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NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

FINE ART - PAINTING

CINDY SHERMAN :
THE IMAGE OF 'WOMAN'

BY

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SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF ART AND DESIGN
AND COMPLEMENTARY STUDIES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE
OF FINE ART PAINTING 1993

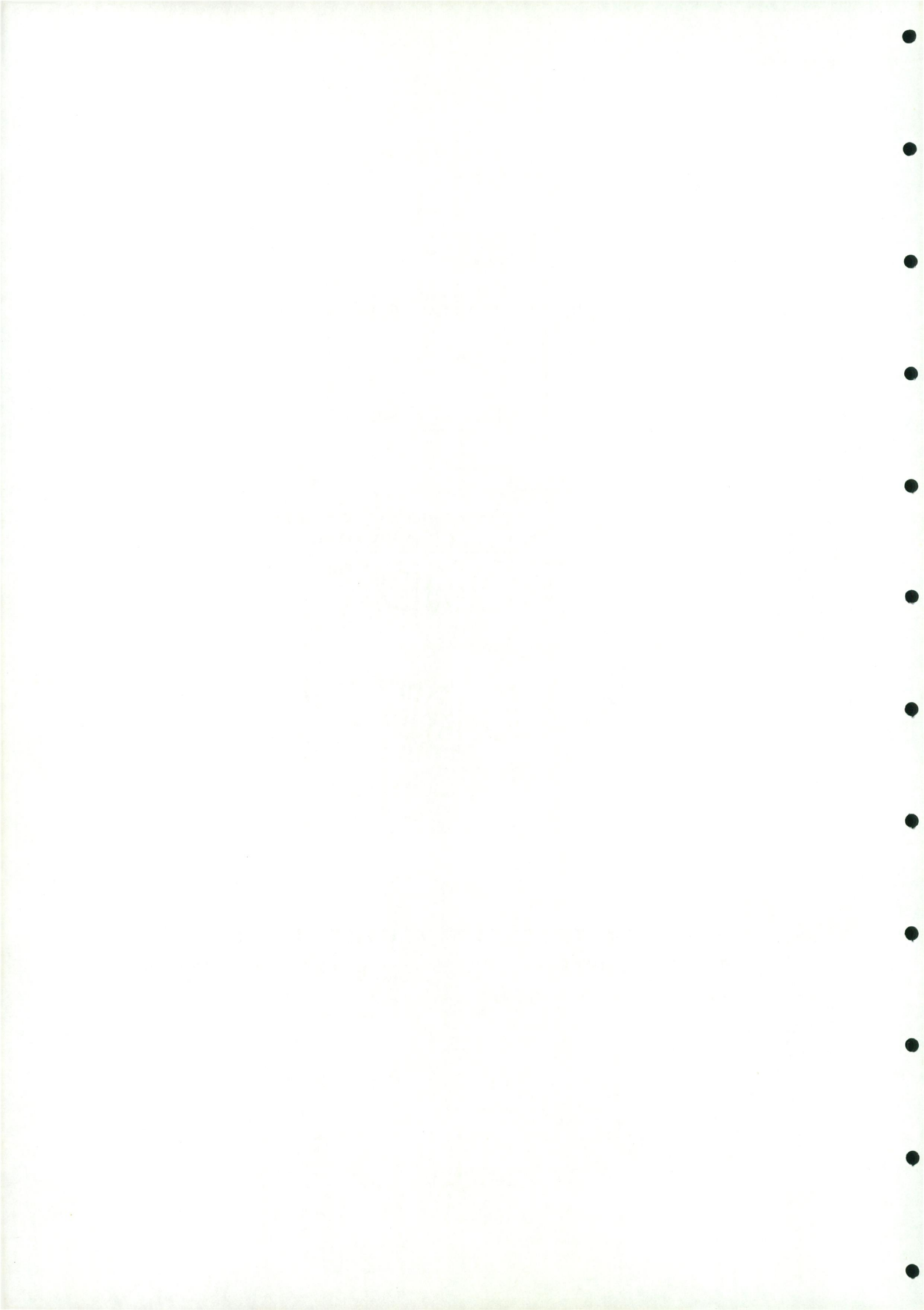
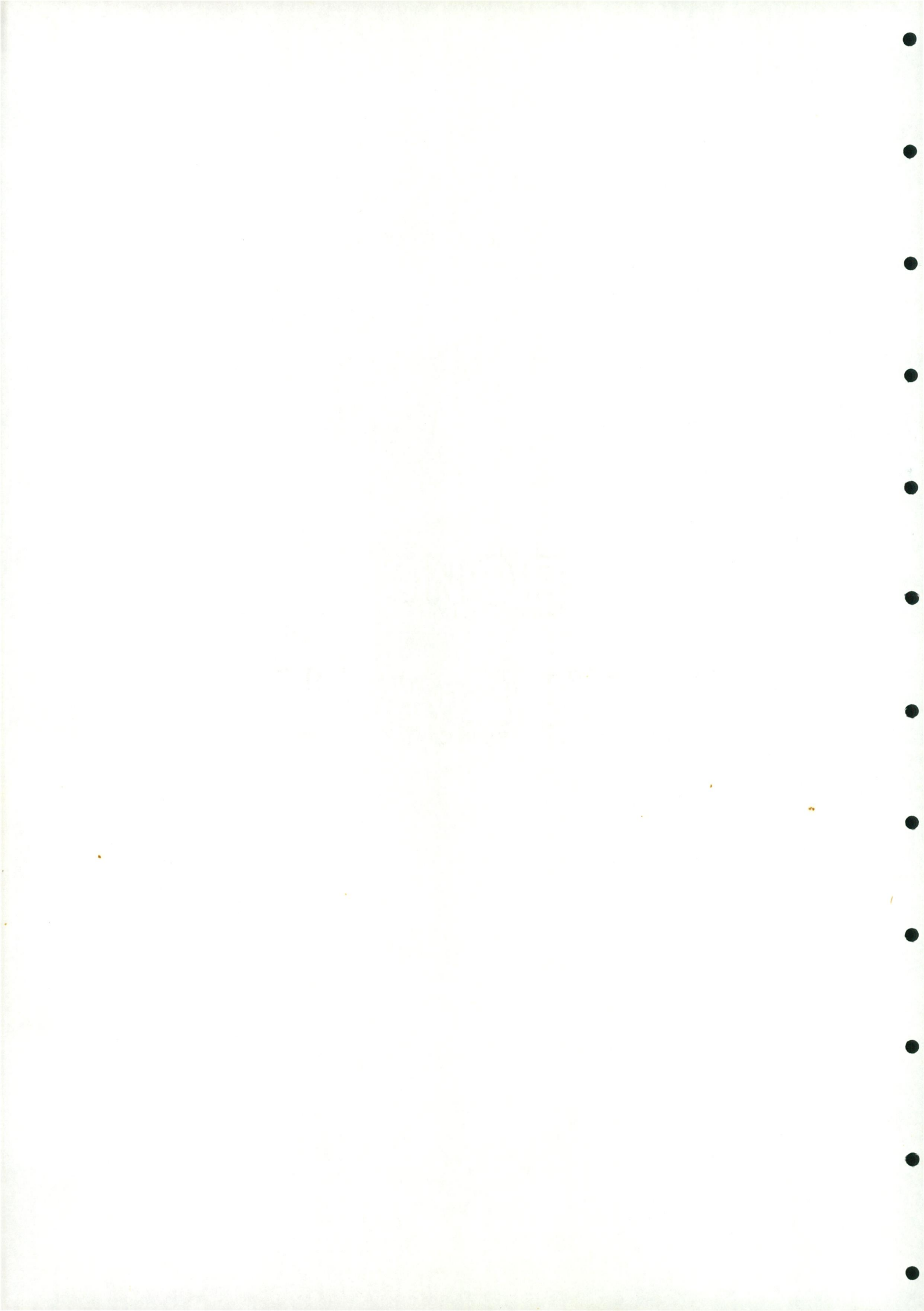


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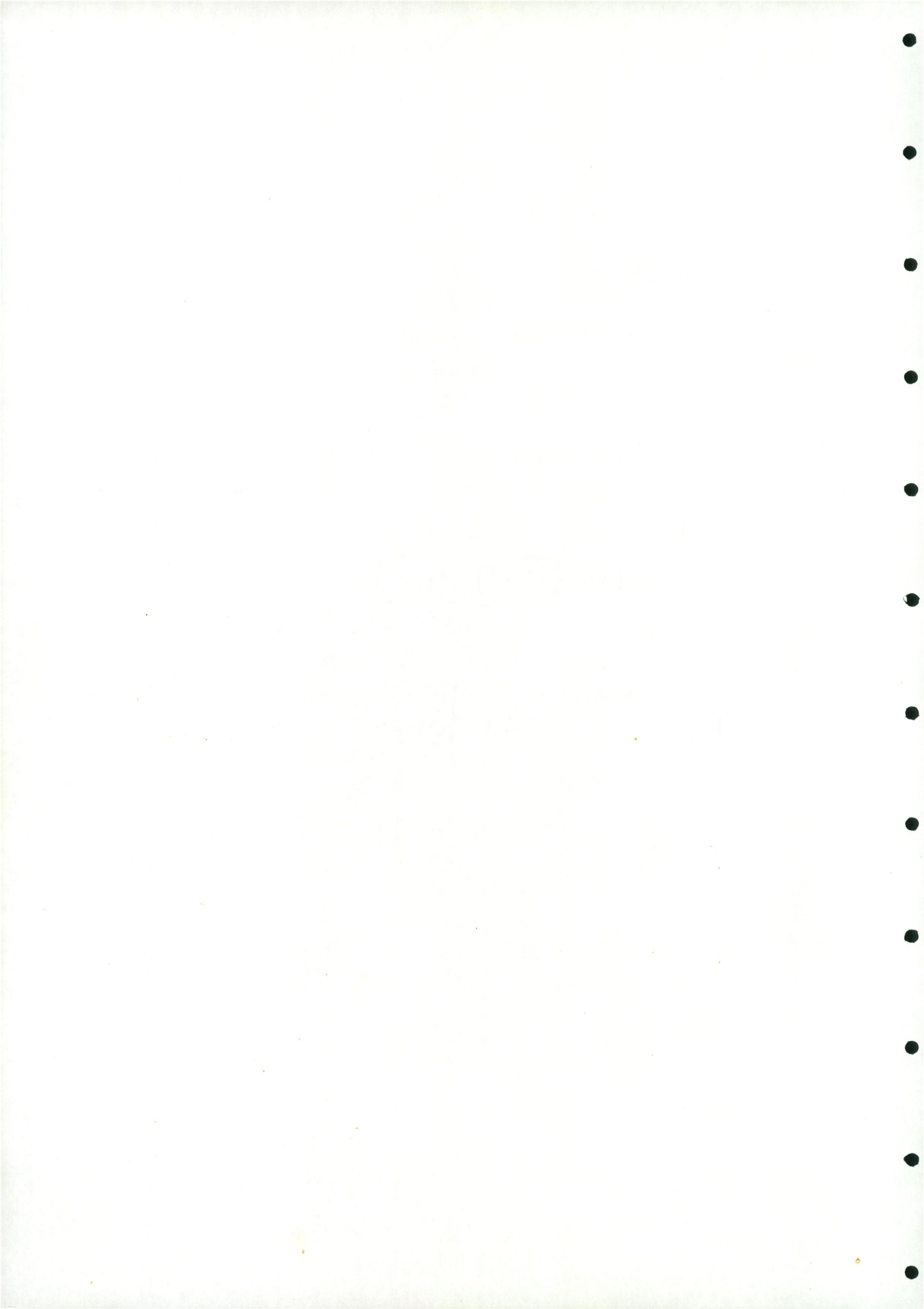


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INTRODUCTION

Among many artists who portray women in contemporary art is Cindy Sherman. She has chosen to do this through photography where she performs as the model to portray an extensive range of characters. Sherman's work is comprehensible and accessible in contrast to much contemporary art which can alienate viewers who are not art literate.

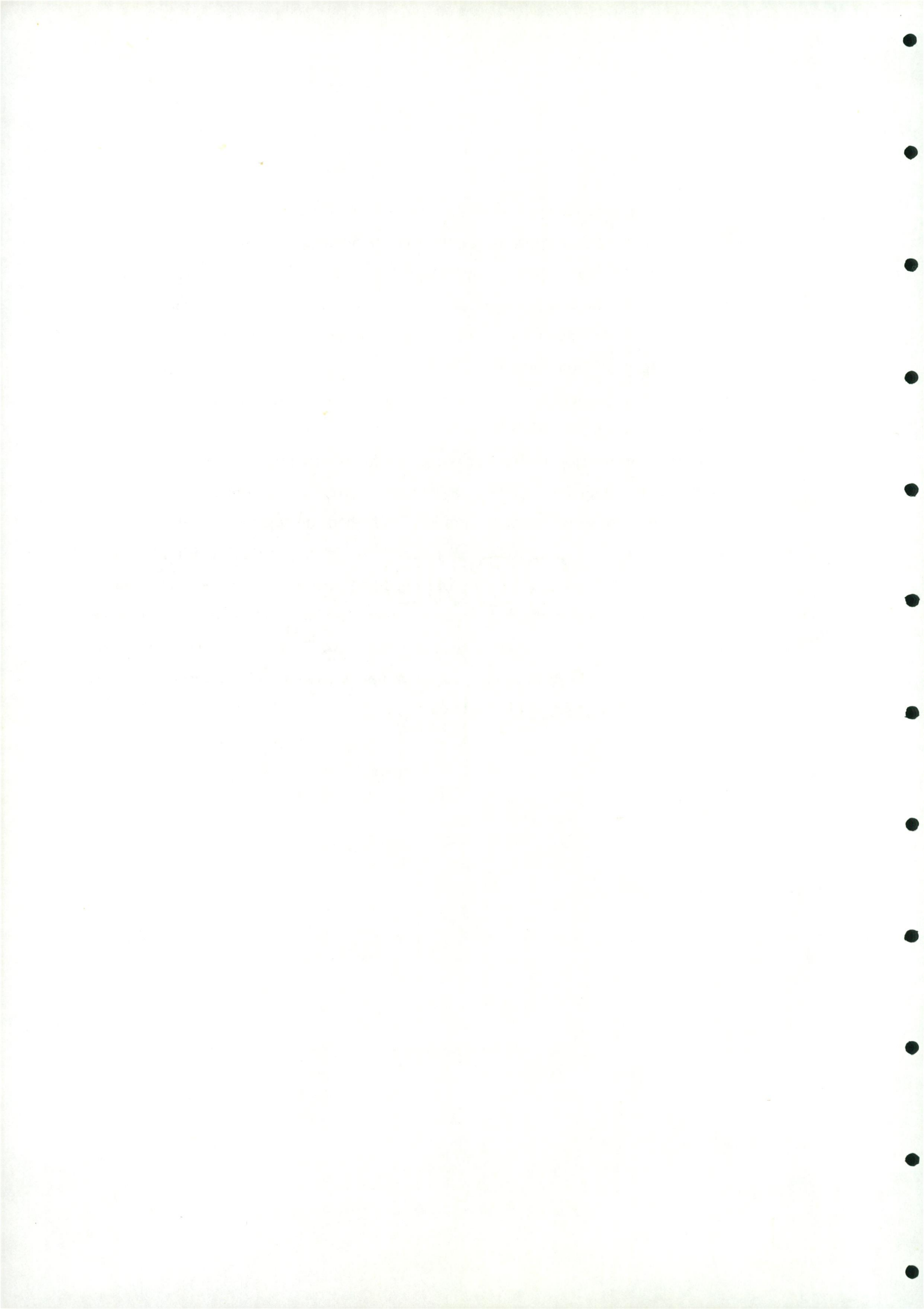
Sherman's images are purely representational and recognisable. Some images are quite beautiful in terms of texture, lighting and colour, so immediately before context or meaning is discussed Sherman draws the viewer into the picture on a purely visual level.

Her work needs time. The viewer needs to study its rich detail and context to begin to assess what her meaning or purpose may be. The viewer must recognise that the work is part of a longer story, a whole. Time must also be taken to think about, and look around the images; to assess them. Sherman's work contains no words or narratives; it is numbered, not titled. This device leaves us free to initiate our own interpretive connection.

Many critics have interpreted her work differently, and, according to their own field of study or interest. Feminist critics see her work as being a part of, or tributary to their discussions; others like Craig Owens has examined her work in regard to post-modernism; whilst Schjeldahl, has seen it as being a representation of the 'human condition' rather than exclusively a representation of a 'female condition'. All of these interpretations are valid as Sherman's work may deal with elements from each of these areas. We must, therefore, look to the content of her work for enlightenment.



In each of Sherman's images there is a woman or a suggestion of 'woman' - they appear alone and either apparently conscious or unconscious of a viewer, who may be in or out of her space. The images are suggestive of representations of women by the media and popular culture. Sherman uses her own body and face on which to hang the characters she creates. If this work is not a self-portrait are the images a depiction of Sherman's personal fantasies and alter egos, an expression of her unconscious? Or does she use her body to signify 'woman', releasing or burying the self so as to become the collective 'woman'? If we are to assume a progression within her work, Sherman's treatment of women must be examined chronologically. Her images moved from being apparently rooted in reality to the progressive disintegration and then disappearance of 'woman'. Does this signify a progressive disintegration of the female within popular culture representations and can this be related to society? Assuming Sherman is taking a combative approach toward the image of 'woman' in the media, what issues does she raise and how does she raise them? Who are the women she depicts and what do they stand for? What methods does Sherman use to communicate her message to her audience?



CHAPTER I

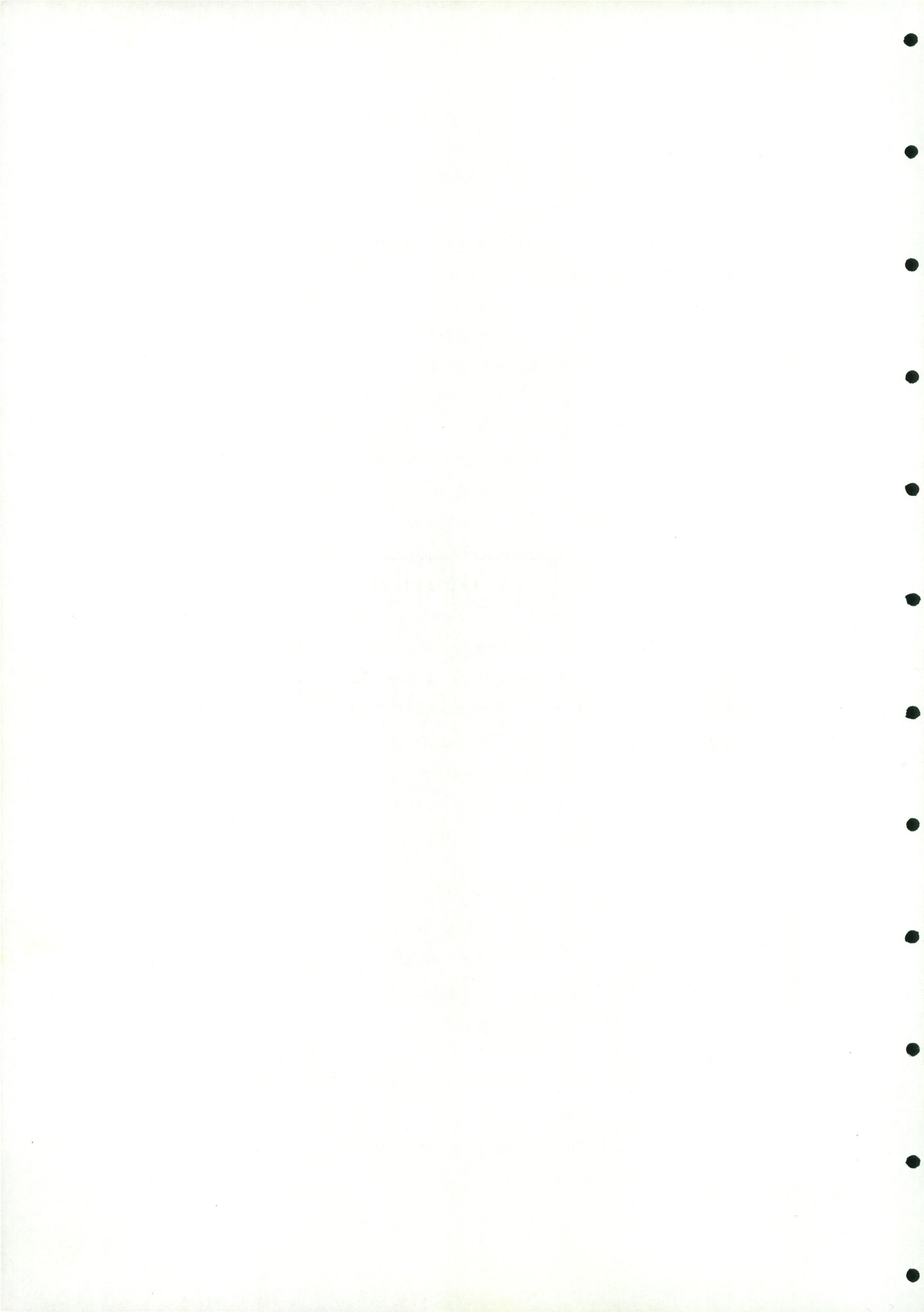
BACKGROUND

The 1960's and 1970's was a time of monumental upheaval in the Art World, which was, at that time, centered in New York. The traditional values of art were being identified and questioned. Values such as originality, scarcity and timelessness of painting and sculpture; the artist as genius; the patriarchal nature of art and its institutions; art as a commodity; and the borders between popular culture and high art were beginning to be dissolved.

Women artists began to assert their position within the art world and demand a prominent place. A new wave of feminism brought with it the examination of the artist's role in society which led to a development of performance art and the formation of alternative working and gallery spaces.

In the 1980's this examination continued to take place but in a different form. With the decline in the American economy money was less readily available for 'alternative' projects and so there was a return to the more traditional viewing spaces. Also there was a return to work which was more accessible to an art literate audience. But the effects of the '70's continued to be felt. The traditional purpose of art had been questioned and widened to encompass a use of popular imagery which could be adapted or 'appropriated' to comment on, for example political issues. Artists such as Richard Prince or Sherrie Levine used existing images from advertisements and well known icons of mass culture to highlight the conditions of contemporary society.

It was within this climate that Cindy Sherman began to study and work. Sherman attended the State University College at Buffalo and received a B.A. in 1976. She began college by studying painting but grew dissatisfied with its limitations and moved into photography. While still at College she lived in and later exhibited in the artists's space 'Hallwalls' in Buffalo which was one of the alternative artist run meeting and exhibiting spaces. At Hallwalls she had an opportunity to increase her knowledge of the issues and attitudes prevailing in the art world at that time as there were continuous discussions, exhibitions and lectures by prominent artists held there. In 1977 she moved to New York.



In all her work Sherman performs as the model for each photograph in which she portrays an extensive range of individual characters (almost exclusively female) and different scenarios.

Sherman professes a disinterest in the study of 'high art' material preferring to draw her inspiration from more popular media.

"I was interested in film noir and psychodrama. I was more interested in going to the movies than I was in going to galleries and looking at art."
(Siegel 1988, P273).

"What we are witnessing is the first generation of American artists weaned on television"
(French 1984, P6)

Sherman's use of photography, as a medium, is also related to popular culture. She is not concerned with the technical aspect.

"I've had to learn much more than I ever would have cared to, but only because I needed it for what I had to express. It was necessary for this work to grow I purposely would underexpose or overexpose it and I wouldn't care if it was printed properly because it was about cheapness and not high art"
(Siegel 1988, P281)

Although quite a young artist, Sherman (born in 1954), has been very successful within the gallery system. In 1978 she exhibited in a group show at "Artists Space" in New York. In 1980 she had her first one-person show at Metro Pictures in New York; in 1982 she was selected for Documenta 8 in Kassel, Germany; in 1987 she was given a retrospective at the Whitney Museum (New York); and she has a show once a year at Metro Pictures in New York. She has also exhibited at many galleries worldwide. Her work has generally been well received both critically and commercially.



