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**National College of Art and Design  
4th Year Fine Art : Sculpture**

**THE OLDER WOMAN IN POPULAR CULTURE AND FINE ART**

**by**

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**Submitted to the  
Faculty of History of Art and Design and  
Complementary Studies  
in candidacy for the  
degree of:**

**Bachelor of Art : Sculpture  
1995**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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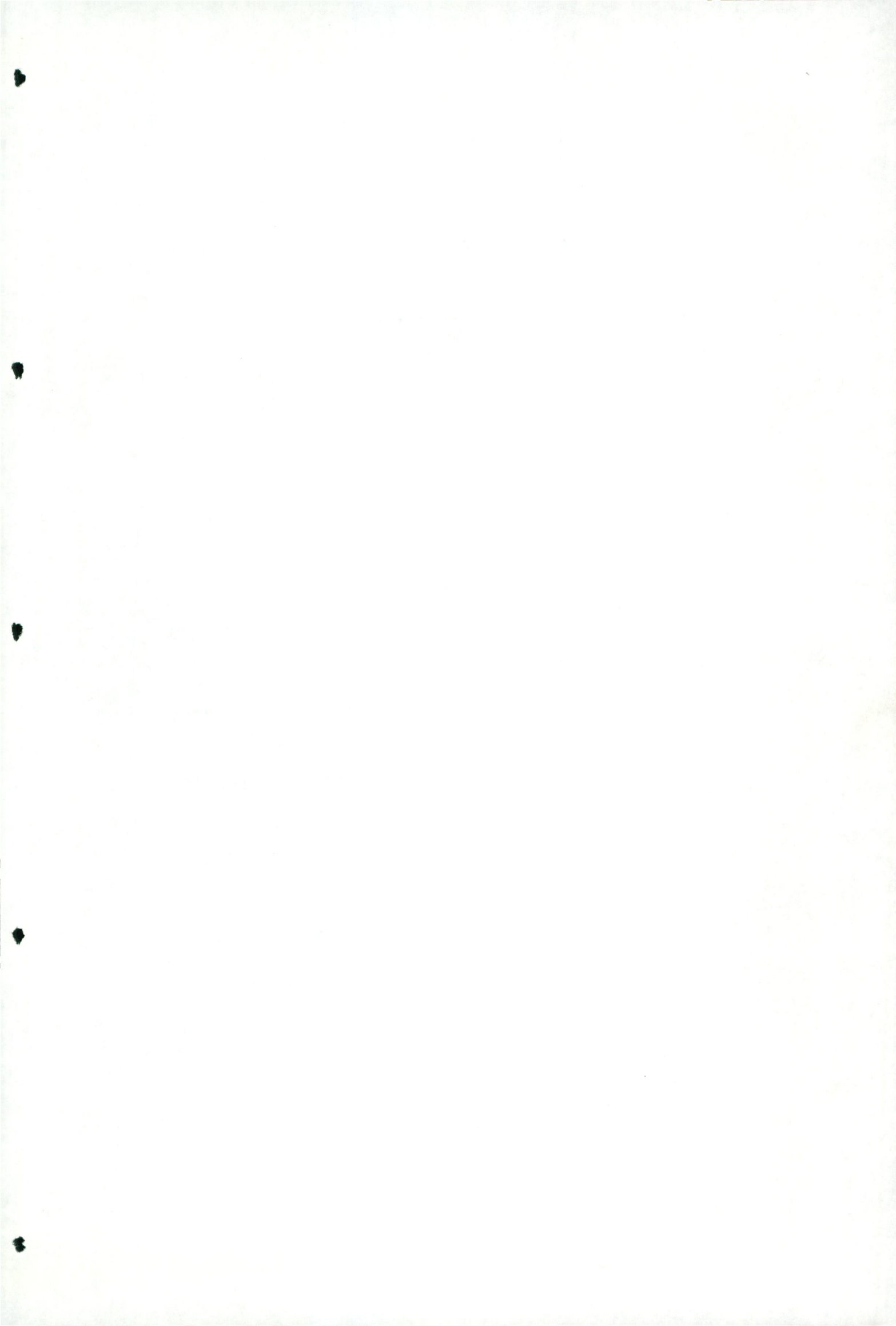
I would like to thank Athena Tacha for her enthusiastic response to my initial approach and for her warm hospitality and generous sharing and discussion of her work and ideas.

I would also like to acknowledge all the help and encouragement that my tutor, Joan Fowler, gave me during the preparation of this thesis.

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## INTRODUCTION

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We are constantly being reminded that we are part of an ageing society. There is a media bombardment with increasing debate over the welfare system (in health and over pension schemes), and in the regular publication of statistics showing the profile of the population. Yet we are divorced and/or in denial of this event happening to ourselves. We are inclined to forget that it is individuals who comprise statistics and census and that all of us are ageing. As Julia Johnson and Robert Slater argue: "It is we and not just the elderly population who comprise the ageing society." (Johnson, R. and Slater R. p.1)

We live in a society which penalises growing old, and old age, severely. The ageing female in western patriarchal culture has to contend with both sexism and ageism. Media images of older women seem to reflect closely the values of our patriarchal, commercialised, contemptuous and hostile attitudes to elderly women. The witch image of long ago lives on in the stereotype of the jealous, scheming mother-in-law. Elderly women are usually characterised as slow, stupid and unattractive.



In this thesis, I look at how the older woman is depicted in contemporary western society, both in popular culture and fine art. In Chapter one, I discuss how feminists have made us aware of the exploitation and oppressive attitudes towards women of all ages in our patriarchal culture. I argue that over the past couple of years, a tremendous pressure on the older women to remain young and beautiful has emerged in the mass media. Also, I point out the stress that older women feel in trying to conform to the 'ideal' image of an older woman such as Joan Collins. I argue too that the medical profession are also a contributing factor towards encouraging women to remain young, as Germaine Greer states:

In our society there are a group of male professional medics whose names appear on hundreds of learned papers every year, elaborating the possibilities of eliminating menopause and ageing. Keeping all women both appetizing and responsive to male demand from puberty to the grave, driving the dreaded old woman off the face of the earth.  
( Greer, G.,p.2)

In Chapter two, I discuss how feminist artists reclaimed the colonized female body from the Old Master/Playboy genre. I argue that these artists challenged the taboos of the female body and they celebrated the rhythms and pains of fertility and childbirth. I discuss how some feminist artists took a radical stance in depicting the female body such as Mary



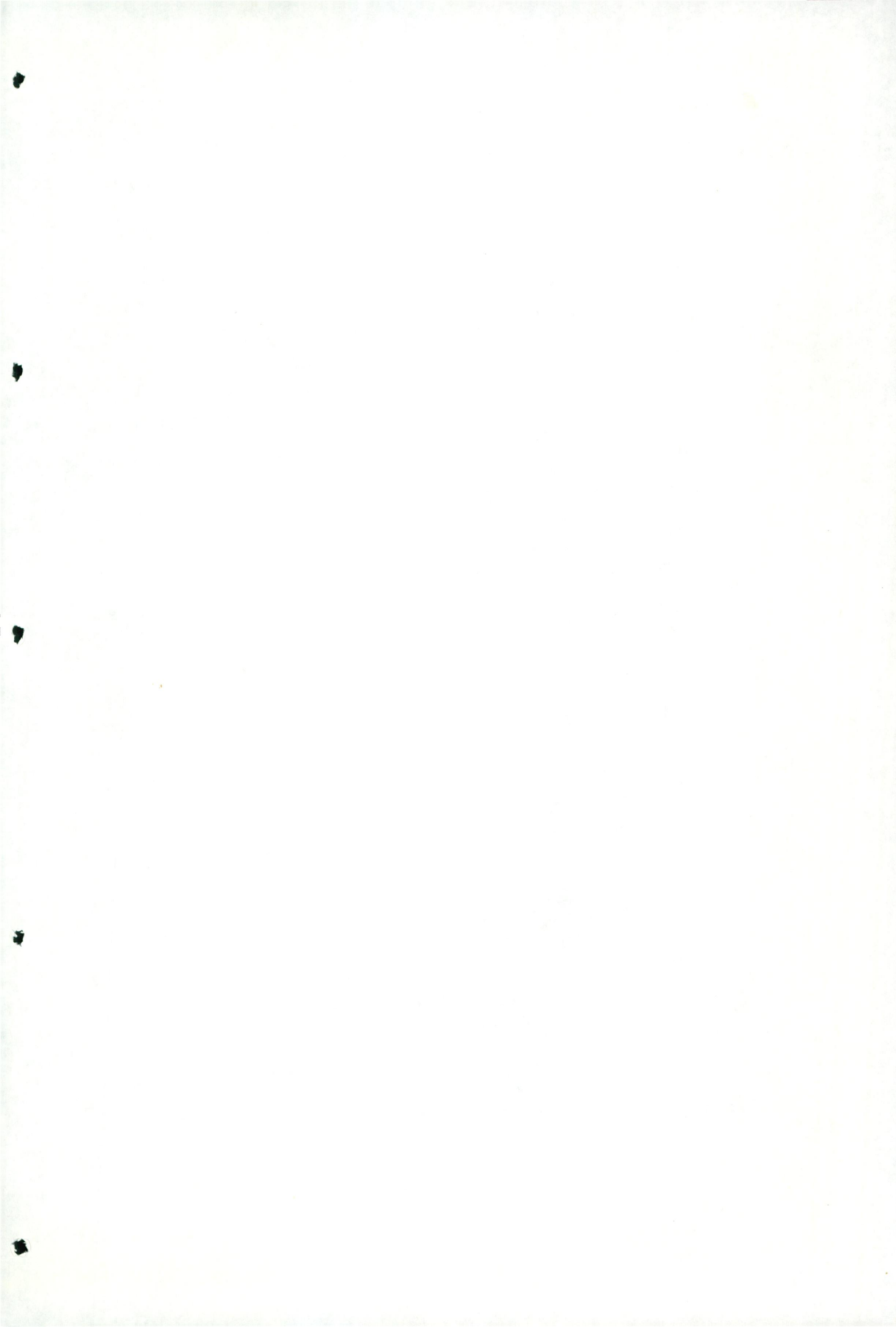
Kelly and Judy Chicago. Kelly's work is scripto visual and addresses issues of the positioning of woman in patriarchal culture, whereas core (female) imagery predominates in the work of Chicago. In Chicago's work, the vagina became a metaphor for the struggle for personal freedom and liberation. Both these artists deal with women's issues in radical different fashions. I point out how Mary Kelly deals with the menopause, and the woman of a certain age, in her work Interim by using abundance of text and woman's garments. In this way, Kelly explores the imaginary construction of female corporeality through the fantasies of romantic fiction, melodrama and advertising without using the female body 'woman' as object for the voyeuristic gaze.

In Chapter three, I look at the work of the artist Athena Tacha, who has been documenting and photographing her bodily changes over the past twenty years. Tacha is not as extreme as Kelly or Chicago. She introduces into her work and text a sensitive and spiritual awareness of her being and an astute, objective approach to her ageing process.

Both Kelly and Tacha are two feminist artists who have approached the taboo subject of the ageing female in contemporary patriarchal society. By questioning, disrupting and interrogating society's attitudes towards



ageing women, they have brought to light many issues that need to be addressed.





## Chapter 1.

Feminist artists, historians and critics have, over the past twenty years, exposed the patriarchal power structures, systems and attitudes towards women in all areas of life. Feminists have made western society aware of the exploitation and distortion of women's bodies both in high culture and popular culture. Visual images of women both in fine art and the mass media usually represent women in situations involving "power" as Linda Nochlin states, "It is most usually its lack." (Nochlin, p.1)

The portrayal of women as sex objects trivialises, degrades and dehumanizes us. In popular culture, advertising and the mass media, women's bodies or parts of them are used to sell products and publications. Women are presented as glamorous alluring and available. This, unfortunately, results in women being viewed as objects to be used for the pleasure and profit of men. Men's attitudes towards women, inevitably, are influenced by this voyeurism.

Such stereotyped portrayal is doubly oppressive for women. We suffer from the effects of men perceiving us in this manner but we also absorb and internalize the images presented. We are led to view ourselves as being at the service of men and to conform to man's ideals of women such as being youthful, slim, beautiful and sexual. John Berger

9.



# Miss 16's

## A STRIP PLEASER

**It's Linsey Dawn's first time, folks!**

SHE'S here! Luscious Linsey Dawn McKenzie makes her sex-sational colour debut in your sizzling Daily Sport today. The sweet 16-year-old stunna had readers of our sister paper the Sunday Sport drooling in anticipation recently as they waited for her bare-they so they could finally get an eyeful of her ample 36E-24-35 charms.

Well now it's your turn, folks. Cos the teenage teaser is gonna have yer begging for more as she slowly unveils her hot 'n horny body in a tantalising strip routine EVERY day this week.

### GRAB HER SEXY VID

LINSEY is the star of a sizzling video that's a must for glamour fans.

To obtain a copy send a cheque or postal order for £25 (made out to Double D Productions) and your name and address, mentioning Linsey Vid, to: *Linsey Video, Double D Productions, 161-167 Block F, Riverside Business Centre, Haldane Place, London SW18 4UG.* Or order by credit card on 081-877-3110.



