

## Maxe Crandall

### *The Nancy Reagan Collection*

Futurepoem, 2020

REVIEWED BY SIMON CRAFTS

*Through Nancy I begin to see behind the image* —Maxe Crandall

In his recently published book *Sexual Hegemony*, the late Christopher Chitty stages a materialist intervention into queer history by tracking homosexuality in relationship to capital and accumulation. He calls this project “queer realism” and describes its task as:

de-dramatizing the kinds of stories we tell about the sexualities of the past. To do so is to short circuit the connection between individual fantasy and collective identification. As in Bertolt Brecht’s dramatization of epic theater with juxtaposition, anecdote, and cut-up, the desired effect of this aesthetic realism is deflationary, its purpose is to reopen the place for “big enough history.”

Maxe Crandall’s new book *The Nancy Reagan Collection* is not a work of history per se but it shares many of the strategies and aims avowed by Chitty’s queer realism. It is a formally audacious poetry sequence that doubles as seance. The spectre of the former first lady is summoned to the stage of the 21st century to account for the deafening silence of the Reagans until 1987 about the AIDS epidemic. As Crandall puts it: “everywhere I looked for AIDS I found Nancy Reagan, in any of her elegant gowns.” Crandall’s book has no explicit allegiance to Chitty’s project, but I mention it here to link *The Nancy Reagan Collection* to a larger contemporary desire to reinvigorate and rethink queer history. The avant-garde poetics Crandall employs literalize Chitty’s injunction to use “juxtaposition, anecdote, and

cut-up” and the book’s purpose is very much “deflationary.” Crandall brings the nagging question of justice to bear upon a character and a moment that refused it to so many. In doing so, *The Nancy Reagan Collection* is a comment on both queer history and a larger political narrative which Nancy Reagan embodies. Crandall’s book doesn’t exist to correct this past, but to correct the future. The haunting final lines of the book indicate the necessity of his project: “Nancy is everywhere. / She is not over.” He thus arrives at a particularly potent form of political poetry that asks what poetry may have for history and what uses history may have for poetry.

*The Nancy Reagan Collection* is broken into fifteen sections that take forays into cultural criticism, poets theatre, and compositions of found language. At times it feels like a play starring Nancy, a series of scenes staged to rattle the bars of ideology as loudly as possible. Crandall is willing to go wherever he needs to in order to achieve this goal and the book is suitably adventurous. It jumps between various historical and fantastical places, but consistently draws from a palette of 1980s popular culture. Crandall engages celebrities, films, albums, and historical events with the fervor and attention of a collector, a pop culture fanatic, and a critical theorist. From these elements he constructs a sort of popular historical consciousness of the Reagan era. He reads this through the lens of Nancy in order to tease out its various political contradictions, ironies, pleasures, and pains. One of the most exciting and astounding examples of this technique is in the section, “Irresistible Forces,” which synthesizes the Iran-Contra affair, the Contra video game franchise, the Sandinistas’ anticolonial struggles in Nicaragua, the Reagan administration’s racialized domestic policies, and meditations on the Japanese and Chinese cultural meanings of peony flowers (Nancy’s favorite) to create a dizzying and damning investigation of race, gender, capital, and American imperialism.

Still, whatever branching paths *The Nancy Reagan Collection* takes, AIDS remains the compass point by which it navigates. Crandall is not the first poet to walk this road, and with its poetic blending of “low” culture with queer

political concerns, his book owes a debt to New Narrative and specifically the work of Kevin Killian, whose *Argento Series* is a clear precursor. Killian used the films of Dario Argento as mediation through which to talk about his trauma surrounding AIDS. Crandall's work is more historical, and the mediation is not via film but celebrity. Still, they share a clever and critical use of camp to render this cataclysmic moment in the bright reds of Argento's gore and Nancy's dresses, respectively. The campiness in both cases exaggerates the formal register and makes the contours of their subject louder, more legible, and more open to intervention. For Killian the use of this camp was principally affective, to help express the horror (movie) of living through AIDS. For Crandall it is more overtly political.

His camp incarnation of Nancy Reagan grants us ways of seeing and thinking critically about the history and ideology that she so stunningly embodies. It's a kind of acceleration of camp until it becomes overwhelmingly political and begins to resemble something more like Brecht's alienation effect. Exaggerating Nancy's aesthetic dimensions denaturalizes her as a character in history. She becomes sinister, cartoonish, and contingent in her "floor length bolshevik" dresses and hairdo like "a stick of dynamite / the wick burning down". This campy figuration is an especially effective strategy for skewering Nancy, and by extension her husband, because the Reagans cultivated their aesthetic so fervently while in office. Both were actors, and Nancy and Ron were adept at playing the sweet and soft spoken grandma and grandpa who lulled the nation to sleep with bedtime stories of renewed moralism and melodious platitudes regarding mass death. Crandall zeroes in on this theatricality with the understanding that in order to "de-dramatize" the Reagans they must be overdramatized until their bad acting becomes apparent. There is a play and pleasure in his taking their performance on its own terms and using a historically queer cultural form like camp to ironize and interrogate their "political grins" as the aggressively ideological spectacle they were.