CHAPTER 2

PERSONAL IDENTITY

There is a general preoccupation, in discussions of Sherman's work, with her actual appearance and personality. Is this relevant? In the '70s women artists, such as, Carolee Schneemann and Hannah Wilke used the body and face as a tool for the projection of the message of their work. By using their own bodies naked or clothed in performance the body stood for "female" rather than individual self. Sherman relinquishes the self by covering it with external additions, such as clothing, makeup, wigs and later prostheses and masks to create characters which serve to convey her message.

"No I don't fantasize that I'd like to look a certain way or be in a certain situation in order to take a photo or set up a scene. Fantasy only comes into play after I've made myself up and I need to imagine how this character would behave in order to capture the expression I'm after".
(Siegel, 1988, P278).

Sherman does not, however, become the character she portrays.

"It's not like I'm method acting or anything. I don't feel that I am that person. I may be thinking about a certain story or situation but I don't become her".
(Marzorati 1983, P81)

Therefore, we are being presented not with an anthology of narcissistic portraits of Sherman, but with fictitious 'portraits' of women based on media images.

In 1977 Sherman began what was to become a series of work called "Untitled Film Stills". Sherman parodied or reconstructed recognizable images taken from original publicity stills of 40's and 50's Hollywood "B" movies.

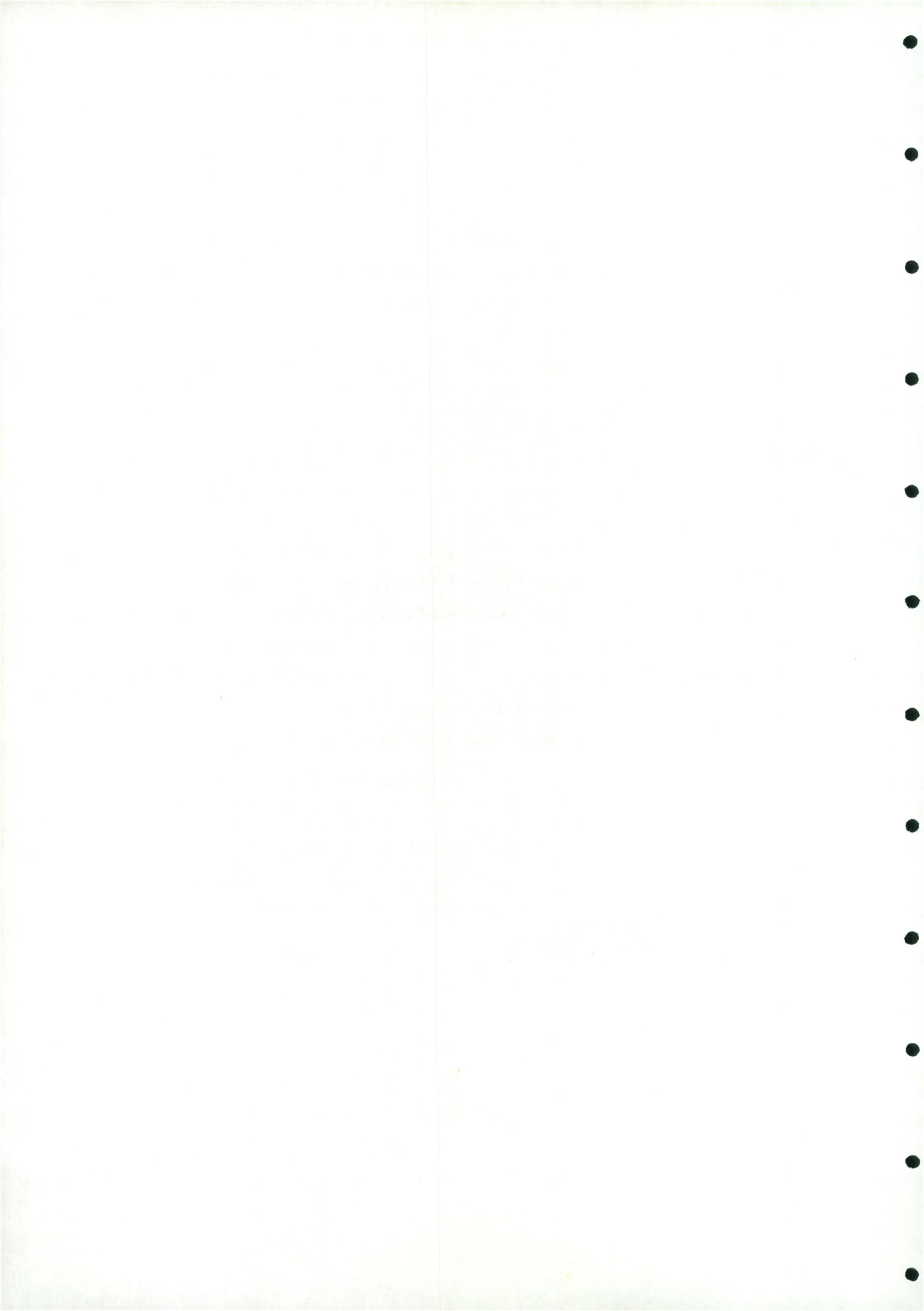


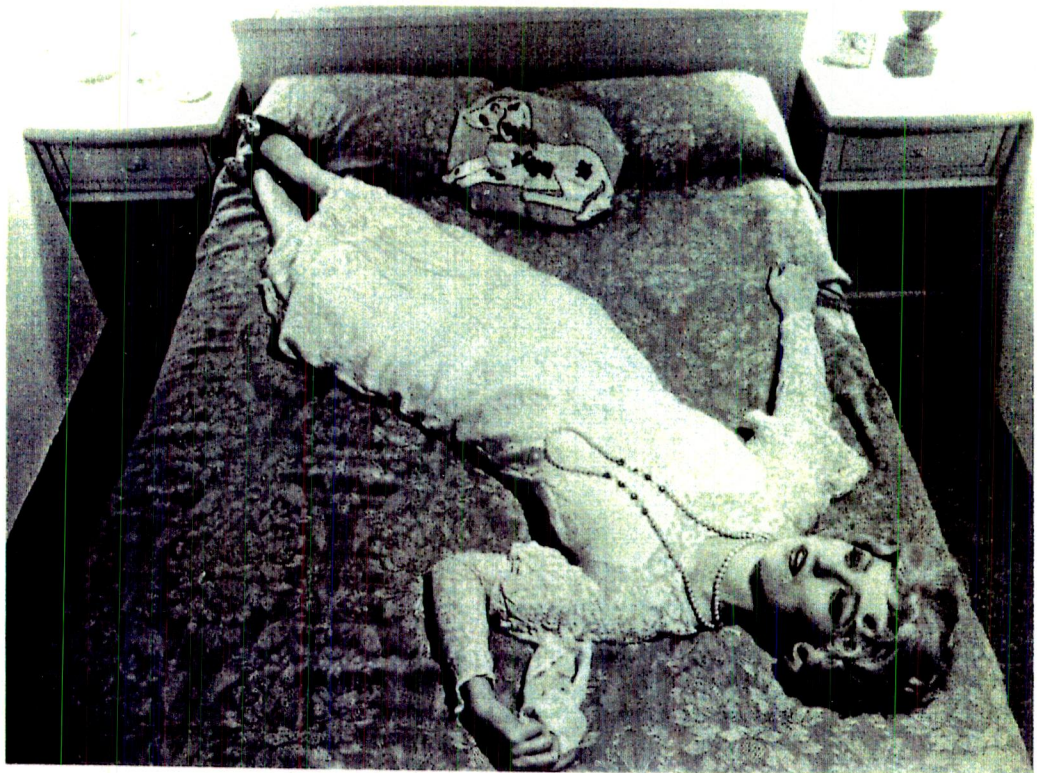
Sherman worked directly from these images so as to reproduce the "look" and feeling of the still. She created work which mocked the notion of the use of the female for promotion purposes. In each still the woman appears alone and poised but,

"I realized that I could make a picture of a character reacting to something outside the frame so that the viewer would assume [there is] another person"
(Siegel, 1988, P271)

On first glance these photographs appear consistent with original stills. Upon closer examination we realise that each character is Sherman. There are also minor inconsistencies. In many the camera shutter-release and cord is visible, as in "Untitled Film Still No. 11, 1978" [1]. Also in this image it is obvious that the woman is wearing a wig. Her pose appears contrived; she holds a hankchief, but her face is devoid of expression. Sherman has created a parody of a scenario constructed by Hollywood of a female stereotype. Often when presented with a stereotype we may not be aware that it is one, but when Sherman re-presents the stereotype she initiates a questioning process.

"In real publicity film stills from the 40's and 50's something usually sexy/cute is portrayed to get people to go see the movie My favourite film images (Where obviously my work took its inspiration) didn't have that. They're closer to my own work for that reason, because both are about a sort of brooding character caught between the potential violence and sex My stills were about the fakeness of role-playing as well as contempt for the domineering "male" audience who would mistakenly read the images as sexy".
(Siegel 1988, P272)





1. Untitled Film Still No. 11, 1978

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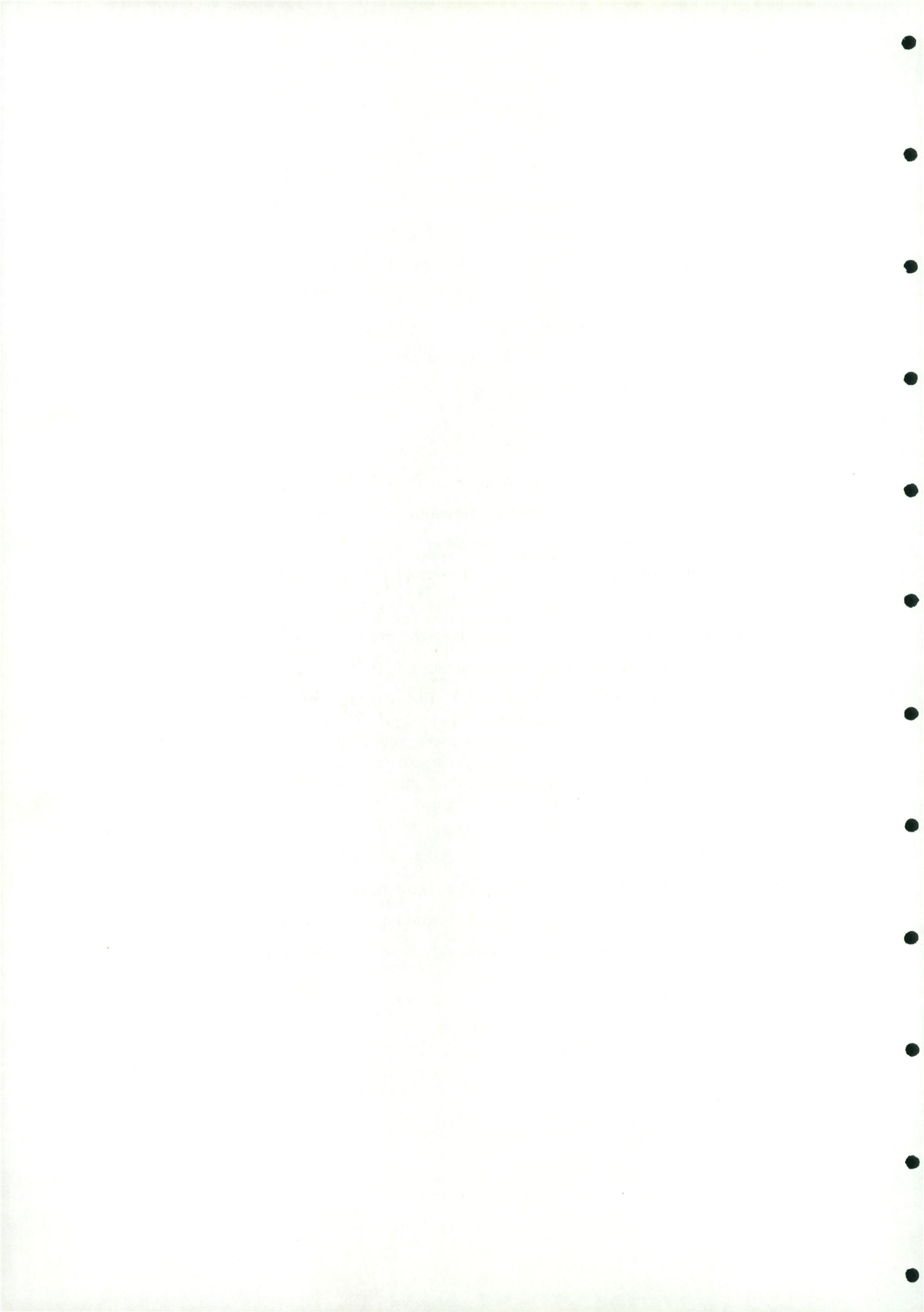
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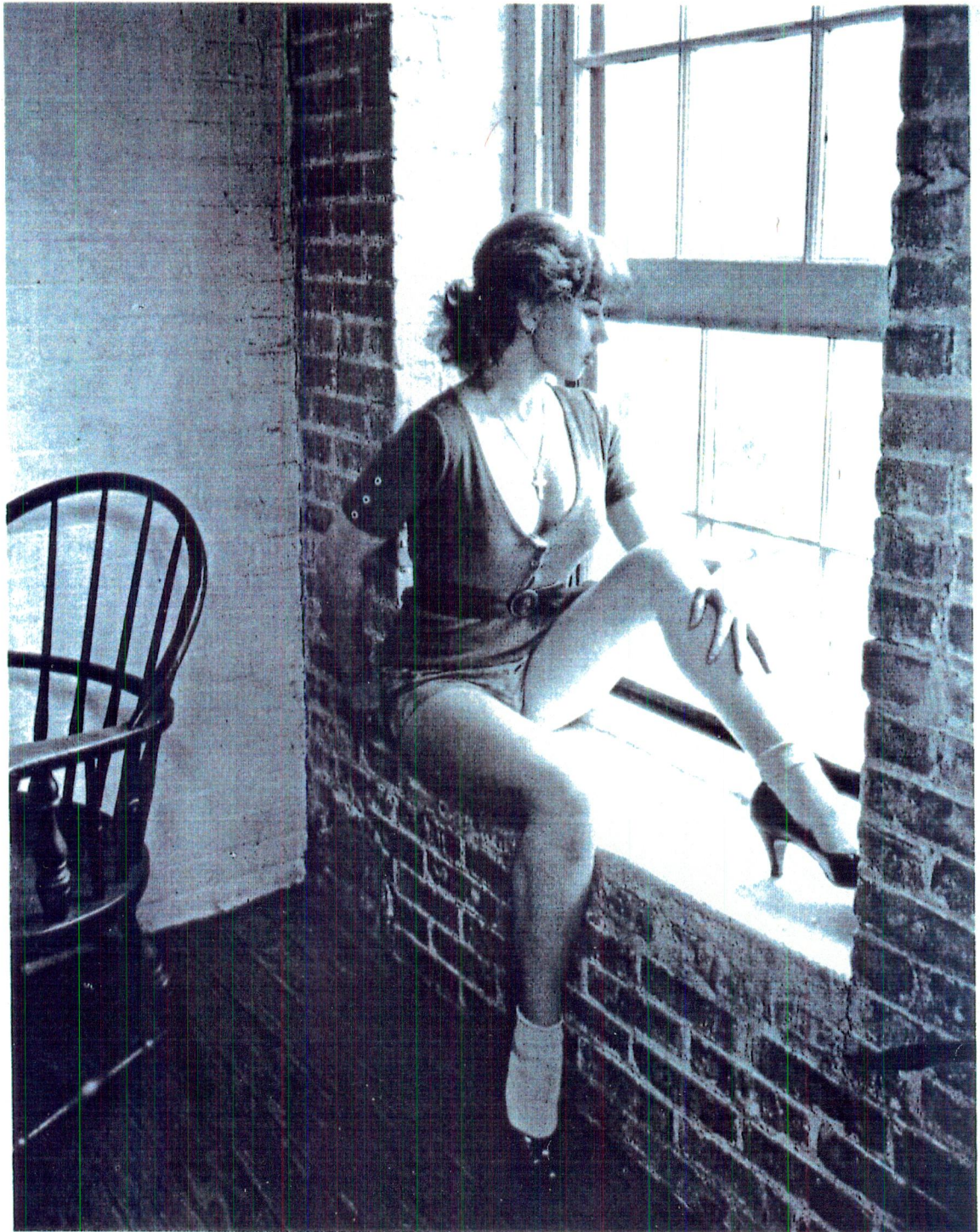
Sherman's "Stills" also question the invasion of women's sexuality in film. In "Untitled Film Still No. 15 1978" [2] the "woman" sits on a windowsill looking away from the camera out the window. She is wearing a revealing top and hot pants. One foot is on the ground, the other raised on the windowsill. Her hands are placed unnaturally, one rests, fingers splayed on her raised leg, the other partially behind her back, forcing her breasts, although covered, to be displayed. She is wearing a large cross on a chain around her neck which highlights her cleavage, making this image incongruous. The intended voyeuristic implications of this picture are obvious. The woman is displayed but does not meet our gaze and so is not available to give us permission to view.

In his article "Sherman and the Anti-Self", Ken Johnson has interpreted her work as being a reflection of her unconscious self. The article was written at the time of the Whitney Retrospective where 129 works were shown chronologically. He maintains that this created an overall narrative in that the progression of her work from the 1940's or 50's film 'stills' to the decomposed bodies, is like the romantic principle that "only through acceptance of the soul's dark side can a person become spiritually whole" (Johnson 1987, P49).

"A mirror, in other words, that exposes the aspects of the self theretofore unacknowledged or denied by consciousness The anti-mirror, in which appears the anti-self, the shadow of ego consciousness which, as Sherman progresses, assumes ever more disturbing, primitive, threatening, and powerful guises."
(Johnson, 1987, P49)

It could be more accurate to assume that Sherman's work is a reflection of the collective unconscious of women against their representation within society. By making the "film stills" Sherman is beginning to expose for women and men the unconscious prejudice within media representation and to raise it to a conscious level.





2. Untitled Film Still No. 15, 1978



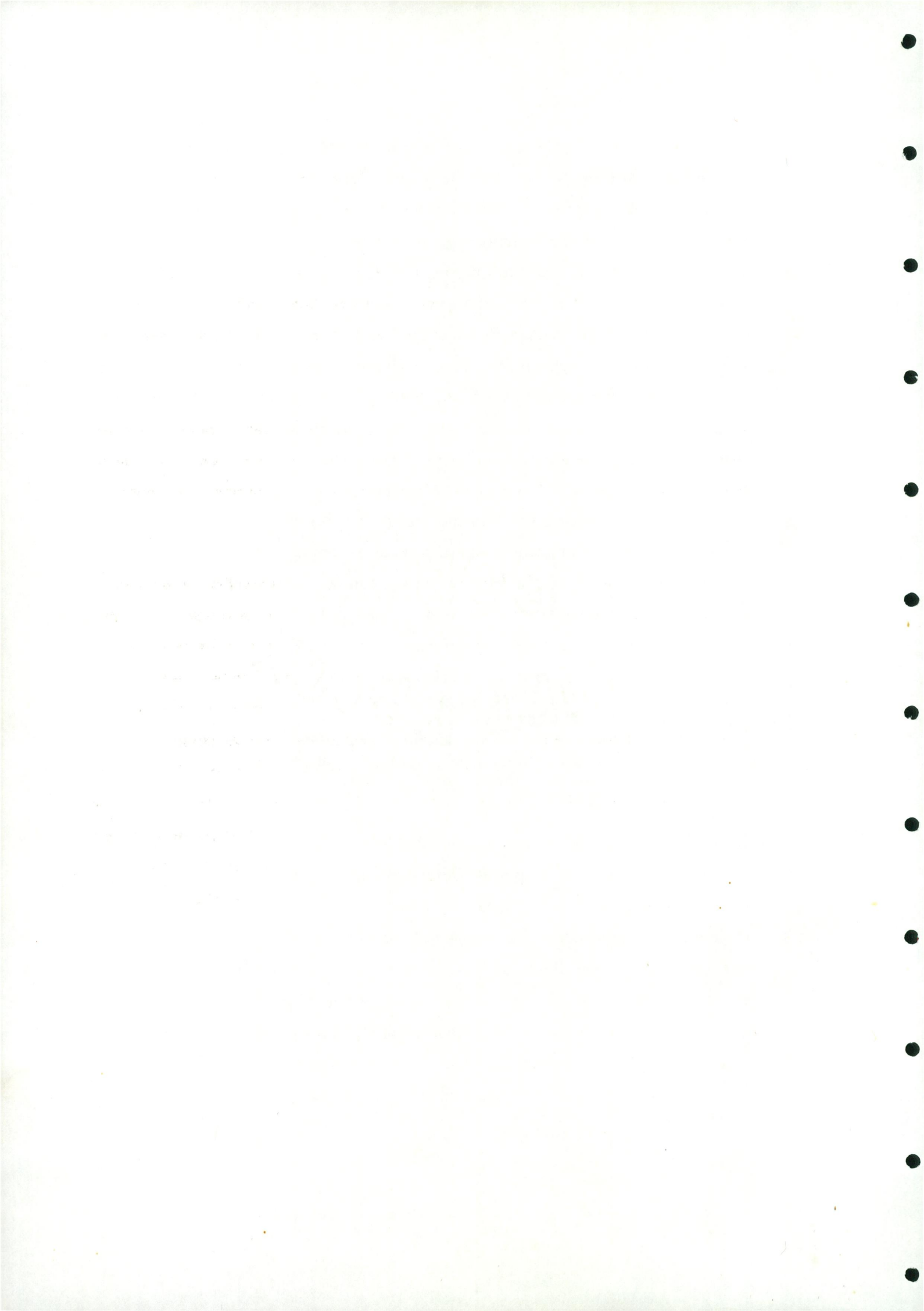
Another area in which woman's presence is questionable is in magazines aimed specifically at men. The centrefold is a very well known phenomenon which appears not just in pornographic magazines (soft or otherwise) but also in motor and bike magazines. It immediately implies an image of a naked or semi-clothed woman in a sexually suggestive pose.

In 1981 Sherman was asked to propose a project for "Artforum" magazine which included a centrefold project. Sherman replicated the nature of the centrefold - the closeness of the camera to the subject and the implied intimacy created by this, and turned it back on the viewer. These pictures are very large and are in colour. Sherman experimented with lighting and spray-on-sweat in addition to an assortment of wigs and clothes. The clothes she chose were contemporary and there was nothing unusual about them. The characters she depicts are young women and teenagers. These pictures are extremely recognisable for what they are. Do we feel embarrassed studying them? They portray women/girls lying or sitting lost maybe in moments of fantasy or daydreaming. These daydreams may not necessarily be of a romantic or sexual nature - although the reference to centrefolds helps us presume this. But most striking about these pictures is the feeling that we have invaded the privacy of the women/girls portrayed.

"I liked the idea of mocking traditional centerfolds, so that's how the format of the oblong rectangle came about. But I wanted to make the viewers embarrassed or disappointed in themselves for having certain expectations upon realizing that they had invaded a poignant or critical personal moment in this character's life".

(Siegel 1988, P275)

In this series Sherman is dealing with the issue of women's identification to the pornographic centrefold or pin-up without resorting to the use of nudity, indeed being unwilling to concern herself with it. Nudity in a centrefold may cause excitement or, in some, embarrassment at the invasion of the privacy of the body but rarely does one think of the invasion of the sensibilities of the mind. Because Sherman's women are clothed, though some of the poses are sensual, we are not stopped by excitement or embarrassment. We then realise that we may be invading the privacy of their thoughts. Sherman's women are caught unaware that they are being viewed, and so we trespass on the privacy of the concealed self.

