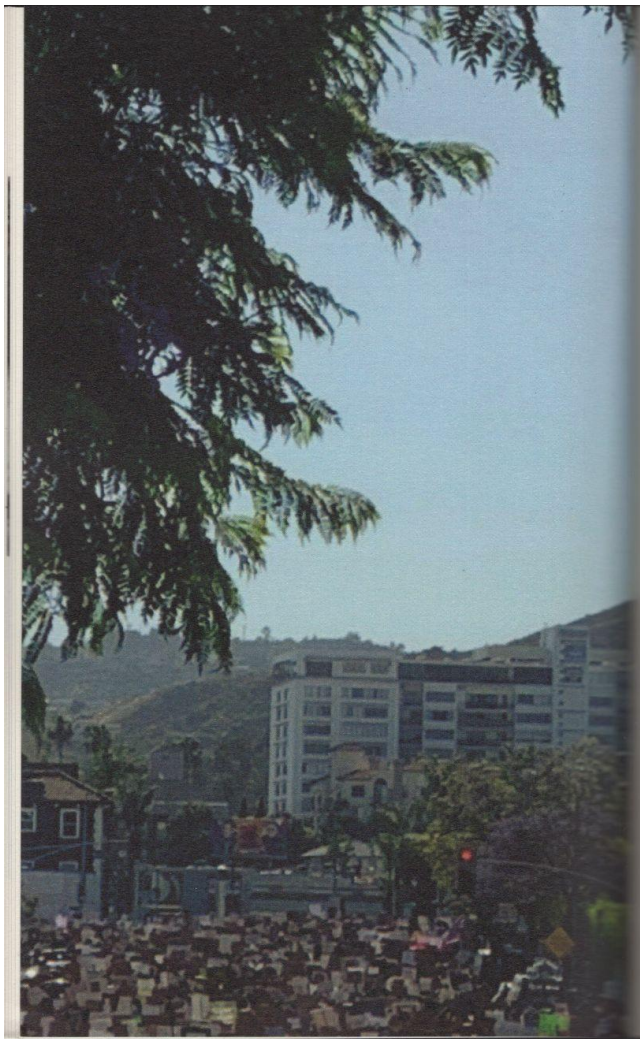
We live in a world of abstraction and
algorithms but we also live in a world
of force and circumference

Bumping into the wrong person can turn
ugly, like when I accidentally bumped
into a woman's cart at Trader Joes

Bumping can also turn into pushing your
way through a group of people and trying
to move forward

Imagine bumping when you're dancing

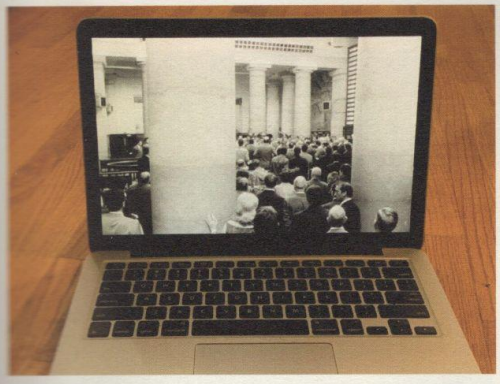
you're at the airport
you're on the subway
you're at a protest



Thinking about your relationship to the collective is a bumpy process

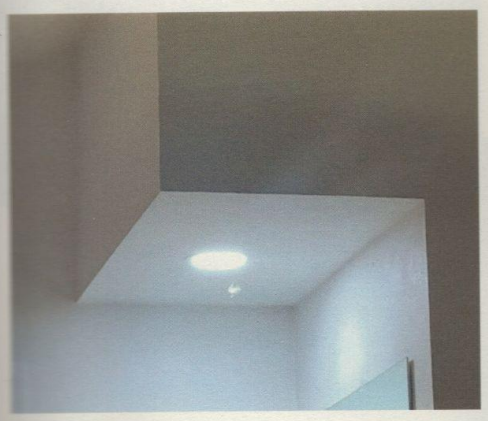
Antonioni's *L'eclisse* makes me think about bumping

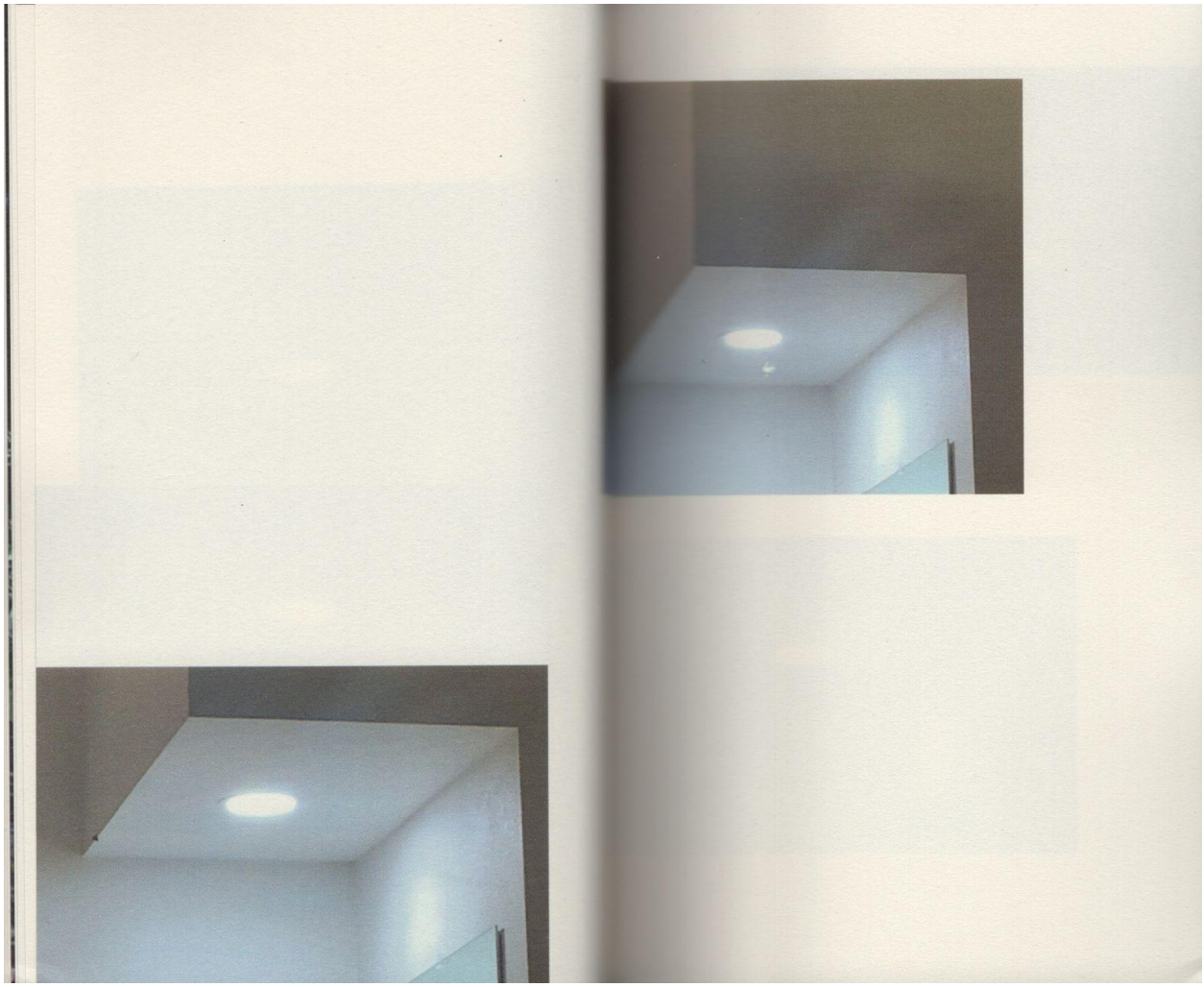
The character Vittoria constantly touches objects throughout the film as if she is an antenna bumping up against her environment, feeling her way through the world

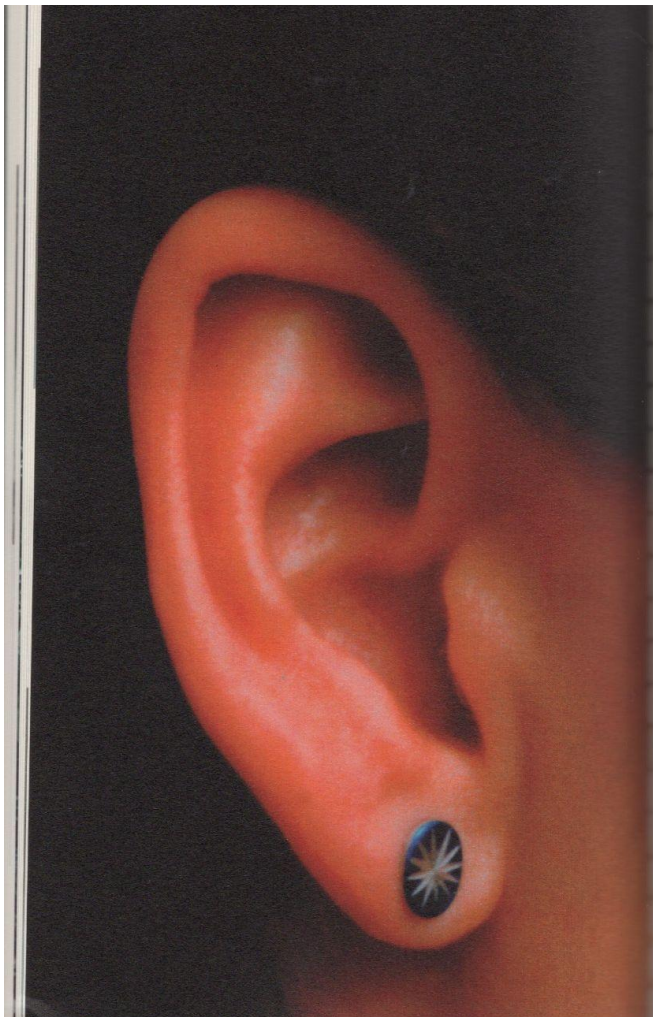


Today one of the students in my Intermediate Video Class talked about wanting to film from the perspective of a butterfly

I was reminded of the other week when I filmed a moth bumping around my room





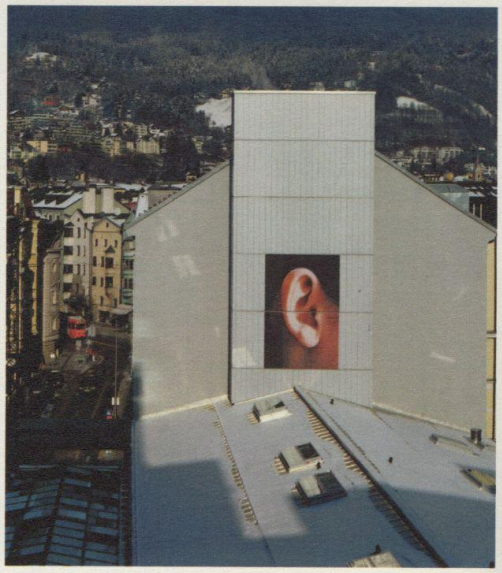


Isa Genzken, like Vittoria, feels her way through the world

According to Genzken the artist is a receiver, constantly listening and transmitting

Genzken would stop women on the street in New York and ask to take photographs of their ears

Sometimes she would put the photographs on buildings



The ear becomes a site of experience, a portal

When I look at these photographs, even though they are large-scale and anonymous, they still feel intimate

They call out to the viewer for contact, for communication

I learned recently that ears are the most vulnerable of human orifices

The portals of the ear remain perpetually open

How do you move around the world and be perpetually open?

You're acutely aware of your body as a leaky container when you're on the subway and you can hear the person next to you chewing gum

Sometimes you get so close that you feel their breath bump into yours—

Simone Weil felt the weight of circumference, writing about her clumsiness, her migraines and inhumane factory work

Chris Kraus writes:

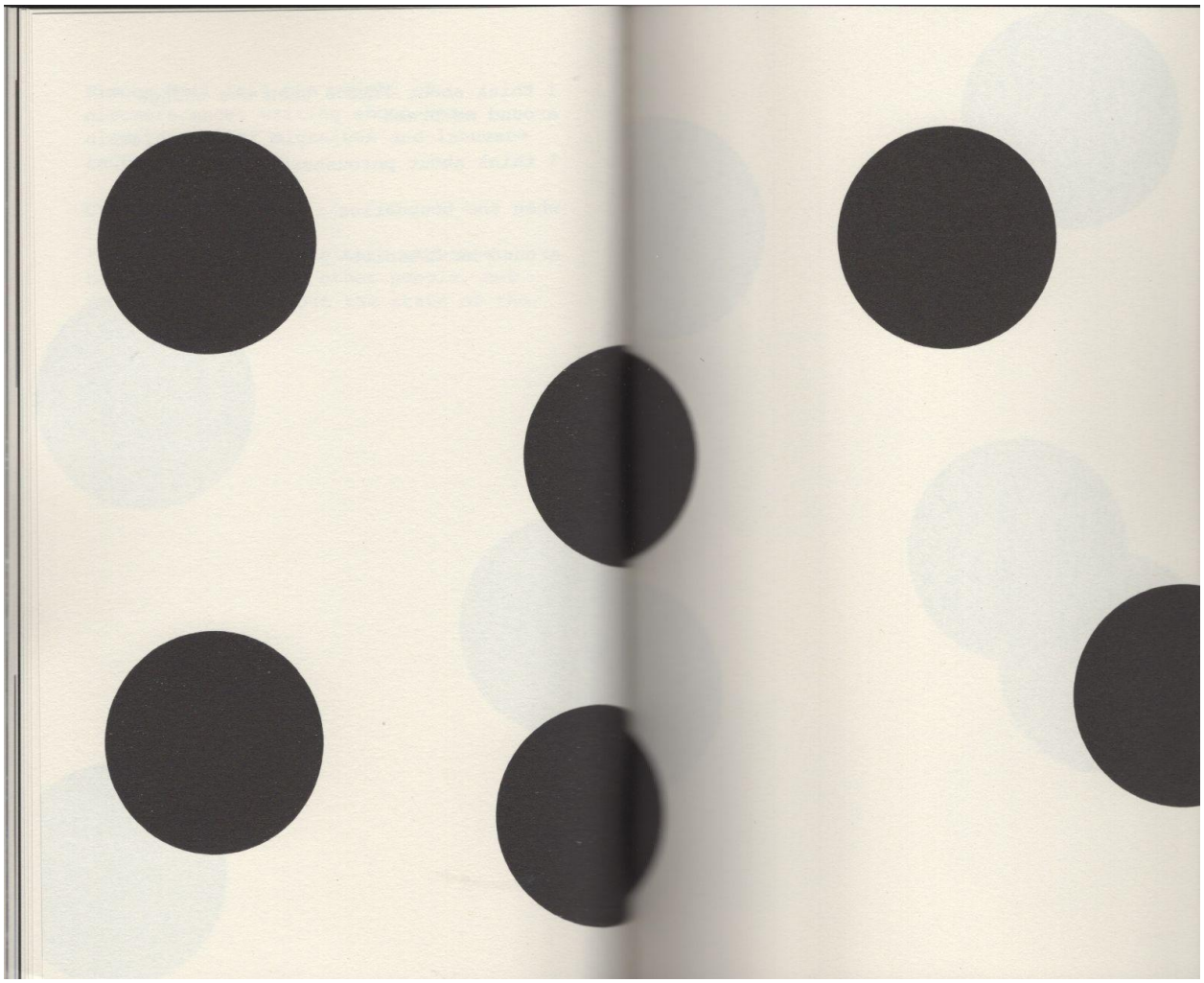
"Simone Weil had this thin membrane between herself and other people, not just individuals, but the state of the world"