PICTURES: JOHN BRANKS

**EARN SOME 'POCKET MONEY'**

*John Virgo's*  
**Snooker Challenge**

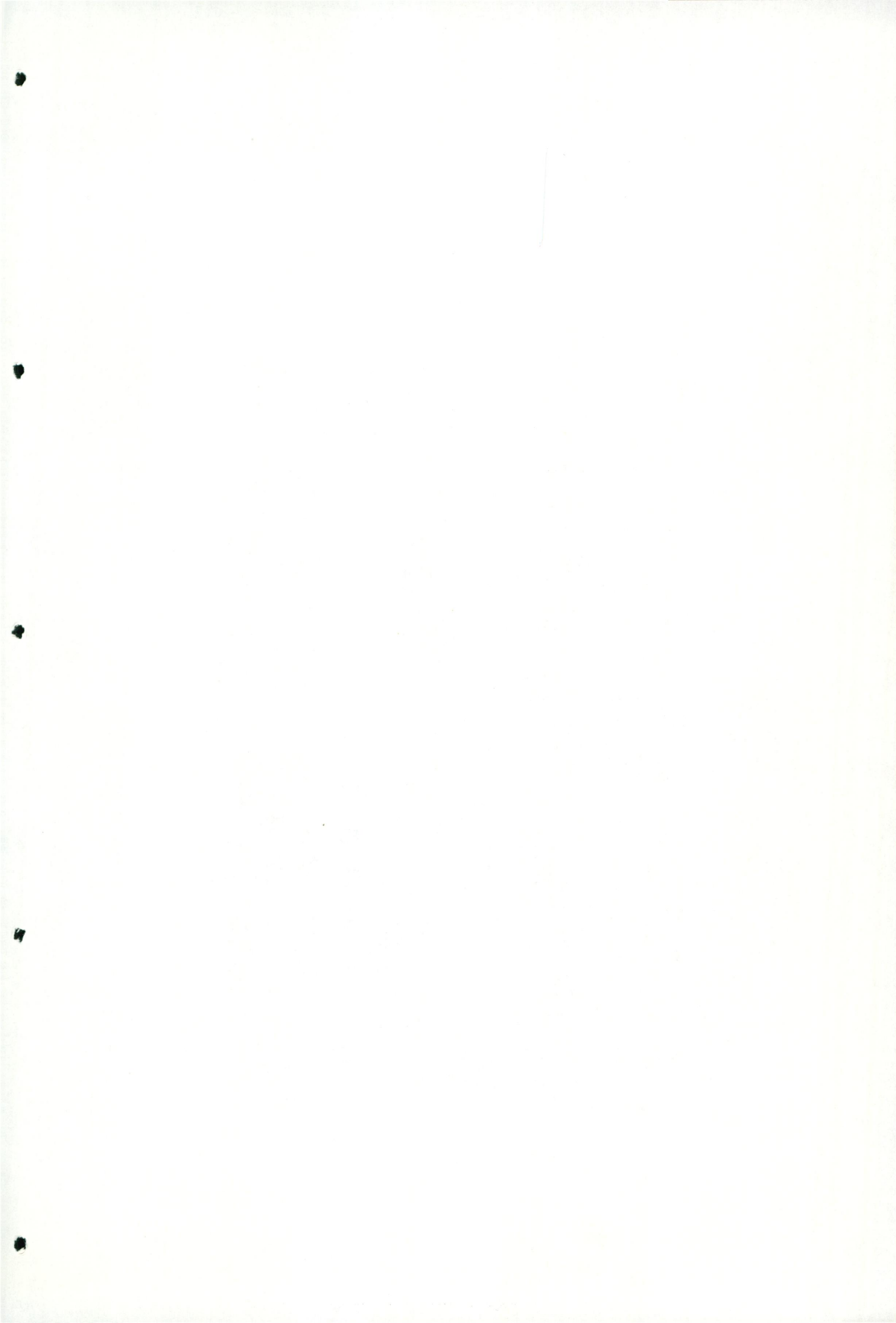
**TOP BREAK WINS!**

- 1st Prize £100**  
+ John Virgo Nodad Waistcoat
- 2nd Prize £50**  
+ John Virgo Nodad Waistcoat
- 3rd Prize £25**  
+ John Virgo Nodad Waistcoat

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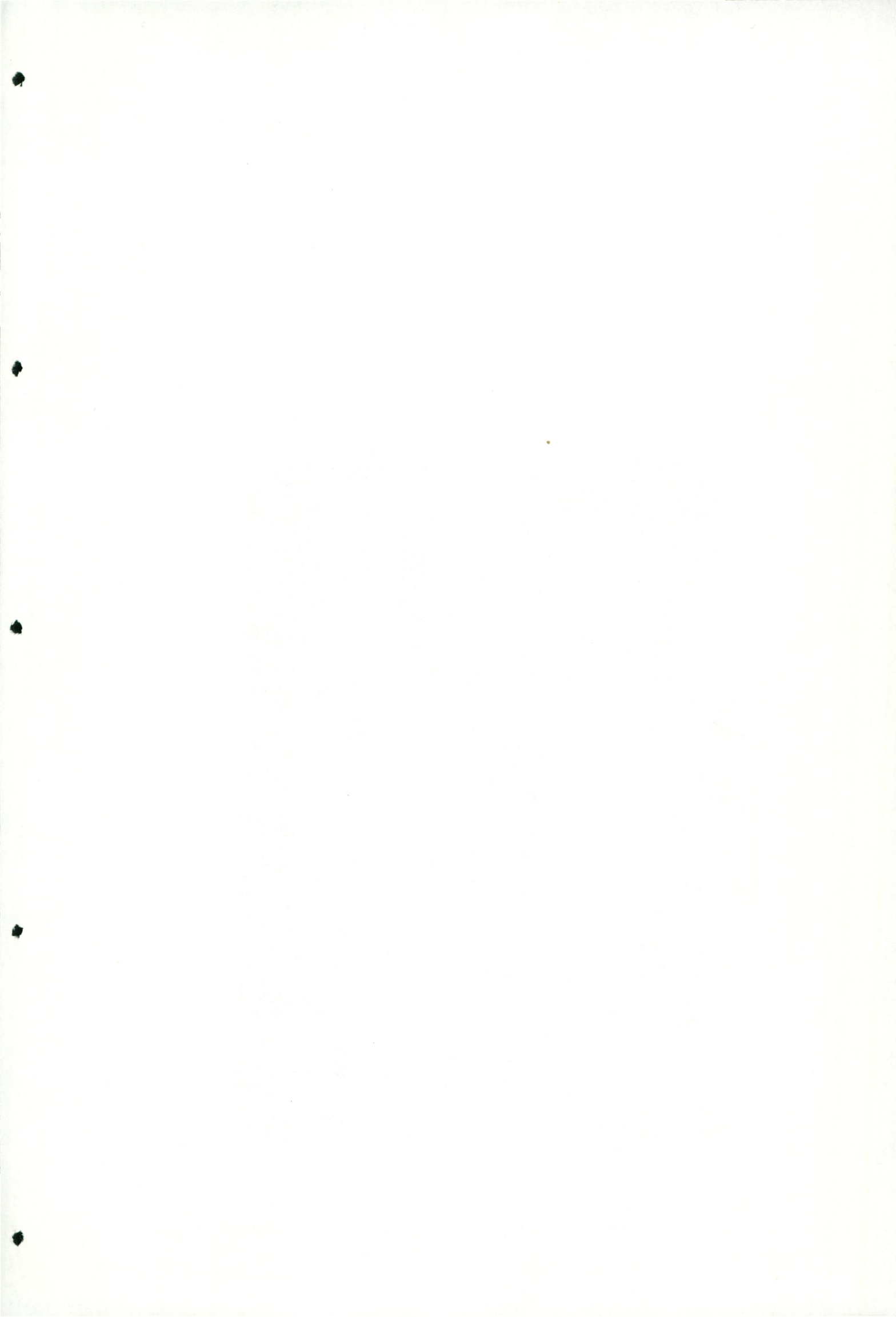
points out in his book Ways of Seeing: "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. The surveyor of the woman in herself is male; the surveyed female. Thus, she turns herself into an object."

Women feel inadequate and inferior if they do not achieve the idealised image of womanhood. We constantly devalue ourselves and our sex and we are encouraged by the media to compete with one another. News stories in the tabloids and also in the more up market papers often emphasise women's sexuality and age rather than their achievements. Two good examples of the emphasis on women's sexuality and age appeared in the Daily Sport (September 26, 1994) and Sunday Times Magazine, (July 3 1994). The former stated: "Miss 16's A Strip Pleaser - Luscious Linsey Down makes her sensational colour - debut.... The sweet 16-year old stunna had readers drooling as they waited for her bare-thday so they could get an eyeful of her ample 36E-24-36 claims." (Plate 1) In the Sunday Times the article by the journalist Kathryn Fleet on the older model Carmen Dell' Orefice - called "Picture of a Role Model" - She is sexy and sassy, classy and elegant..." The most beautiful woman I have ever met happens to be a model, but she is also 63! (Plate 2) Women of all ages are commodified, packaged and sold as objects. 'Mainstream' images in our culture bear the traces



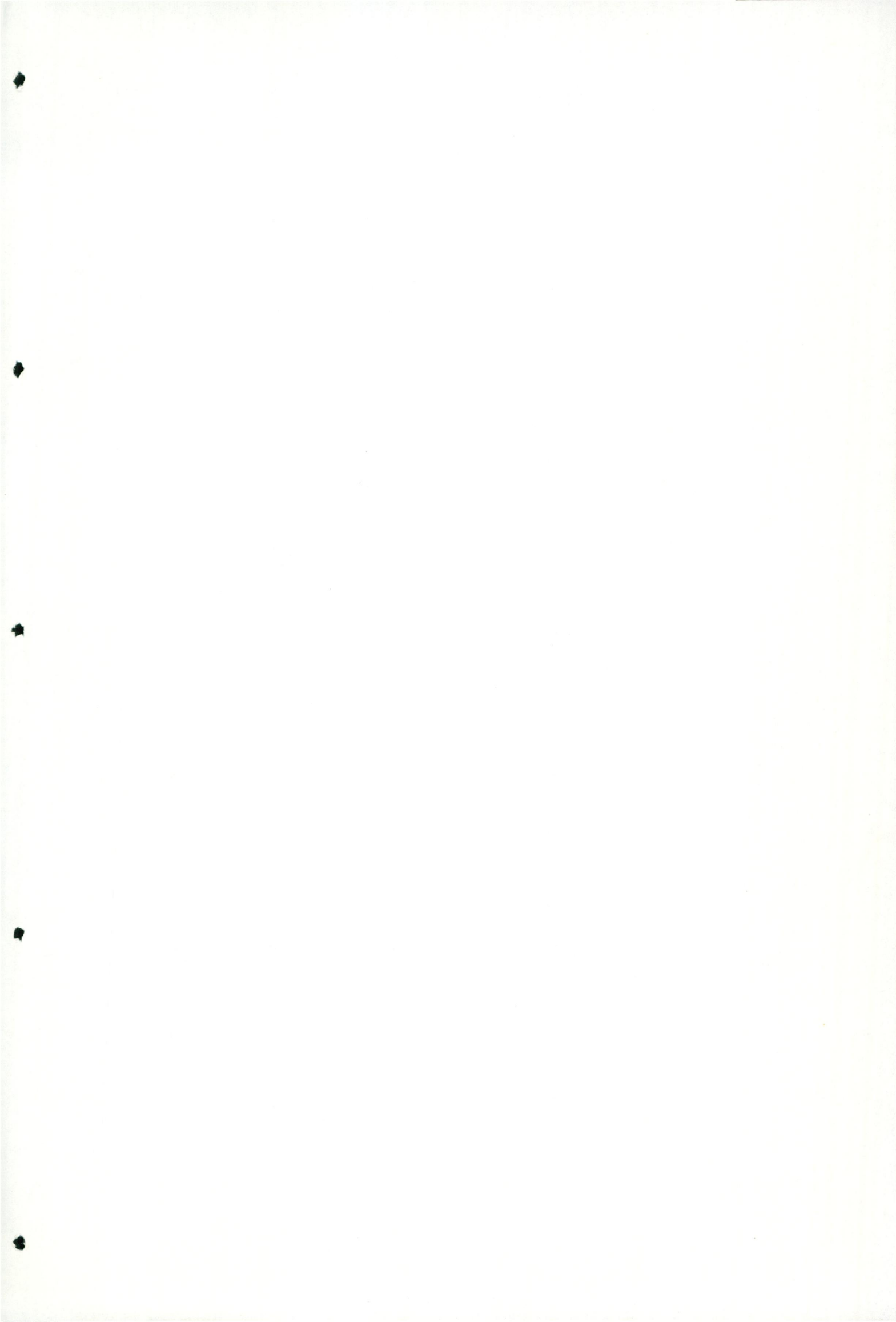


SHE IS SEXY AND SASSY.  
CLASSY AND ELEGENT

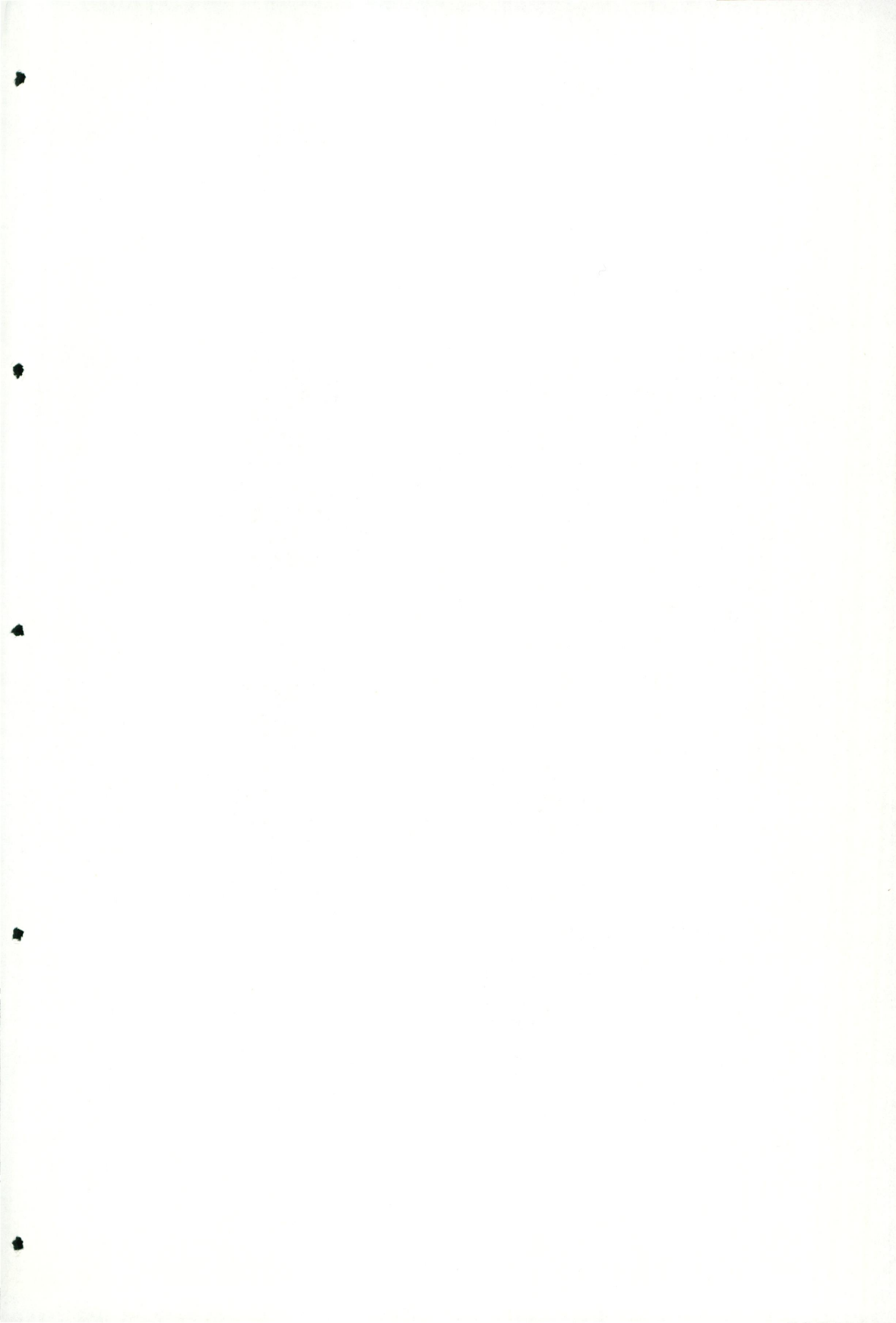




Supermodel  
Lauren Hutton  
is feisty, 5'11"  
a figurehead  
for the first  
wave of baby  
boomers to  
hit middle age







of capitalist and patriarchal social relations in which they are produced exchanged and consumed. Over the past couple of years, tremendous pressure on the ageing woman has emerged in our western culture to remain youthful, fit and beautiful. A significant proportion of advertisements for cosmetics, hair care and skin care denigrate the women's ageing process as something to be concealed and postponed. Many advertisements construct negative images of older women's bodies. For example, "Equalia helps prevent premature ageing...keeping your skin looking younger for longer.." 'Innoxia' - "How can you match her youthful glow? (competitive element with the younger woman.) - "Oil of Ulay will help keep your skin young looking for longer".