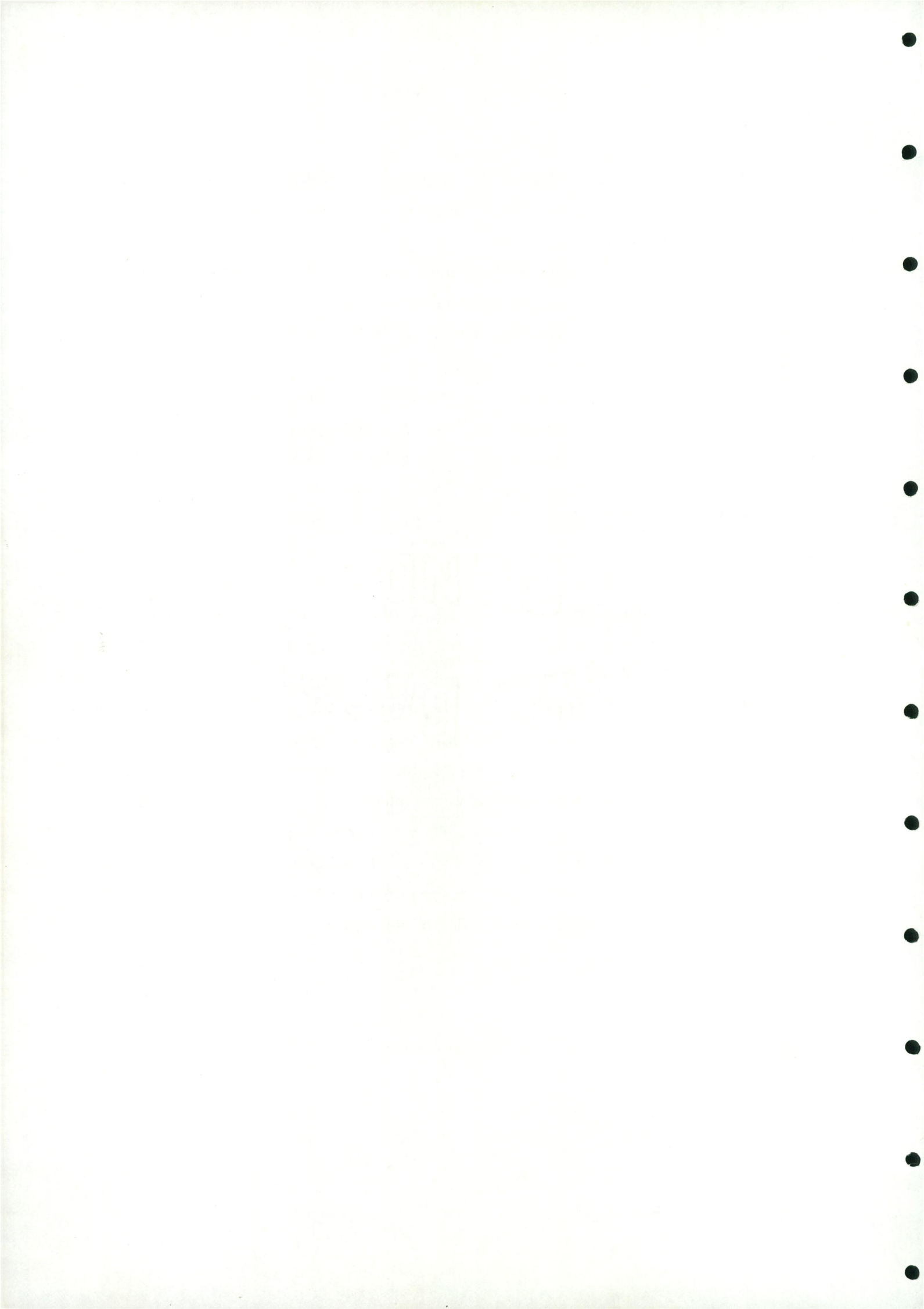


In "Untitled No. 88 1981" [3] The girls eyes are glazed, staring into space. She could be sitting in front of the fire after returning from school. She is apparently unaware of a viewer.

In "Untitled No. 91 1981" [4] the adolescent lies on the bathroom floor one hand back over her head, the other hand messes with her long brown hair. The light is coming in the window, she absent mindedly stares at it. She looks tired, comfortable and alone.

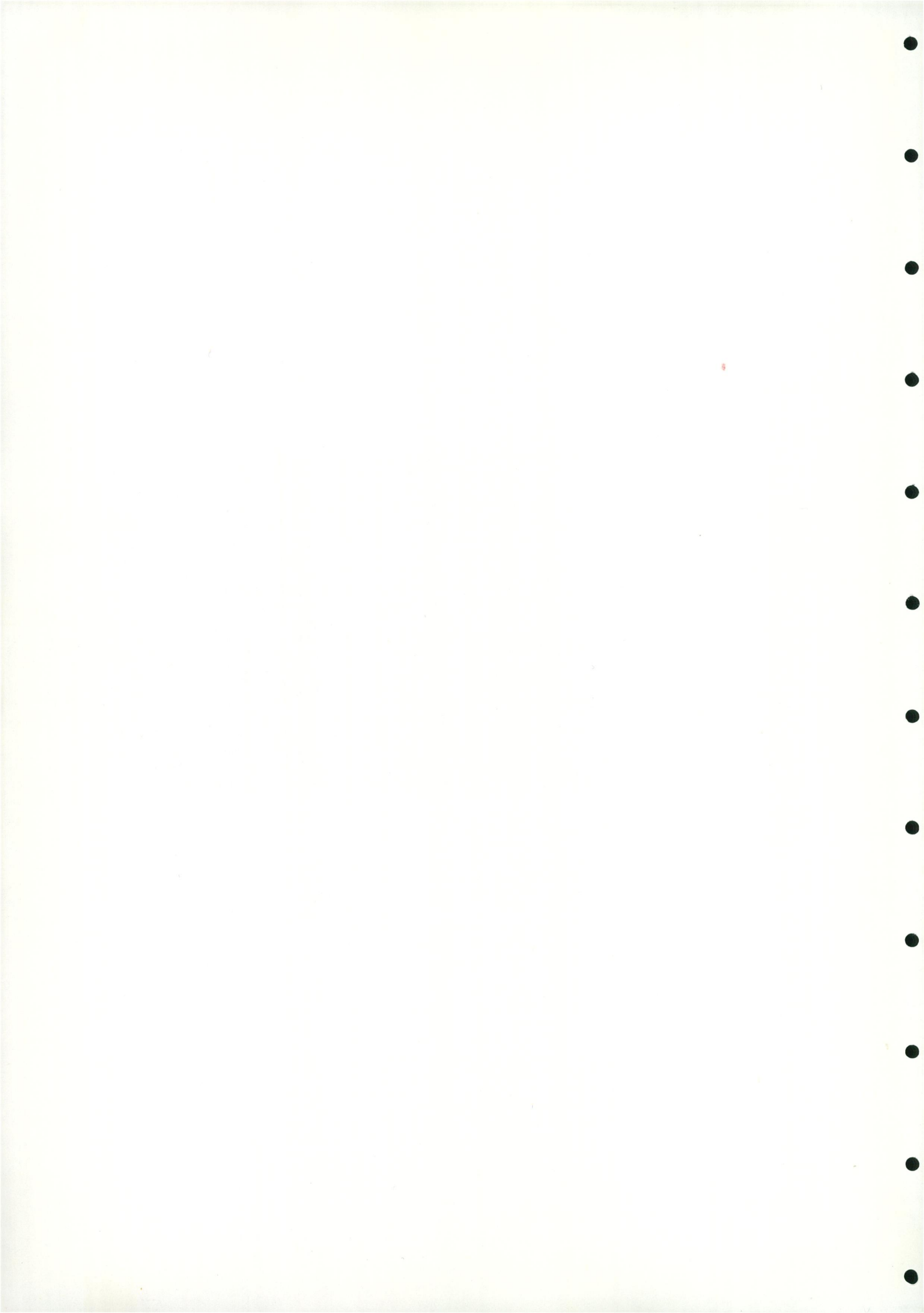
In "Untitled No. 90 1981" [5] a woman lies on a sofa staring at the phone beside her. Her right hand crosses her body and looks poised and ready to lift the receiver to dial or receive a call. This woman is also alone; how many of us let others see our longing to receive a phone call or insecure hesitation to make one?

Sherman in these one-shot performances highlights the passivity of woman in media representations. In the 60's and 70's many artists explored this issue. Carolee Schneemann and Robert Morris who enacted a performance named "Site" in 1964 [6], in which Schneeman took up the pose of Manet's "Olympia" behind 8 ft x 4 ft white boards. Morris during the course of the performance removed the boards one by one to expose her. This highlighted the general passivity of the female model in art. Work such as this at times encountered difficulties in that it so closely resembled what it intended to question that it became indistinguishable from it. Sherman, however, in choosing to change the emphasis from invasion of the body to invasion of the private space succeeds in highlighting the passivity of the centrefold without opening herself to misinterpretation and misunderstanding by the viewer



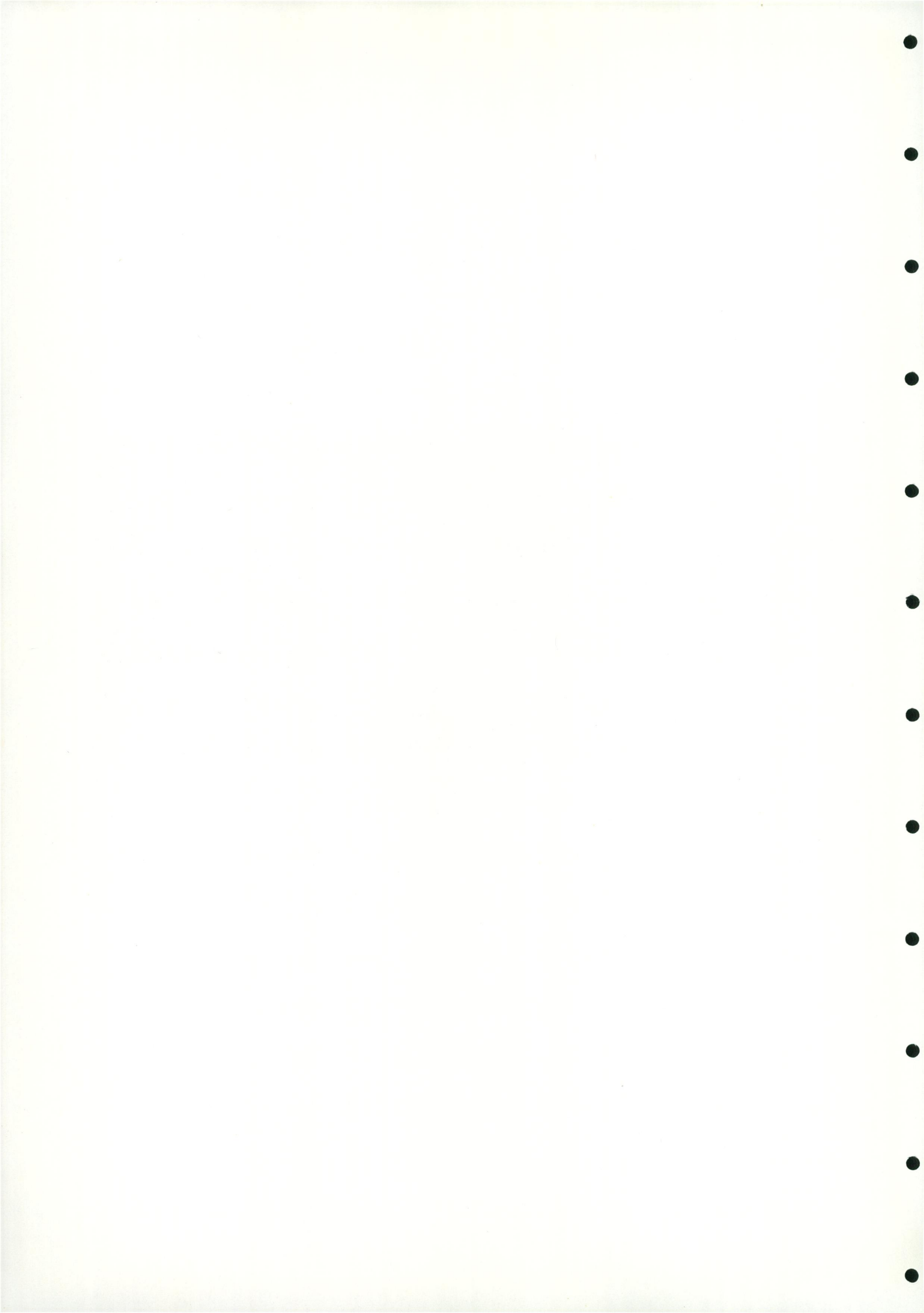


3. Untitled No. 88, 1981



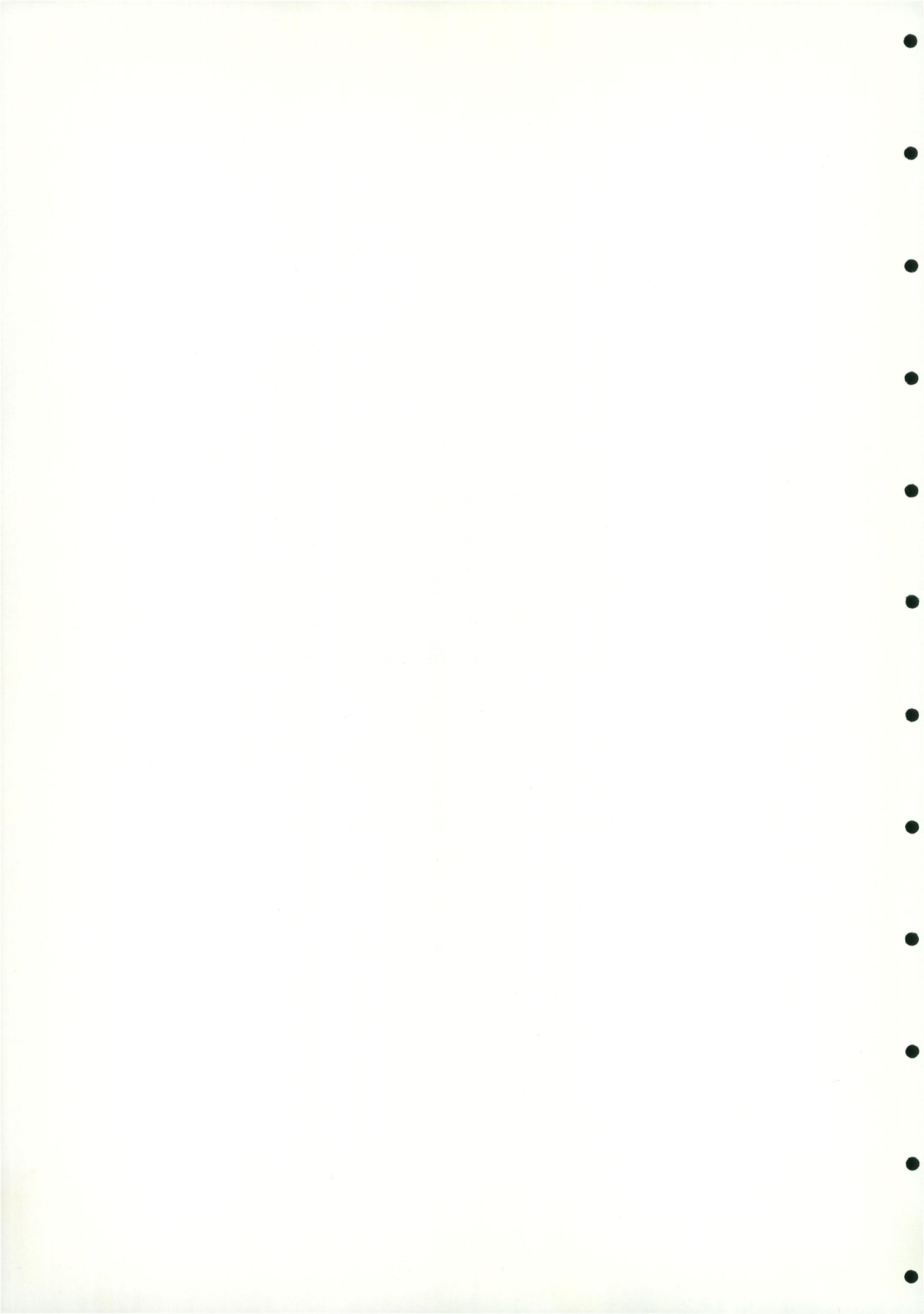


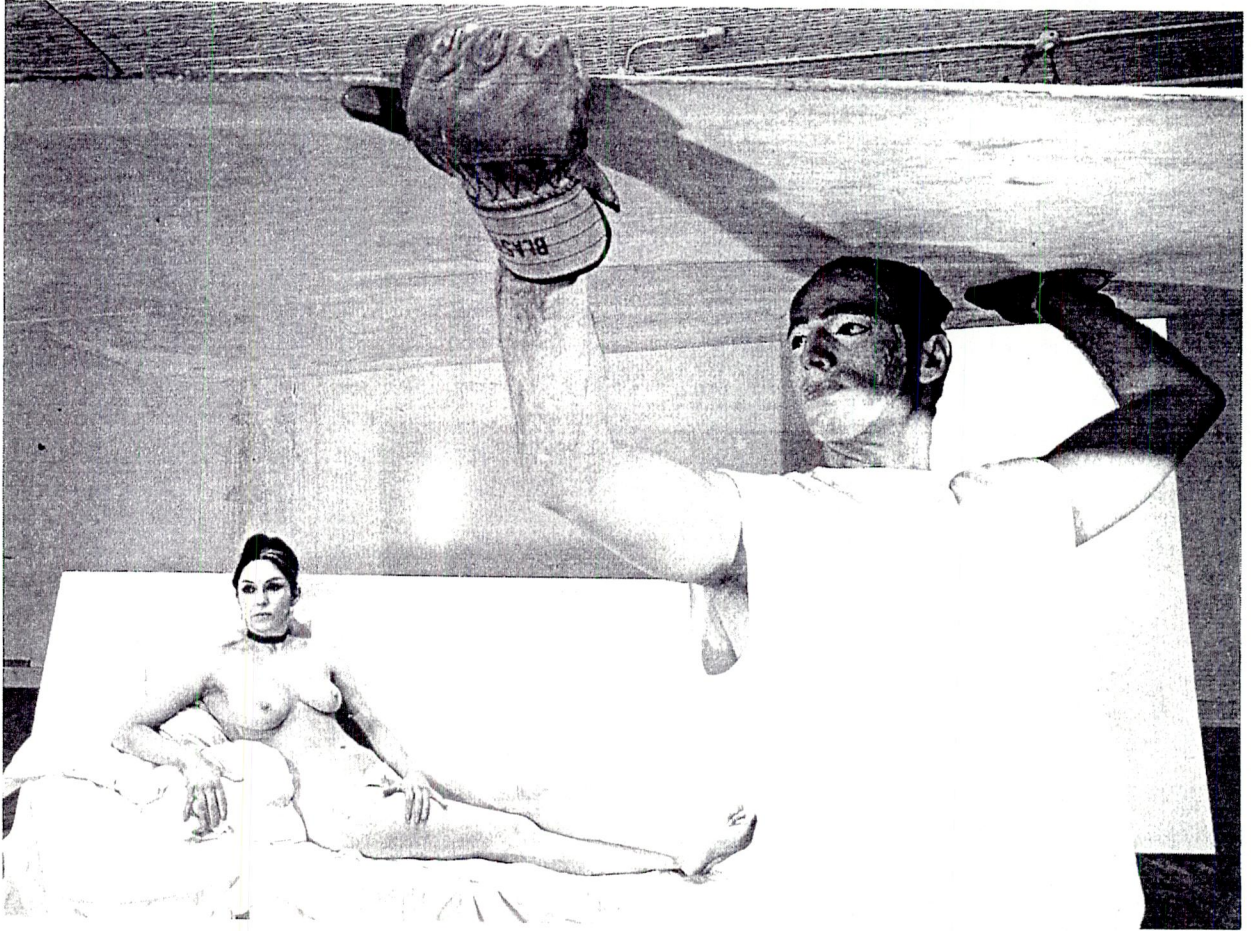
4. Untitled No. 91, 1981



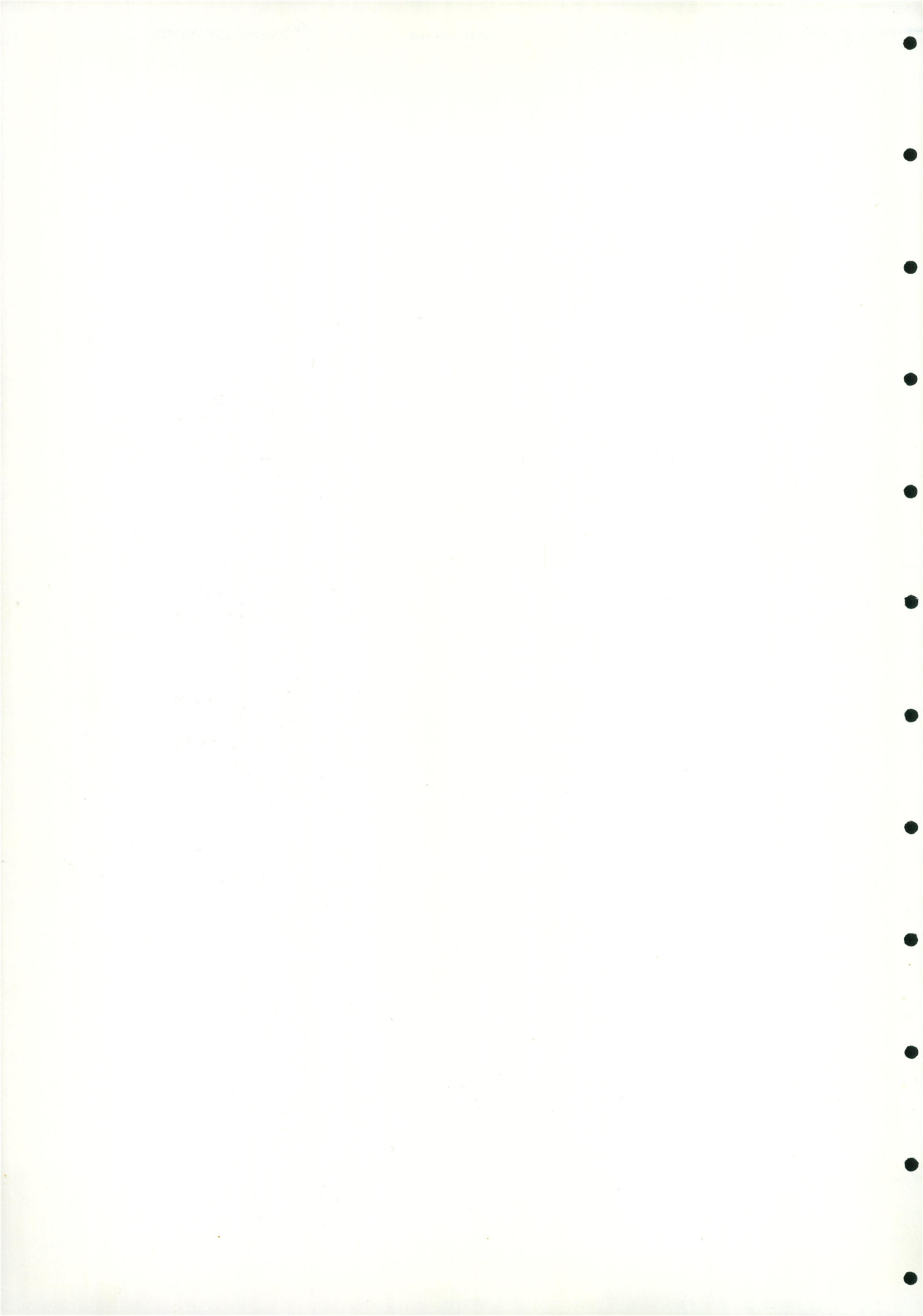


5. Untitled No. 90, 1981





6. Carolee Schneemann and Robert Morris 'Site', 1964



CHAPTER 3

SOCIAL IDENTITY

Between 1981 and 1982 Sherman's work changed from a horizontal format to a vertical one. The subject matter also changed dramatically. She had received criticism from feminist art critics who charged her with perpetuating and feeding the 'male gaze'.