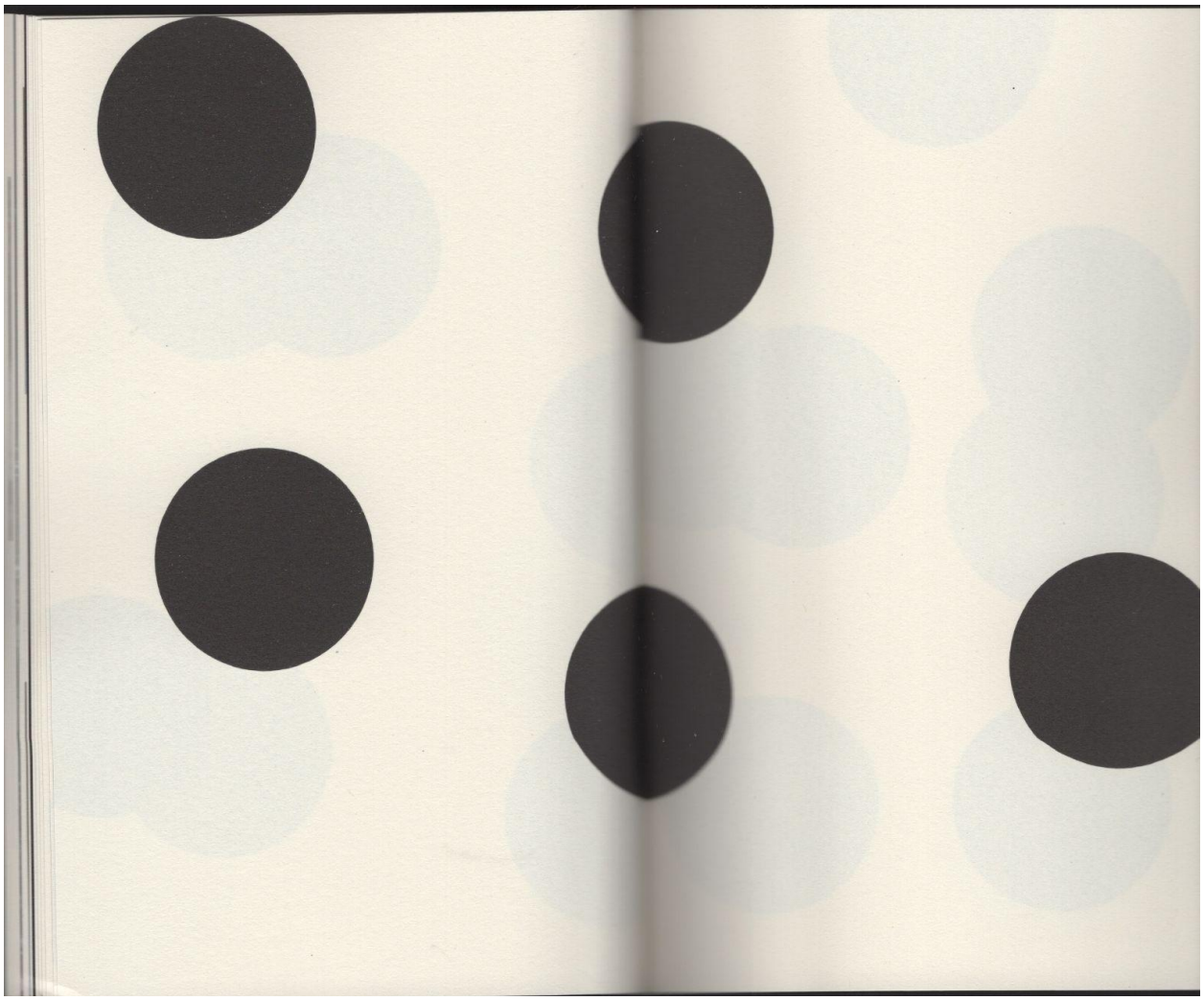
I think about limits when the things around me break

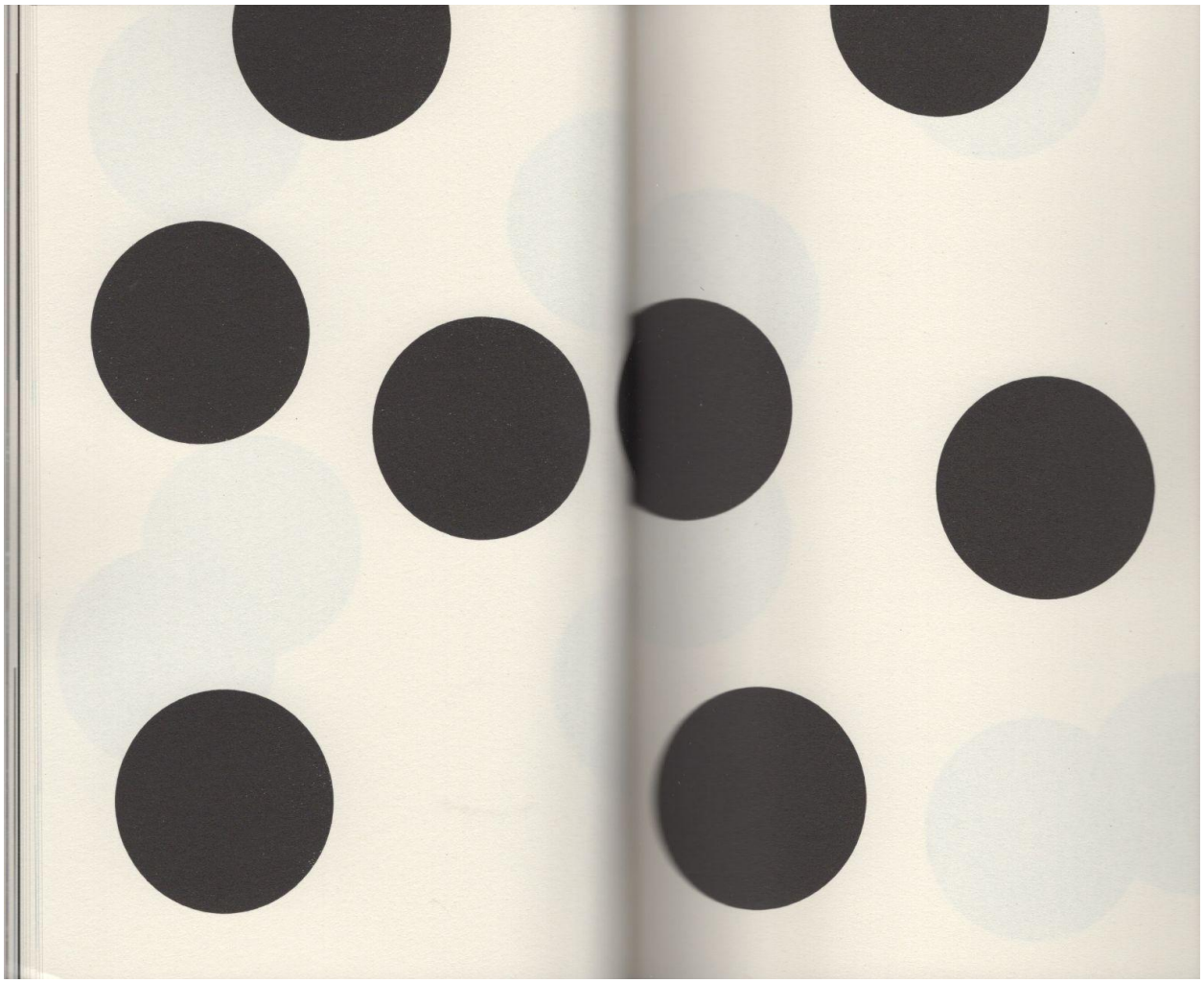
I think about porousness

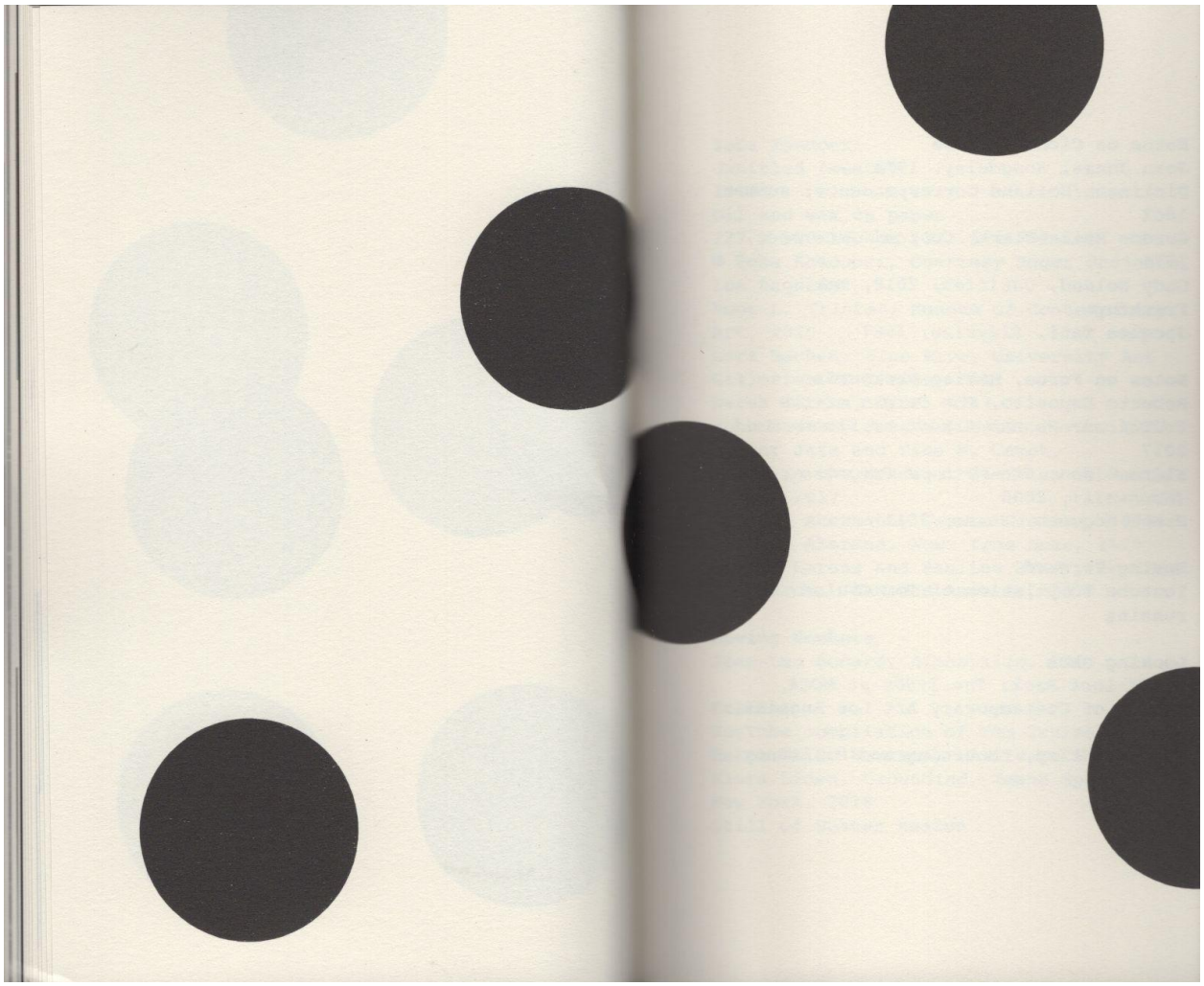
when the boundaries

around me dissolve—









Notes

Notes on Circumference
Joan Jonas, *Songdelay*, 1973
Dickinson/Holland Correspondence: summer 1862
Gordon Matta-Clark, *Conical Intersect*, 1975
Cady Noland, *Untitled*, 2018, mmk, Frankfurt
Jacques Tati, *Playtime*, 1967

Notes on Force, Moving Backwards
Roberto Esposito, *The Origin of the Political: Hannah Arendt or Simone Weil*, 2017
Klara Liden, *The Myth of Progress (Moonwalk)*, 2008
Steve Mcqueen, *Shame*, 2011

Moving Forward
Youtube compilation of Tom Cruise running

Looking Back
Don't Look Back: The 1990s at MOCA, Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, 2016
Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy, 1989

Toba Khedoori
Untitled (seats)
1996
Oil and wax on paper
127 x 300 inches (322.6 x 762 cm)
© Toba Khedoori, Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles
Pope.L, *Trinket*, Museum of Contemporary Art, 2015
Lutz Bacher, *Blue Wave*, University Art Galleries UC Irvine, 2019
Derek Jarman, *Blue*, 1993
John Badham, *Saturday Night Fever*, 1977
Arthur Jafa and Tina M. Campt, "Love is the Message, The Plan is Death", *e-flux*, 2017
Chantal Akermann, *Jeanne Dielman*, 1975
Chantal Akerman, *News from Home*, 1977
Renate Lorenz and Pauline Brody, *Moving Backwards*, JOAN Los Angeles, 2019

Moving Nowhere
Jean-Luc Godard, *Alphaville*, 1965

Falling
YouTube compilation of Tom Cruise falling
Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Circles*, 1841
Klara Liden, *Grounding*, Reena Spaulings, New York, 2018
Still of Buster Keaton

Framing

Cady Noland, *Industry Park*, 1991
Cary Wolfe, *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame*, 2013
Harun Farocki, *Prison Images*, 2000
Jean Genet, *Un chant d'amour*, 1950
Tony Conrad, *Yellow Movies*
The Language of Less: Tony Conrad, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2012

Bumping

Romeo Bosetti, *La course aux potirons*, 1908
Photo of Emily Dickinson's bedroom
Still from *The Fire*, the 84th episode of Seinfeld
Protest at John F. Kennedy International Airport, 2016
Black Lives Matter protest, Hollywood, 2020
Michelangelo Antonioni, *L'Eclisse*, 1962
Isa Genzken, *Ohr* (Ear), 1980
Isa Genzken, *Ohr* (Ear), City Hall, Innsbruck, Austria
Chantal Akerman, *News from Home*, 1977
Chris Kraus, Interview by Gary Indiana, *Purple Magazine*, 2006

Stop, Blue

Olivia Leiter

Stop, Blue deals with impossibilities and limits, stumbles and mismatches. As I was finalizing this book I bumped up against the physical limitations of CYMK printing. The resulting blues do not match the digital version. This coincides with my understanding of Blue. Blue is unstable and relational, always existing in the space of the in-between—a pause before breakdown and a portal, opening up the possibility for reorientation.