Moreover in a recent article on the model Lauren Hutton by Sarah Mower The Sunday Times Magazine (August 21st 1994, p.38) the headline ran:

Supermodel Lauren Hutton is feisty,  
fifty-one, a figurehead for the first  
wave of baby boomers to hit middle age.  
(Plate 3)

Mower argues that she is an image, a figurehead for the new middle-aged woman "to look to and to hope she is no longer condemned to invisibility." (Plate 4) Today in both Europe and America, Lauren Hutton is the face of the new rage of Revlon cosmetics for older women.



27 Forever?  
Now you can look  
As young as you feel.....  
ETERNA 27 + helps to curb  
The onset of ageing.....  
Allowing skin to look and  
Act younger  
Revlon ETERNA 27+  
(Plate 5)

The above strategies keep older women in a state of anxiety and stress regarding their ageing process. Older women are manipulated, 'passing' for being younger at the expense of confronting the reality of ageing in all its aspects.

Cynthia Rich states:

Passing....is one of the most serious threats to selfhood...our true identity, never acted out, can lose its substance, its meaning even for ourselves. Denial to the outside world and relief at its success...blurs into denial of self.  
(Davies, K. Dickey D. Stratford T. p.34)

In these ways, women's ageing process is invalidated: our identity denied. There is no doubt that the stigma of a woman ageing is a powerful one in western culture.

The journalist, Gail Sheehy, in her book Silent Passage interviewed a number of famous older women. What she found most intriguing were the subjective attitudes about this "passage" as she calls menopause, and the whole subject of the ageing process that the menopause inevitably stirs up. Sheehy found that many women put blinkers on and

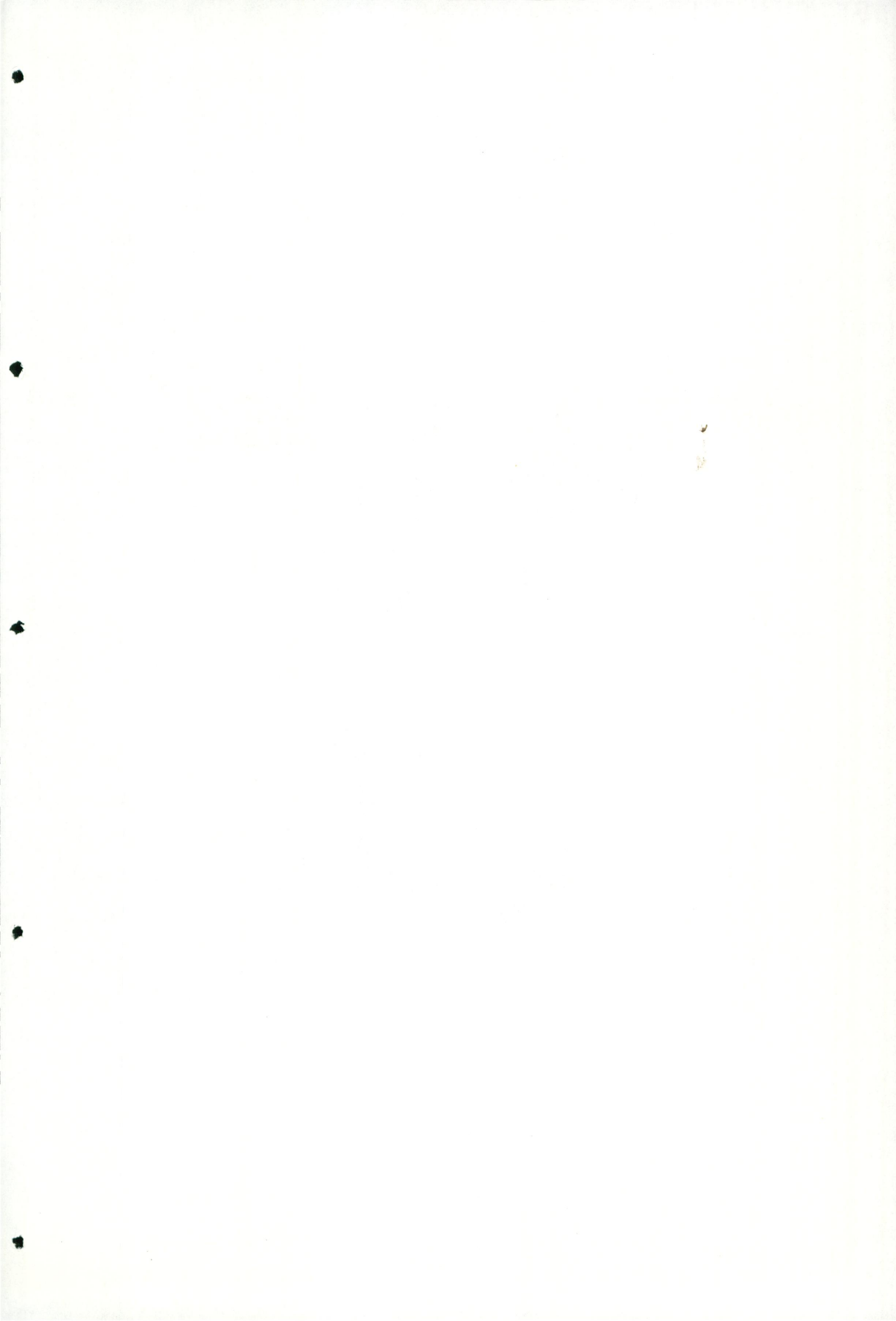






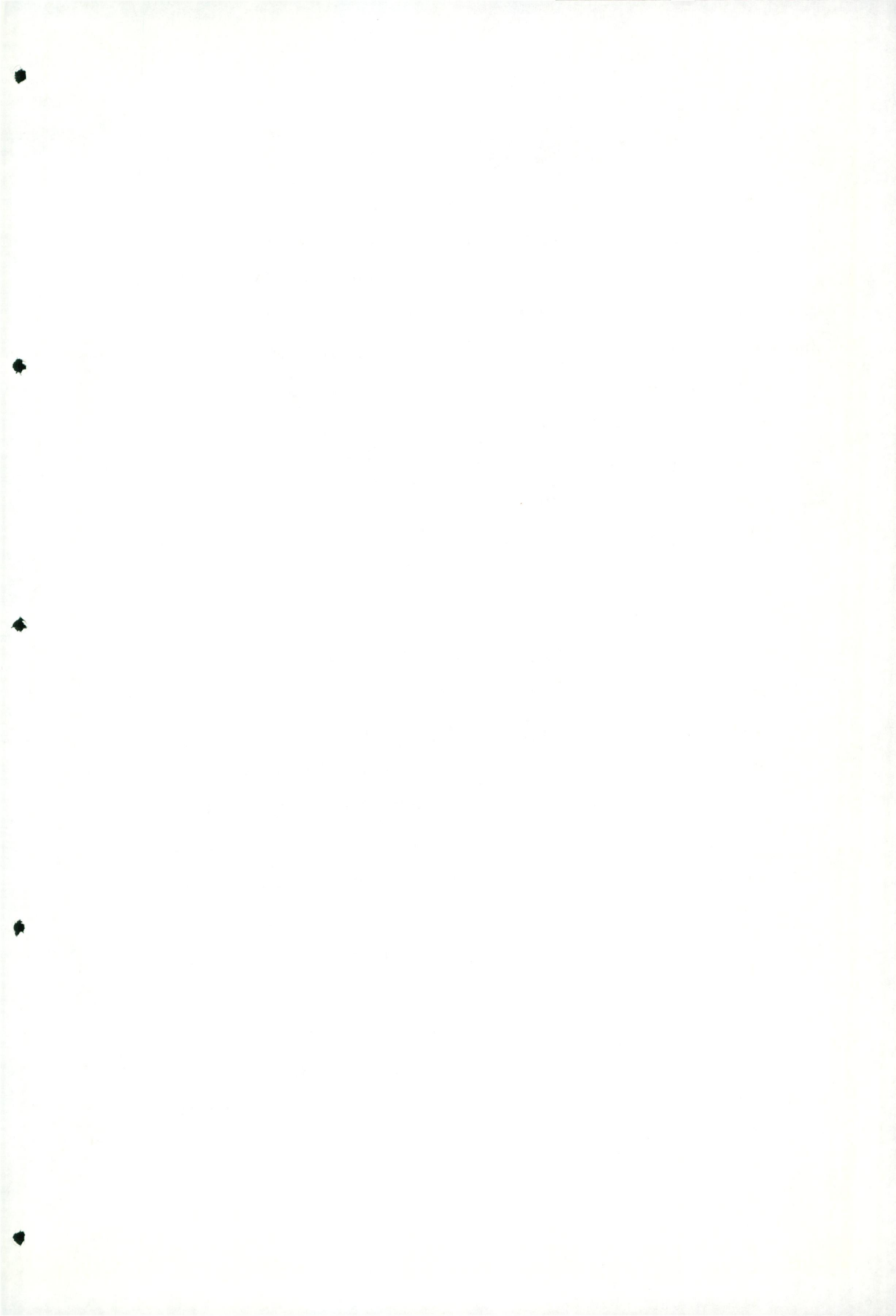
REVLON

ETERNA 27+



refuse to acknowledge the deeper psychosexual questions and long term questions raised by the transition from menstruating, to menopause, to ageing.

Sheehy's interview with Fay Weldon, the novelist, famed for her witty send-ups of male sexual vanity, stated: "To define yourself as menopausal is in a way a mistake....it's a word used by men to define the cause of your being horrible, miserable and unattractive, as they see it." (Sheehy, p.4). Sheehy commented on the popular British novelist, Barbara Taylor Bradford stating that Taylor Bradford put up an even more defiant resistance to ageing. Remembering her aunt's hushed talk about the change, she vowed that when she hit fifty it was not going to have any effect on her and she decided not to pay any attention to it. A similar attitude to Taylor Bradford's, but put slightly differently, is that of the usually outspoken editor of the Sunday Express, Sue Pollard. Pollard stated - "If you don't talk about it, you might just float through it." She acknowledges however, "In Britain we certainly share the American nervousness about getting older." (Sheehy p.4) Indeed older women are made to feel nervous about getting older. Today there are more and more articles and programmes on television and radio which are of interest to older women's health. There are many debates regarding

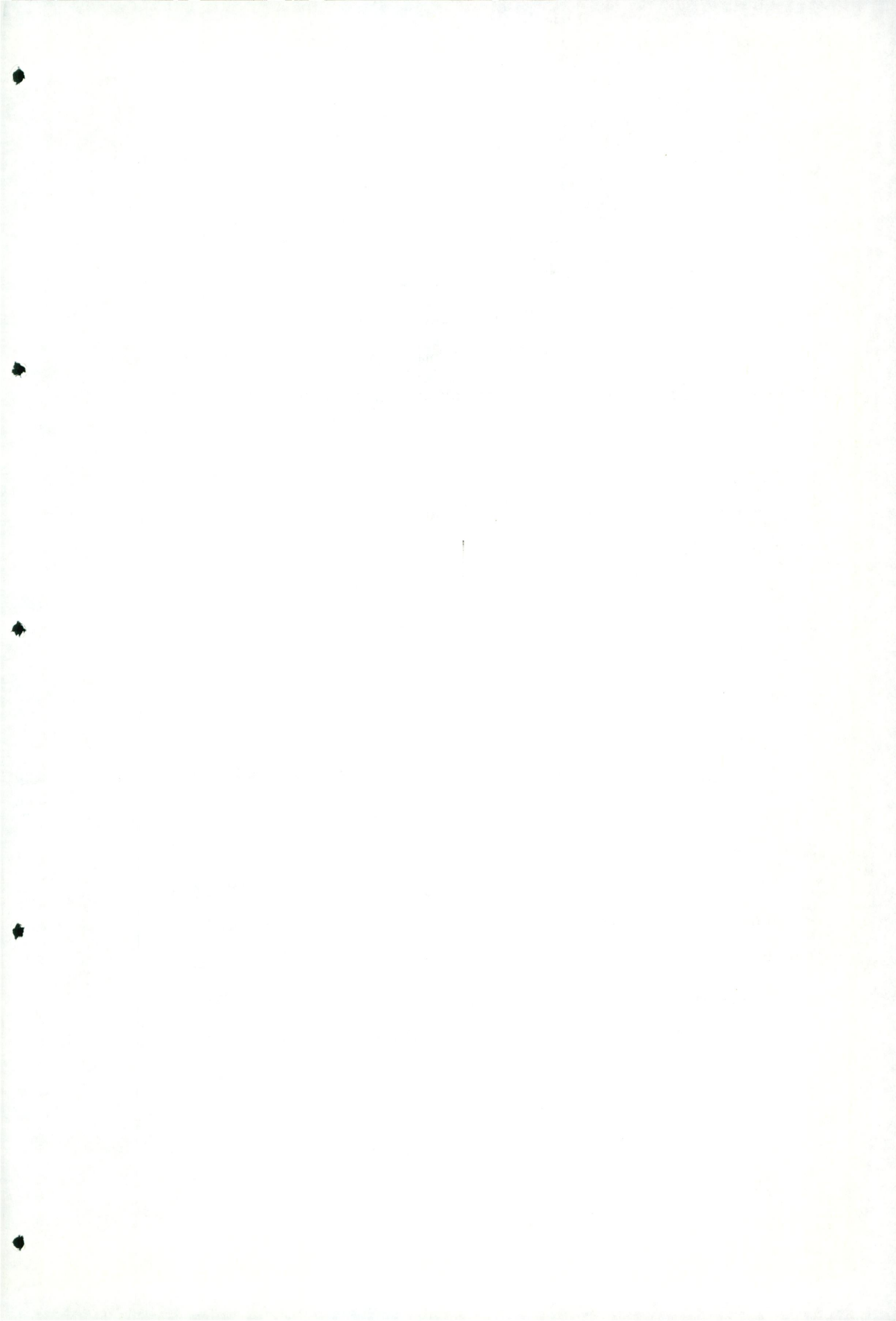


hormonal replacement therapy. Older women are told not to put up with the menopause, but find a sympathetic general practitioner who will give you tranquillisers or H.R.T. There are of course opposing views on H.R.T. One view is that it is the elixir of life. The tabloids from time to time have headlines like - "My Sex Life is terrific because I'm on H.R.T." Rich glamorous famous women such as Joan Collins, Raquel Welch, Cher, Sophia Loren and many more, praise H.R.T. claiming it keeps them young and sexy!

The opposite view to the menopause and ageing defies the 'medicalization' of menopause and holds the view that it is a natural process; one should not interfere with nature. Of course the extreme version of the natural menopause is represented by Germaine Greer's extreme polemic view - "Go out and be batty old hags." (The Sunday Times Magazine May 2, 1993, p.37). Ageing women in patriarchal society have to contend with both sexism and ageism and many oppressive structures that devalues them keeping them enslaved.