"After reviewing the problems with that work and how people interpreted it, I consciously switched to a vertical format featuring strong, angry characters, women who could have beaten up the other women, or beaten up the men looking at them."

(Siegel 1988, P276)

In this work there is no obvious reference to any specific popular media as source material.

"I wanted to concentrate on how with just holding my body a certain way, or how the light hit me, I could create this different thing. Just me in front of the camera".

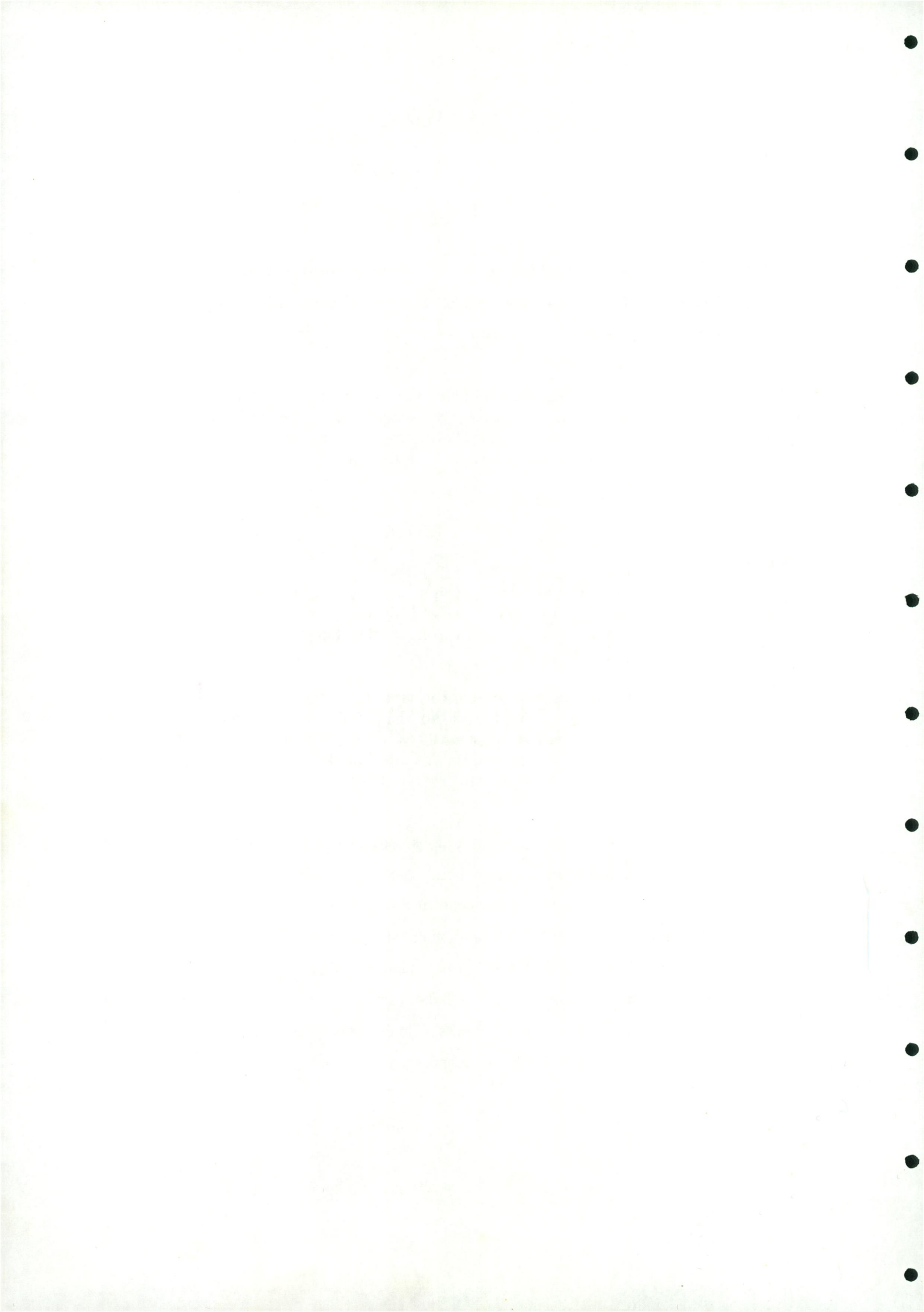
(Marzorati P19, P87).

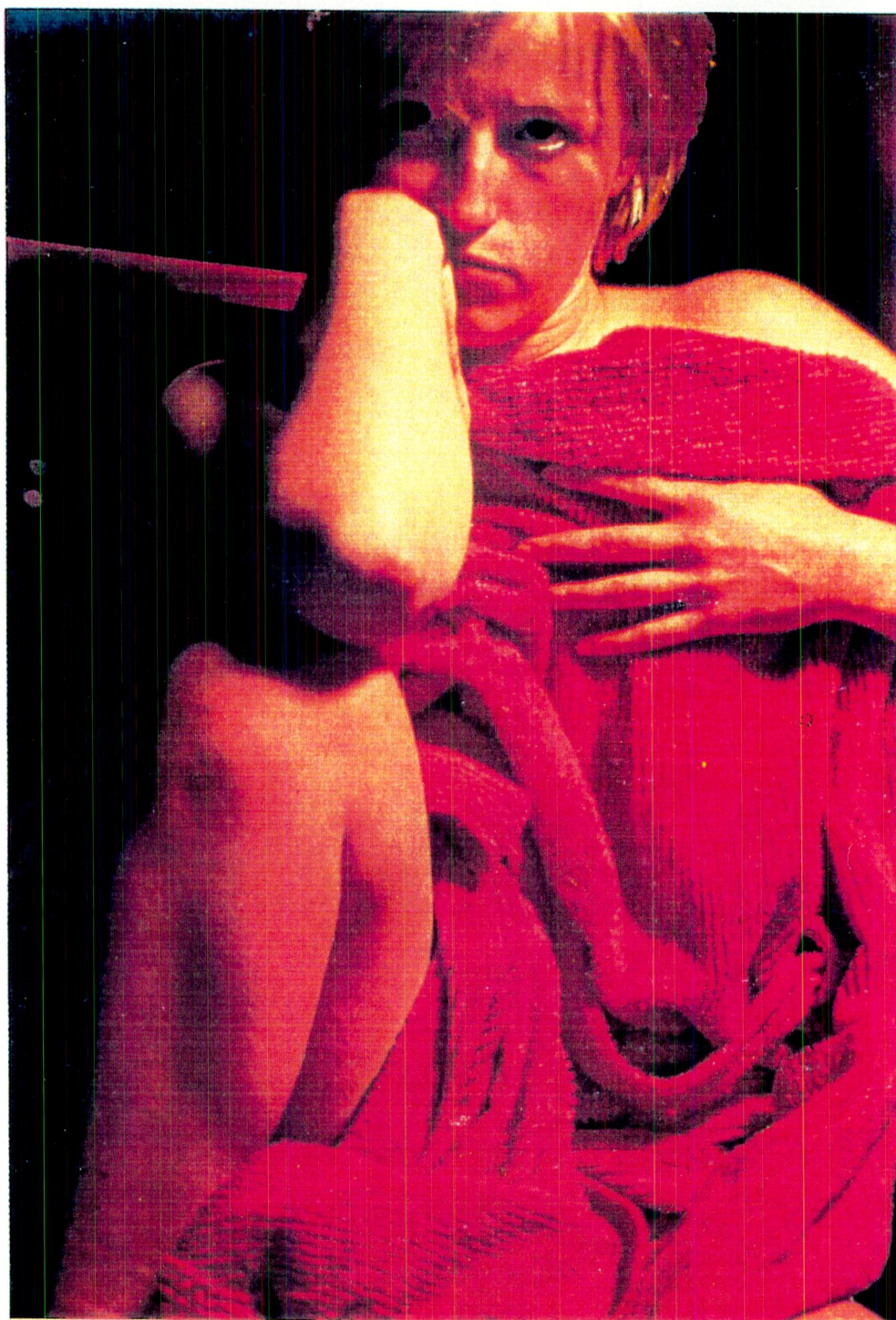
"Maybe working in a bigger format at the time, I became more conscious of trying to fill up the whole space with visual detail but I wasn't consciously working in terms of patterns or textures. I was trying to make the body a part of the landscape, to blend in with everything else".

(Siegel, 1988, P277)

Perhaps for the first time we become conscious of her gaze engaging with us, the viewer of the picture, rather than with someone within her space. In the 'red robe' pictures we can see a progression of thought and action.

In "Untitled no. 97 1982" [7]; a woman sits with one leg raised and her arm resting on her knee, and her chin on her hand. Her other hand holds up the robe to cover herself. She appears to be naked under the gown. The lighting is dim and the background fades to blackness. The woman fills the image. She stares at us with a sullen face. Have we trespassed? She looks defensive.





7. Untitled No. 97, 1982

1. The first part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions. It emphasizes that this is essential for the proper management of the organization's finances and for ensuring compliance with applicable laws and regulations.

2. The second part of the document outlines the specific procedures that should be followed when recording transactions. This includes the use of standardized forms and the requirement that all entries be supported by appropriate documentation.

3. The third part of the document addresses the issue of internal controls. It stresses that a robust system of internal controls is necessary to prevent errors and fraud, and to ensure the integrity of the financial reporting process.

4. The fourth part of the document discusses the role of the audit function. It explains that the audit team is responsible for providing an independent and objective assessment of the organization's financial statements and internal controls. This assessment is crucial for the confidence of investors and other stakeholders.

5. The fifth part of the document outlines the requirements for the preparation and presentation of financial statements. It details the specific information that must be included in these statements and the standards that must be followed in their preparation.

6. The sixth part of the document discusses the importance of transparency and disclosure. It emphasizes that the organization must provide clear and concise information about its financial performance and the risks it faces. This is essential for the informed decision-making of investors and other stakeholders.

7. The seventh part of the document addresses the issue of risk management. It explains that the organization must identify, assess, and manage the risks that could affect its ability to achieve its strategic objectives. This is a key component of the organization's overall risk management framework.

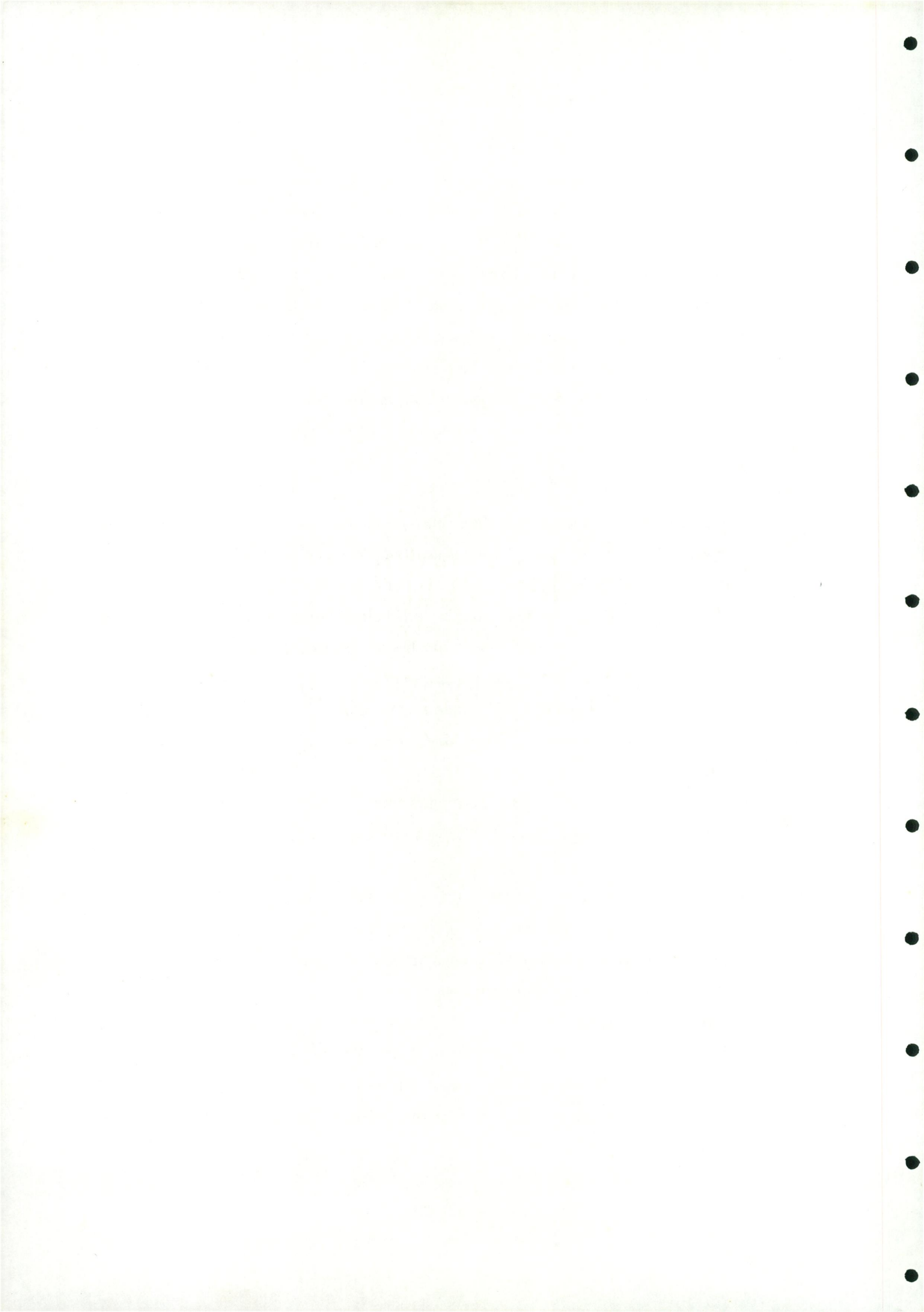
8. The eighth part of the document discusses the importance of continuous improvement. It emphasizes that the organization must regularly review and update its financial reporting and internal control processes to ensure they remain effective and relevant in a changing business environment.

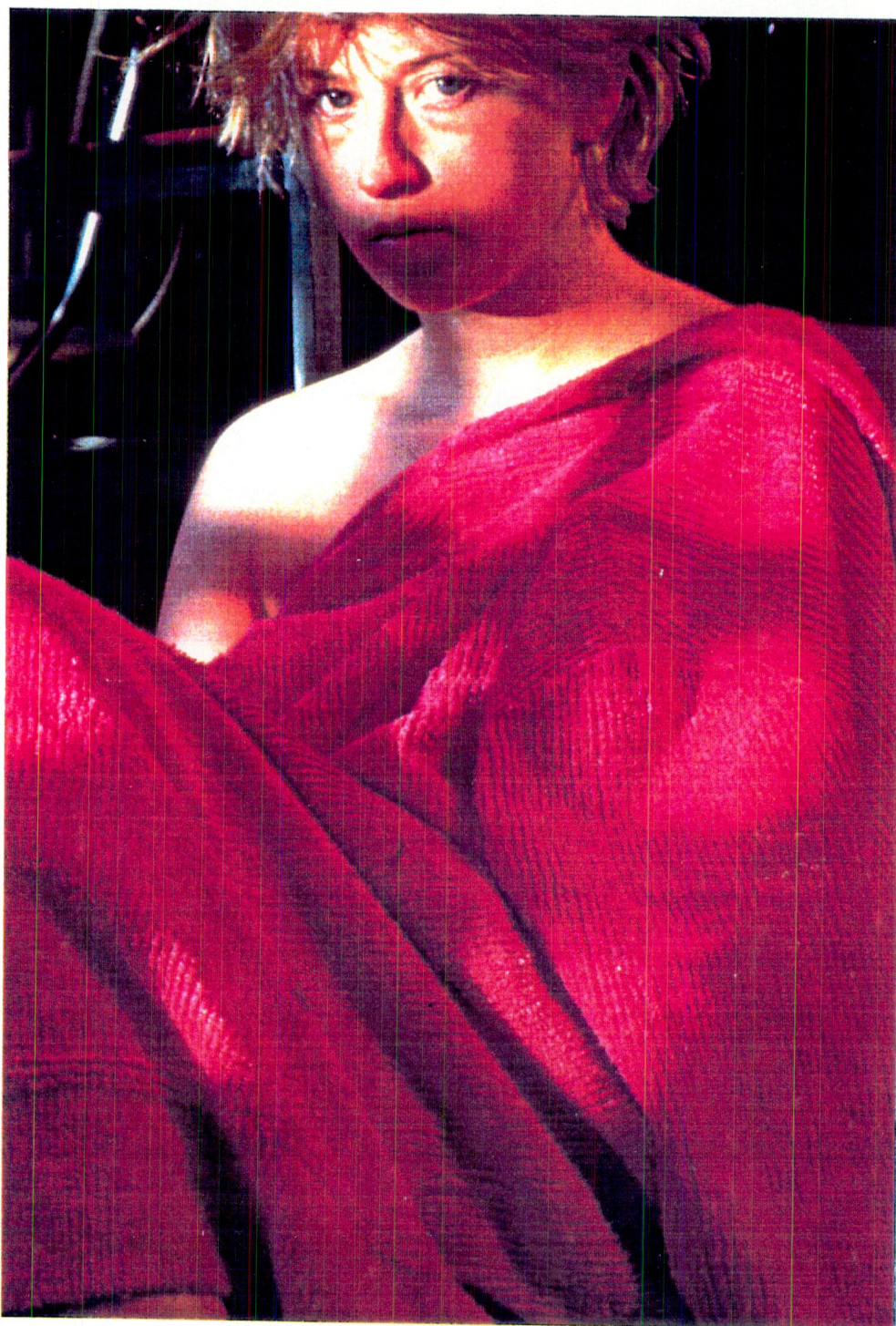
9. The ninth part of the document outlines the responsibilities of the board of directors and senior management. It stresses that they are ultimately responsible for the accuracy and integrity of the organization's financial reporting and for ensuring that the organization complies with all applicable laws and regulations.

In "Untitled no. 98 1982" [8] another woman meets our gaze, she has changed position and expression slightly. The robe still covers her but she no longer holds it defensively. In "Untitled no. 99 1982" [9] the woman once again holds up the gown and catches our eye with a challenging, puzzled look in her eyes. The image is more disjointed and darker than the last; the woman's left shoulder merges with the darkness of the background cutting her arm off just above the elbow. Finally in "Untitled no. 100 1982" [10], the image is nearly completely dark; the woman is wearing the gown; she is crouched with one hand raised; we can see half of her face and may imagine that her eye is looking challengingly at us.

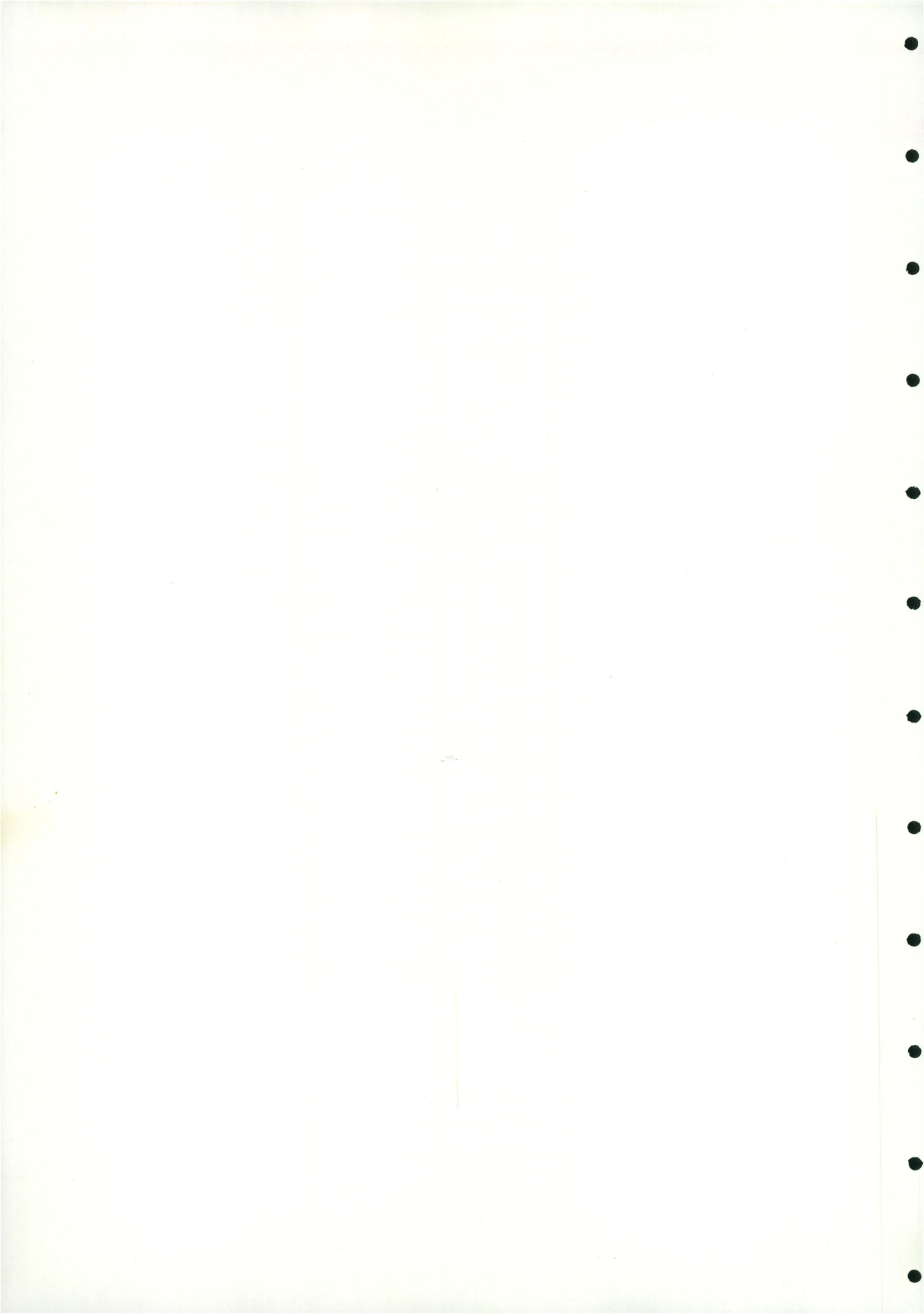
Has Sherman intended to introduce into popular culture a real facet of woman where it rarely exists? Many women artists have made work which has portrayed women in social realist positions. The American photographer, Mary Ellen Mark [11], took photographs of real women and their children in an attempt to exhibit the realities of women's position in the home and on the streets. This work is of social importance as it brings awareness of and exposes inequalities of gender and power in society. Sherman's work is not documentary. The very fact that she is the model confirms that these are not carefully searched for character-studies of real women. This is not to say that Sherman's work does not deal seriously with issues regarding women. The strength of her work is in the ambiguity of it, as it demands the viewer's exploration.

This work was certainly the beginning of a change in Sherman's work and her treatment of the female image. The women in the photographs are more assertively challenging, may be even aggressive toward the viewer. The viewer seems no longer to be within their space; somebody apart from the photographer. For the first time we the viewer of the image are the ones with whom she is actively engaging. How do we react to this? We are faced with large images of women, women who are in an ambiguous space - part private, part public. Although the women are aware of our presence they certainly have not put on a face of beauty for us.