Part 1: Stop, Blue

I hear a dripping noise

I walk to the kitchen and notice that the pipe above the sink was leaking overnight

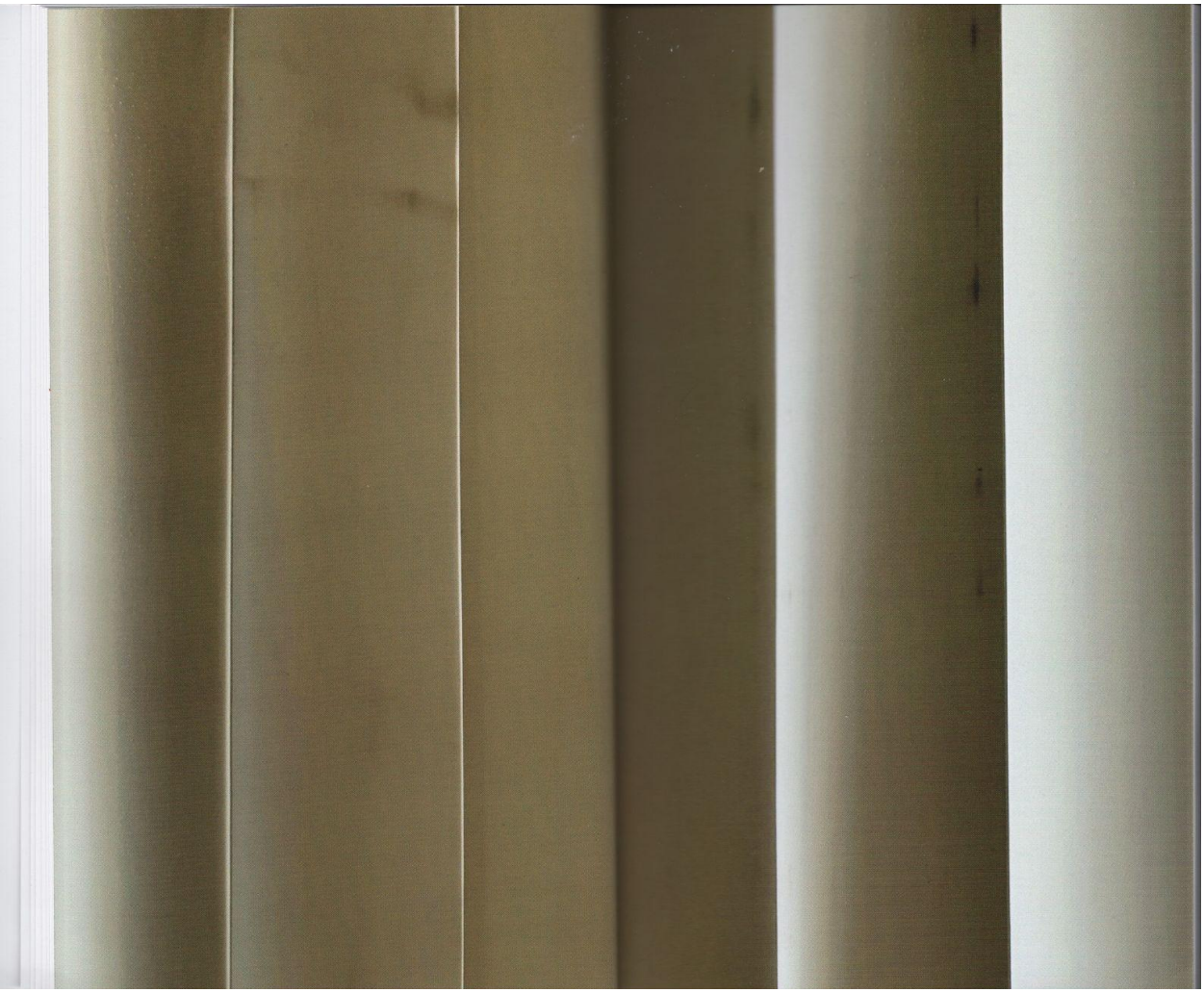
I imagine a scenario where I accidentally break the pipe and water explodes everywhere

I think back to watching Judith Hopf's film *Lily's Laptop*

In Hopf's film, Lily, an au pair, leaves the faucet running and floods the modernist home of her employers

She sits on the kitchen table, trying to see if her laptop is able to swim

I put a pot under the pipe and call a plumber



In a letter to a friend Emily Dickinson describes her experience moving to a new house:

"Repair is useless and I can't help laughing at my own catastrophe"

The next day I hear a low humming noise as I drive around L.A. on hold with the DMV

I stop at the gas station
Someone takes a photo of my car
We make eye contact
They look away
I look at my car—I forgot that I had tried to fix my broken trunk with painter's tape in the morning
I pause

I trace the contours of the red and yellow bands of the Shell logo with my eyes, following them around the perimeter of the structure

From a distance they form a horizon line

Shell Gas Stations are orientation devices, providing a sense of above and below, a feeling of stability

I stare at the text

I trace the contours of the red and yellow bands of the Shell logo with my eyes, following them around the perimeter of the structure

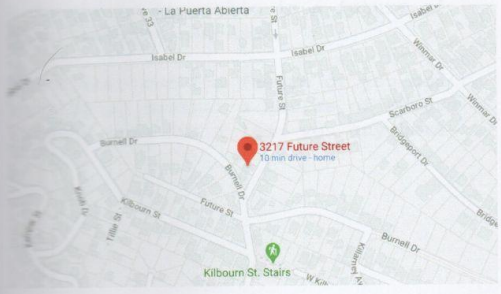
From a distance they form a horizon line

Shell Gas Stations are orientation devices, providing a sense of above and below, a feeling of stability

I stare at the text

I learned recently that in L.A. streets are named "Future" when they don't have a name yet

I google search Future Street



The Zillow ad reads:

2 bedroom
2 bath
1,504 Square Feet
Perched high above Future Street sits an amazing opportunity to own your own private artist's compound

I place the words Own and Future side by side

I think about the fantasy of ownership

Self ownership
Family ownership
Home ownership
Land ownership

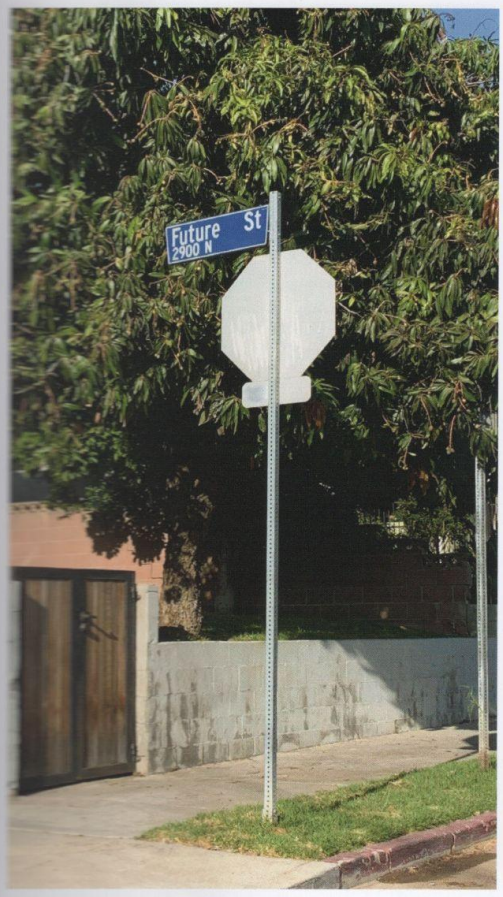
I think about the fantasy of stability

Built into the worldview of ownership are those who fall outside its edges

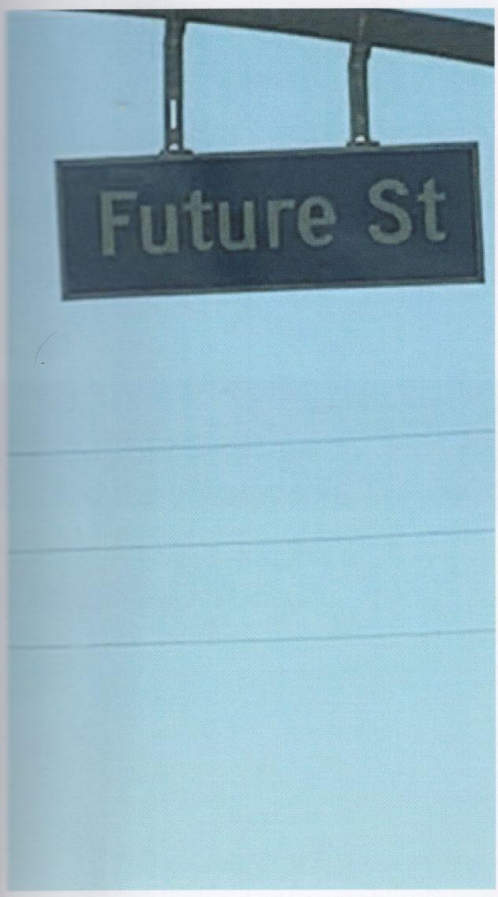
A future of ownership is a future of dispossession and debt

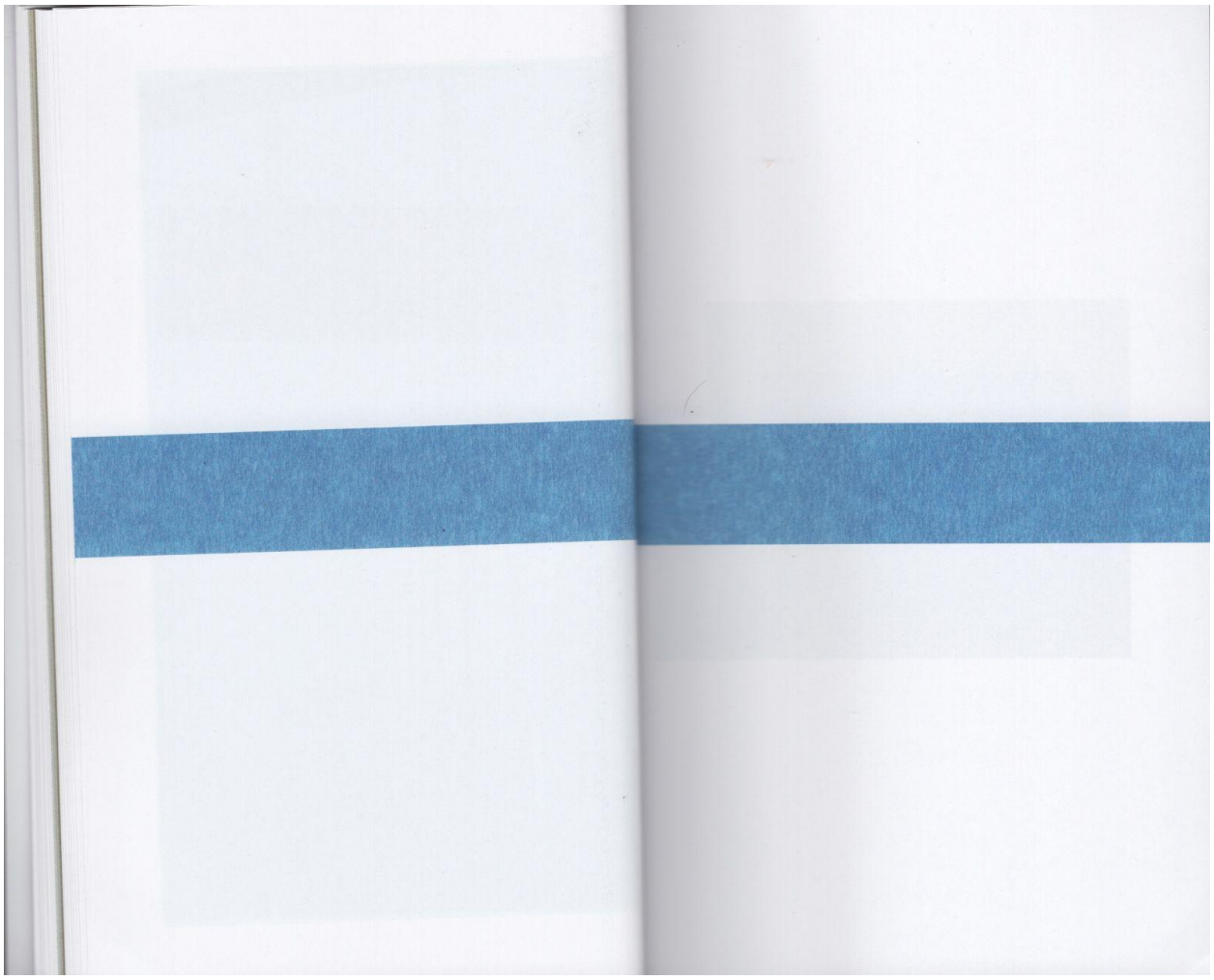
You either own the future or you don't, bumping up against a series of Future Streets that don't lead you anywhere—