For many women in the third stage of their lives the problem is usually financial. Many marriages break up in middle age leaving an enormous number of women facing poverty. J. Ginn and S. Arber, in their article on Ageing and Cultural Stereotypes of Older Women argue that:

As a woman ages, she is treated  
as of diminishing value by men,



both as a wife and as a potential employee. The increase in the divorce rate over the last thirty years has swollen the number of women aged between 45 and 64 who must make the transition from partial or complete financial dependency in marriage to self-support. The combination of their 'redundancy' as wives and home makers with the age/sex discrimination they encounter when trying to obtain employment has left many middle aged women in social and economic limbo.  
(p.60)

On the other hand, some middle aged women who have money and/or a career, can become acutely anxious regarding their looks, especially if their partner has left them for a younger woman. Women, gripped by fear, feeling discarded, and with a loss of self-confidence, having been thought usually to always deprecate themselves, can go on a massive denial trip and become quite desperate to remain young at any cost. Many women fall into the trap of trying to emulate the "ideal older woman", the glamorous stars of film and television by seeking cosmetic surgery. In many magazines and from time to time in the tabloids and the more up market newspapers, i.e. The Times, The Observer etc, there are articles on cosmetic surgery encouraging women to use it. Women's magazines set the beauty index. Nowadays they carry many advertisements for cosmetic procedures. A good example is in 50 Magazine - the magazine for the over-50's (Spring 1994 No. 22), (Plate 6). The advertisement runs:

Can Cosmetic Surgery Help You?  
There are a number of ways in which  
surgery could improve the appearance



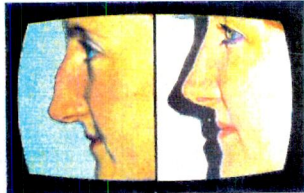


# Can Cosmetic Surgery Help You?

Find out if cosmetic surgery can help you: without obligation consult **The Pountney Clinic** - one of Europe's foremost centres of cosmetic surgery. No-one can turn the clock back - but the experienced surgeons at **The Pountney Clinic** have achieved remarkable and lasting improvements - in face and figure, for both men and women, using proven techniques.

## NOSE IMPROVEMENT

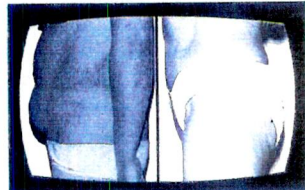
Cosmetic surgery can make many changes to the nose. Some are dramatic, others extremely subtle. At a surgeon's consultation the desired effects will



be discussed thoroughly with you and the probable effect could be demonstrated to you - on screen, using our remarkable video-sculpt system. With this improvement operation all the skills and experience of the cosmetic surgeon are brought into play. Your facial features: the general shape and appearance, the characteristics of the face and lips, the profile formed by these in conjunction with the chin and forehead - all are equally as important. The final effects of nose refinement produce a more pleasing nose shape and size together with a general enhancement of the face itself.

## ABDOMINOPLASTY/ 'TUMMY TUCK'

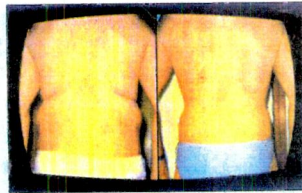
The stomach lift operation reduces the amount of loose skin and flesh lying across the tummy and helps to re-waist the figure. This procedure is often specified, for example after childbirth when the flesh may not have returned to its original condition and you are left with a sagging 'apron'. Many men and women find this procedure particularly attractive if they are interested in outdoor activities such as sunbathing and swimming and wish to maintain or return to - a lithe and shapely figure.



## LIPOSUCTION / SPOT FAT REDUCTION

This highly specialised, successful treatment (also referred to as Lipectomy) involves the drawing away of excess fatty tissue through a slender, hollow instrument. Several different areas can be treated at the same time. This is not an easy way to lose weight. Liposuction is not suitable for overweight people - it is only used to recontour areas where diet and exercise have not been able to help.

Surgeons at The Pountney Clinic have performed suction-assisted lipectomies for many years, eliminating fatty deposits from knees, tummies, thighs and other problem areas such as beneath the chin, the buttocks and flanks.

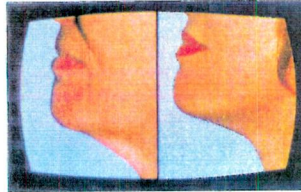


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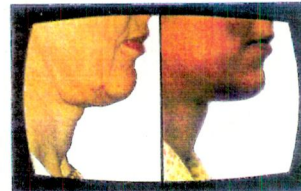
**The Pountney Clinic**  
081-570 9658

41 Bath Road, Hounslow  
West London, TW3 3BN

## THE CLASSICAL FACE LIFT



There are a number of ways in which surgery could improve the appearance of the face. **Chin Tucks**, **Neck Lifts**, even **Eyebag and Eyelid removal** can each improve specific features. One of the more popular procedures for both men and women is the Classical Facelift. This involves the removal of any loose, surplus skin and unwanted fatty deposits from the upper neck, the jaw line and the lower cheeks.



The remaining skin is then smoothed gently over the facial contours eliminating the ageing signs and restoring a facial freshness and a pleasing, younger appearance.

## BREAST ENHANCEMENTS

There are a number of key procedures for improving the shape of the breasts. **Breast Enlargement**, for some, **Breast Uplift** for others, and **Breast Reduction**. Sometimes the breasts may have sagged and also reduced in size, possibly as a result of childbirth and breast feeding. In these cases the uplift can be augmented with a breast enlargement.

## NEW VIDEO-SCULPT SYSTEM

Your surgeon's consultation can now include - on screen - a strong indication of what improvement surgery could do for you personally. Our revolutionary new imaging system automatically puts you on screen. Working with you in confidence, the surgeon can show you what improvements could be made. It does not replace your comprehensive consultation with a caring and highly experienced surgeon. Nothing can. But it could do your confidence the world of good.

Some of the excellent procedures undertaken at The Pountney Clinic

NOSE IMPROVEMENT AND REFINEMENT  
FACELIFTS · WRINKLE IMPROVEMENT  
EYEBAG AND EYELID IMPROVEMENT  
LIP IMPROVEMENT · CHIN 'TUCKS'  
BREAST ENLARGEMENTS, UPLIFTS AND REDUCTIONS  
INVERTED NIPPLE IMPROVEMENT  
NECK LIFTS · SPOT FAT REDUCTION  
SCAR REFINEMENT  
THREAD AND VARICOSE VEINS  
'TUMMY TUCKS' · CHEEK IMPLANTS  
RECEDING CHIN CORRECTION  
'BAT EAR' CORRECTION  
MOLE AND TATTOO REMOVAL  
OVERCOMING MALE BALDNESS

I am interested in improving my \_\_\_\_\_

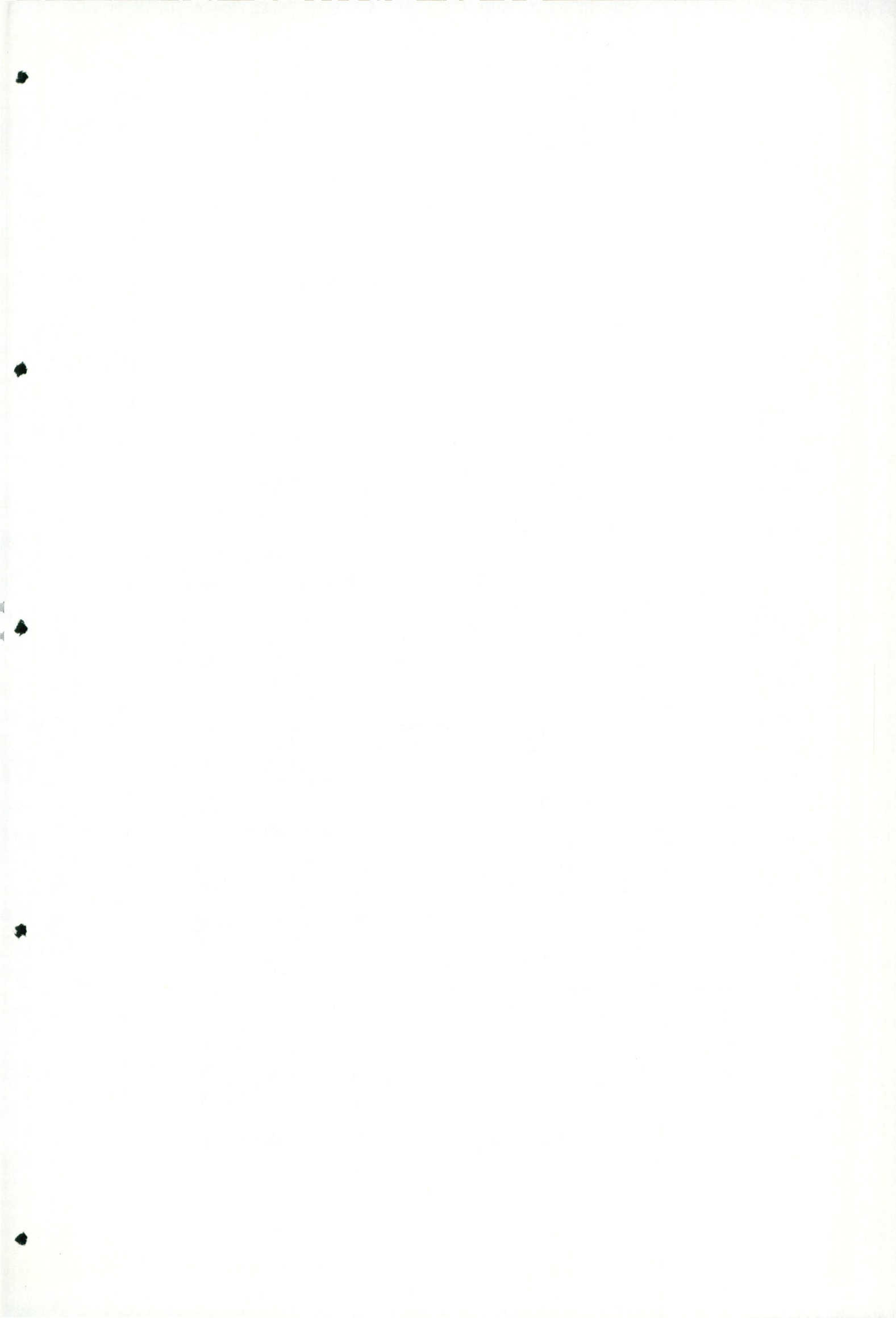
Please send me full details, without obligation, today. BLOCK CAPITALS

Name (Mr/Mrs/Miss) \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Postcode \_\_\_\_\_



of the face - chin tucks, neck lifts, even eye bag and eye lid removal can each improve specific features.....

The Classical Facelift: This involves the removal of any loose, surplus skin and unwanted fatty deposits....The remaining skin is then smoothed gently over the facial contours eliminating the ageing signs and restoring a facial freshness and a pleasing, younger appearance.

Through the above advertisement women are seduced into believing that cosmetic surgery can transform them into beautiful younger looking women. Unfortunately bad results from aesthetic point of view are not uncommon after surgery. Trying to emulate Hollywood stars and other fashionable images is totally unrealistic as these images are usually contrived. Cosmetic surgery is a business and smart sophisticated advertising promising to eliminate the ageing signs are all part of the selling campaign. It is a big business and face lifts can cost from £2,500 to £3,000.

What many older women are denying is not their age, but a derogatory stereotype of an older woman. In our society, which penalises old age severely, a woman's effort to avoid the appearance of ageing may be a rational response to escape from the prevailing, unjust image and discrimination of an ageing female.

Initially articles on cosmetic surgery and cosmetic surgeons were usually discreet and the advertising space small.

Today's advertising space for cosmetic surgery takes



up full pages in magazines. All one has to do to find a surgeon is to look up the Golden Pages in which there are numerous cosmetic surgeons. If you cannot afford the surgery, never mind. There are ways around that too. There are loans available for cosmetic surgery, for, as one advertisement stated: "Loans for Cosmetic Surgery....for a free brochure including our terms for competitive medical and dental loans." (Chic, December/January 1994/95) The female in western culture seems trapped and intimidated from all angles to become a man-made woman.

In her book the writer and feminist Naomi Wolf discusses the violence of cosmetic surgery on women. The publicity minimalizes the danger and risk to the lives of women who undergo such procedures, and the pain of the actual surgery throughout is trivialized. Such statements regarding the pain are to the effect that, "There will be a little bruising and swelling, or it can be uncomfortable or/and there is some discomfort."

Wolf states:

Surgery hurts, it hurts....  
Waking up hurts, and coming back  
to life hurts horribly. Cosmetic  
surgery is not 'cosmetic' and human  
flesh is not 'plastic' ....When  
a class of people is....repeatedly  
cut open and stitched together to no  
medical purpose, we call it torture.  
(p.257)

Many women are becoming desensitized and anaesthetized to the effects of cosmetic surgery on the body. When we see a



face with blacked eyes or a broken nose and crusts of blood under sutures, we take this for granted as part of the procedure to help us erase our wrinkles and blemishes. We do not see the harm that eyelid surgery can leave us blind, a nose job may damage our sense of smell and numbness can accompany face-lifts. We are becoming willing to see our ageing process as a disease and hand our bodies over to surgeons to recreate our bodies into culture's official fantasy.

We are all consumers, but today, older women's bodies are becoming more and more packaged, commodified and glamourized in order to sell products to them. Some of these women have good buying power. Female stars such as Raquel Welch, Cher, Jane Fonda, Elizabeth Taylor, Joan Collins all promote their own products such as cosmetics, clothes, books on health, fitness and video tapes. They are packaged and glamourized, promoting life after forty. These beautiful women hold out a vision of perfection which few of us can ever attain.