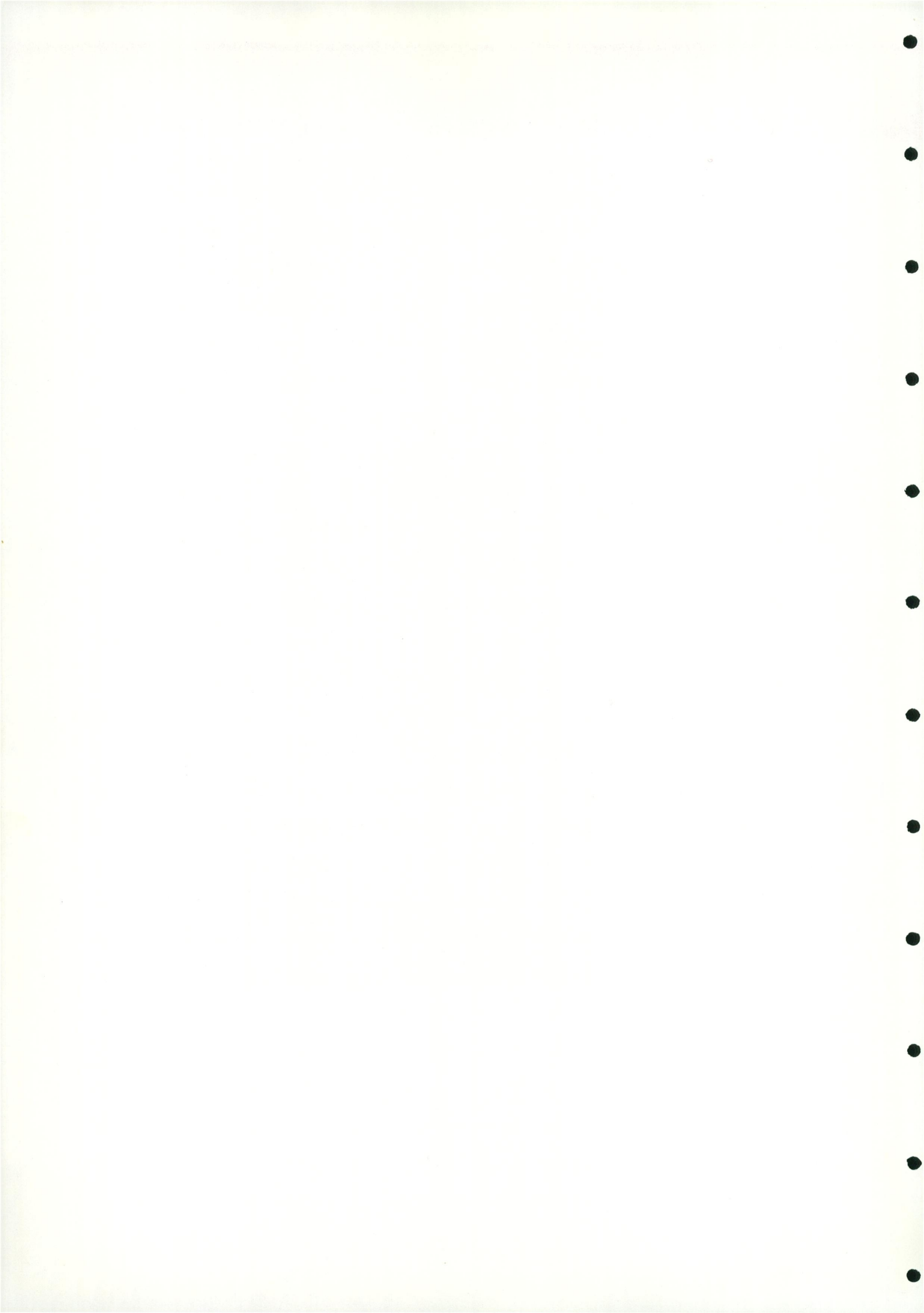


8. Untitled No. 98, 1982



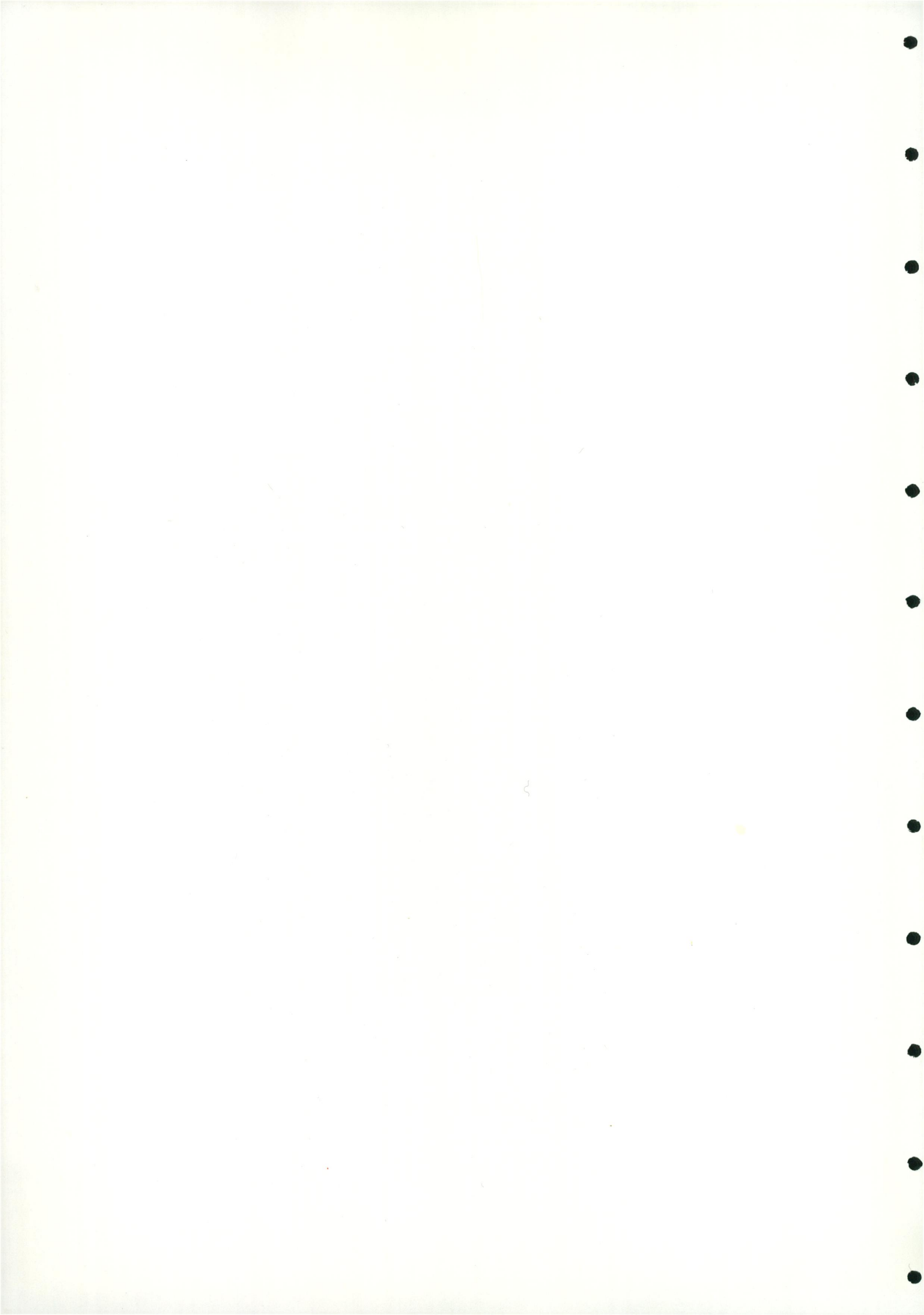


9. Untitled No. 99, 1982





10. Untitled No. 100, 1982





11. Mary Ellen Mark "Tiny", 1983



"That's when I got tired of using makeup and wigs in the same way, and I started messing up the wigs, and using makeup to give circles under my eyes or five o'clock shadows, or hair on my face - to get uglier".
(Siegel 1988, P276)

Sherman may be encouraging us to contemplate the emphasis placed on the 'necessity' to be beautiful and feminine which is forced upon women in today's society. Many of these images even cross the boundaries between masculine and feminine (Untitled No 112, 1982) [12].

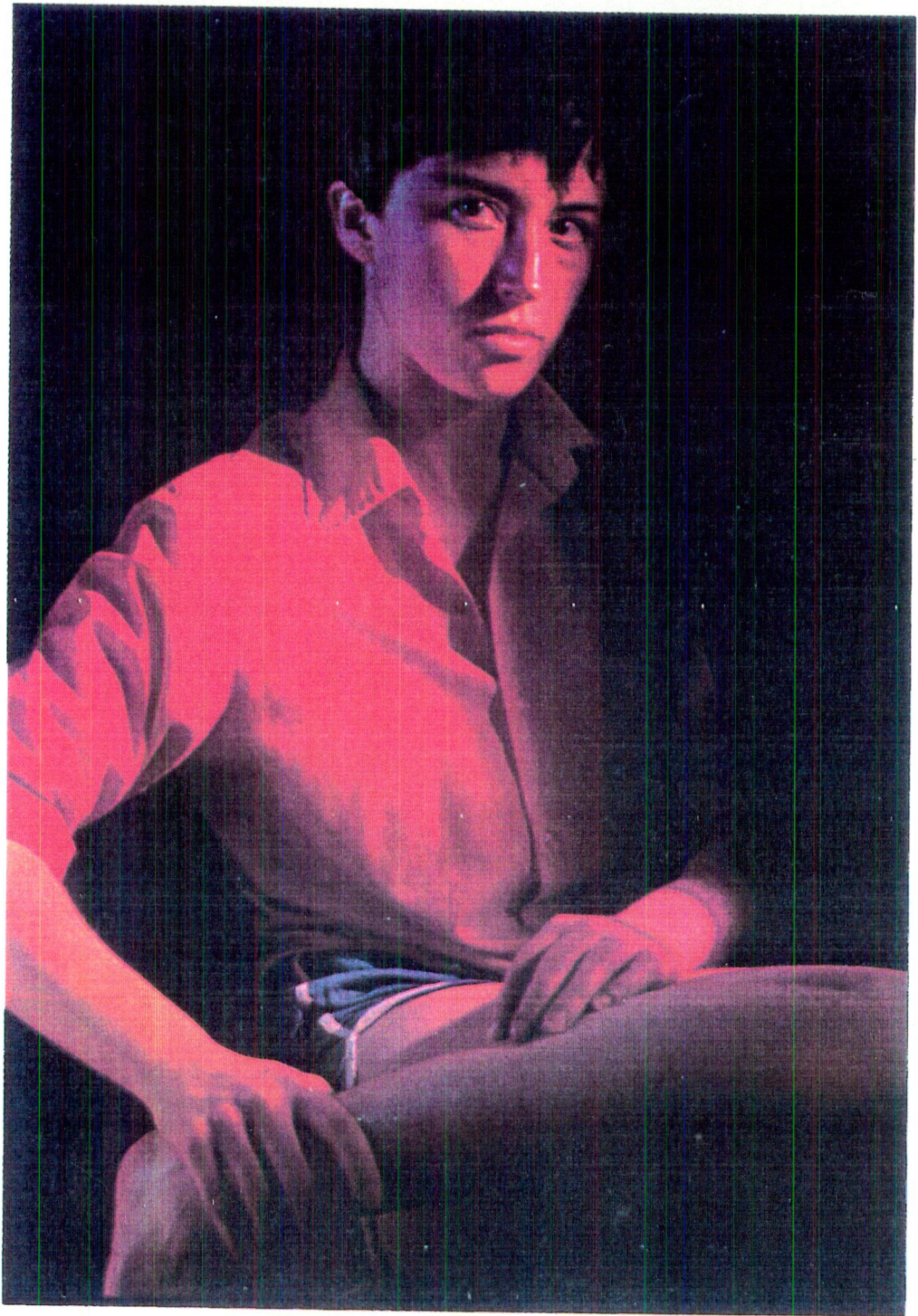
Fashion advertising is based on a desire or need to appear beautiful which encourages a passive role for the female; as Gambrell pointed out "inaccessibility is a prime ingredient of successful high-fashion ads"; the adverts force the female into a passive sexual narcissism; "Sex - on the level of innuendo, never explicit, always anticipatory, promising intimacy but never delivering - has probably sold more clothes than intimations of wealth and status combined". (Gambrell 1984, P115)

Perhaps Sherman wishes to introduce her viewers to the notion that adverts are an absurdly inaccessible construct by a patriarchal culture invented to preoccupy and to mould its female population into becoming purely objects of desire.

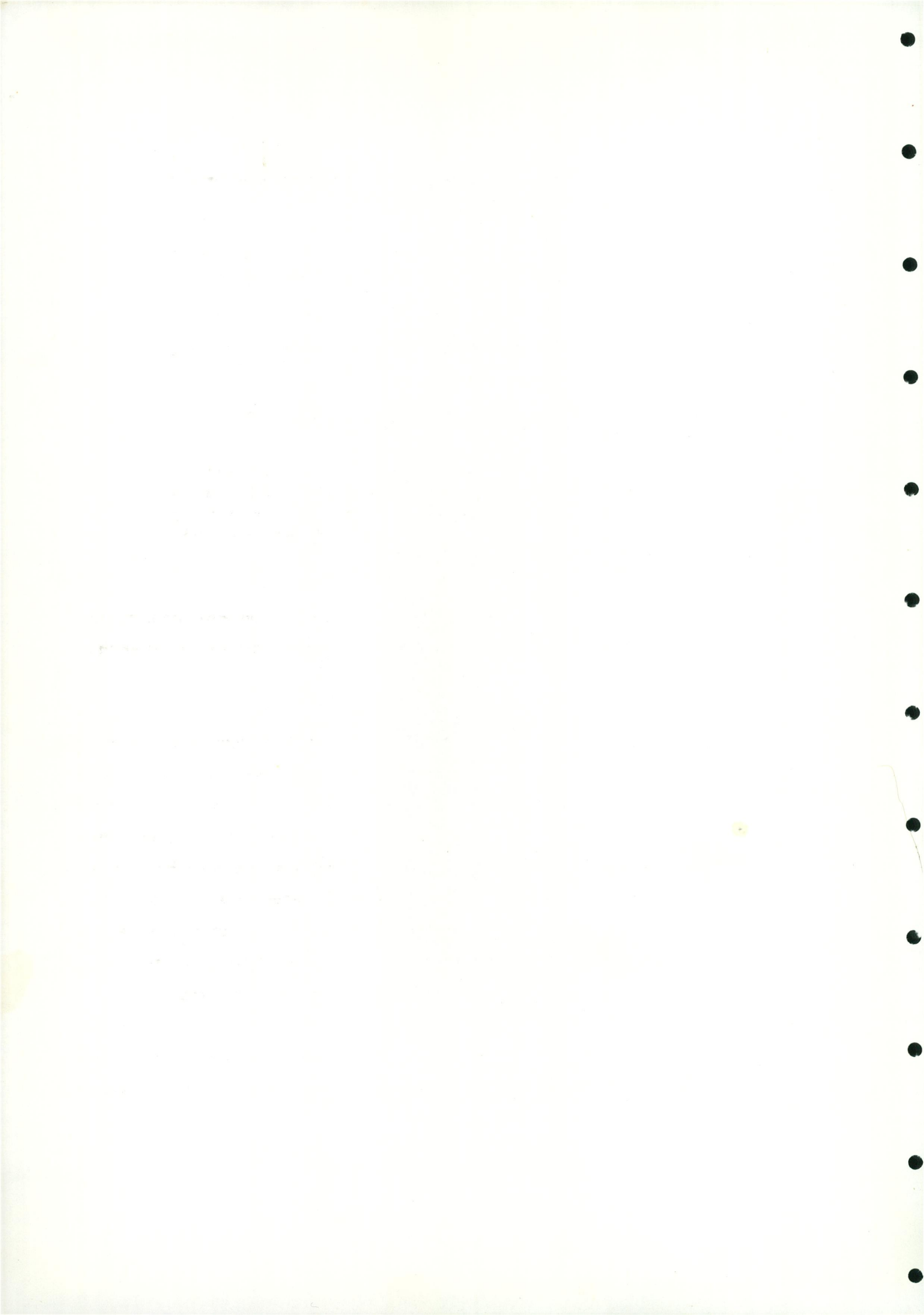
"While the direct purposes of these images is to sell products and services by playing upon their (claimed) abilities to fill our supposed needs, they indirectly sell us ideas and beliefs. They may be laughable fantasies, but images in the media mask, or make acceptable, the underlying inequalities of power."
(Nairne 1987, P127)

In 1983 Sherman was asked to make a series of photographs for the Dianne Benson boutique in New York. She was given a selection of clothes to work with. These were designer clothes, tailored for those who could afford an eccentric but not necessarily serviceable wardrobe.





12. Untitled No. 112, 1982



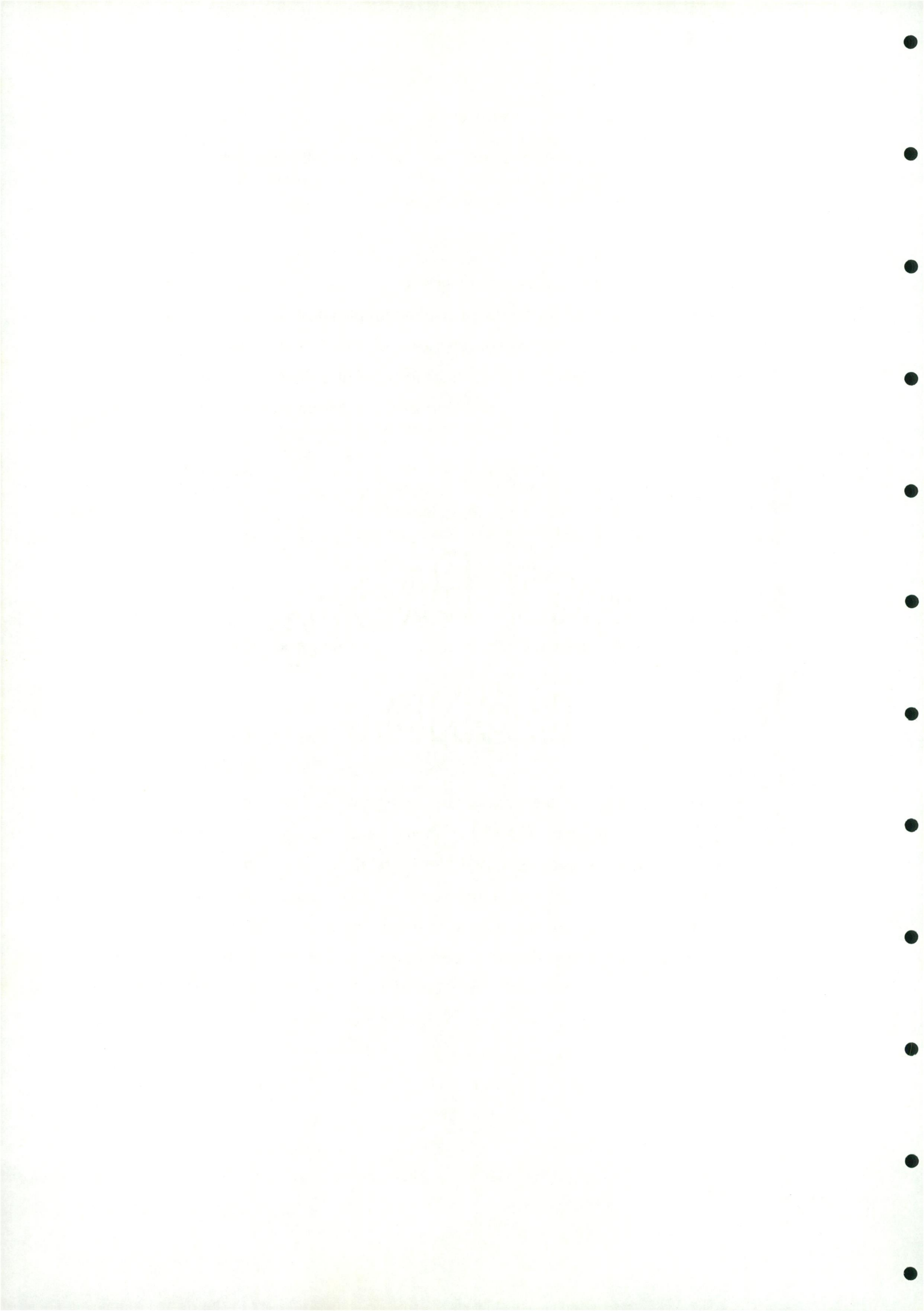
"They were really weird clothes that were fun and inspiring, but also very powerful on their own terms - overwhelming in fact. To balance them, I started making the characters as bizarre as the costumes so that they would fit together and neither would overshadow the other."
(Siegel 1988, P277)

The result is a series of humorous and indeed bizarre images of women which are like scenes from an amateur dramatics society. The images do resemble the fashion photograph, in so far as each photograph constructs a mood or scenario around the items of clothing or the look of the clothes, displaying its affect and the feeling it might induce on the buyer. But unlike the fashion model, the 'models' are not the poised, confident, sexy, beautiful models of usual fashion photographs.

"I wasn't modelling, I didn't care about that. I wanted to block out what the clothes were meant to be. And I wanted to get beyond what they looked like on me. I wanted to get rid of the idea that these clothes could make me look beautiful".
(Marzorati 1983, P81)

Sherman has thus subverted the mainstay of original fashion advertisements in that she has made images which demonstrate that the product does not create the beauty.

In "Untitled No. 131, 1983" [13] the "model" stands in front of a flowered drape. She is wearing an all in one strapless satin body suit which has concentric stitching on the breasts and lacing on the front and on the legs; she clasps her hands in front of her; her shoulders are hunched. She looks out past us with a vacant stare; her mouth looks as if she is saying something or is trying to pout. The points of the breast part are pushed in as they don't fit her. The atmosphere of the picture is one of coyness. The woman looks as if she is attempting to be someone she cannot be. It is ultimately a disturbing image for we realise that she knows she doesn't live up to the ideal. Perhaps the primary message is that women can not generally live up to the standards set by the fashion and advertising industries. Sherman mocks the fashion stereotype by placing vulnerable and bizarre characters into explicitly staged scenarios where the viewer is aware of the staging.





13. Untitled No. 131, 1983

1. The first part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions.

2. It is essential to ensure that all entries are dated and clearly describe the nature of the transaction.

3. Regularly reconciling the accounts helps to identify any discrepancies or errors early on.

4. Keeping receipts and supporting documents for each entry provides a clear audit trail.

5. The second part of the document outlines the various methods used to collect and analyze data.

6. These methods include surveys, interviews, and the use of specialized software tools.

7. Each method has its own strengths and limitations, and the choice depends on the specific research objectives.

8. It is important to select the most appropriate method to ensure the reliability and validity of the results.

9. The final part of the document provides a summary of the key findings and conclusions.

10. These findings highlight the need for continued research and innovation in the field.

11. The document concludes by emphasizing the importance of transparency and ethical practices in all research activities.