Future St


Future St
2900 N


Future St


Future St



Fatal system error
Faulty memory
Bugs in the operating system
Crash

Blue reminds me that infrastructure is physical

I sit in bed listening to recordings of the subway on my phone

I hear metal rattling, coats brushing up against poles

Foundations are shaky

My air conditioner hums in the background

A freight train passes outside my window

My upstairs neighbor drops a weight on the floor

Blue is hitting a brick wall,
tech slapstick

I walk around L.A. wearing sabots I bought on eBay

The word sabotage is derived from the noise and clumsiness associated with the wooden sabot shoe, worn by French factory workers in the Industrial Revolution

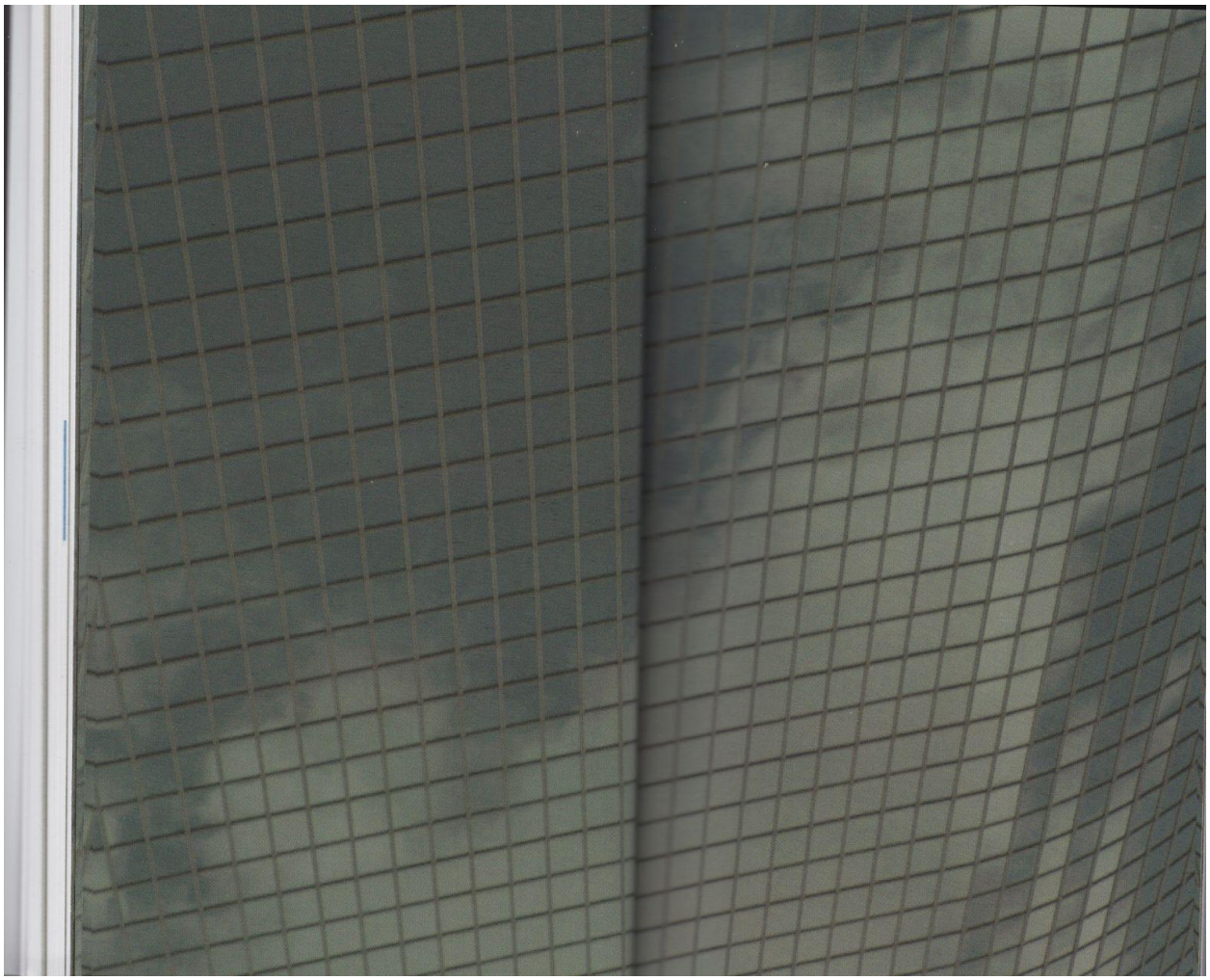
I walk on concrete, bricks, marble, tiles and varnished flooring

My steps echo in an empty parking lot

I walk down Grand Ave, past the glass surfaces of corporate buildings

The glass appears both immaterial and all pervasive, reflecting and shifting as I move past it

I lose my bearings



Then I hear the sound of my sabots on the concrete

Each step produces the sensation of coming up against a structure

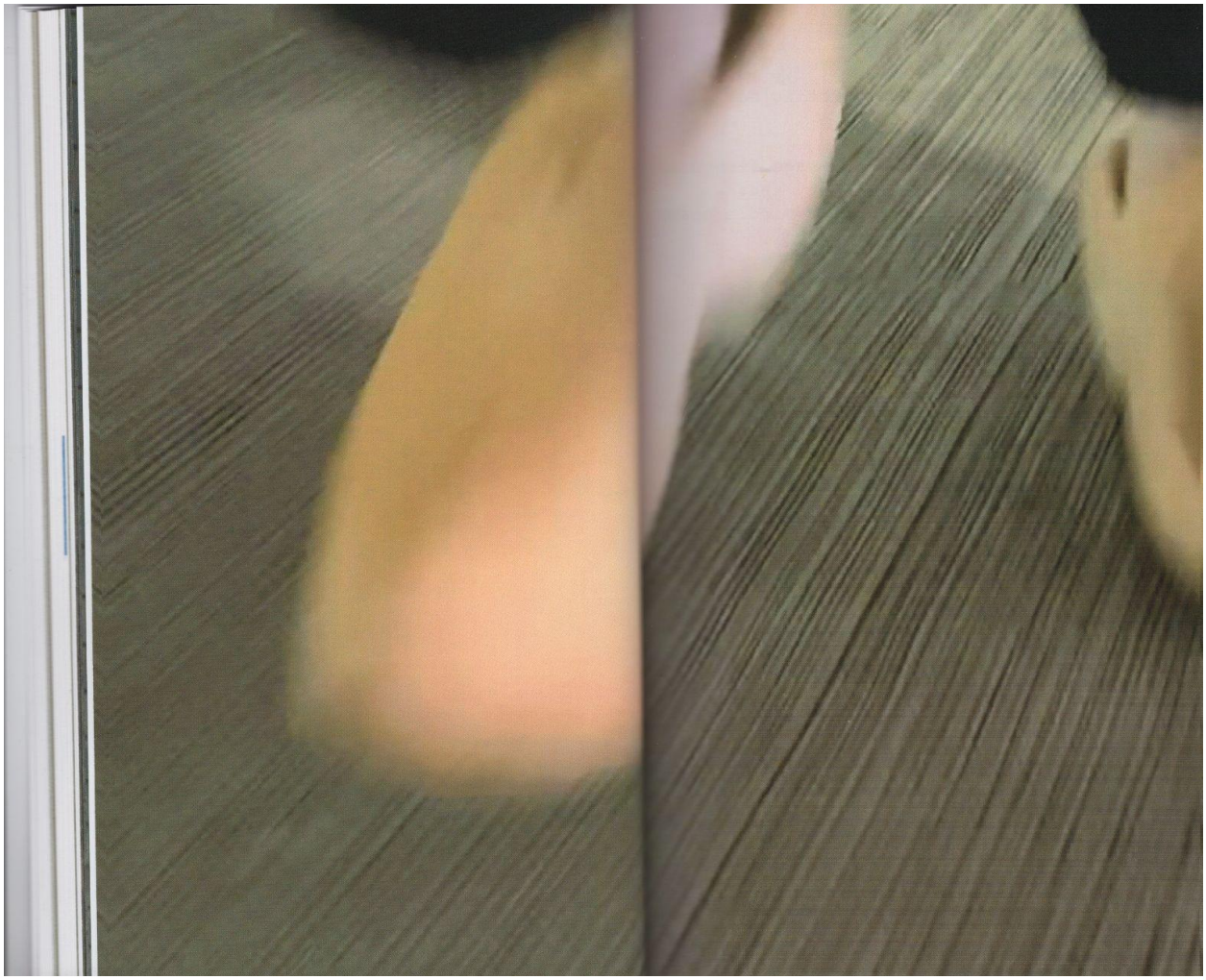
I walk diagonally, in the opposite direction of arrows

Eventually I fall into a rhythm

Each step becomes a declaration, a punctuation mark

I start walking faster

Eventually the sabots break down



Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is about hitting walls and constructing new rhythms

The book begins with a passage from *Dick and Jane*, a children's story that represents the white, upper-middle class suburban family unit

Each sentence is only a few words, a staccato beat

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes meow-meow. Come and play. Come play with Jane. The kitten will not play. See Mother. Mother is very nice. Mother, will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh, Mother, laugh. See Father. He is big and strong. Father, will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, Father, smile. See the dog. Bowwow goes the dog. Do you want to play with Jane? See the dog run. Run, dog, run. Look, look. Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play a good game. Play, Jane, play.

Morrison repeats the text throughout the novel, tracing its form

HEREISTHEFAMILYMOTHERFATHER
DICKANDJANETHEYLIVEINTHEGREE
NANDWHITEHOUSETHEYAREVERYH

SEEMOTHERMOTHERISVERYNICEMO
THERWILLYOUPLAYWITHJANEMOTH
ERLAUGHSLAUGHMOTHERLAUGHLA

SEETHEDOGBOWWOOOG
DOYOUWANTTOPLAANT
TOPLAYWITHJANESEENR

SEEFATHERHEISBIGANDSTRONGFATH
ERWILLYOUPLAYWITHJANEFATHER
ISSMILINGSMILEFATHERSMILESMILE

She removes punctuation and
spacing, repeating words and letters
until things become illegible, mutating
into something new

Whiteness is a wall
Language is a wall
Convention is a wall

All walls are constructed

Morrison deconstructs the wall and works
towards finding new orientations

The electricity goes out
I try to orient myself,
feeling my way through the apartment
I touch the edges of things
I stumble into a wall
I look for my phone
I check under the couch and receive dust
and receipts
I brush up against the legs of my
table, scaling the boundaries of my
space through sensation
I touch a piece of gum
Things start to get weird
Boundaries collapse
Straight lines turn into sticky curves—

Blue leaks outside the boundaries of my screen and touches my face

Ooze, slime dynamics, overflow, fluid mechanics

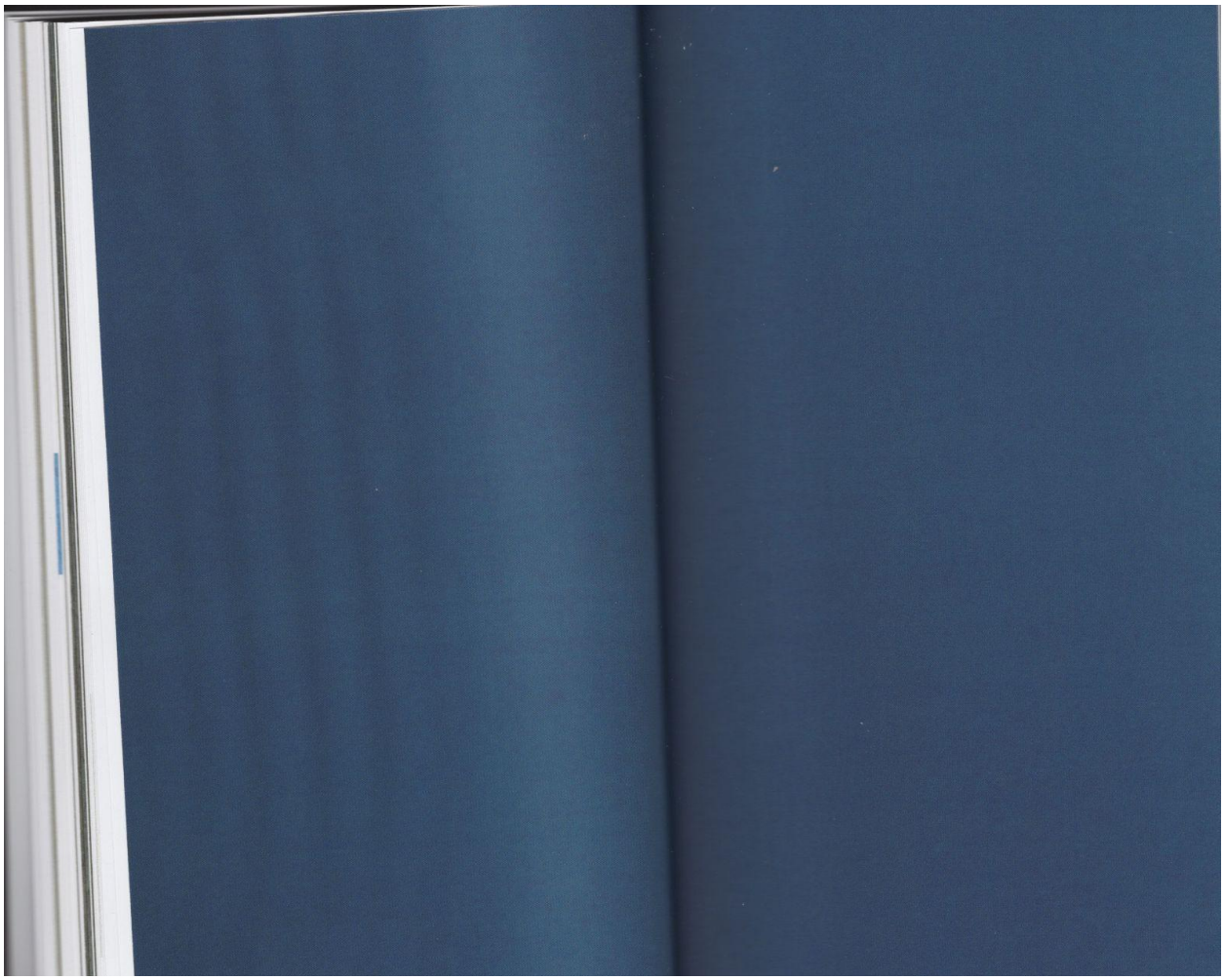
I remember working at MOCA when the ceiling started leaking in the Rothko room