Annette Khun in her essay on "Living Dolls and Real Women" discusses the illusion of the glamour image and the power it has over women. Khun states:

Glamour is a notion applied almost exclusively to women....Glamour is understood generally to imply a sense of deceptive fascination of





groomed beauty, of charm enhanced by means of illusion. A glamorous/glamourised image then is one manipulated, falsified perhaps, in order to heighten or even idealise. A glamorous image of a woman (or an image of a glamorous woman) is peculiarly powerful in that it plays on the desire of the spectator in a particularly pristine way: beauty or sexuality is desirable exactly to the extent that it is idealised and unattainable. (Kuhn, p.12)

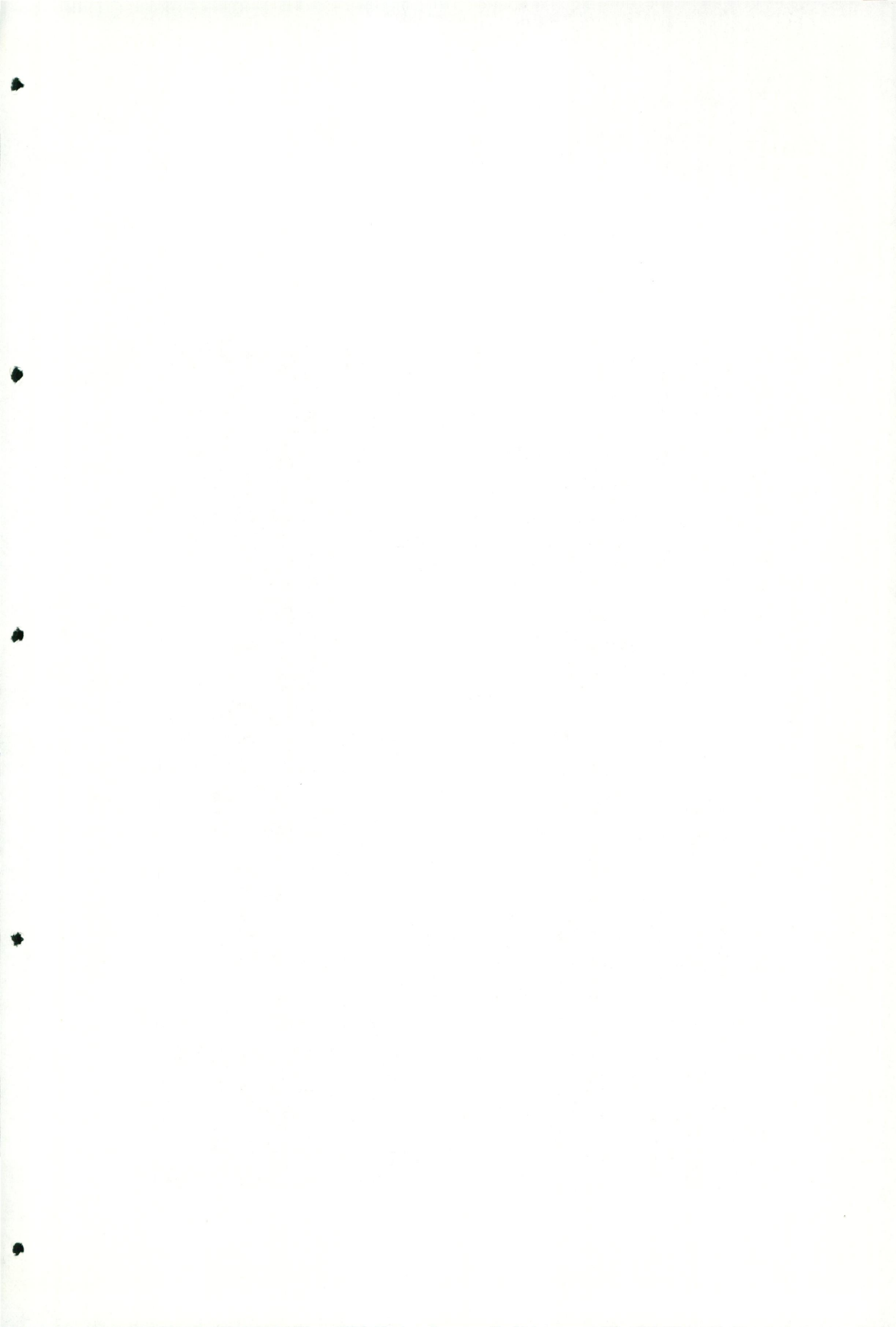
Khun points out that the glamourised woman is strongly represented in mass-produced images. We women realise we cannot attain such glamour so we get our displaced desire on the products they advertise or connote - buying their products in order to be pleasing to look at.

What many women are inclined to forget/deny as Khun points out, is that a great deal of the groomed beauty in the glamour images we see are 'made up'. Cosmetics have been applied to the body in order to enhance the body. The image is also 'made up' in the sense that the images rather than the women are put together, constructed, fabricated or falsified on sophisticated soft ware. Glamour is in many ways about surface appearances aimed primarily at a female audience. Glamour images are always idealised images of women. They promote the ideal woman as being put together, composed of surfaces and defined by appearance. Annette Khun argues:

It is here that the glamour tradition in all its manifestations may be seen to occupy a place dangerously close to another tradition of representation of women, from myth to fairy tale to high art to pornography, in which they







are stripped of will and autonomy. Woman is dehumanised by being represented as a kind of automaton. (Kuhn)

The actress and film star Joan Collins, who in 1983 was riding very high on the crest of the wave of success as Alexis Carrington in the soap 'Dynasty,' did a photo session for Playboy (Plate 7). Collins writes in her autobiography Past Imperfect:

...Women had been exploited for years, whether by themselves or others made no difference. The women I saw in Playboy and other men's magazines were young girls doing their erotic or sexy 'thing'...being a woman of a 'certain age', I felt revealing what I did in Playboy was a definite plus for women. "A significant step for feminism", I lightly announced. I was exploiting myself, yes, indeed, but in doing so I felt I was breaking the ageism taboo that so many women fear and dread....I hoped to prove that a woman can definitely be attractive and sexy over thirty-five or even over forty-five.... but the admiration that I received from women particularly for doing it, was well worth the minimum amount of negativity I received. (Collins, p.349-350, 1984)

Given the words of Joan Collins - "the admiration that I received from women, particularly", I wonder what kind of woman can admire any woman being exploited and commodified. I do not agree that doing a photographic session for Playboy is a "significant step for feminism." Collins has allowed herself to be depicted in the Playboy images like so many classical depiction of women's bodies in nineteenth century salon art and contemporary high and low culture: woman is present as an image but with specific connotations









of body and nature that are passive, available, and powerless. As Griselda Pollock states:

Despite their manifold disguises  
and the elevated obscurantism of their classical  
historical or literary titles, women's bodies are  
offered as frankly desirable and overtly sexual.  
(Parker and Pollock, 1981, p.116)

The pictures of Joan Collins in Playboy say nothing of Joan Collins the woman, the actress, the mother, the person. Collins is objectified and dehumanised. Pornography is about power, men's power over women. In it we are seen, regardless of our ages, as vulnerable, helpless, open, submissive and longing to be violated. As Rosalind Coward states:

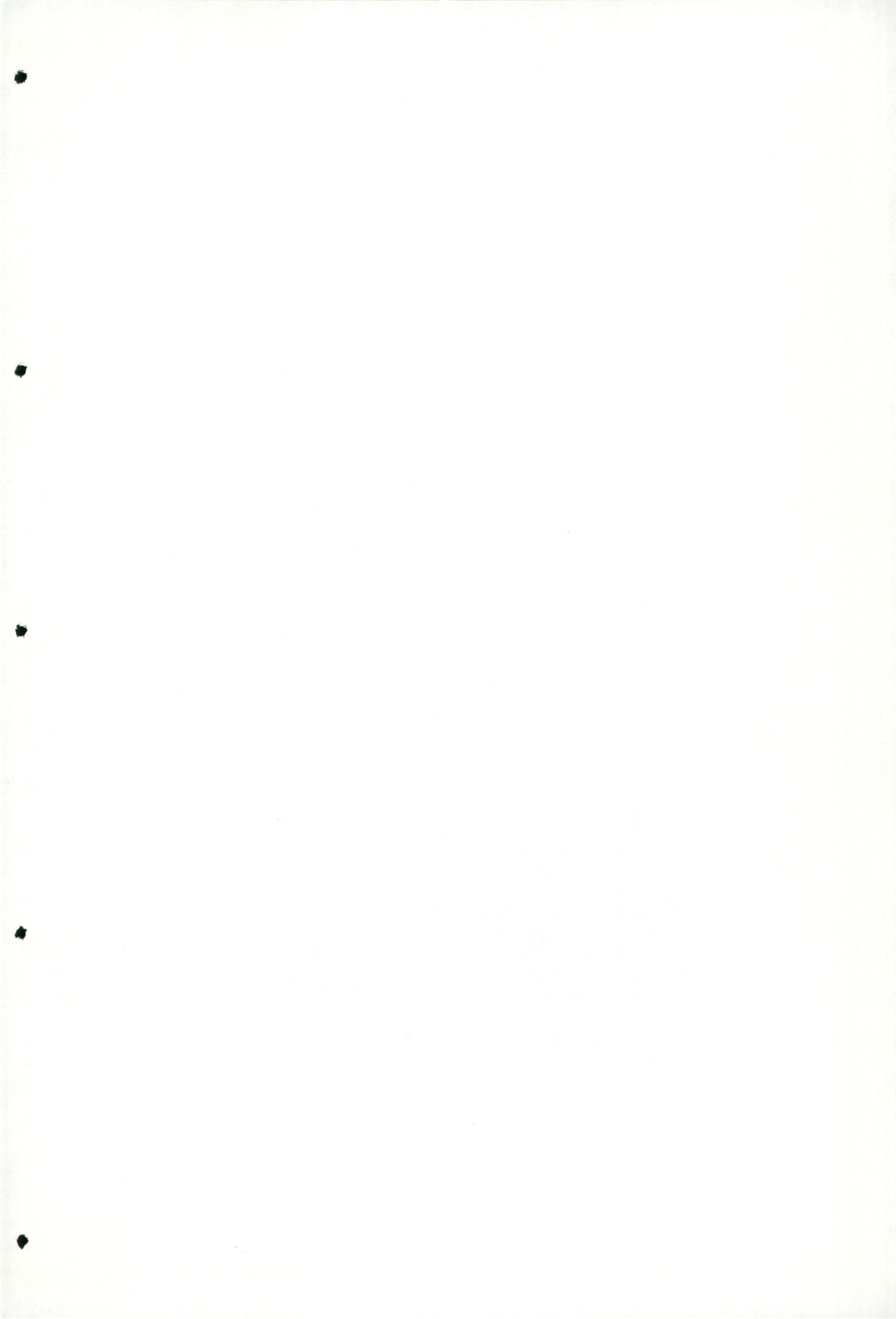
However the woman is portrayed in porn,  
whether as enjoying or resisting, the purpose  
is to give men pleasure and to increase their  
power over us.  
(Betterton (ed.) p.177)

Collins has allowed herself to be portrayed as an object. (Plate 8) Her humanness is unimportant and irrelevant. She is placed in a fantasy setting. Through photographic techniques, any blemishes, like wrinkles or grey hairs, are removed. She is stripped of anything that would make her a unique person. To produce a 'look', many effective skills are used such as harsh lighting and soft focus. In this process, Joan Collins has become depersonalised, an object to be viewed and consumed (Plate 9).

Collins, by posing for Playboy, is promoting an image of







herself as simply a sex aid for man. She is partaking in an industry that uses, abuses and exploits millions of women in the production of images from art to pornography showing women as everything from loving rape and abuse, to snuff movies where women are actually murdered for entertainment. Joan Collins has not proven to us that women can be sexy and attractive over thirty-five, over forty-five or whatever, nor is she breaking any ageism taboo; what she has portrayed and reaffirmed in this layout is that at any age, women are for men's use, objects to service men's sexuality.

Many images of female sexuality have been constructed by men to maintain social control. Women's sexuality has been denied, distorted and devalued. We are objects of others' fantasies, not the subjects of our own lives. Women who object to pornography are often labelled as sexual conservatives, prudes or puritans. But many women are not prudes. They do not wish to be portrayed as objects where men's depersonalised needs are met. Julienne Dickey in her essay on The Body Politic - The Campaign against Pornography asserts that: "In rejecting pornography, we are not rejecting sex but the prevailing male view of women and sex." (P.79) In our society today, women of all ages are still being degraded. Rosalind Coward:

The male/female relationship depicted in pornography is an extreme example of the power imbalance within the institutions of heterosexuality in western culture.  
(Betterton, (ed), p.181)

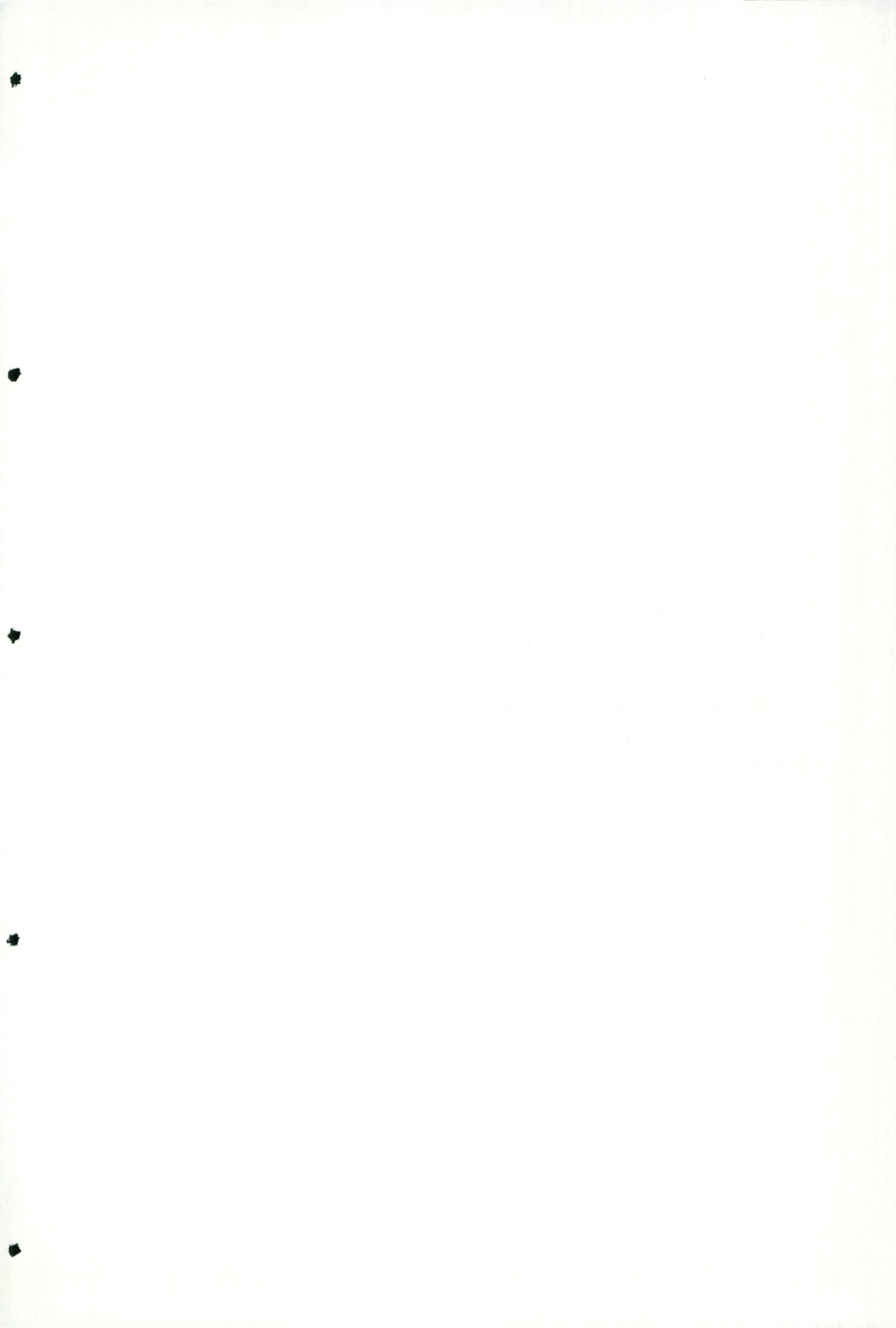


What the older woman needs is to be depicted and represented in positive ways in popular culture whether in soaps, sitcoms, films, newspapers or magazines. Scriptwriters and image makers, both male and female, have the power to show the older woman in a positive constructive manner, by creating roles whereby the actress can portray a lawyer, doctor, shop assistant or whatever. Scripts can be written which show middle aged women partaking in society as capable human beings and are well able to function in society with or without a man in their lives. The American sitcom The Golden Girls has shown how female friendship is important and part of women's everyday lives. This series deals in a comic fashion with subjects from menopause to broken marriages. Unfortunately at times the humour in the programme can depict the women as confused or scatty. However, the series is a starting point breaking many taboo notions regarding older women. Lorraine Gamman points out that up to the 1970's, television women detectives were represented for the distribution of glamorous spectacles, rather than as the focus of significantly women - centred entertainment. The detective T.V. series Cagney and Lacey can be seen as progressive or feminist mainly because the focus is on female activity rather than female sexuality. The series features independent female cops as strong central characters. This is an important ideological