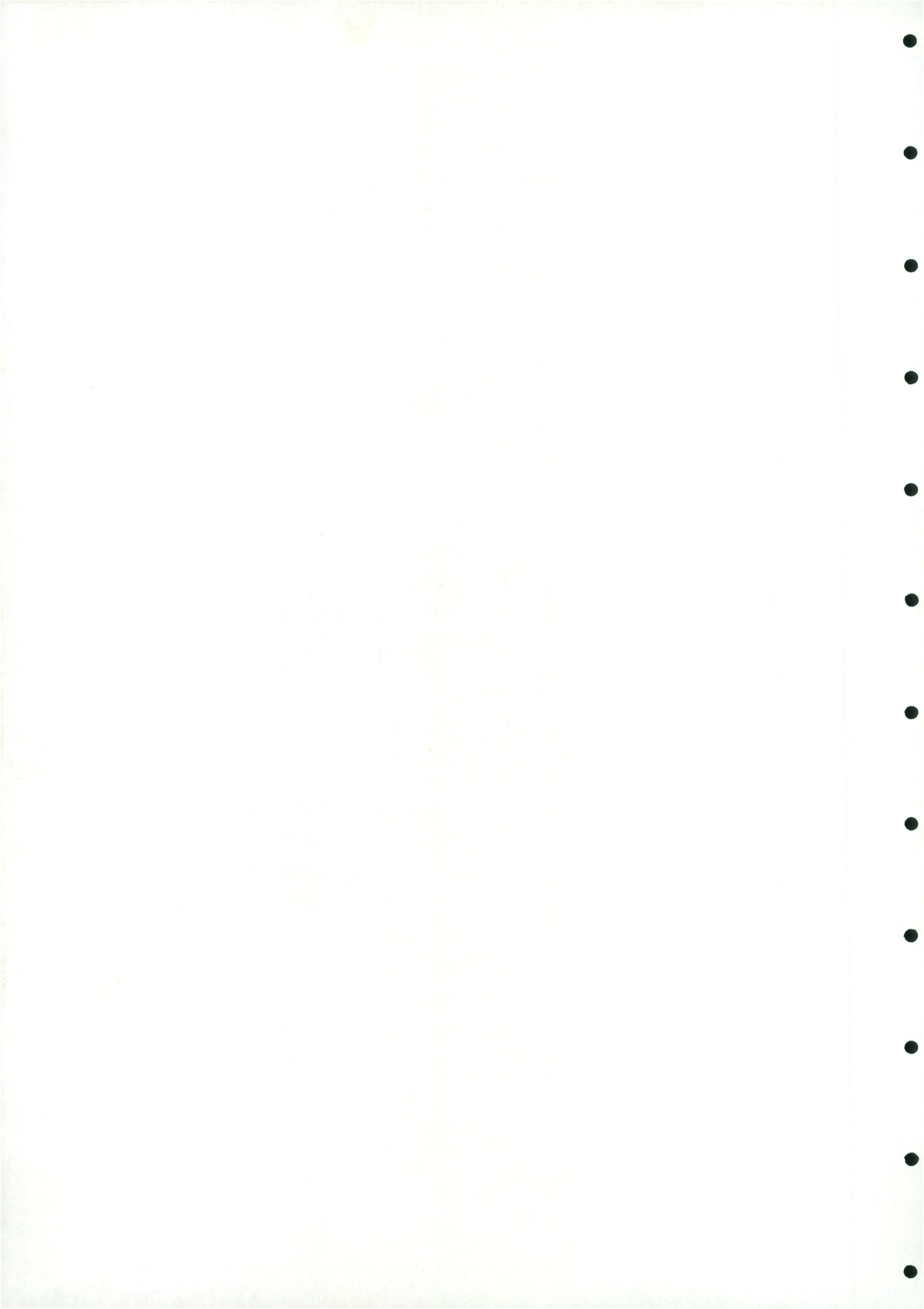
12. Overall, the document serves as a comprehensive guide for anyone involved in data collection and analysis.

Because of the nature of Sherman's work not all the images can be read as statements on fashion adverts. Each image stands separately; creating its own mystery. Each image in this body of work especially is a strong image; strong in colour, content and composition. "Untitled no. 122, 1983" [14] is unforgettable; a woman stands against a white wall casting a shadow on to the wall. She is positioned in the centre of the picture, her head and feet are cropped, she resembles a "pillar of rage". She is wearing a classic dark business suit; her arms are held straight by her side and her hands are clenched into fists; her face is concealed by tangled platinum hair, all that is revealed of her face is one furious red eye. The shadow cast on the wall adds a malevolence to the image as it is like a demonic shadow of her psyche which is ready to back her up.

In 1984 Sherman was asked by a French designer to repeat what she had done for Dianne B, the previous year, for 'Vogue' but,

"I wanted to go on to something new, and since they were going to use these pictures for Paris Vogue, I wanted the work to look really ugly. The clothes were boring and not the ones I had asked to use so I thought I'll just go all out and get really wild"
(Siegel 1988, P277)

The images she produced are startling and macabre; she makes no attempt to flatter the clothes. Sherman's intention was to mock the poses of Vogue models by subverting them. She has now entered into the realm of the aesthetics of ugliness. Not surprisingly the pictures were not accepted by Vogue and she had to do another set of less insulting pictures. If fashion advertising sells hope and desire; Sherman's images indicate fear and the acceptance of ugliness. They highlight the fact that clothes do not "make the woman". Although this creates an element of irony because of the way in which Sherman works - the clothes and make-up induce the personality for her. There being no narrative, one is free to build one's own, and the narratives these pictures present are far from the ones which the fashion industry would like to evoke. Sherman is playing with the beauty industry of 80's America.

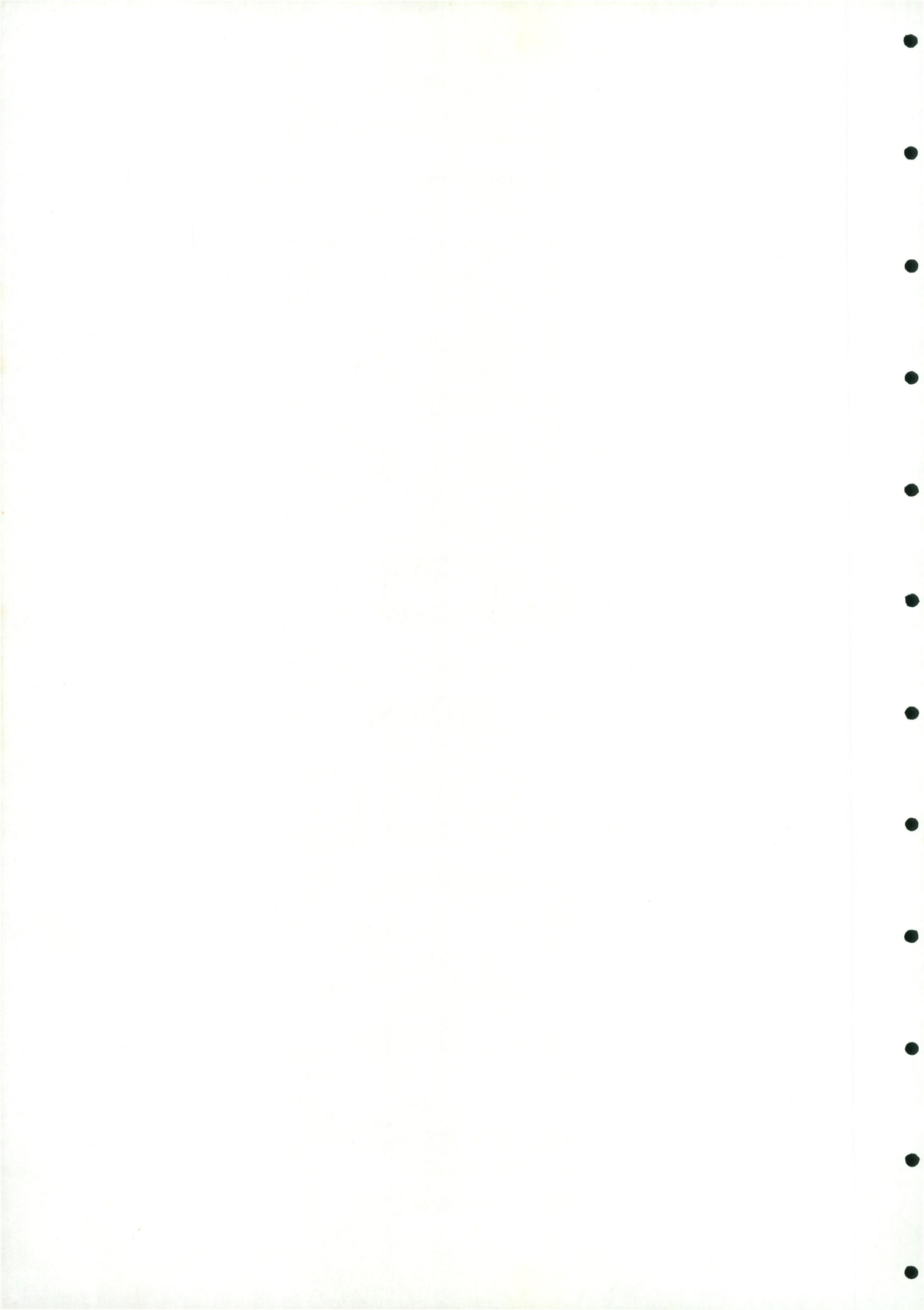




14. Untitled No. 122, 1983



In "Untitled no. 138 1984" [15] a woman, wearing a long striped lime green and black dress with tie to match sits open legged on a plastic chair. She is wearing a grey/green wig and almost lecherous grin. Her hands are upturned on her knees and the tops of her fingers appear to be coated in blood. Sherman has borrowed this often-used pose - the open legged, confidently smiling suggestive seated pose - and made it into a nightmare. These photographs are frightening and the element which increases this fright is the strong insinuation of the link between violence and sex combined with a suggestion of mental illness.





15. Untitled No. 138, 1984



CHAPTER 4

PLASTICITY, DISINTEGRATION AND DESIRE

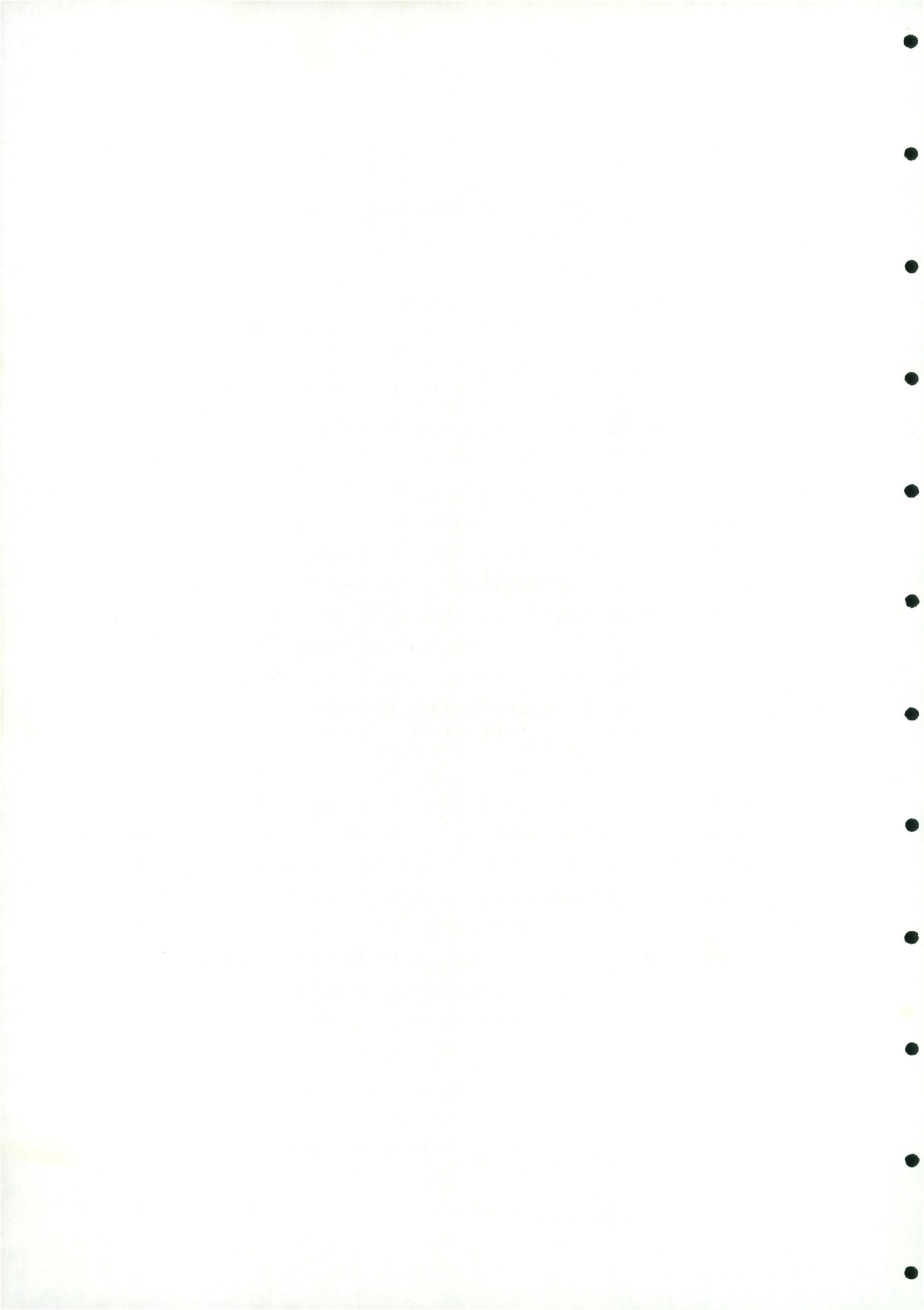
"It is not so that the world is beautiful. "Beauty" long obsolete ferment of classical value matrices, has palled; the 'world' is different, bad, unadulterated nightmare When beauty palls reality fills the void: mold, violence, decay, disintegration, and even faeces are, ambiguously, a 'fact'..... Cindy Sherman has always loved stories that turn out badly, since her kindergarten days".
(Bryson 1991, P80)

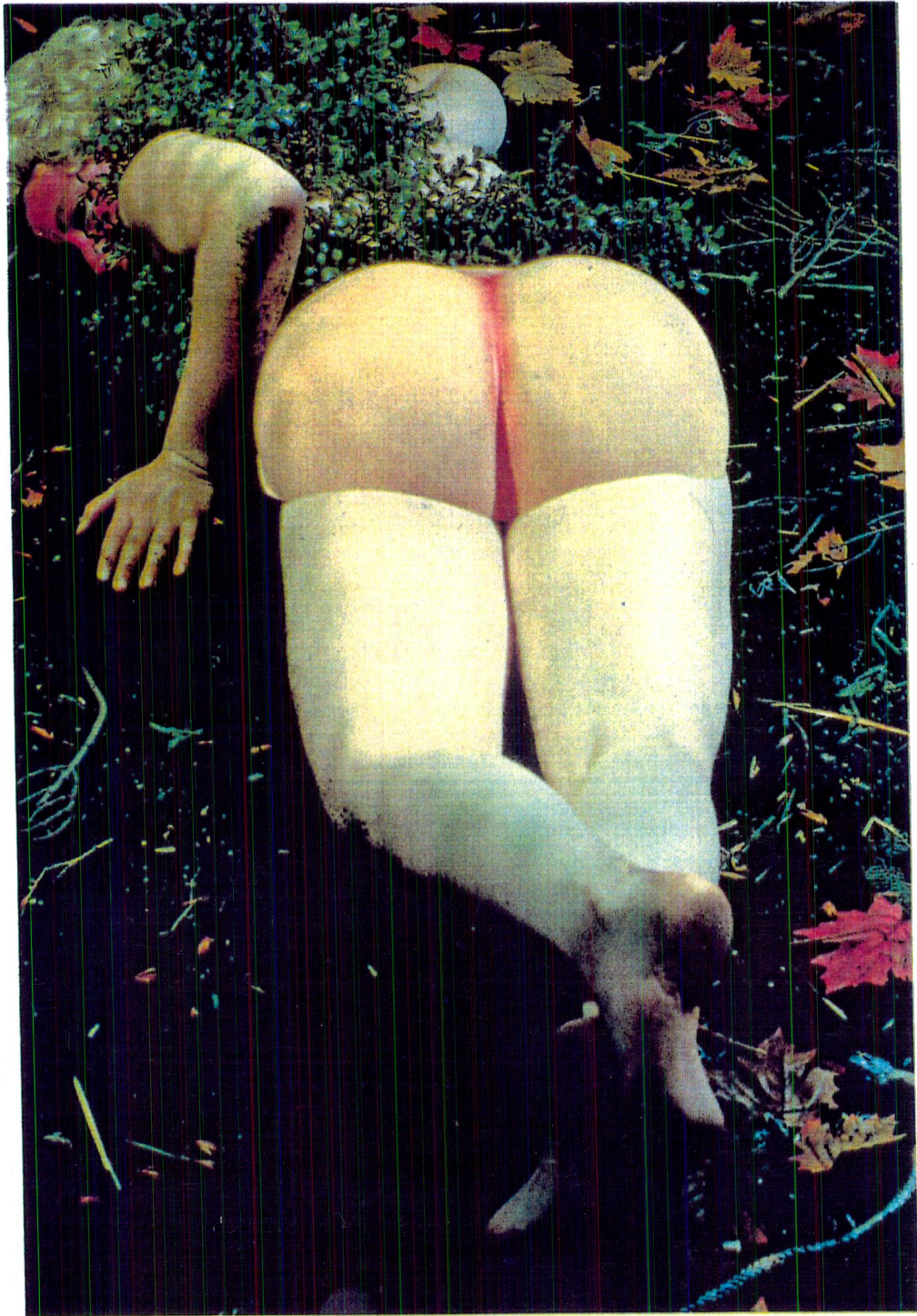
In 1985 "Vanity Fair" suggested that Sherman illustrate a fairy tale for the magazine. The work that resulted from and proceeded this is a continuation in the development and direction that her work had taken in the Vogue pictures. Gone are the subtle but poignant parodies of woman-as-image in mass culture, gone are the recognisable women of the stills; gone are the images from the centrefolds and fashion adverts in all their various forms and moods. Sherman confronts us with images of monsters/caracatures of ambiguous gender.

"While I was reading fairytales for research I did find an abundance of standard characters but I was seeking to find the quirky characters, or most bizarre scenes".
(Siegel 1988, P278)

If we are to assume that Sherman continued to also use film as a source material for the exposure of the notion of femininity as a masquerade. Perhaps this series is a parody of the American film in which real horror and catastrophe is fictionalised and sensationalised in an attempt to provide entertainment.

In "Untitled No. 155, 1985" [16] a 'woman' (?) lies naked on a leaf-covered wasteland. We view her from her feet up; her hand looks positioned to help her get up. We can see some of her face which is flushed red. Covering the rest of her face and back are green leaves.





16. Untitled No. 155, 1985

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Sherman once again questions nudity with this work.

"The false ass and tits, were at first glance perhaps as much of a lure as nudity would be in any photograph, but once the viewer looked up close, not only were they fake, they belonged to a hideous character, the face, the teeth and everything. So it's a slap in the face to those who would get off on nudity to think that I would have to stoop to that".

(Siegel 1988, P278)

DISINTEGRATION

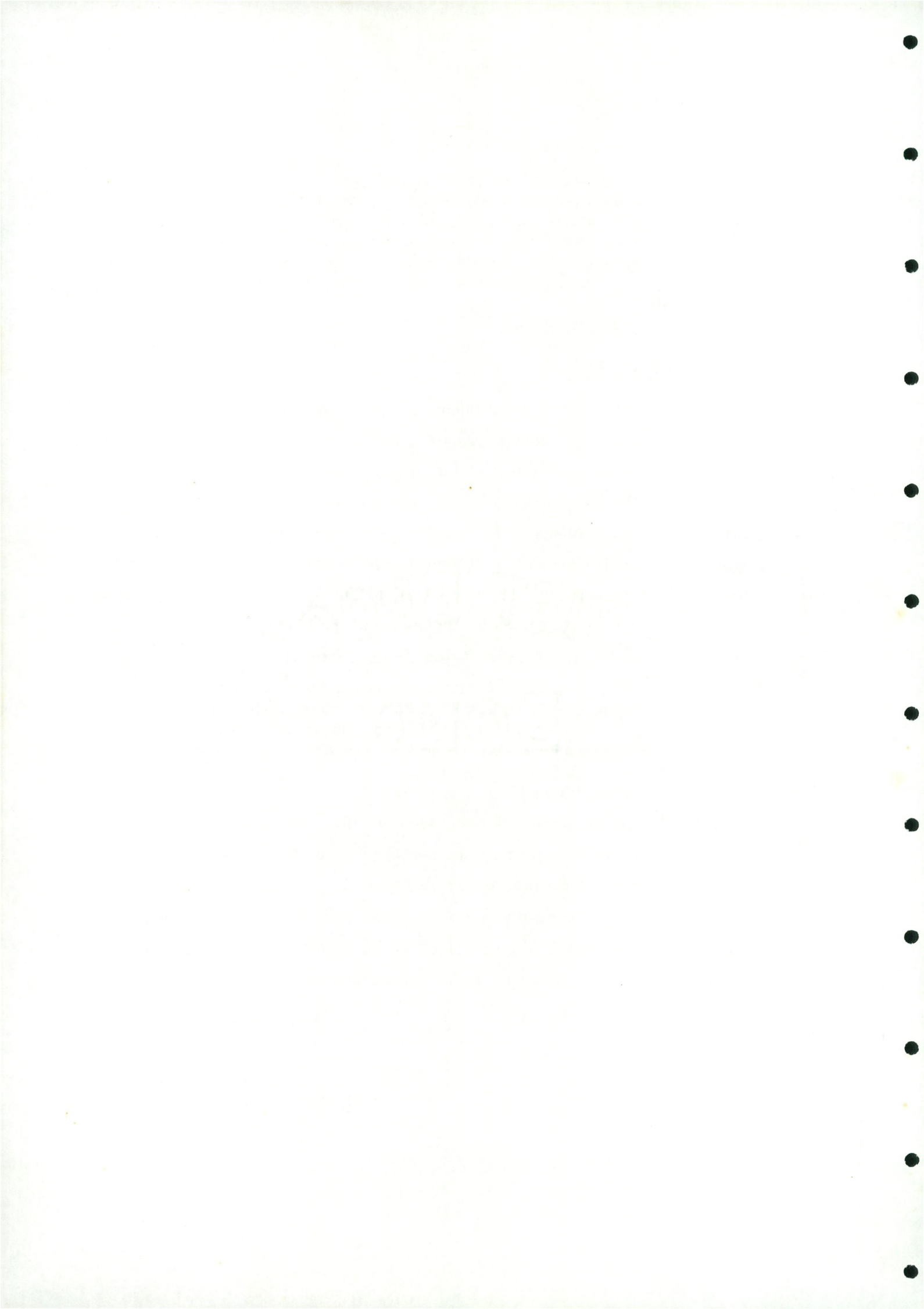
Each work in this series is distinctly different from the last, except for the common thread of the inhumanness of the human - we can no longer be sure that these images are of women or even human.

In "Untitled No. 140, 1985" [17] Sherman has attached a (plastic) pigs snout over the lower part of her face. She is wearing a wig and lying on the muddy ground; her hands approaching the open pigs mouth. Are we to assume that Sherman is suggesting the degeneration of the female into a genderless figure and then to an inhuman animal-like creature and that this is Sherman's comment on contemporary American society? Ken Johnson supports this theory.

"In the best sense, Sherman's art is America's bad dream, a surfacing of the dark side of modern consciousness and a promise that psychological wholeness awaits those who can look unflinchingly into the anti-mirror and accept what they find there as part of themselves".