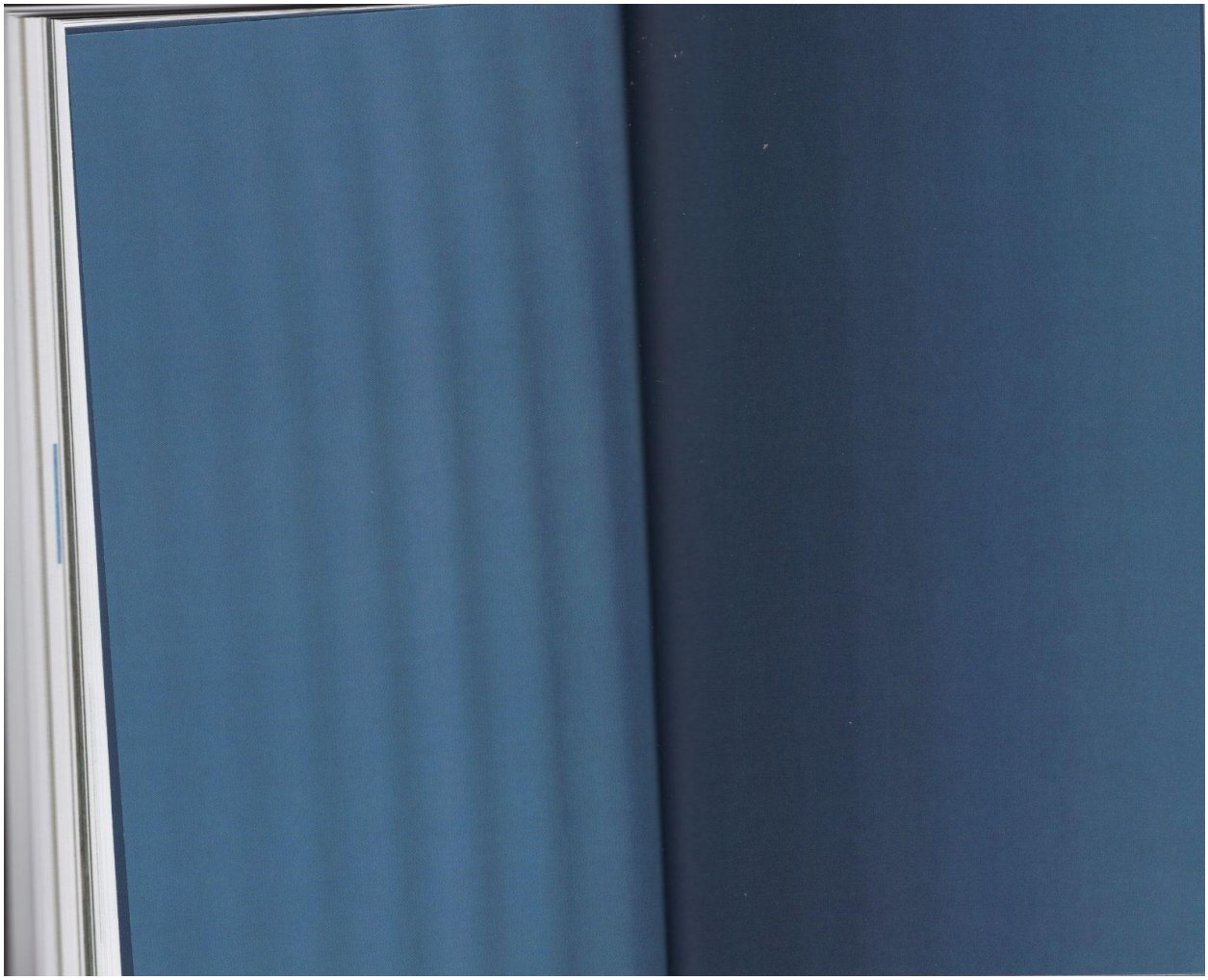
I heard a dripping noise and watched the exhibition staff promptly remove the paintings

This was the first time in 5 years I had seen the room empty

Audre Lorde writes about the erotic as the chaos of feelings and desires, what can't be contained

The erotic is off-center and unstable, rubbing up against structures of racism and patriarchy





I have a laughing fit in bed for 10 minutes
My body shakes back and forth
I start crying
I forget why I started laughing
This happens when I'm stressed
After about 5 minutes someone usually asks
if I'm okay

Laughter is excess and sound is rupture
fragment
the performance of uncontrollable things
a breakdown of the body

I think about bodily responses when
language fails

Cassandra is a figure in Greek mythology
who delivered true prophecies but nobody
believed her

Then she screamed so loudly she made the
temple floor shake

I think back to shaky foundations

Stains

Rips

Leaks

Punctures

Dashes, ruptures and transformations

Holes as a contradiction to wholeness break
down in communication laughter and screamin
and the contagiousness of sound

I imagine an eruption of polyphonic noise—

Break

Return to dripping

A few years ago I received a phone call that my elementary school, P.S. 51, was contaminated with high levels of TCE, a chemical which causes cancer and effects the central nervous system

The highest levels of TCE were found in the cafeteria

P.S. 51 was located in the northwest Bronx at the corner of Jerome and Van Cortlandt Avenue

Above Jerome Avenue is the #4 train, nearby are apartments, auto repair shops, a petroleum bulk storage facility and a gas station

The school was used as an auto garage from the 1940s to the 1950s and as a lamp manufacturer from 1957 to 1991

The lamp manufacturer used TCE in its manufacturing process between 1982 and 1987

Four 550 gallon gasoline tanks were buried beneath the building from 1945 to 1992, right before the property was renovated as a school

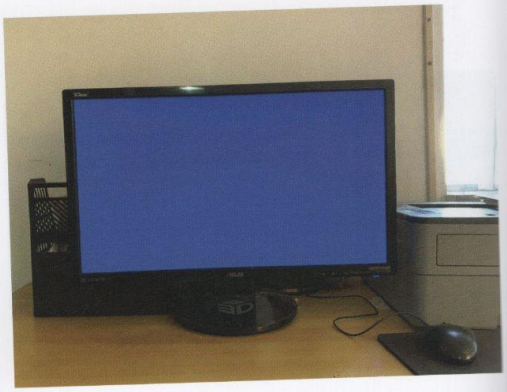
The School Construction Authority leased the property in 1993 without conducting environmental tests

I started attending school in 1997

A "leasing loophole" made it possible for P.S. 51 as well as 31 other public schools around the city to remain untested for toxins for decades

The school has recently been closed down and relocated

I look up an image of the vacated building on google maps



Cut to Blue

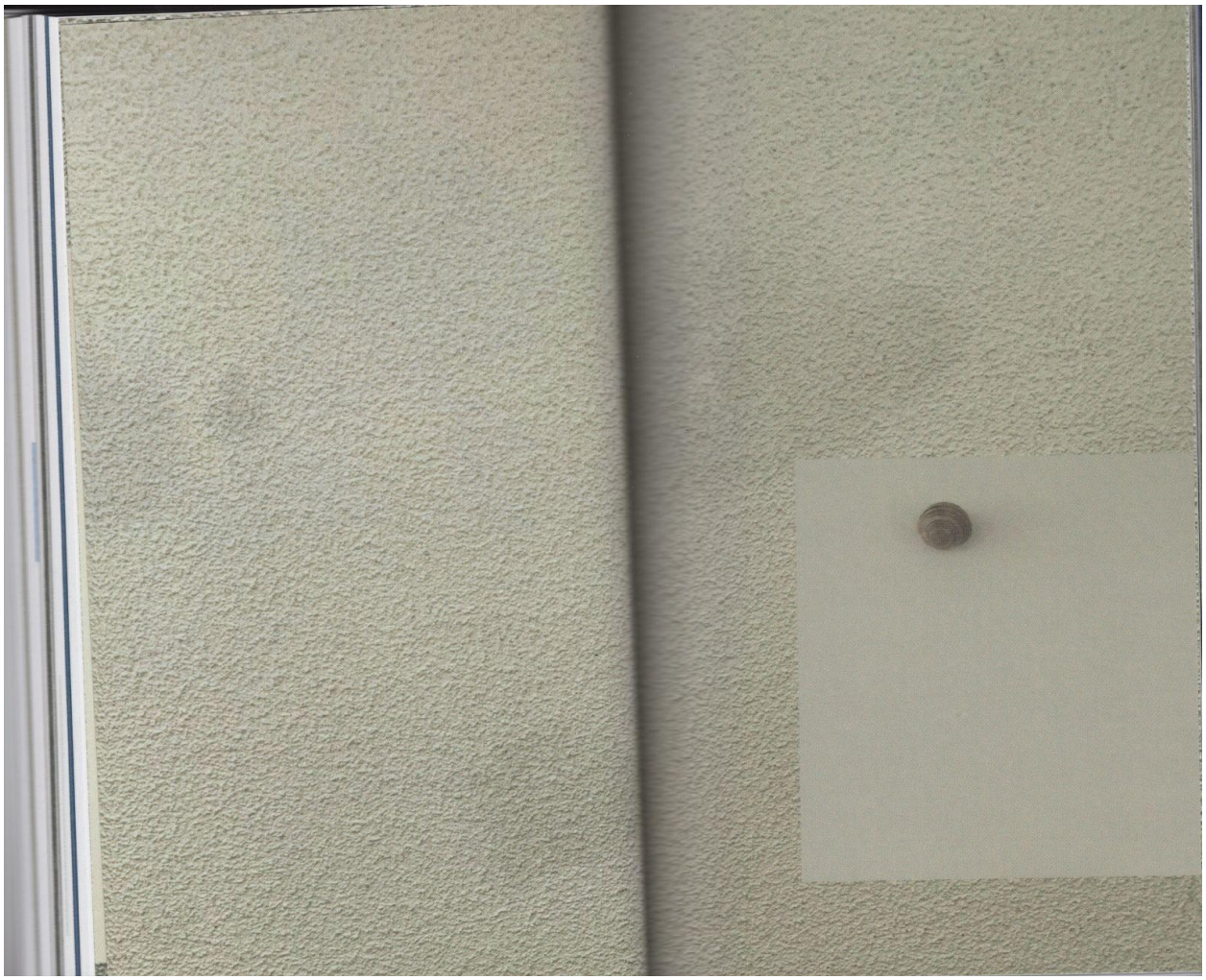
I stare at the screen, waiting for a signal

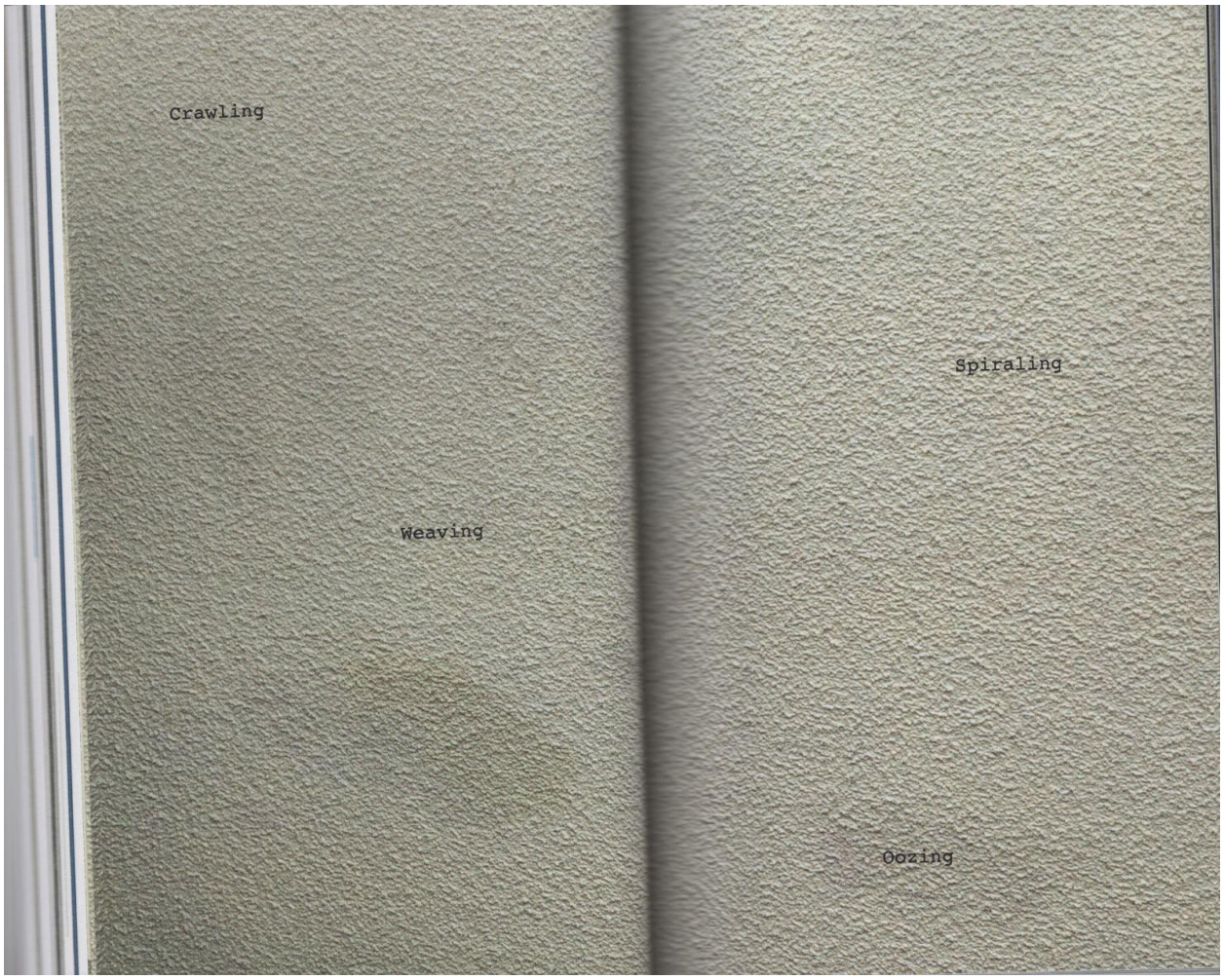
I am reminded of a short story by
Virginia Woolf where a woman becomes
fixated on a mark on her wall