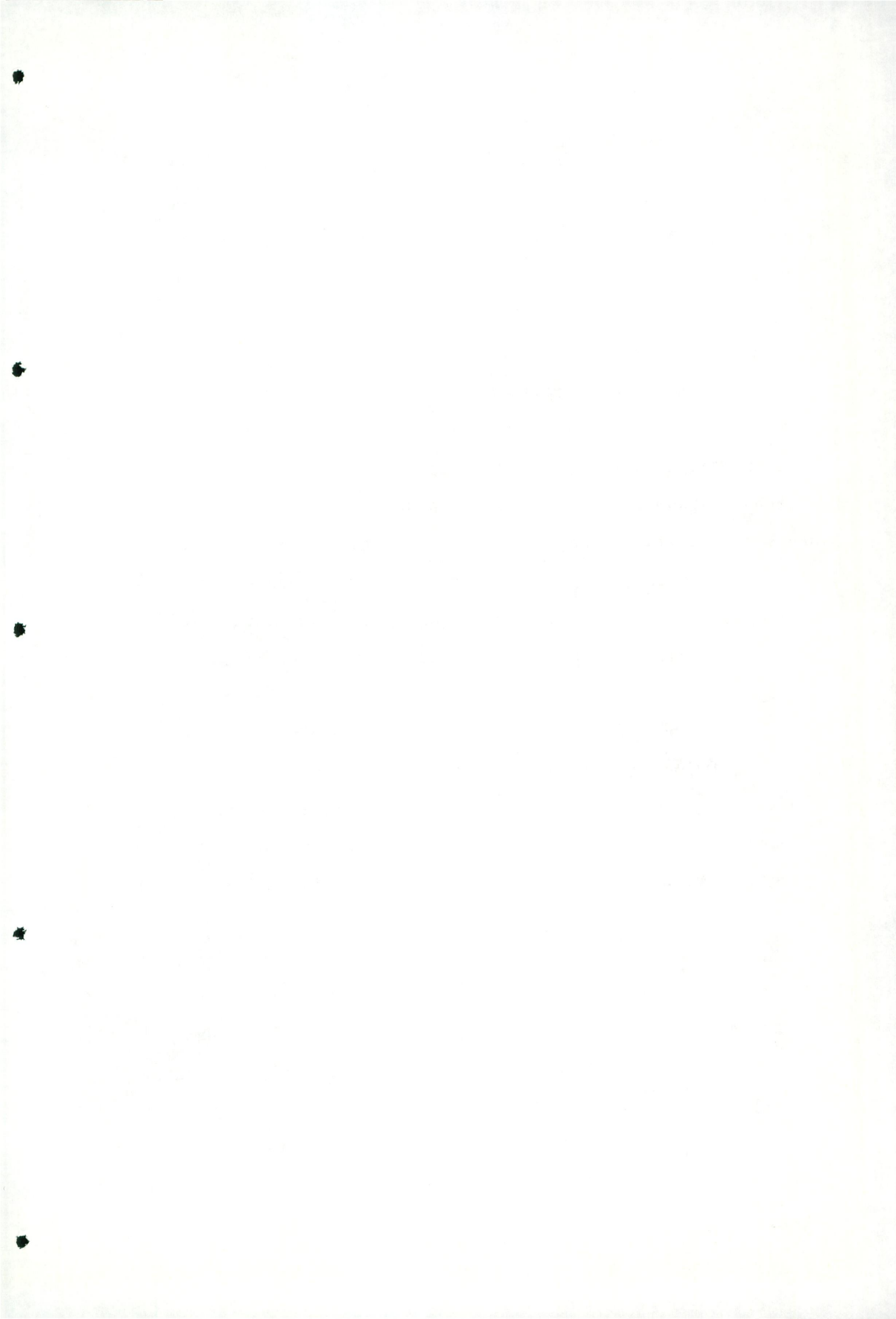






shift in terms of mainstream images. The characterisation in these series do not reduce female activity to familial roles as girl friends, wives, mothers and daughters, but acknowledges other social identities of women in the work place. These detectives are shown as active, assertive and fortyish.

Mike Hepworth, in his essay on "Old Age and Crime Fictions" argues that crime, being one of the most widely read types of popular fiction, can be an important source of positive imagery (Johnson J. and Slater R. ed. p.32). Agatha Christie's ageing Miss Marple, whose outer appearance of confusion, masks a formidable criminal investigator. More recently, the writer Lynda La Plante has written the television thriller Prime Suspect in which the actress Helen Mirren portrays a very capable woman detective Chief Inspector Jan Tennison. In this series, La Plante has shown how a middle aged woman detective can lead a murder enquiry very successfully. La Plante also exposes the difficulties, oppositions and resentments women have to overcome in working in a traditionally male environment (Plate 10). Another very constructive and sensitive characterisation of older women in the media was the B.B.C. series Tenko. The women portrayed in this series such as Sr. Ulrike the nun, Beatrice the doctor and Joss the aristocratic rebel, are all powerful women. Sadly such compelling images of women are still notably rare in the media today.

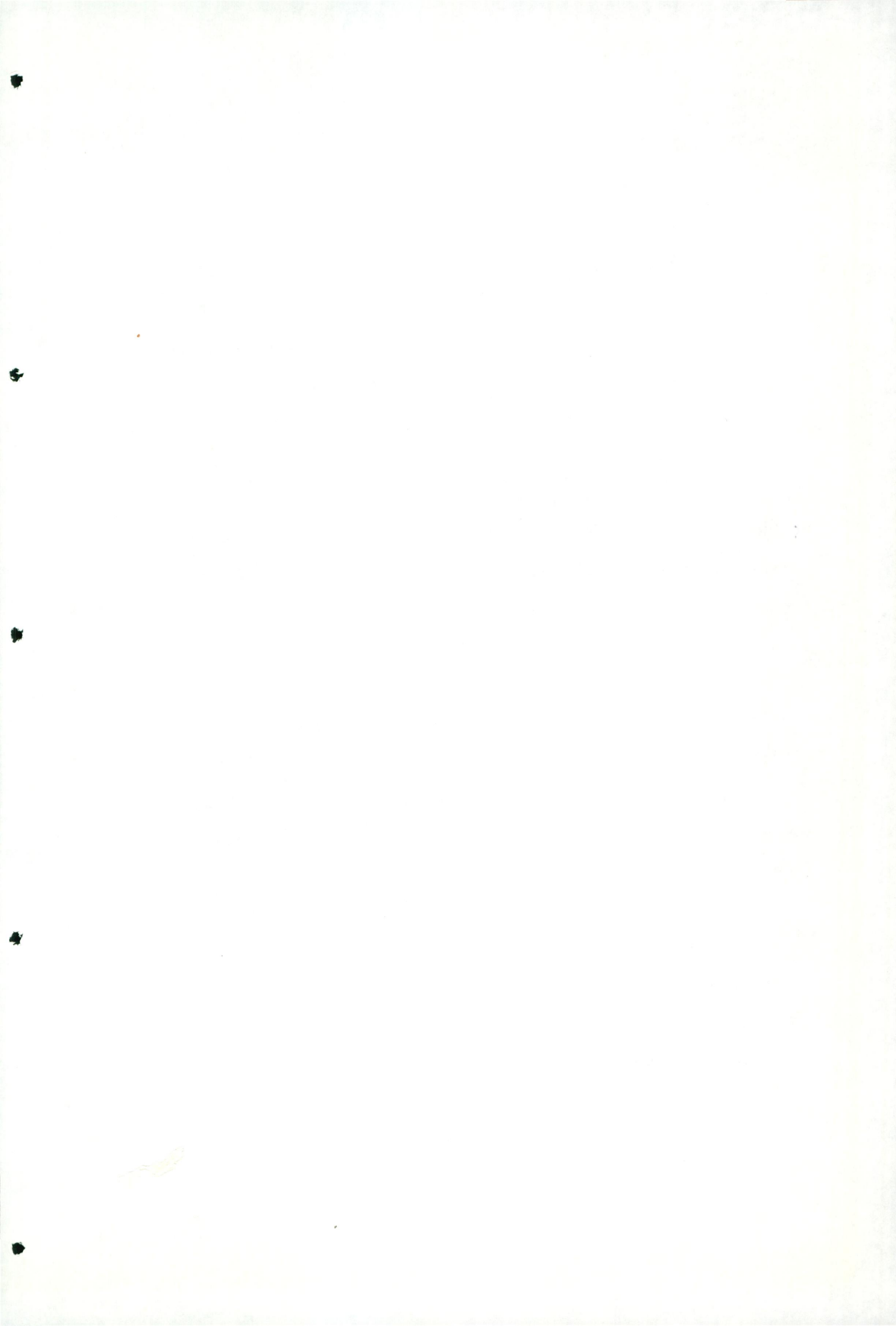


## Chapter 2.

In examining the history of western art, feminists have challenged, questioned and explored the ways in which the female body has been used and abused in artistic practice. The nude is an icon of western culture. As Lynda Nead states, it is, "A symbol of civilization and accomplishment". (Nead, p.1). The term "artist" has been equated in society with male artist, implying qualities and prerogatives which were exclusively associated with maleness. "Woman", as Mara R. Witzling has pointed out, "has meant denial of artistic agency and relegation to the role of object or muse." (Witzling p.8)

Feminist artists in the 1970's challenged the dominant tradition of the female nude. A strong belief in a female nature or feminine essence led to an important awakening in female creativity. Initially women's body art was to a large extent reactive against the glamorous, glorification of the "ideal woman" of the Old Master/Playboy tradition, and also against the traditional academic schools of art, which also continued to see the female body as a special category.

Feminist artists are very aware that women do live in a culture still dominated by patriarchal attitudes and values.



We are aware also that for centuries the female body as Lisa Tickner states:

She seems everywhere present in art, but she is in fact absent. She is not the expression of female experience, she is a mediating sign for the male.  
(Parker and Pollock, (eds) 1987, p.264)

Tickner also informs us that many depictions of female sexuality and images produced by male artists are for a masculine audience. The woman is not an equal sexual partner - she is used as John Berger claims: "The spectator-owner will in fantasy oust the other man, or else identify with him." (Berger, p.56)

Simone de Beauvoir has argued that living in a female body is different from looking at it as a man. Even the Venus of Urbino menstruated, as women know and men forget. Breasts, the womb, ovarian secretions, menstruation, pregnancy and labour are for the benefit of others not ourselves. Female artists have inherited from patriarchal culture iconographies of Venuses, mothers, whores, femmes fatales, vampires and Lolitas. Many feminist artists have taken this heritage and started working with it reclaiming the colonized territory from masculine abuse and fantasy. They have attacked it, reversed it, exposed and have used it for their own purposes. Lisa Tickner has pointed out that the most significant area of women and erotic art was that of the de-colonizing and the de-eroticizing of the female body





to challenge the taboos and celebrate the rhythms and pains of fertility and childbirth. Tickner also stated that, "Narcissism and passivity must be replaced by an active and authentic sexuality and cease accommodating our own alienation." (Parker and Pollock (eds.) 1987 p.266)

Many women artists sought forms through which to valorize women's experience and to insert women's personal experiences into art practice. Central core imagery predominated in the works of some feminist artists as part of an attempt to celebrate sexual difference, to affirm woman's otherness and to give a sense of pride and confidence in the female body and spirit. Other artists brought an awareness to the ways that sexual difference is produced and reinforced through representations in western high culture. The critic John Berger has stated that:

A woman must continually watch herself. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the surveyed and the surveyor within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman. (Berger, p.46)

To explore and celebrate the rhythms and pains of the female body and to seek new ways of resolving the relationships between the body as site of the spectacle of the woman, feminist art practices produced a plurality of aesthetic and political positions. A multiplicity of styles, media and subjects emerged. Many feminist artists and sculptors began



using materials which were uncommon to the history of painting and sculpture. Both Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse introduced materials which were powerfully tactile and suggestive. Other feminist artists became involved with film making, T.V., video, performance art, as well as the traditional areas of fine art.