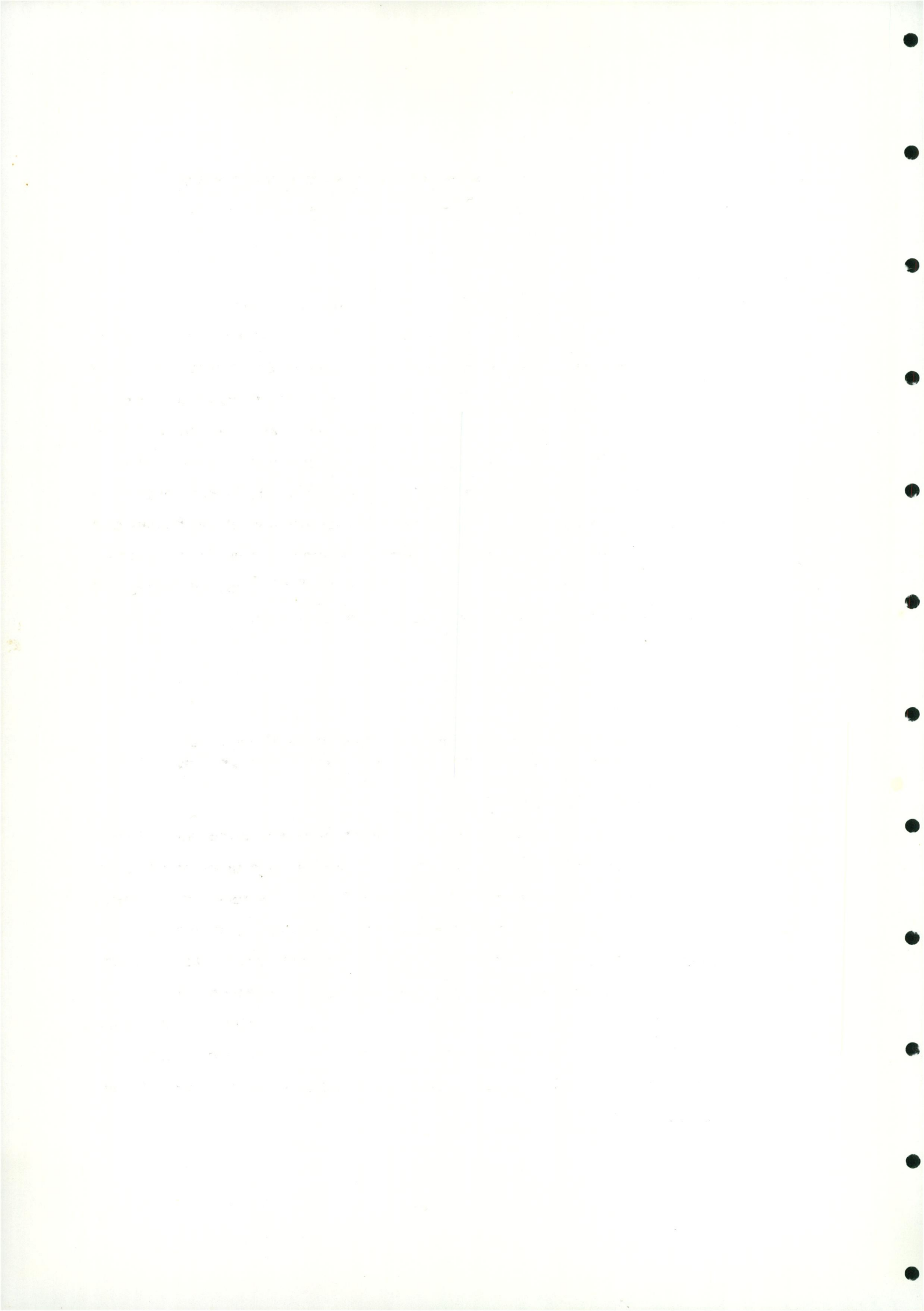
(Johnson 1987, P53)

In 1987 the human figure all but disappears from the elaborately constructed landscapes; landscapes which are as apocalyptical as the human beings of the former pictures. Her world decomposes into areas of garbage, plastic files, contraceptives, carrots wearing condoms, fake vomit and chocolates cakes. We know it is false, that is obvious on examination but it still causes a chill to run up our backs. Is Sherman cataloguing nightmares for us so we can face our fears?





17. Untitled No. 140, 1985



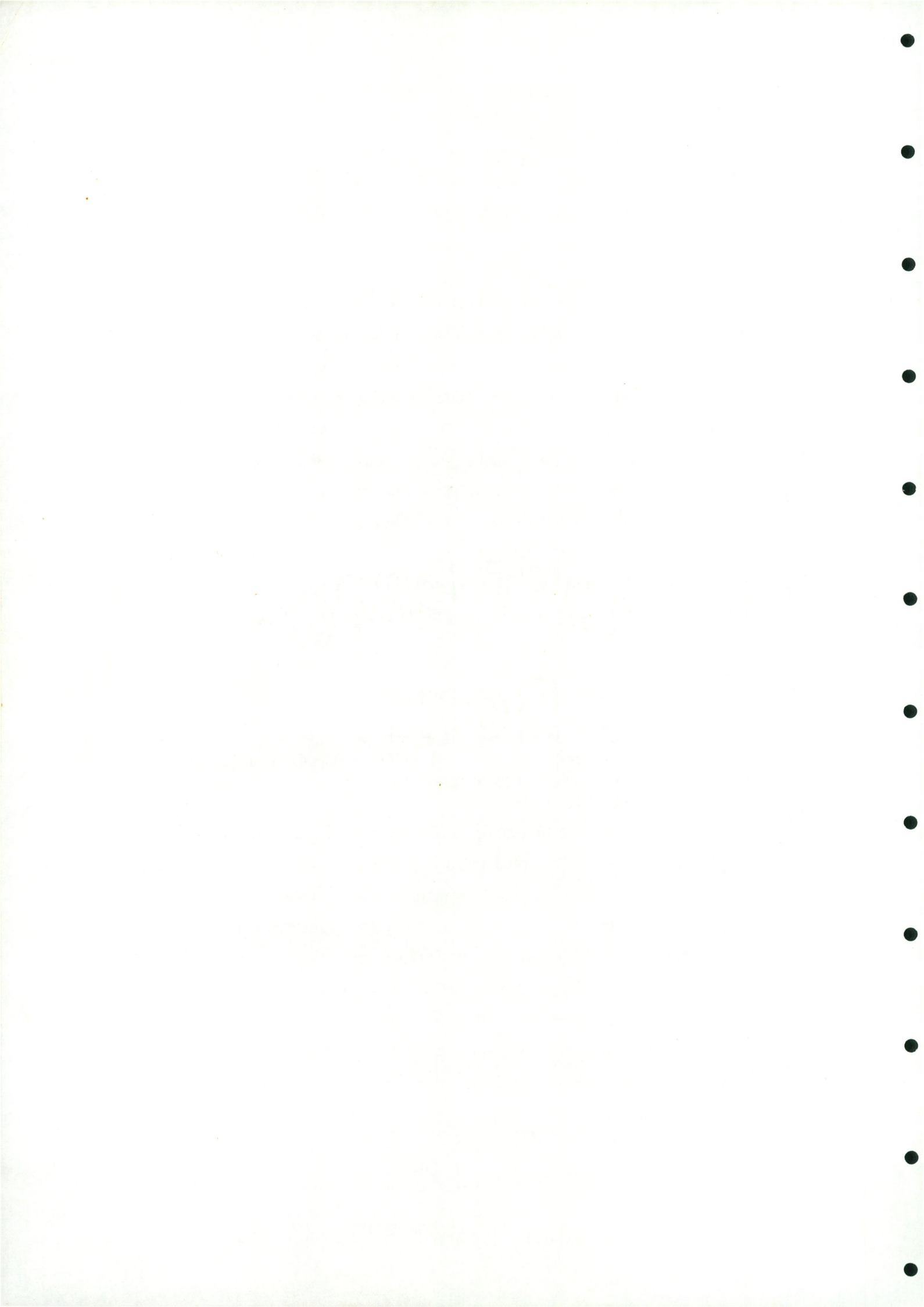
In this series 'woman' is marginalised and at times is nearly non-existent being covered by debris or only appears as a mirror image. In some of this work 'woman' does not exist at all.

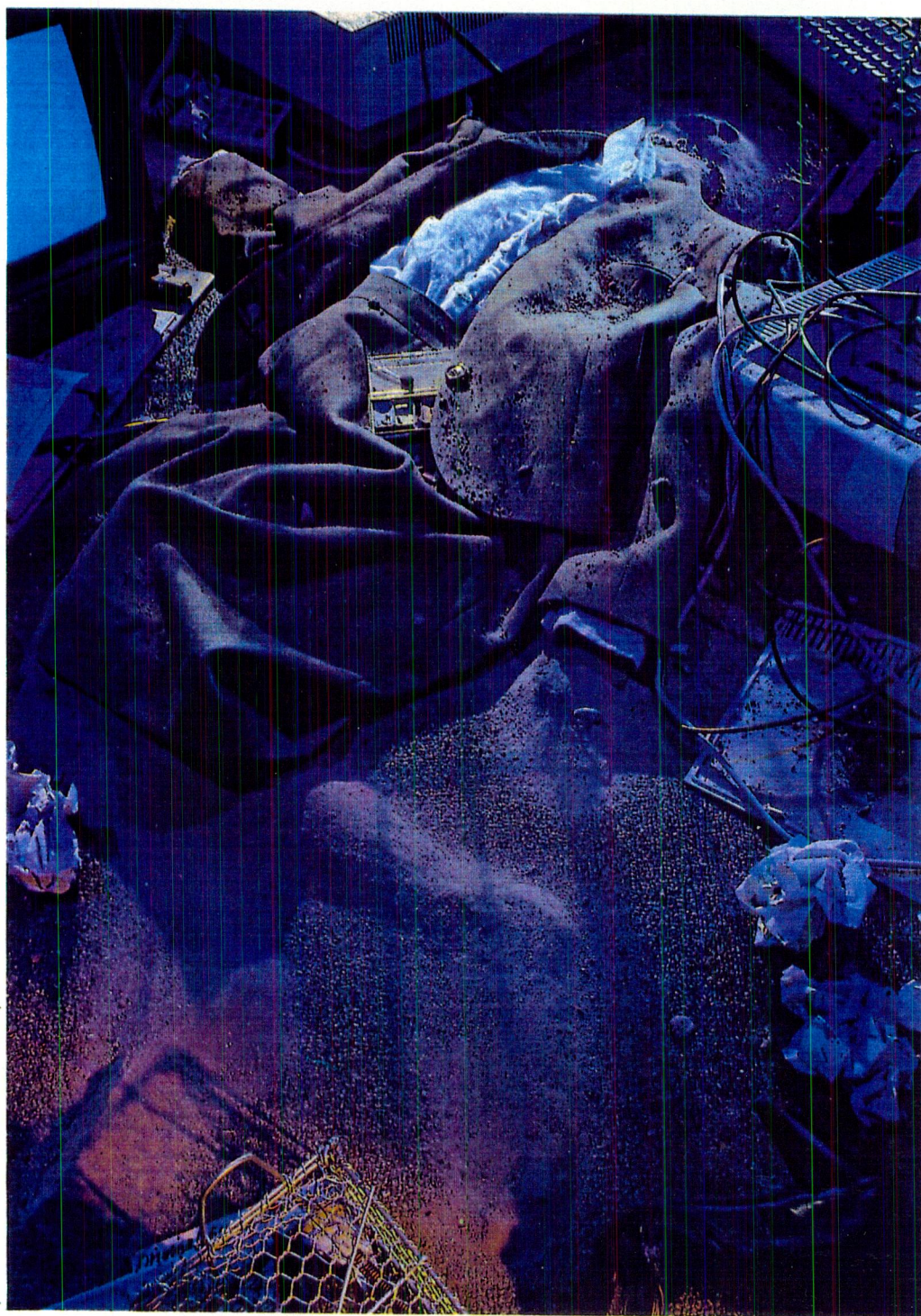
In "Untitled" No. 168, 1987" [18] a woman's suit and blouse lie on a dusty carpet floor; a make-up compact rests on top of it. Surrounding it lies the debris of an office which has been ripped apart. Scrunched up pieces of typing paper are scattered on the floor. The screen of the word processor continues to 'flicker' blue. The secretary (we must assume she was a secretary by the quality of her suit) has disintegrated into nothingness. The work is reminiscent of cheap horror movies of the 50's in which 'aliens' appear to destroy the earth or nuclear-age dramas about the destruction of the human race by power hungry military generals. Is Sherman creating a visual "1984"? If so, her intention is indeed to raise our consciousness of the constant barrage of film images which depict violence, particularly against women.

DESIRE

"The matter of fact acceptance of ones 'natural' looks and one's 'natural' personality is being replaced by a growing sense that it is normal to reinvent oneself".
(Deitch 1992, P22)

The 1980s saw the development of the time of personal re-creation. Plastic surgery was becoming accepted in society. It is no longer a taboo subject, this is obvious from the increased advertising for plastic surgery in women's magazines. We live in a culture where a youthful appearance is as highly valued as a standard of health and fitness. Plastic surgery provides us with a means of retaining youth and removing fat, both of which are acceptable, but the extent to which it is being used is becoming dangerous. Dangerous in the sense that women have not only been informed that they must use make-up to become or remain acceptable, they must also adjust their bodies through surgery to suit the accepted shape.





18. Untitled No. 168, 1987

1942
The following is a list of the names of the persons who were members of the organization during the year 1942.

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The above list is a complete list of the names of the persons who were members of the organization during the year 1942. It is to be understood that the names of the persons who were members of the organization during the year 1942 are listed in the above list.

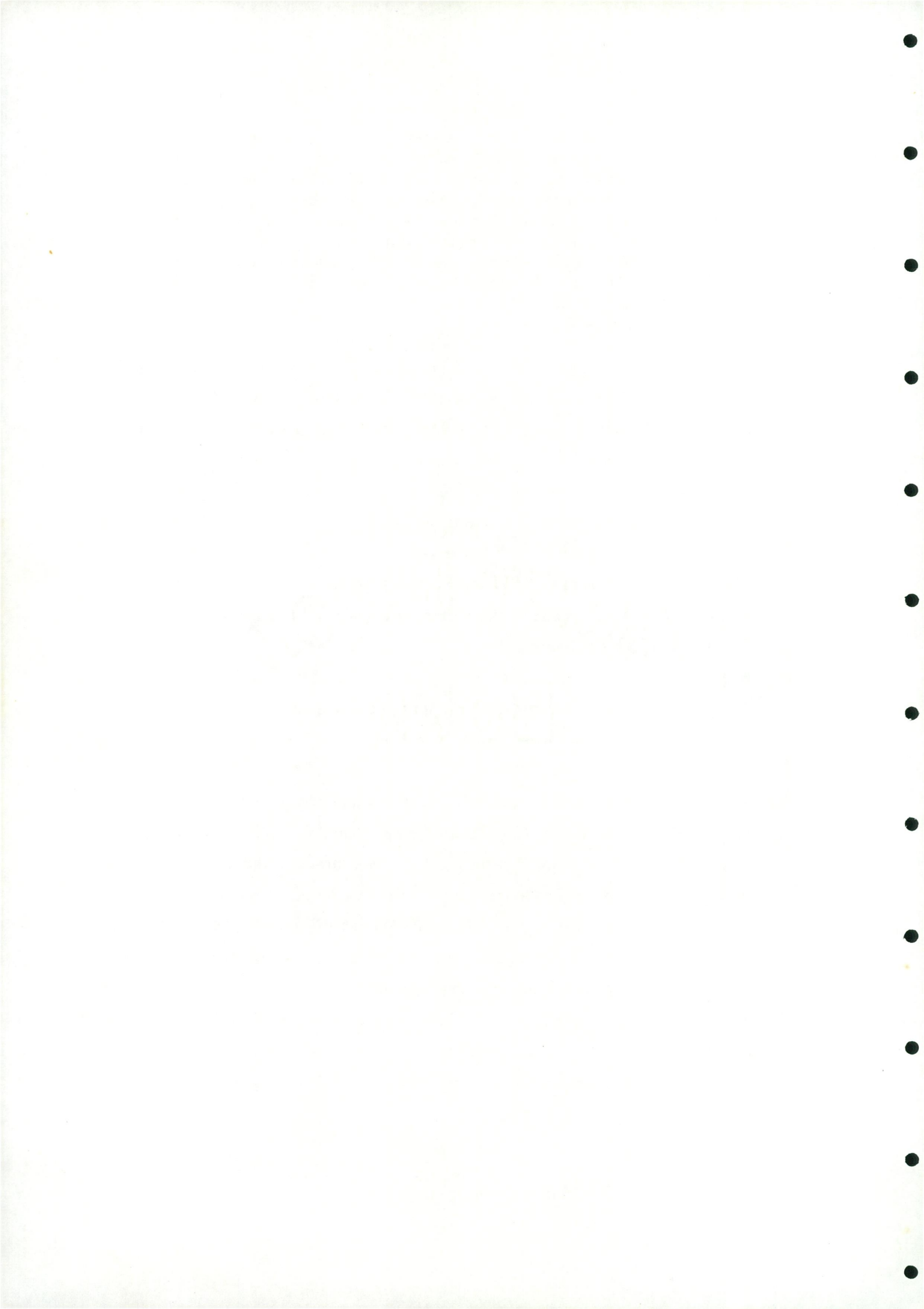
"Our consciousness of the self will have to undergo a profound change as we continue to embrace the transforming advances in biological and communications technologies. A new construction of the self will inevitably take hold as ever more powerful body-altering techniques become common place. As radical plastic surgery, computer-chip brain implants and gene-splicing become routine, the former structure of self will no longer correspond to the new structure of the body."
(Deitch 1992, P29)

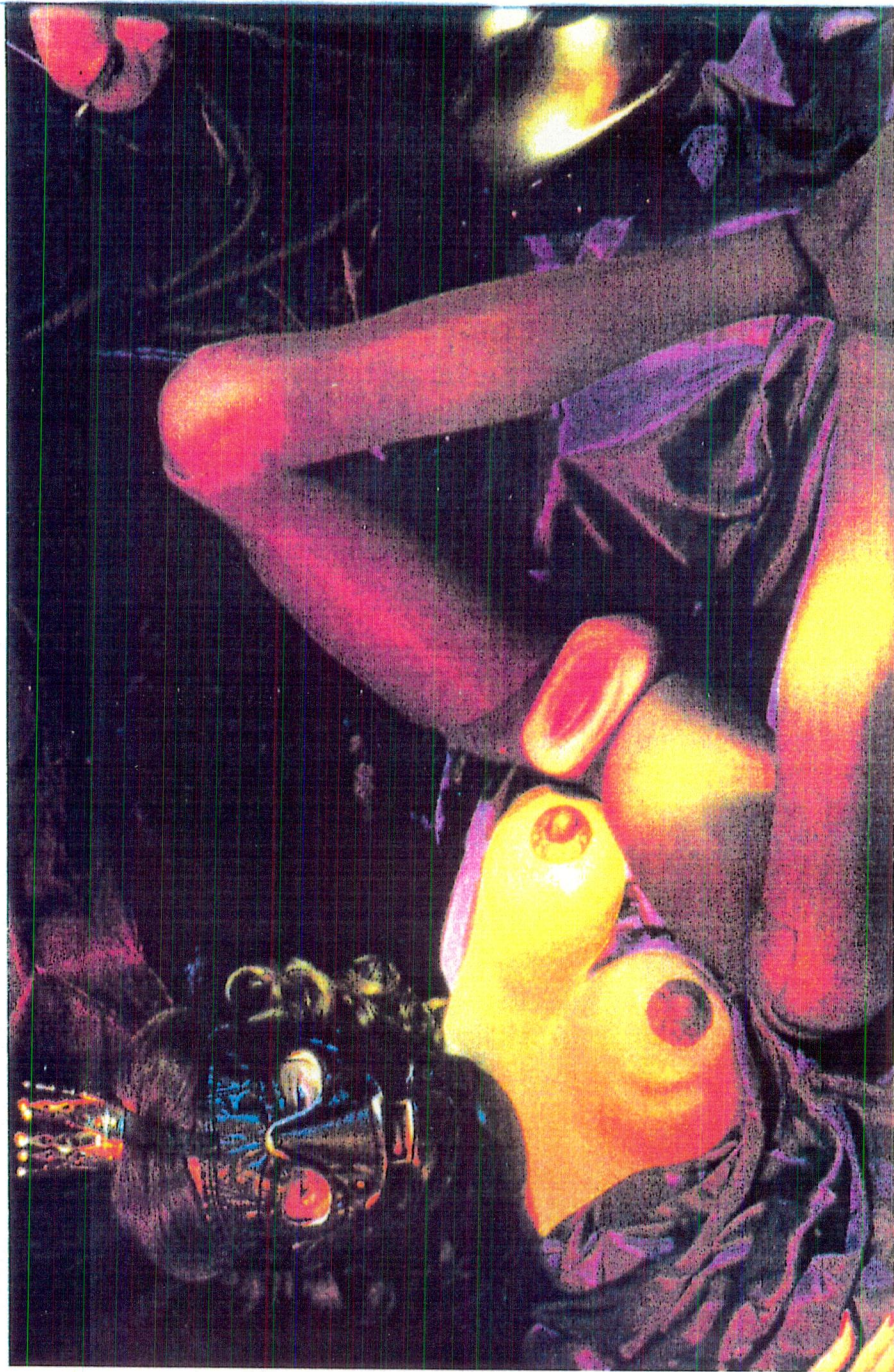
In her work Sherman has, since 1985, performed her own brand of plastic surgery. She has altered her face and body with plastic false noses and prosthetics to create an alternative body and reality. She has used 'plastic surgery' to change her self, her identity. She has made addition to the self to demonstrate the pressures imposed upon women (and men) in society, specifically the American society in which she lives and works. Plastic surgeries' main purpose now is not the correction of defects but the restoring of youth and/or the creating of beauty. Beauty being synonymous with desirability (and especially sexual desirability), plastic surgery has become a means of attaining a dream or fantasy - a means of attaining perfection.

Sherman deals with the issues of sexuality, the body and artificiality in her 1992 work. She has amassed a collection of plastic medical dummies, mannequins, sex dolls, prostheses and masks. The actual human body is almost non existent in this work.

A "doll" [19] lies on a bed of richly textured and coloured fabric with its legs apart, like a nude in an 18th century erotic painting. Each of its parts are disjointed; its breasts are prostheses and made from a different plastic than its legs and its brightly coloured vagina; the face is an elaborate mask; on the blond wig rests a theatrical crown. But behind the mask is a real face; the eyes, tired but real, stare out at the viewer and from the bottom left hand corner, we see a human hand with painted nails.

The implications of this picture are immediately apparent. This 'body' is made of disjointed false additions. This is a picture of a 'post-human doll'. Only the eyes and hand remain human. It is stretched out in an explicit sexual pose like a crowned queen of plastic.





19. Untitled 1992

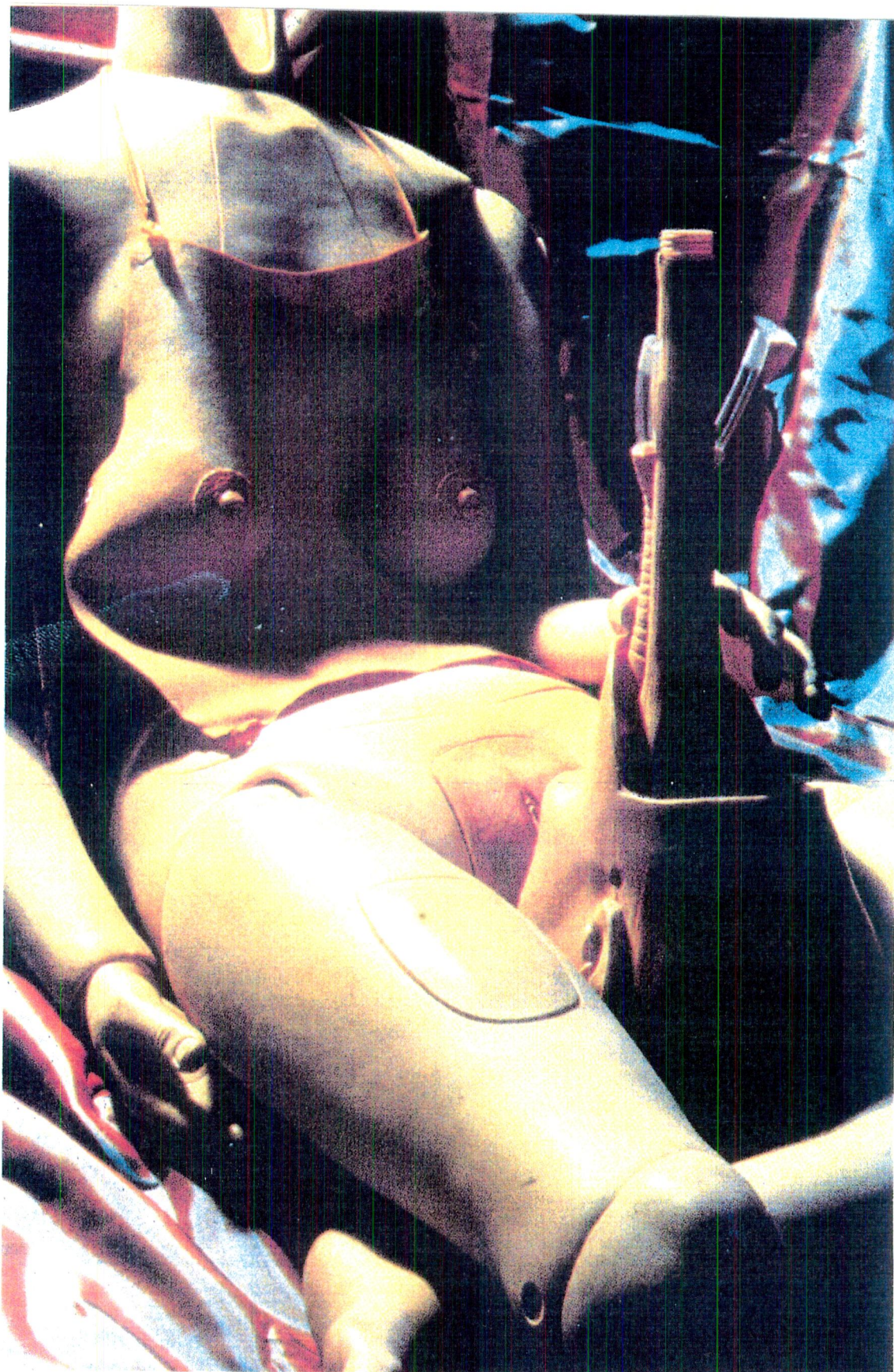
[Faint, illegible handwritten text, likely bleed-through from the reverse side of the page.]