The mark prompts her to think about
ooze, wood, modern technology, war, the
instability of things around her

She keeps returning to the mark,
clinging to it like an anchor

Suddenly an outside voice interrupts her
and she realizes that the mark is
actually a snail



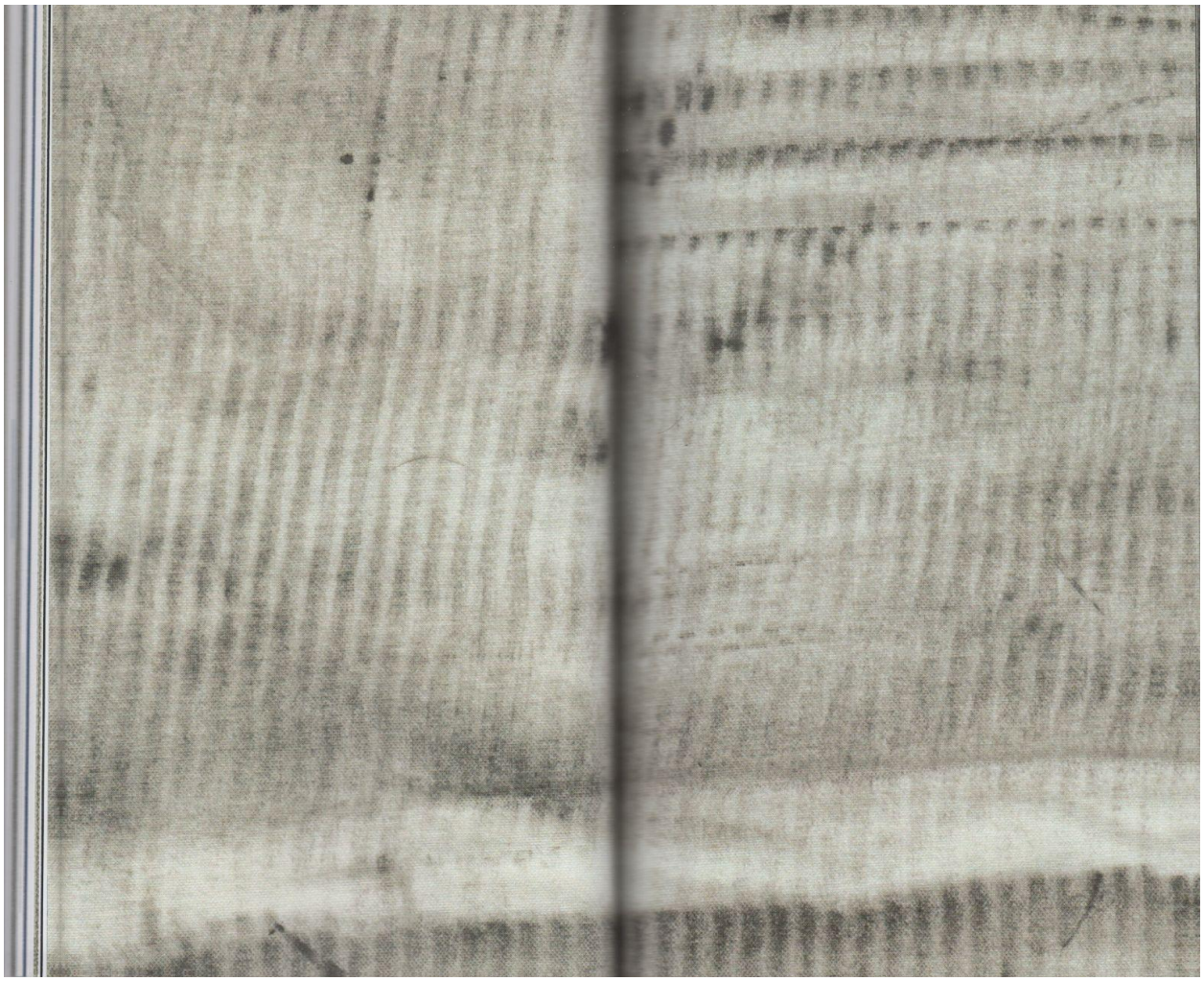

Crawling
Weaving
Spiraling
Oozing

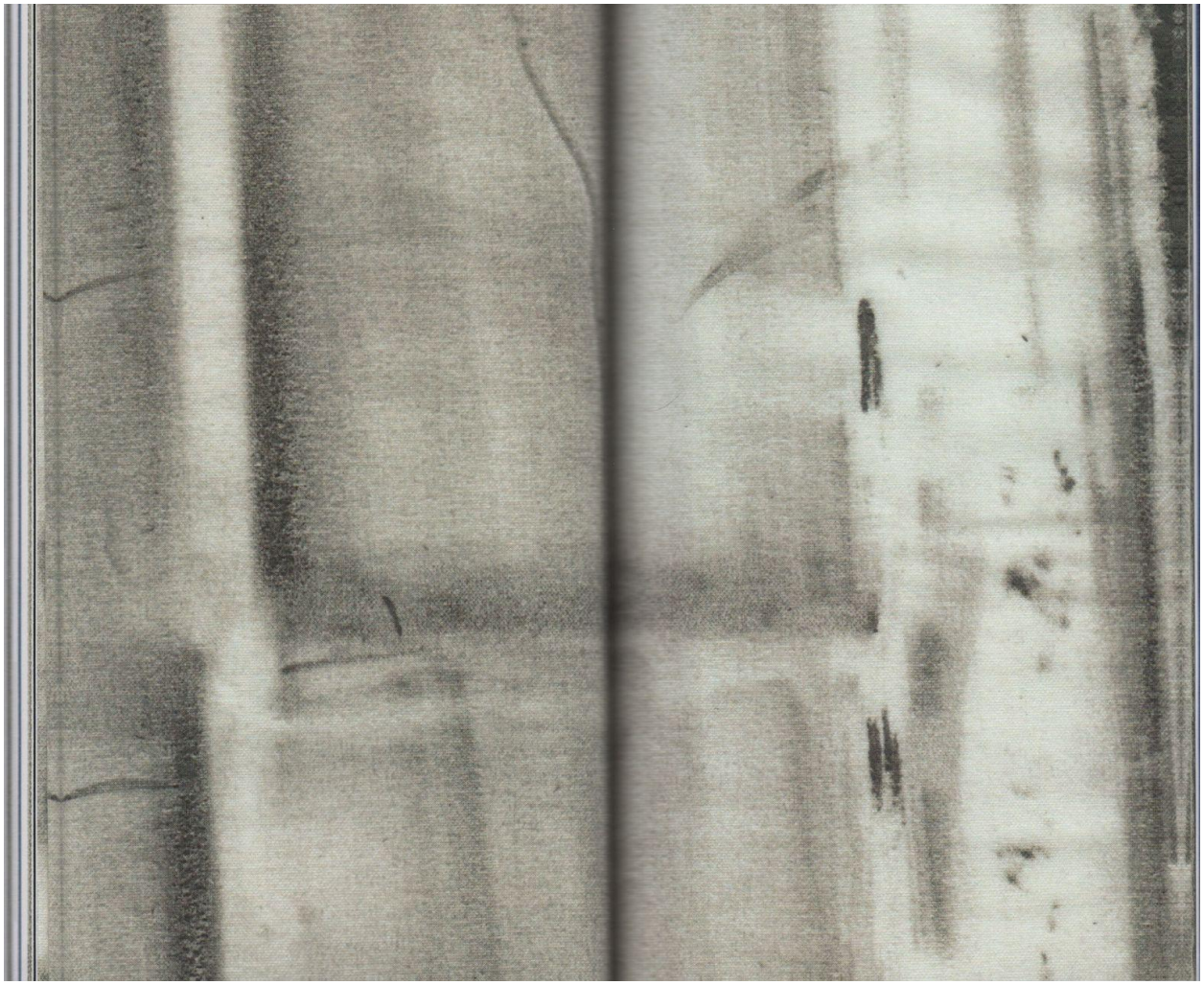
I think about orienting my body around a snail

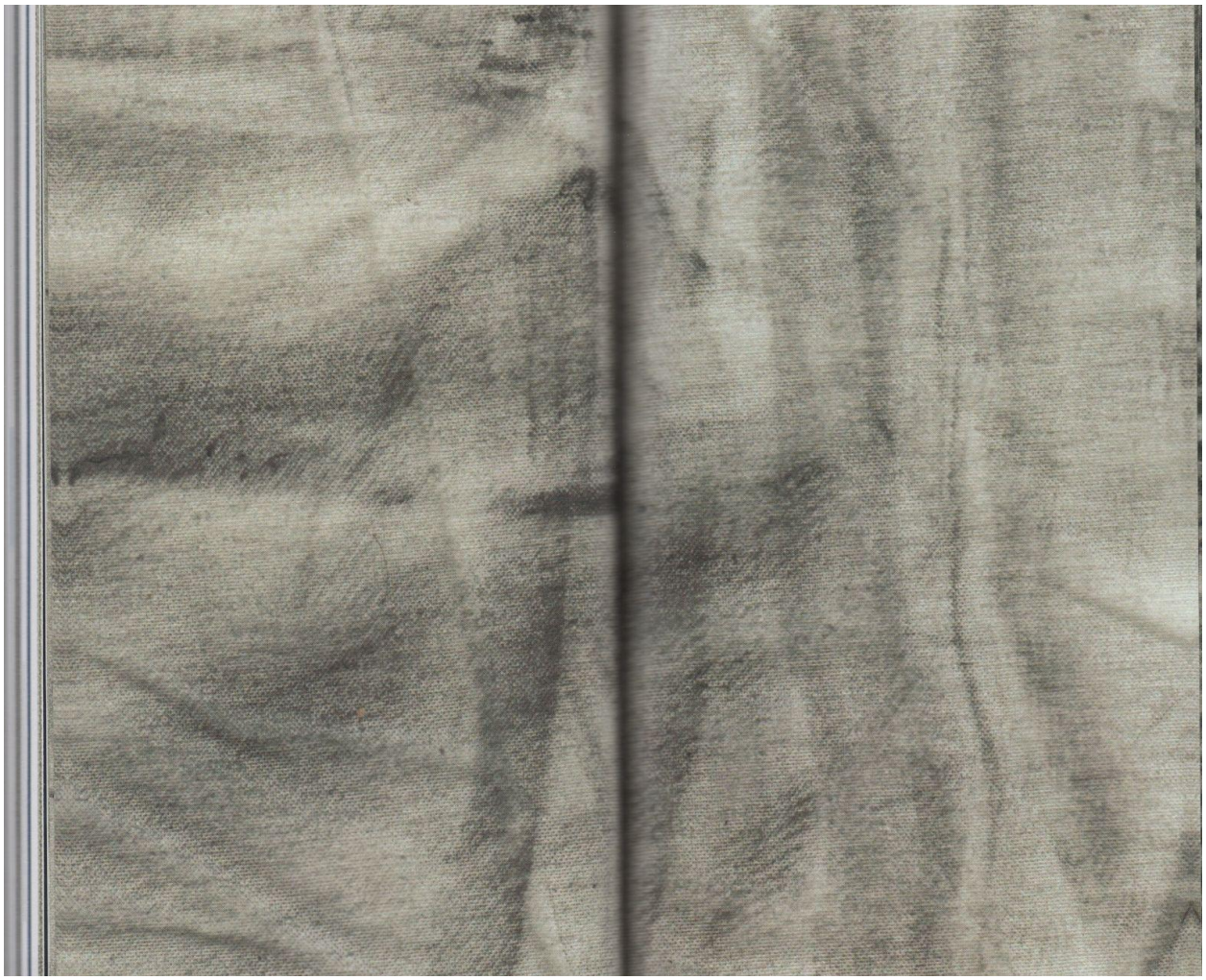
Blue obscures the edges of things,
spilling outside my window and into the
street