Other artists took a radical stance in depicting the female body. Linda Nochlin points out how in western culture, the representation of the female nude can be problematic from a feminist point of view. Nochlin states:

In Utopia, that is to say, in a world in which the power structure was such that both men and women equally could be represented clothed or unclothed in a variety of poses and positions without any implications of domination or submission - in a world of total and so to speak, unconscious equality, the female nude would not be problematic. In our world it is. (Nochlin, p.30)

A good example of an artist who took a radical stance and still holds it today is the artist Mary Kelly. Her work is scripto-visual and addresses issues of the positioning of woman in patriarchal culture. Kelly's work emphasises sexuality as an effect of social discourses and institutions, and stresses the potentially oppressive sociopsychological production of sexuality. This contrasts with, for example, Chicago's work which embodies a belief in female sexuality as an innate quality. Her work, using vagina iconography, became a metaphor for the

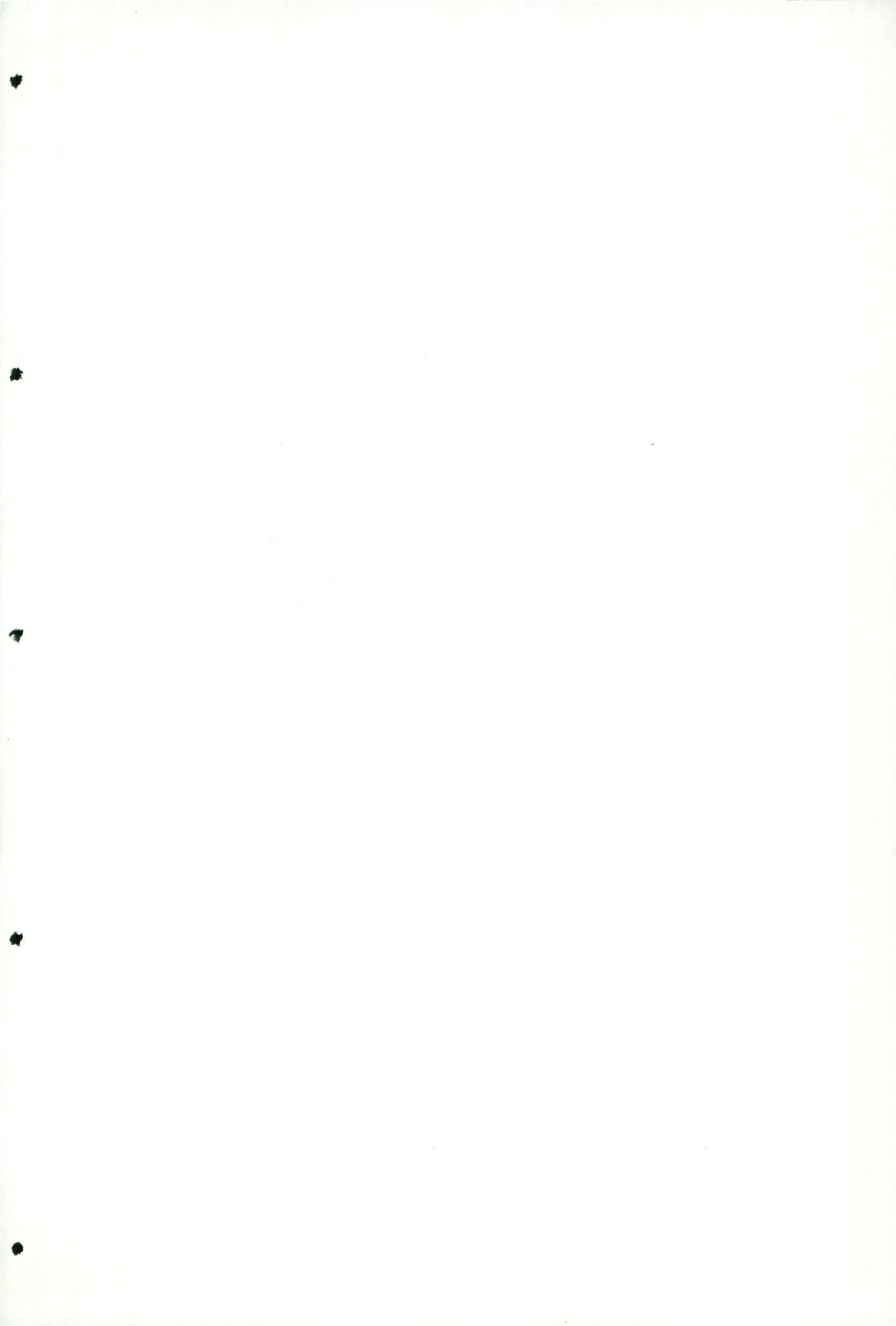
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struggle for personal freedom and liberation.

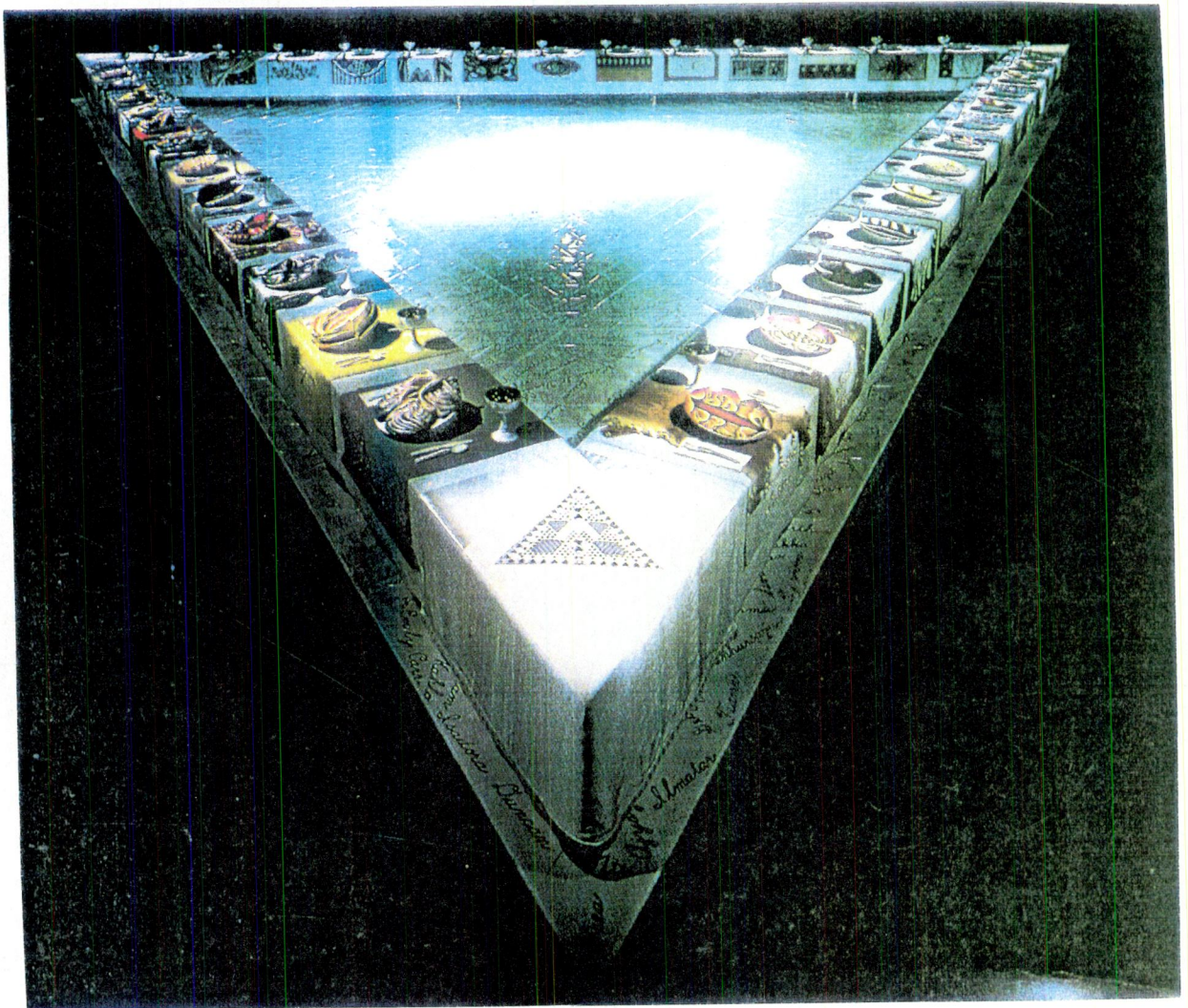
Kelly and Chicago are two very polemic and divergent feminist artists. Both artists deal with feminist issues. Kelly's art is highly scripto visual using articles of female clothing and numerous texts. Some critics find her theorizing too lengthy and extreme, whereas Chicago's central core images was/is very provocative and controversial. Critics either applaud or attack her work. Some find her vaginal depictions either vulgar or obscene and do not accept them as a metaphor celebrating femaleness. Some feminists have reacted fervently to the notion of womb centred imagery, arguing that it is just the same as the old style biological determinism in a new guise. Chicago states that she uses flower and genital forms metaphorically to symbolize the duality of strength and vulnerability, or of power and receptivity of the female. The Rejection Quintet : Female Rejection Drawing (Plate 11) clearly refers to the form of the female genitals. The Dinner Party (Plate 12) caused much controversy. The work consisted of a large triangular banquet table with thirty-nine place settings representing various mythological and historical women. Each figure has a runner, cutlery, goblet and plate designed to symbolize her particular achievements. Both Kelly and Chicago, in their art, desire to promote social change, to articulate a new language with which to

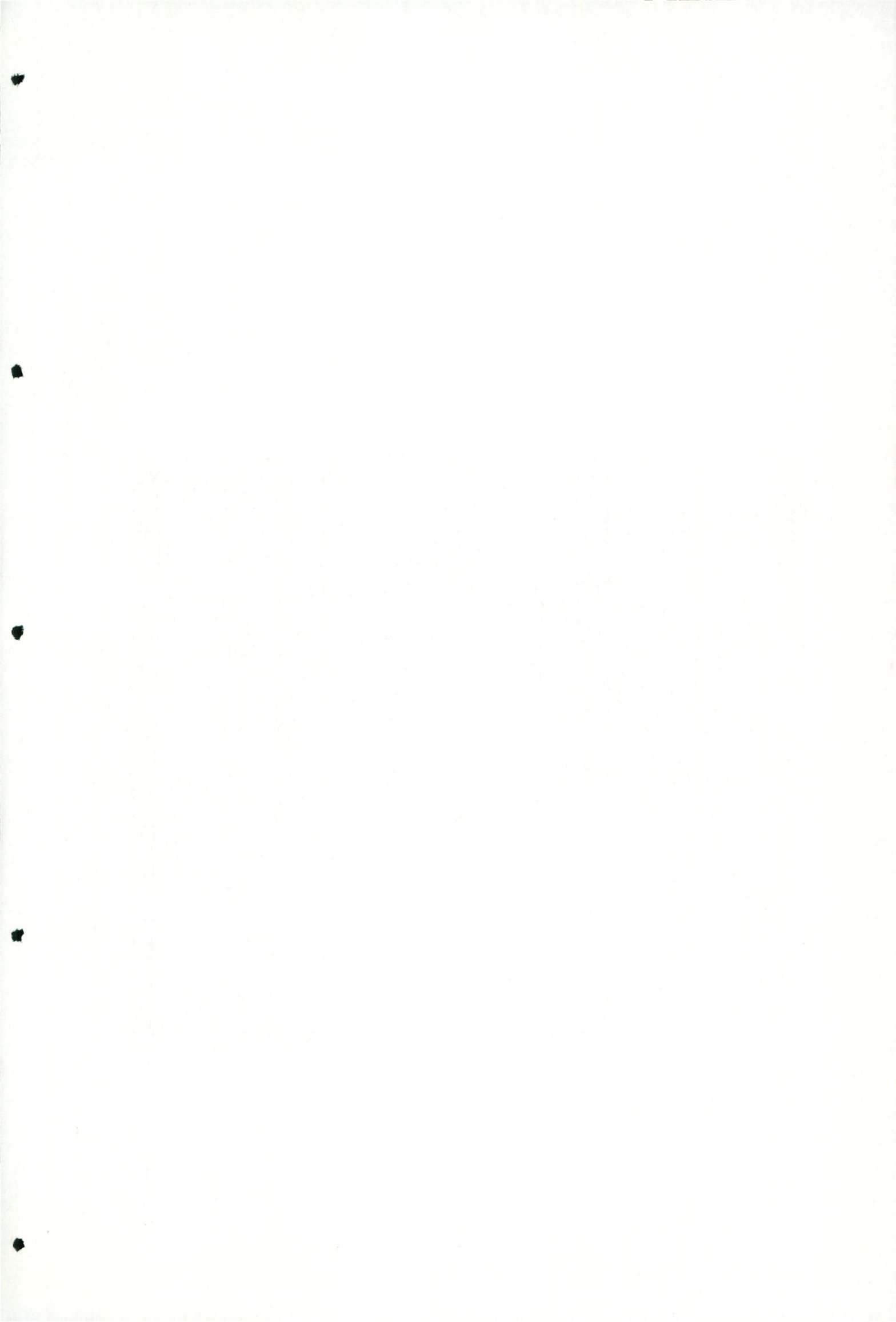












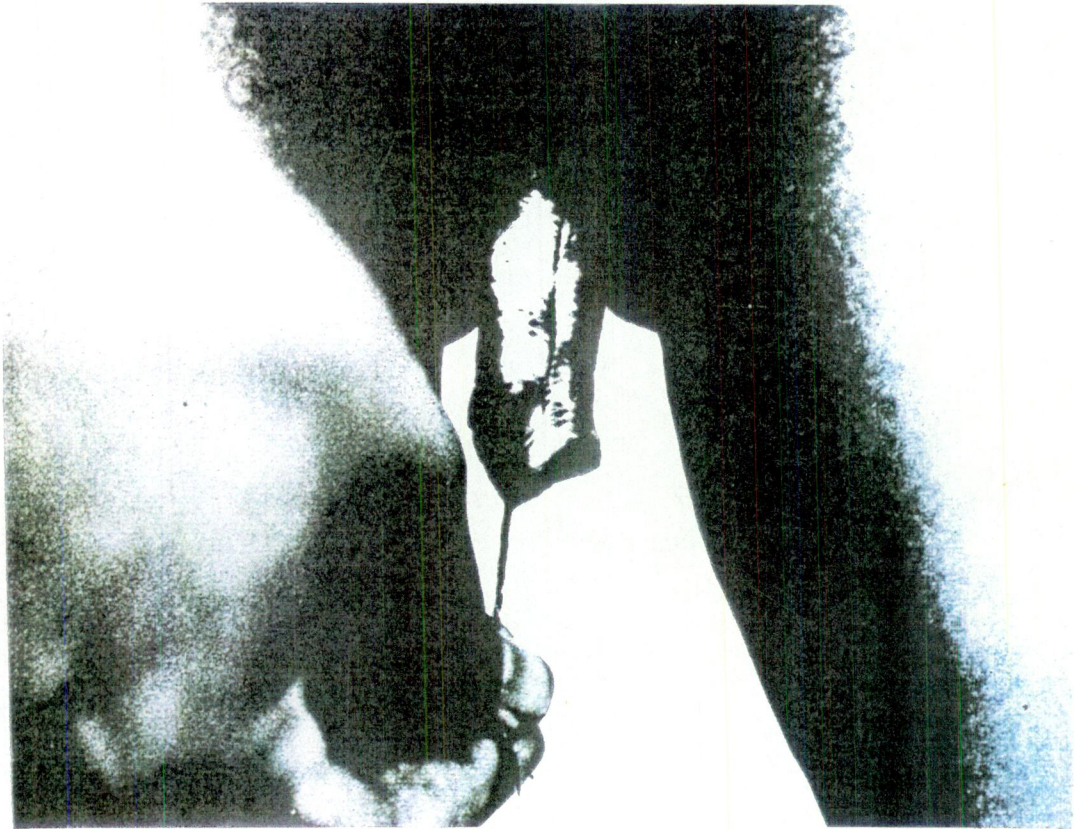
express women's experience. Their process and imagery are poles apart, but both address and challenge the hierarchy of art forms, the high/low dichotomy that has traditionally dominated our notion of what constitutes culture or art. Both artists also expose the oppression of being female in western patriarchal society.