Archive is also essential to Crandall achieving this effect and it runs through *The Nancy Reagan Collection*, in the form of footnotes, citations, and asides. It's a parallel text that functions as a kind of foil, a straight man, and a tragedy to popular culture's avowed comedy. The names, birth dates, and death dates of victims of AIDS are catalogued meticulously like headstones that poke through the book's arc. They buoy its antics with the grim reality of death that underpins Nancy's endless preening. The footnotes and archival citations take detours into fascinating, bizarre, and intimate aspects of the Reagans' lives (did you know Nancy had a personal psychic or that her Secret Service codename was "RAINBOW" while Ronald's was "RAWHIDE"?) that legitimate a representation that might otherwise be read as more parodic.

Sandwiched between the archive and Nancy is the poem's narrator, a complex voice that reads them both for us. This task is primarily a source of tension and grief for them: "Since meeting Nancy I'd had the distinct pleasure / of landing on the shores of Hell, so to speak // where demon people profit from doom." And it is why they become the seat of the book's political consciousness:

It was urgent to see what I could find  
In a maze covering names in a feeling of politics,

To ascertain my weaponry within  
This series of berserk emergencies.

This narrator has a complex and enigmatic voice. It's where something like Chitty's queer realist notion of "short circuiting the connection between individual fantasy and collective identification" becomes most clearly manifest.

The narrator is many selves and no consistent self throughout ("peering out of the eyes of someone / who was supposed to be me"). It may occasionally

be Crandall's own lyric voice, occasionally Michael Jackson's, occasionally Janet's, occasionally "SATAN", occasionally an anonymous man dying of AIDS, and many others. Who the speaker is is not as important as *what* the speaker is: a figure of alterity that functions as a reluctant observer, correspondent, and confidant to Nancy. Crandall codes this narrator as a queer subjectivity, irrevocably and unhappily conditioned by the melodrama Nancy is starring in, by her stagecraft turned statecraft. Their relationship is dialectical, and can be read several ways within the larger political concerns of the book. Nancy is certainly an icy ideal and representation of the white conservative heteronormative couple form, from which all other expressions of gender and sexuality (i.e. the narrator) deviate or are forced into orbit and distinguish themselves from. However, in the context of AIDS this relationship and her meaning becomes even more expansive and fraught.

If AIDS is one origin story for the political identity of "queer" that activist organizations like ACT-UP mobilized, then queer history is contemporaneous and twinned with the heroic era of Reaganism. In addition to sentencing so many queer people to die, this "moral majority" would usher in the post-Cold War political regime of organized abandonment that characterizes the current capitalist era of deregulation, mass incarceration, and austerity we often shorthand as neoliberalism. Queerness, then, has an intimate and embodied tie to and knowledge of the forces that have helped to produce our immiserated present. *The Nancy Reagan Collection* weaves this knowledge into its fabric: "Right into the future / what Nancy wears influences everything". This is an understanding of history that seems to inform much of how the book goes about chasing down and cataloguing the callous, calculated, and deceitful actions of the Reagans. It's a pursuit that culminates in the section "Nancy at Noon" where Nancy transforms into AIDS itself, death incarnate, and watches the narrator (at this point Michael Jackson) succumb to the virus.

The meaning of this death, and so many like it, is the tremendous and unanswered question for Crandall. It's why the book's relationship to

archive and history is as much a source of pain as its relationship to Nancy. The archive does not tell the whole story and the facts it presents are not necessarily the truth. History can lie through omission, or unwittingly tell the truth through what it fails to speak of, just like the Reagans' silence on AIDS. However, It's essential to confront this archive and how this knowledge is transmitted, because to be a political subject is to be a historical subject. To know history is to know oneself as a political being. Characteristically, Crandall uses Janet Jackson's 1986 debut album *Control* as a launching point for the narrator to speak directly about this desire for autonomy and agency via historical knowledge:

Mine is also a story about control,  
about reading everything there was to know.

Most of what we could control early on  
became known to us through speech,

small bites of knowledge shared aloud,  
difficult to digest

without devising

otherworldly  
ways of remembering.

These “otherworldly ways of remembering” are the stakes of *The Nancy Reagan Collection* and it tries to perform such an act of remembrance and analysis via the unsuspecting medium of poetry. The hope is that a confrontation with Nancy might provide us more “control” of ourselves as political beings, and make room for a “big enough history” that it might reconfigure our future towards liberation both queer and otherwise. I was struck by one line where all these feelings coalesce, a détournement of the

slogan famously emblazoned on the back of David Wojnarowicz's jacket during an AIDS demonstration:

if I die forget burial

just drop my body

so it can be studied

so

I can remember