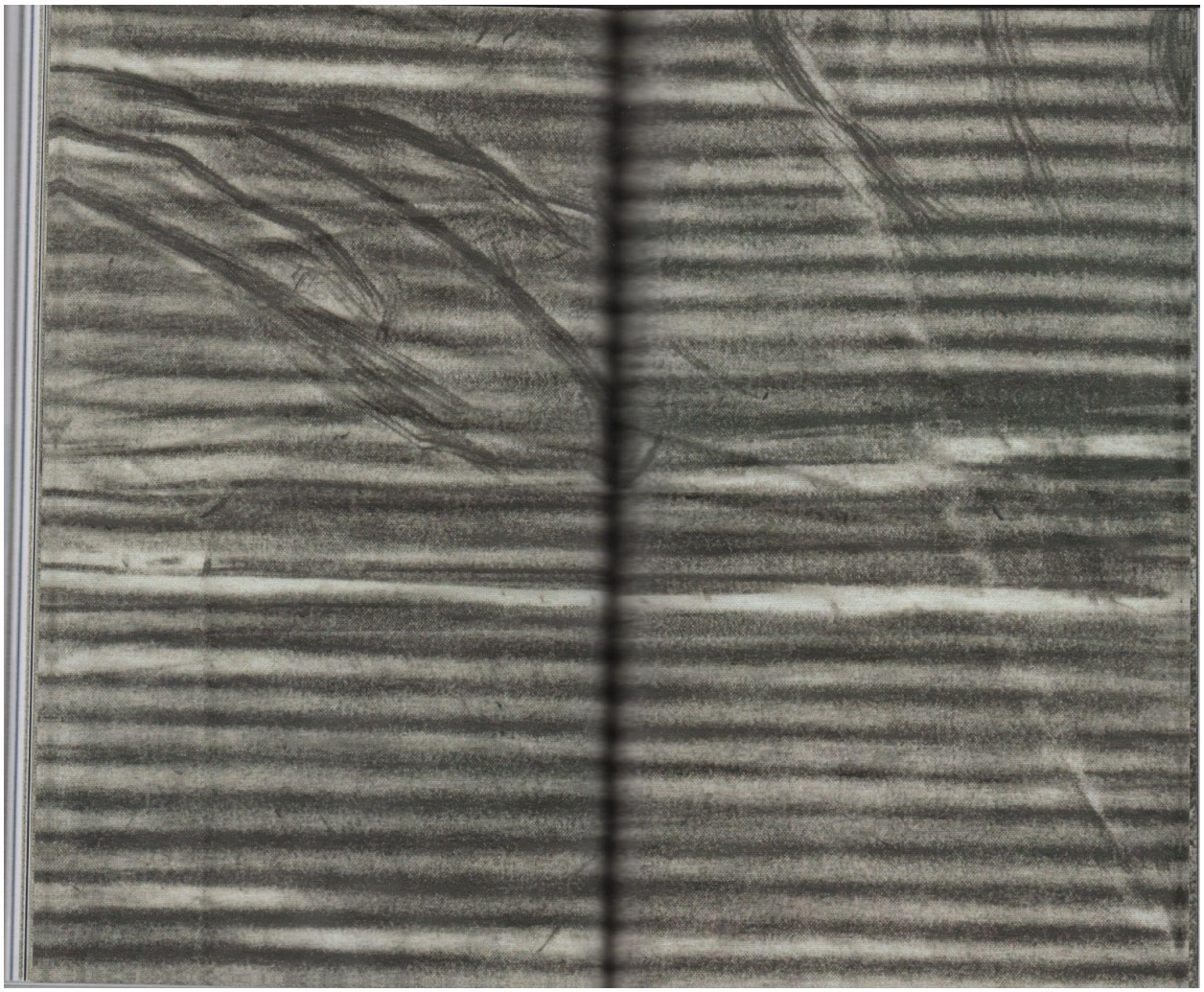
The horizon is blurred
The ground is blurred
I lose my standing

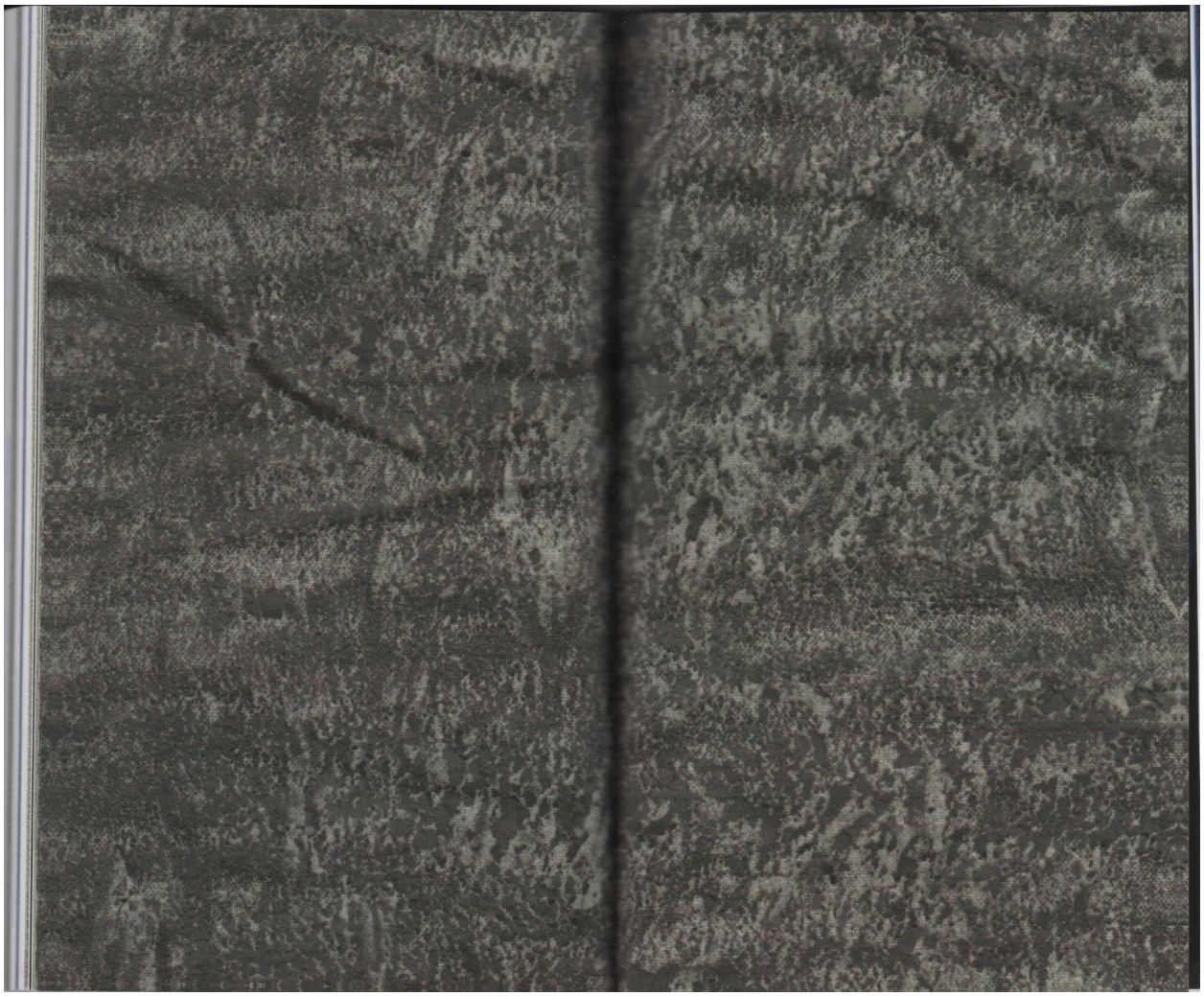
I can’t sleep
I pace around the apartment
I make rubbings of the walls around me,
trying to feel grounded
I keep rubbing until my hands get tired
I start using my elbows,
then the rest of my body
I rub until I can’t move anymore and
it’s hard to tell if I’m rubbing my wall
or if my wall is rubbing me
The ground starts shifting











The characters in Samuel Beckett's plays use repetition to cope with shaky foundations

In *Happy Days* Winnie is buried to her waist in a mound of scorched earth

It's unclear how she ended up there

(In Robert Wilson's adaptation there is an eruption in the asphalt)

She slowly sinks into the ground

She follows a daily routine, trying to hold it together

At the start of each day she methodically removes items from her bag

At the end of the day she places the items back in the bag

Eventually her possessions break down

At one point her parasol catches fire

The ground keeps shifting

She keeps talking and singing, trying to maintain a coherent identity

She keeps falling

The play ends

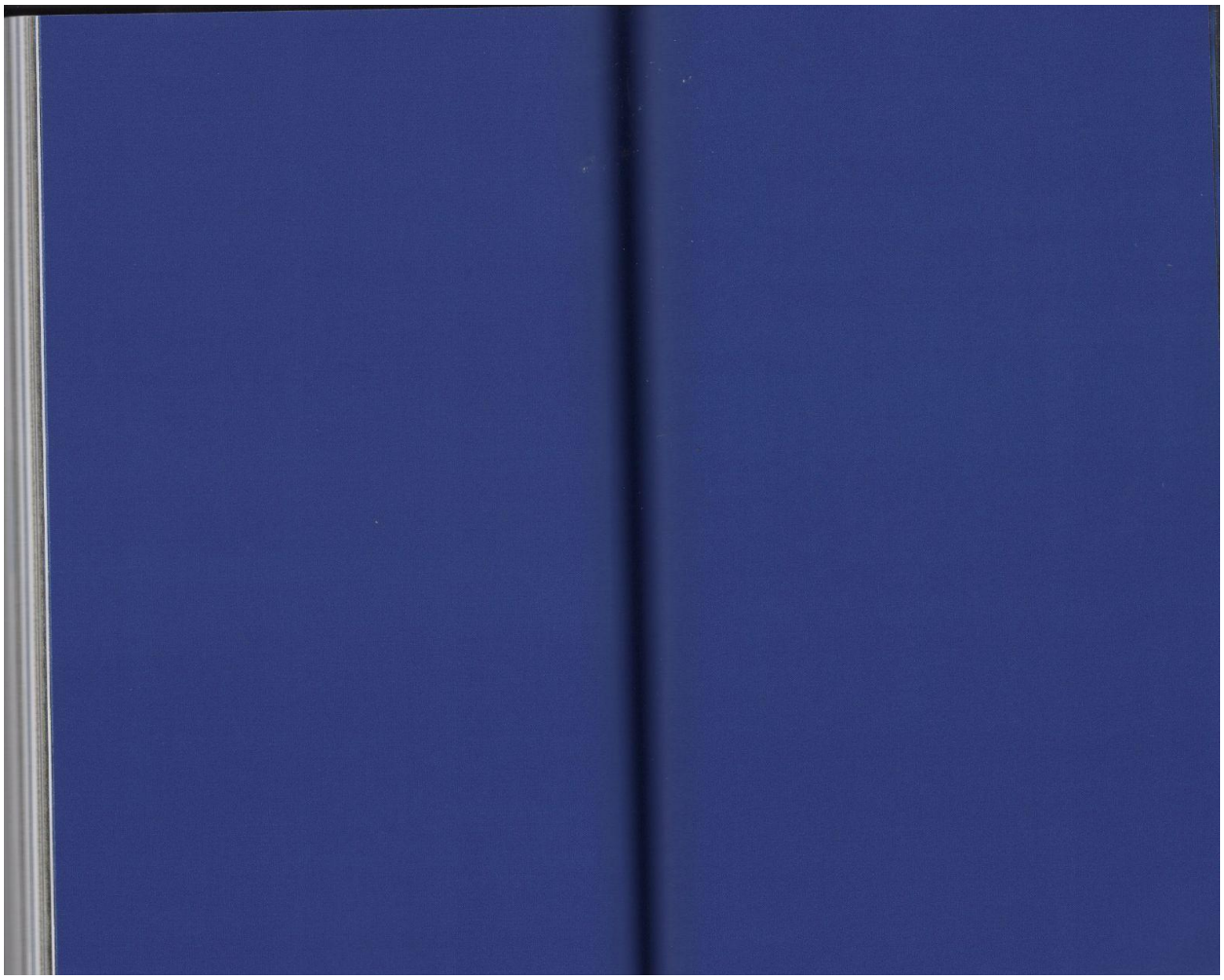
I imagine an alternate ending where Winnie falls farther and farther into the ground

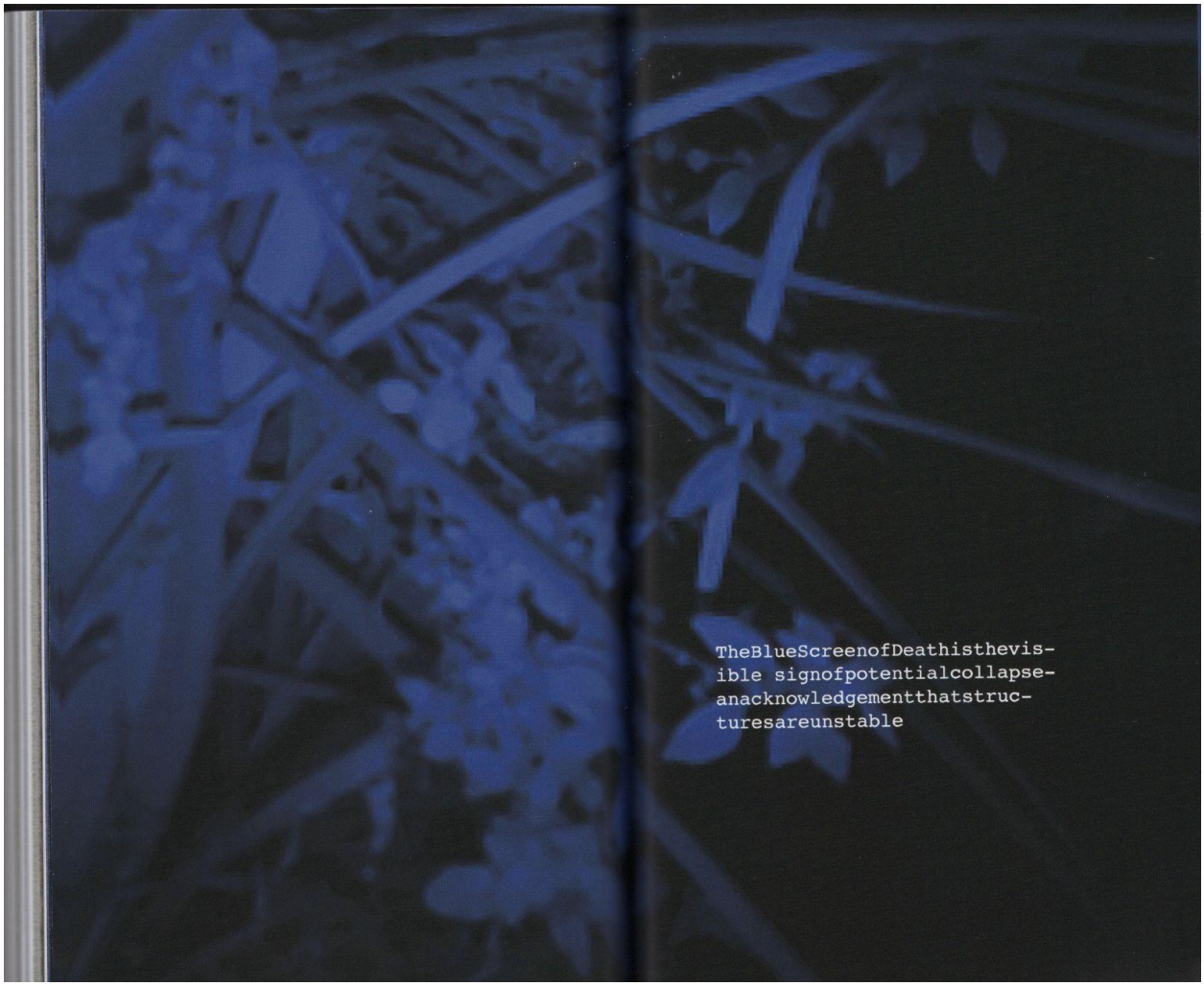
Eventually she falls into the ocean

Instead of drowning she swims with the fish and becomes reoriented

She forms new rhythms, entangled in a liquid world

I notice a small crack in my wall near the air conditioner
I cover it with painter's tape
The hole gets slightly bigger—about the size of my eye
I look through and see my landlord walking outside
He looks in my direction
I look away
I tape over the hole
Eventually the hole expands across the entire wall
I put down the tape
I sit in the hole, listening to music
I hear dripping in the background—