Another picture [20] from this series depicts a mannequin/sex doll with false breasts tied on with string. Its head and neck are removed from the torso and it rests upside-down between the dolls legs. These works appear to be a comment on the lengths society will push women in order that they retain sexual desirability and ironically point out the undesireability of the artificial.

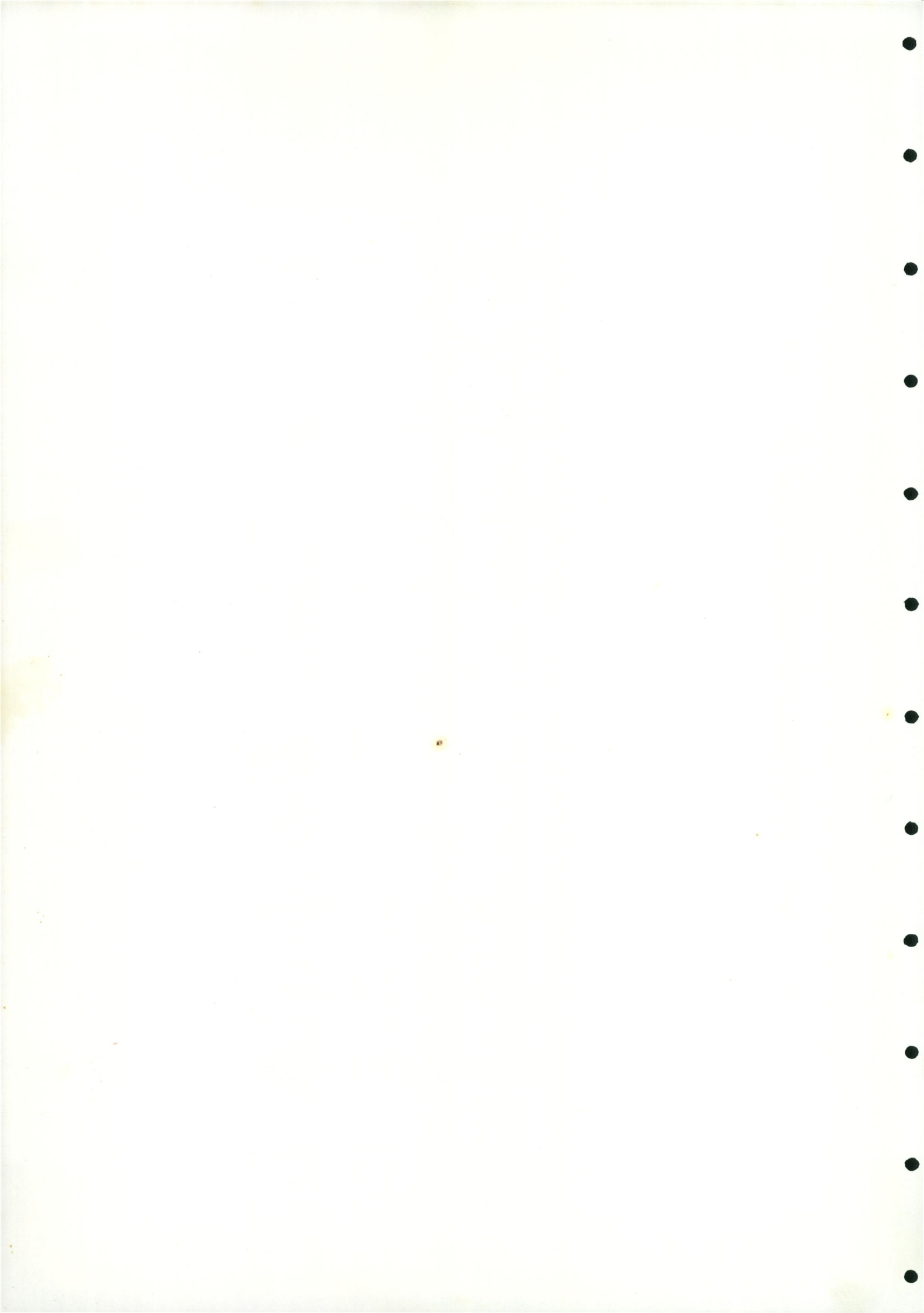
Another interpretation of these pictures is that Sherman is mimicking the representation of woman as a sex 'object' - in pornography. By fragmenting, dehumanising and objectifying the 'women' represented she is doing that which feminists have said is done to woman by pornography. By exaggeration and irony she has included female identity, representation, contamination and taboo into pictures which remain humorous. Of course, pornography is also a plastic product, the porn "actress" simulates sexual excitement made public to represent actual excitement, which it generally isn't; this is sold to the unknown customer so as to stimulate actual arousal within him/her. Sherman has constructed a "doll" who represents and stands in for a human; "she" is photographed in pose to signify sexual availability; the viewer recognises the image as representative of pornography but is faced with artificiality like the fake arousal of the human pornographic subject. The work can be interpreted as offensive to woman if taken literally. Sherman, as always, leaves the decision to enter deeper into the meaning of the pieces to the viewer.

In the light of these latest works it is interesting to note that the images in Madonna's book "Sex" [21] were also created in 1992. Some of these images have similarities with Sherman's work. Both women in 1992 dealt with images which test the boundaries between art, popular culture and pornography. Madonna assumed the alias 'Dita Parlo' (a 1930's film actress) and collaborated with a photographer to recreate existing images with the intention of questioning and reinterpreting them: Madonna substituted herself for the porn star in stereotypical semi-pornographic images. Although they contain elements of humour and farce, Madonna depends upon the fact that they are created by a woman to change their message from degradation of woman to a celebration of her sexuality. Her images, however, unlike Sherman's, do not rise far enough above entertainment and titillation to become art and so for now remains within popular culture.



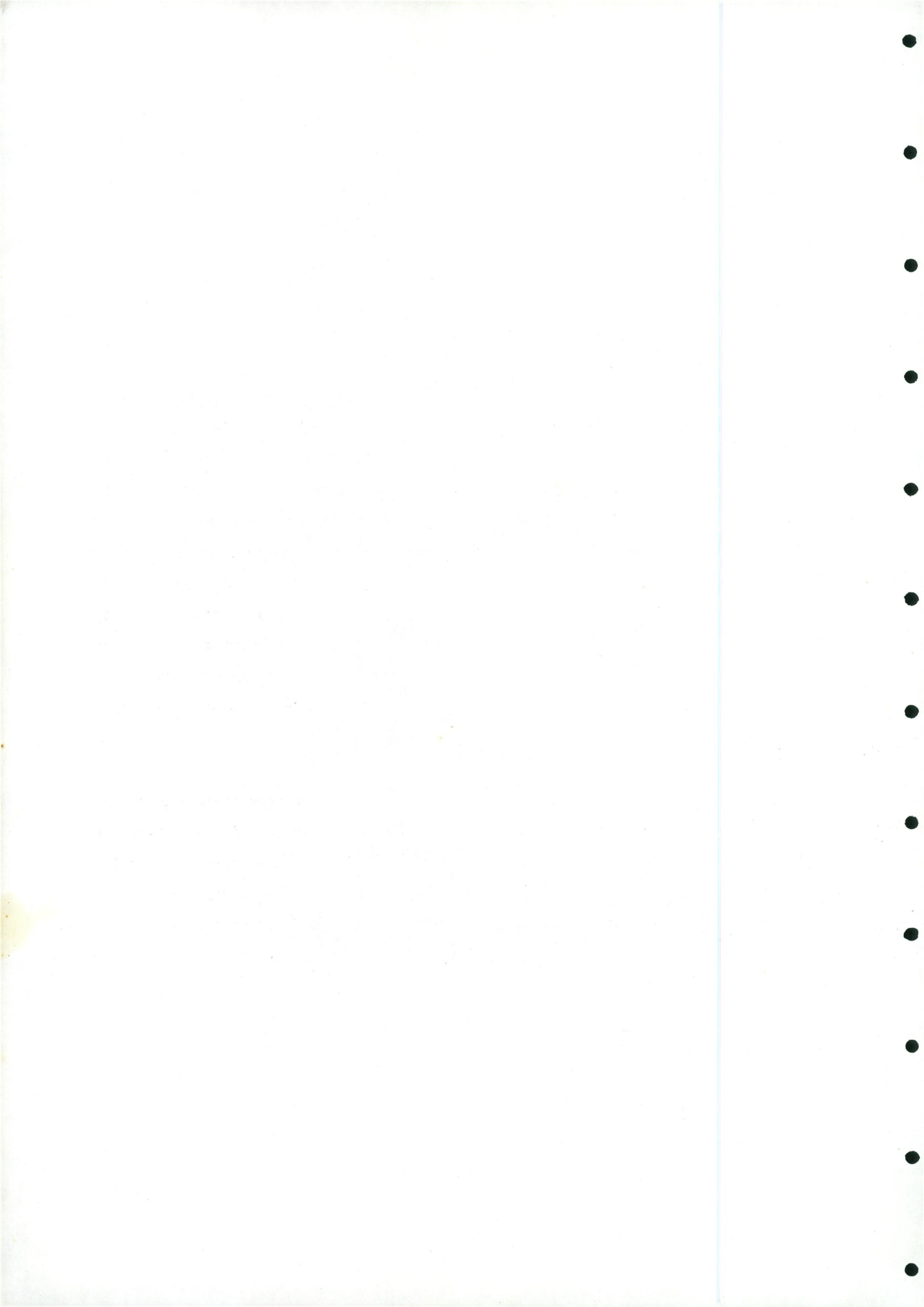


20. Untitled 1992





21. Madonna 1992

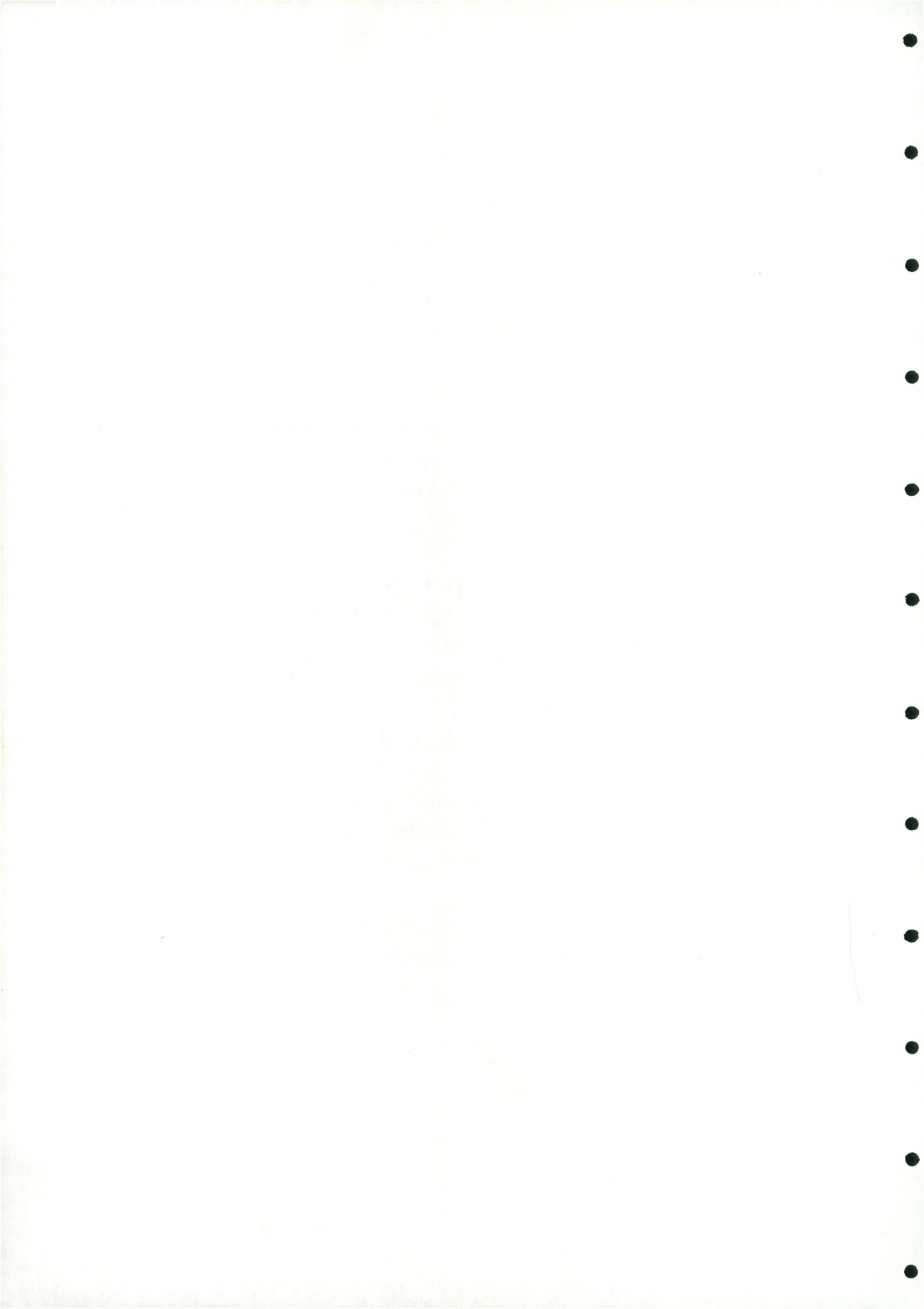


CONCLUSION

"She provides the image, we must give it meaning"
(Beckett 1988, P102)

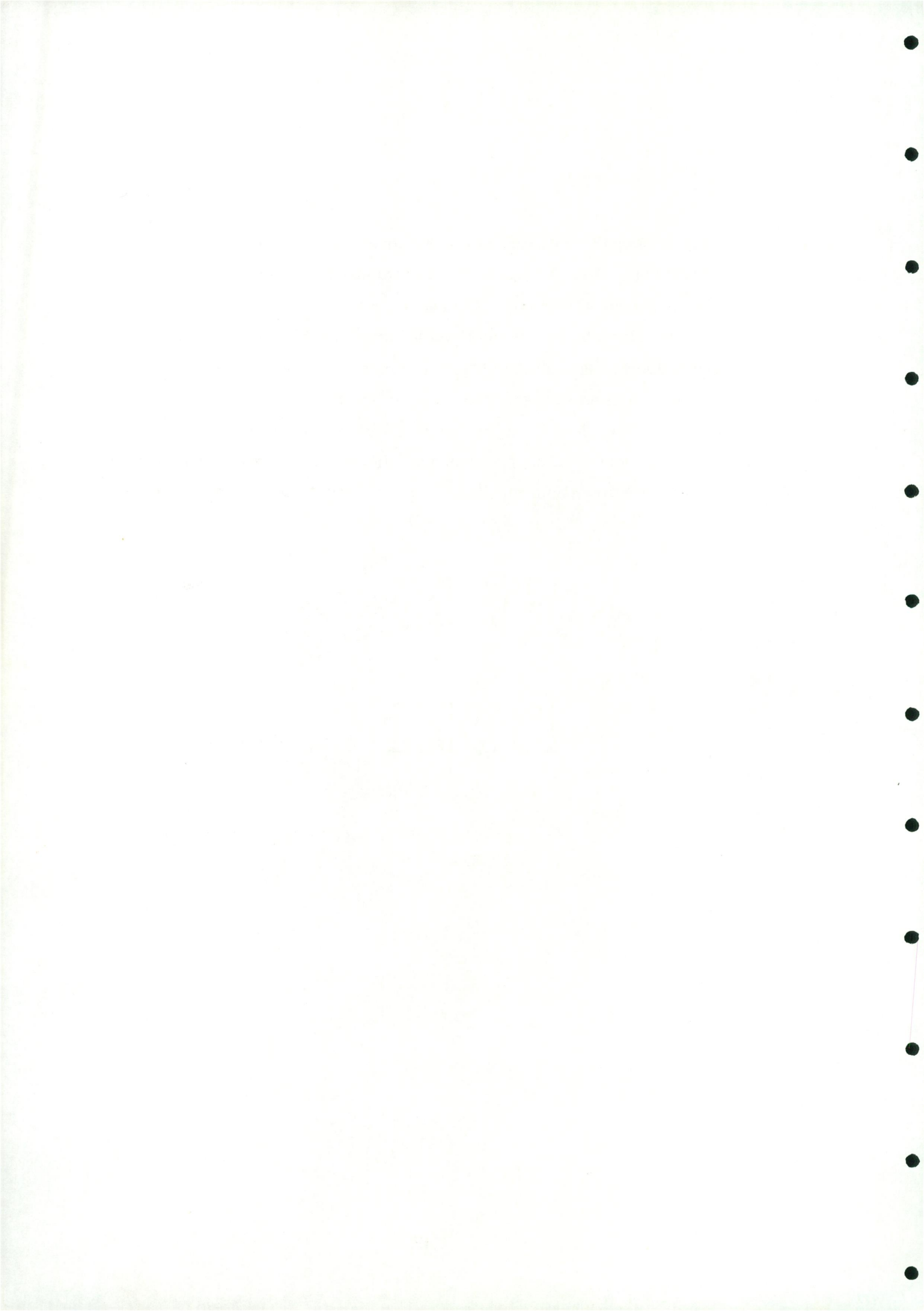
By re-creating and subverting the prototype of women provided by popular culture Sherman is making a statement regarding female representation. She uses an open narrative and engrossing image to draw the viewer into speculation. She initiates an identification process whereby we recognise the images as being culled from popular culture, we assimilate the changes in the images and relate them to personal experience. Some of Sherman's images may expose us to insights into representations of women which we had never questioned. Some, both, disgust and delight us and thus expose us to insights into ourselves that may not please us and may ultimately demand commitment. But Sherman's work is not insistent, its issues are not immediately apparent and do not command any particular reaction from us. We can identify and be affected only to the degree that we choose to be.

There is no doubt that Sherman's images have become more disturbing in their subject matter over the years. The 'Film Stills', although different from the originals did not deviate as much from the reality of their source as do her latest works. Sherman's work is becoming ever increasingly frightening in its mockery and portrayal of society. In the later works Sherman has taken us to the edge of the abyss; we dare not contemplate what new images of horror Sherman may have in store for us, what other aspects of human society will command her attention.



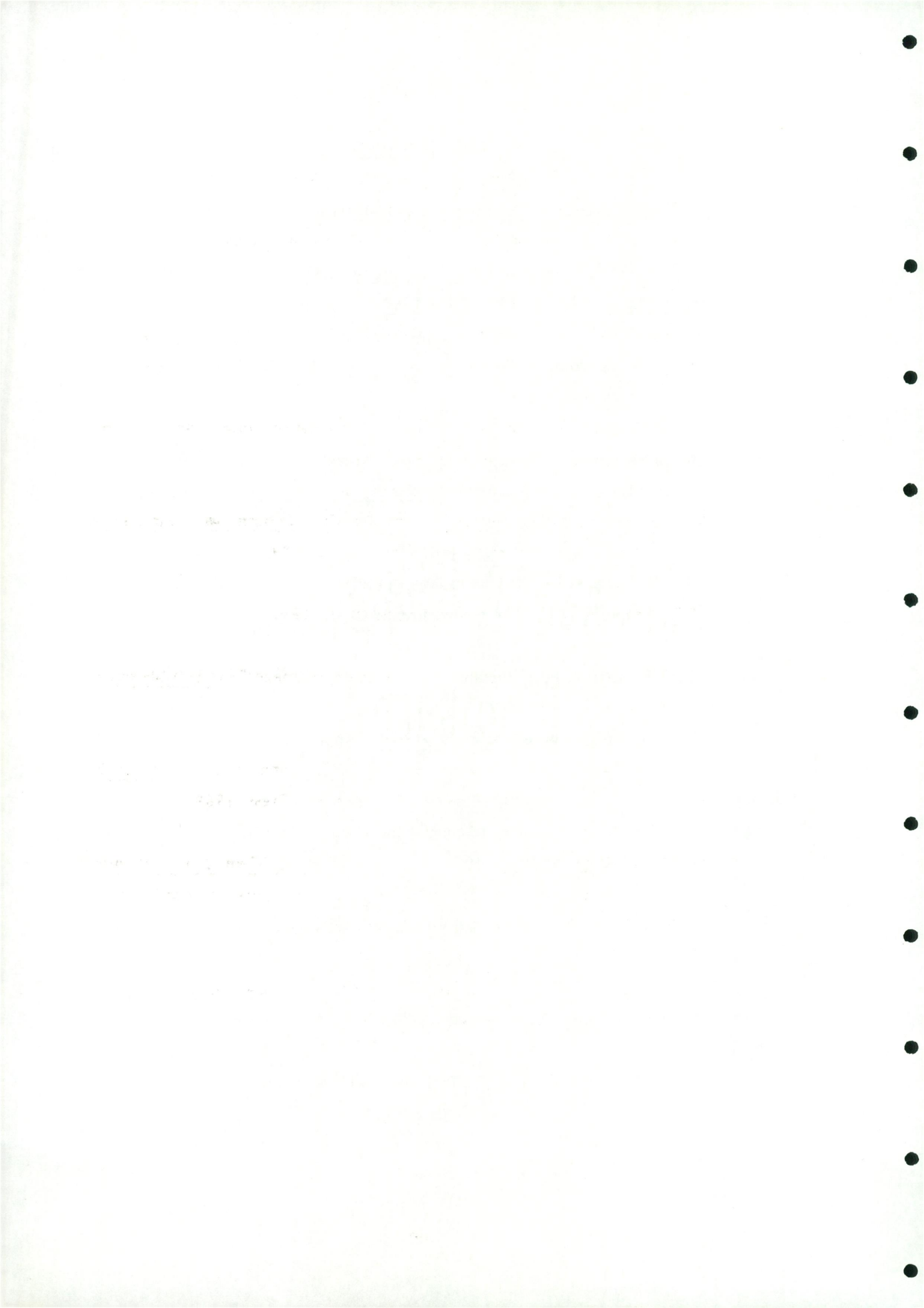
Although Sherman's work deals almost exclusively with the depiction of women in popular culture, they do ultimately lead to an examination of the self that transcends sexual difference. A male viewer must look at the issues and question them from his own position within and around Sherman's images and then popular cultures images. The full human being has both male and female elements and Sherman does not exclude either from her work.

Although there is the weight of serious issues in Sherman's work, her work depends on humour, mockery and ambiguity. In this way Sherman's work resembles the 'fable' - it is entertainment with a moral.



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