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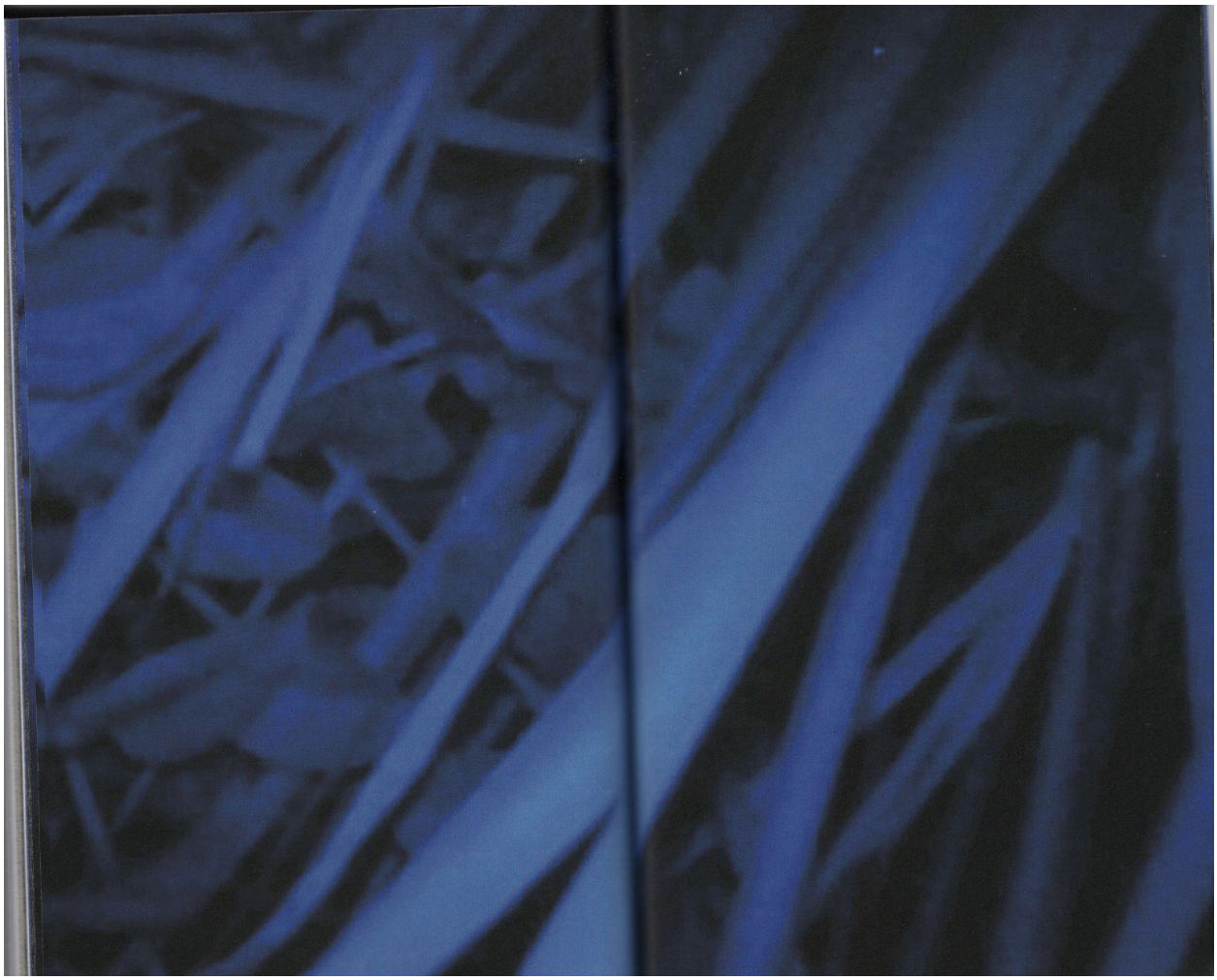

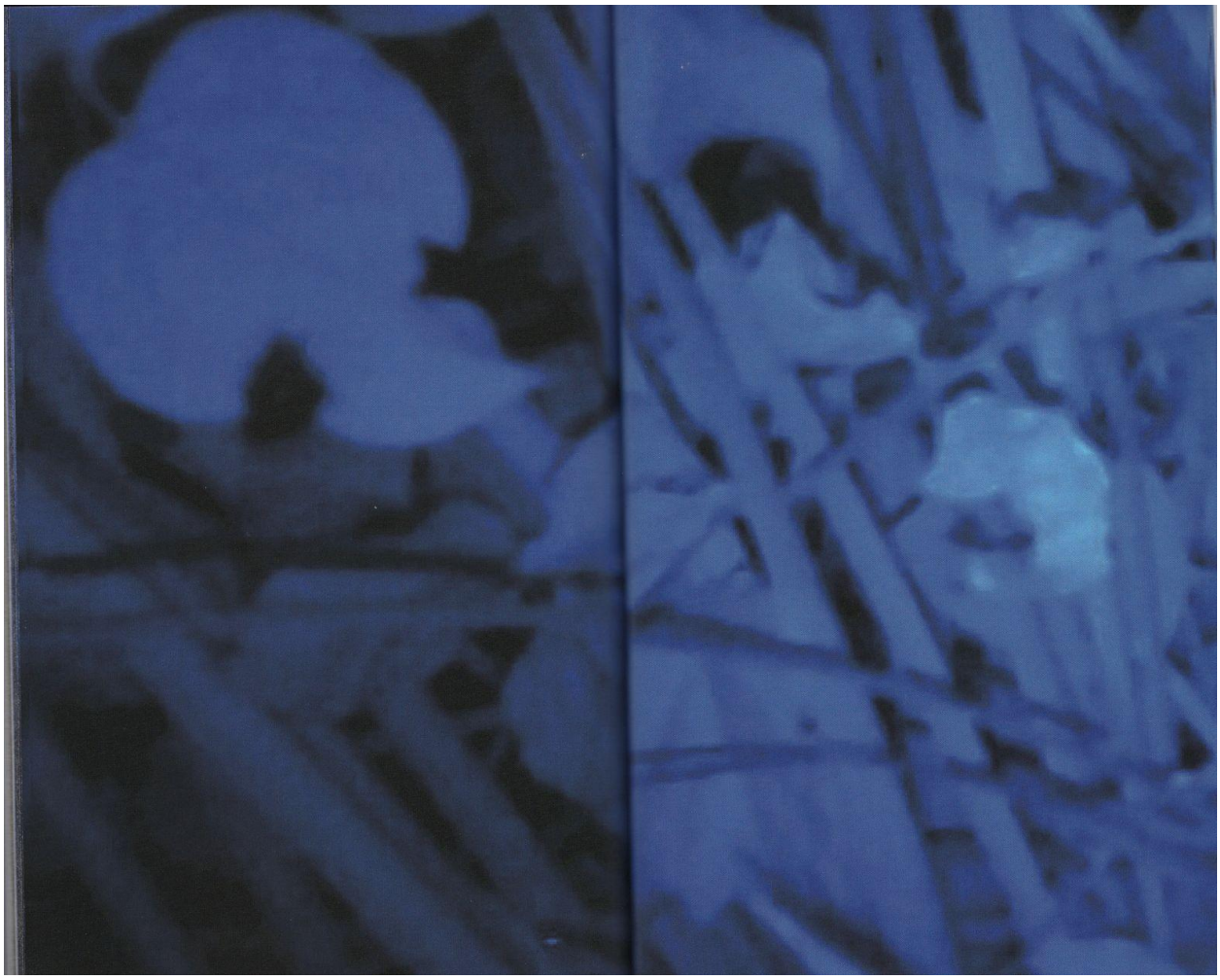

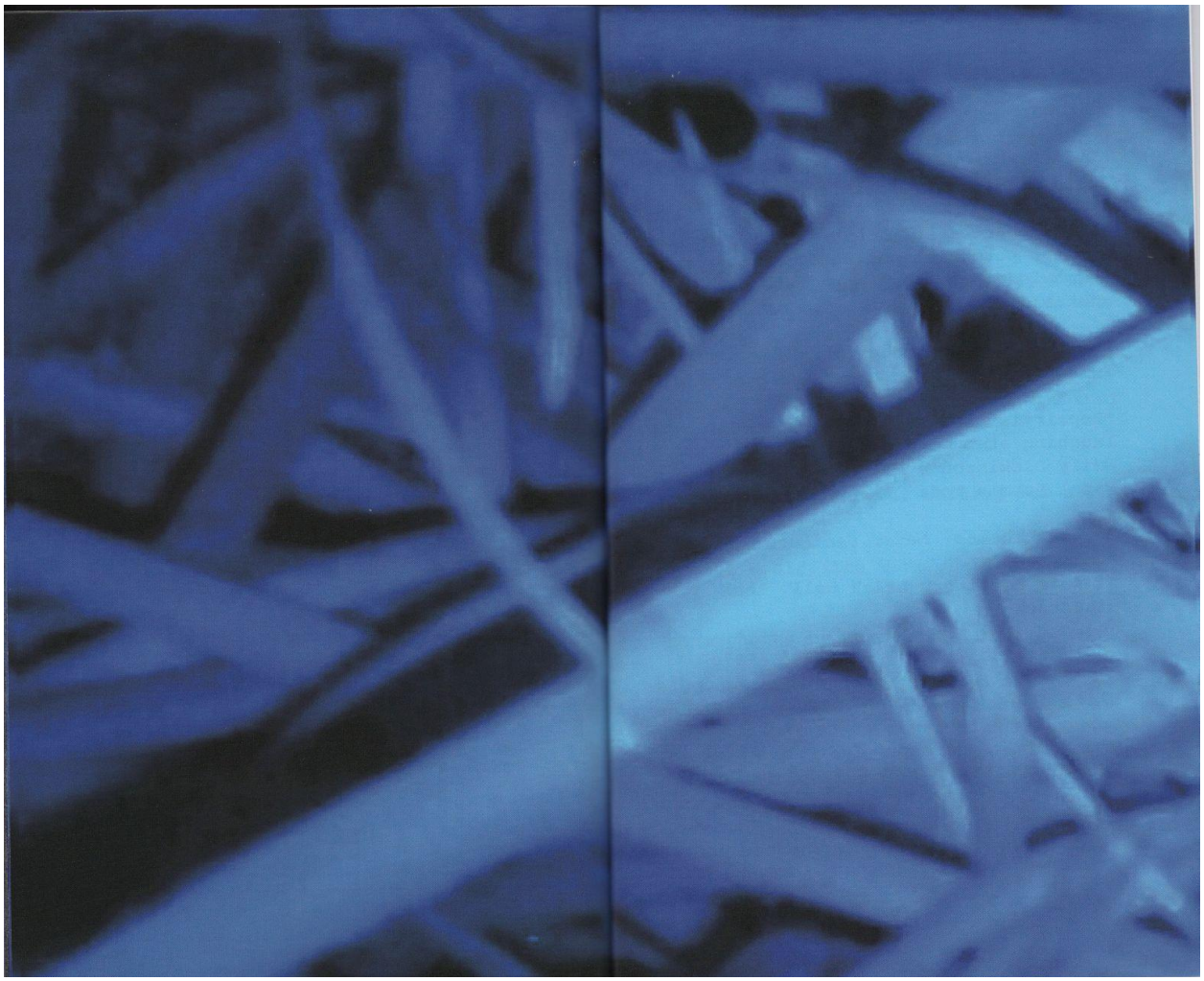

Notes

Derek Jarman, *Blue*, 1993

Julia Kristeva, "Giotto's Joy", 1972

The Blue Screen of Death is the visible sign of potential collapse, an acknowledgement that structures are unstable

Still from Judith Hopf's *Lily's Laptop*, 2013

"Repair is useless and I can't help laughing at my own catastrophe": Emily Dickinson's Letters, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd

Douglas Thomas, *Never Use Futura*, 2017

Blue is hitting a brick wall, tech slapstick

Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 1970

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *Sabotage: The Conscious Withdrawal of the Workers' Industrial Efficiency*, IWW Publishing Bureau, Chicago, 1917

Blue leaks outside the boundaries of my screen and touches my face

Luce Irigaray, "The Mechanics of Fluids", 1974

Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power", 1978

Health Consultation, Public School 51, Bronx Borough, City of New York, Prepared by New York State Department of Health, May 27, 2015

Cut to Blue
I stare at the screen, waiting for a signal

Virgina Woolf, *The Mark on the Wall*, 1917

Snail photos by Garrett Hallman

Blue obscures the edges of things, spilling outside my window and into the street
The horizon is blurred
The ground is blurred
I lose my standing

Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days*, 1961

Photo of Dianne Wiest in *Happy Days* by Gerry Goodstein