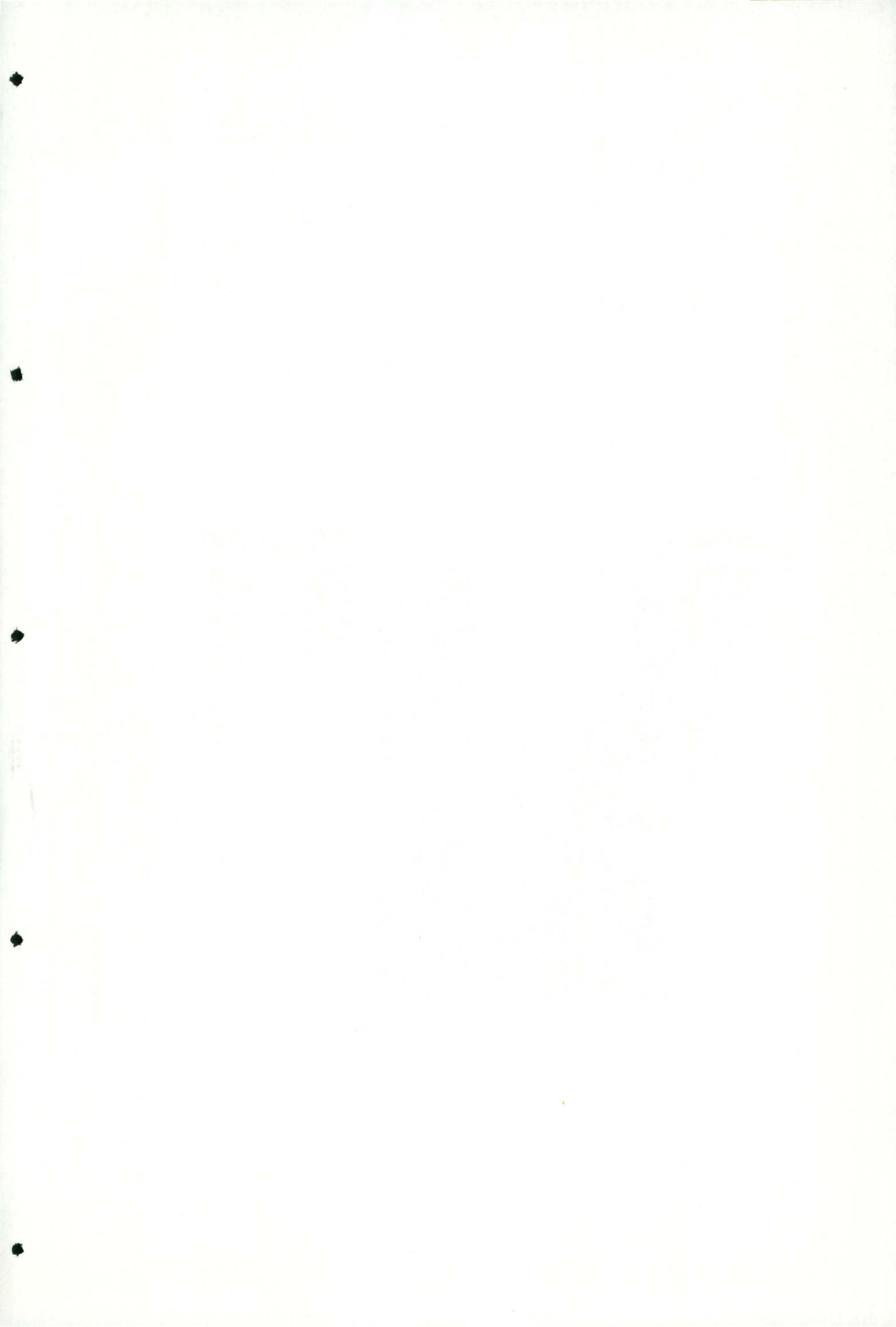
Lisa Tickner has pointed out in her article on "Transformation and Process" that women are closer to bodily processes and transformations than men. Our physical cycles are more insistent and we are used to treating our bodies as raw material. Unfortunately we are never accepted as we are. Women are either the raw material for their own cosmetic transformation in which we enhance nature to be fetchingly "culturized or we are for the artists" as Simone de Beauvoir has written. Tickner also states:

That at some deeper level, women are somehow inherently disgusting and have to be deodorized and rearranged into the "the delicacy appropriate to our sex. ( Parker, R. and Pollock G. Ed. 1987, p.27)

Lynda Nead also argues the ways culture finds such bodily functions as tears, urine, faeces despicable or that which is despicable are usually seen as feminine functions. Pregnancy, menstruation, lactation, menopause and the ageing female are all seen as despicable. In western culture women's bodies had been concealed until Chicago executed the notorious Red Flag photo lithograph (Plate 13) - a self







portrait from the waist down showing the removal of a bloody tampon. This work was deliberately made as well as the menstruation 'Bathroom' in Woman House which explored the dichotomy between the secrecy, the mess and discomfort of menstruating on the one hand, and the slick sophisticated, packaged denial of the truth.

From the initial feminist art movement of the early 1970's to contemporary art practices of the 1990's, many feminist artists have dealt with women's issues and women's bodily processes such as pregnancy, menstruation, lactation. These issues have been taken out of the 'female cupboard' and aired. But the process of ageing and the menopause has until recently been kept a secret. Another taboo subject, the ageing female has to contend with both sexism and ageism in a patriarchal society. Many issues regarding ageing in a patriarchal society have not been fully dealt with by many feminist artists until relatively recently. Two American feminists, Athena Tacha, and Mary Kelly, have approached this taboo subject of the ageing female. Tacha had documented her own personal ageing process whereas Kelly has documented and used scripto visuals and articles of women's clothing to look at 'the moment of middle age'. Mary Kelly's work Interim examines the woman as subject as she enters middle age, a time when her increasing invisibility





masculine world may lead her to experience vividly her own "constructedness". Marcia Tucker's catalogue introduction to Kelly's Interim points out how the icon of perfect womanhood which one finds in magazines reaffirming woman's identity is located in the private institution of domesticity, home and marriage. (Interim p.18). Tucker states that, "Mary Kelly's Interim meant to upset and displace this voice and its seductive logic." As Kelly states: "The question I want to raise is, what is a woman?" (Interim, p.18).

Kelly's work is deliberately structured to encourage viewers to ask themselves some fundamental questions: How do we know who we are? What is our subjectivity, how do we believe ourselves to be constituted in and through the social order? And, finally, who is doing the constituting? (Interim p.18)

For three years, Kelly gave structure to this project. She kept a notebook, an archive as she calls it, in which she recorded many conversations she had overheard or partook in with women who were involved with or had been affected by the second wave of feminism after 1968. From her archive we have the opportunity to hear these women as they explore their experiences as wives, mothers, sisters and daughters, many of them from the vantage of middle age. In the process, as Marcia Tucker points out, we discover



that we too are being encouraged to search and research our own histories and responses, an engagement which creates both a new definition of authorial power and a sense of pleasure in the interchange of subjectivities (Tucker p.19). The issues that are investigated in Interim are an indication of Kelly's own interests and experiences. Interim is not specifically an autobiographical work.

Kelly creates a middle aged woman who is conspicuously absent in most novels, films and advertisements. The older woman is not considered sexy because she is no longer seen as a useful measure to a male's potency. In patriarchal culture woman's power is in her youthfulness, the fact that her body has procreative capacity and its potential is for fertilization. Marcia Tucker states:

...the ageing or aged female body becomes a relic, a site of loss. For Kelly, this loss of power lodged in the body renders transparent the economic, political and cultural conditions that deprive a woman of power - the very conditions which simultaneously keep her from her own subjectivity. (Tucker p.18/19)

Interim is also about identification or crisis in which the middle aged woman or as Kelly states "the moment of middle age" - that stage "between", finds herself stranded between roles and identifications which no longer appear to fit her situation (Plate 14).

In her earlier work Post Partum Document, Kelly had an excess of identification. In society, the status of



The room is crowded yet subdued, almost silent. No music, no dancing. Everyone is talking quietly in couples or small groups. Many are *old friends*, some I haven't seen for several years. They look different, not just greyer or fatter or more degenerate or less fashionable, just not the same. We are celebrating Hynn's fortieth birthday. "*you look great*," she says kissing me on both cheeks, "haven't changed at all"; then Anna mocks us but affectionately, "*well preserved*." She smiles. We laugh. I am *content*. Emboldened by the warmth, the comfort of their compliments, inevitable, at least until Rod whispers, "How old are you anyway?" and I remember I am nearly *forty three*. I hesitate and Sarah fills the gap with, "See, she *can't even say it!*" A possible reprieve, Elizabeth comes over and asks me what I'm working on. I tell her it's another long project and hope she won't pursue it. "On what," she insists. I fumble, knowing it will sound dreadful no matter how I say it, "*middle-age*, well, that is, I suppose I mean women like us." "I don't feel middle-aged," she snaps, seems offended. I try to explain that it's not so literal, more about the way we represent it to ourselves, almost before the fact. She says she has a *phobia* about it, tries to change the subject. Sarah interrupts to tell me the leather jacket is lovely but she distinctly remembers that I said I'd never wear one. I confess I finally gave in for professional reasons, that there's so much to think about now besides *what to wear*, that the older you are the harder it seems to be to *get it right* and that the *uniform* makes it a little easier. I look at Maya for confirmation but she disagrees, says there's a certain *freedom* attached to getting older, not caring so much, being able to get up in the morning and get dressed *like a man*, confidently, without wasting time primping. I notice she is dressed simply, hair hanging loosely on her shoulders, wearing very little make-up, nearly sixty and absolutely gorgeous. I say I'm not so sure most men are that *secure* but maybe her confidence comes from knowing she has always been a very attractive woman. She looks *surprised*. "No one is that confident," she protests, "I must admit I've never missed an opportunity to *glance in a mirror* as I passed it, or in a shop window, or any reflective surface for that matter, hoping to *catch a glimpse of myself as others see me*." Hynn is lighting the candles, "Watch me," she says, "I'm going to blow them out now." And she does, all forty, without a flicker.



motherhood is a crucial role. The state of motherhood is a momentous one for the woman. Kelly's work confronted one of the myths of patriarchy, woman as nature and nurture because of her capacity to bear children. Kelly collected and ordered material from the first six years of her son's life around the specific and ideological. Kelly analysed the impact of motherhood and childcare on herself from a personal, psychoanalytical and political perspective.

Using multiple levels of text and imagery, her work combined fragments of personal documentation: soiled nappy liners, the child's first letters and diary entries which contained a theoretical analysis based on Lacanian psychoanalysis. These elements combined together are intended to deconstruct the cultural, social and psychological meaning of motherhood. In the Post Partum Document, instead of presenting a single female identity, Kelly depicts feminity as a complex production of social and cultural meanings which it is the undertaking of the artist to deconstruct. Kelly stated:

(It) seemed crucial, not in the sense of a moral imperative, but as a historical strategy, to avoid the literal figuration of mother and child to avoid any means of representation which risked recuperation as 'a slice of life.' To use the body of the women, her image or person is not impossible but problematic for feminism.  
(Kelly p.vii)

The specific purpose of Kelly's work is to disrupt the





possible pleasuring one expects of the subject matter of the mother and child genre. Kelly does not offer a pictorial image of the artist's personal experience of motherhood, instead the view is encouraged to partake in an active process of reading the documentation of the analysis of social and cultural discourses which define motherhood as a particular kind of experience for women. Kelly's Post Partum Document has a strong autobiographical mode but in Interim the autobiographical element has, as Norman Bryson points out: "lost its fullness and rationale." (Interim p.27) Once again Kelly uses language and emblematic imagery instead of conventional images which have been used to depict woman throughout history. Kelly isolated the prominent recurring themes of ageing from the collected informal conversations she had with women and used them to organise the project into four sections:

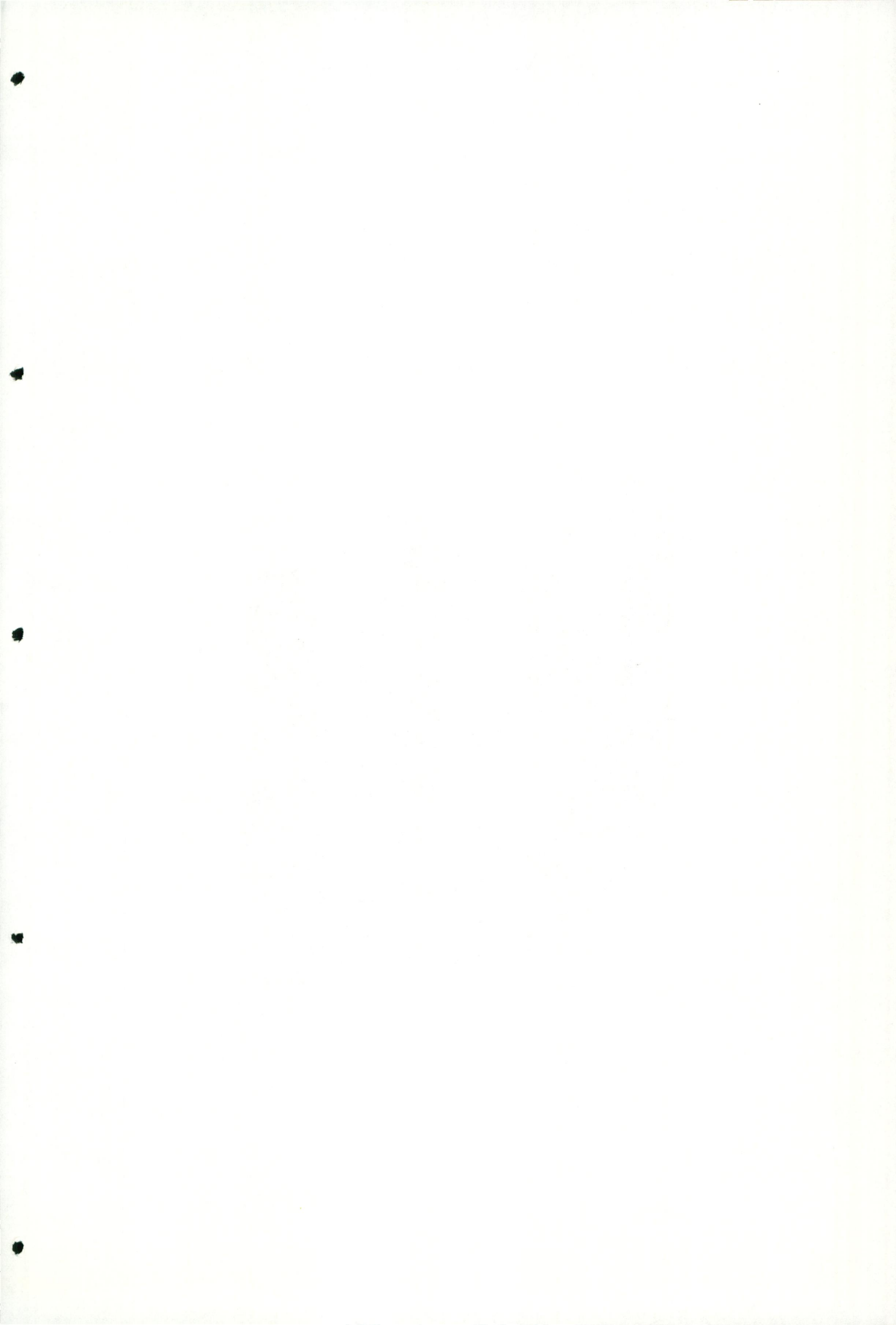
**CORPUS, PECUNIA, HISTORIA, POTESTAS.**

CORPUS is both documentary and fantasy. There is a tape recording which reflects women's real dilemmas. Hand written texts in the first person explore how older women experience the body, shaped socially and psychically by the discourse of popular medicine, fashion and romantic fiction. There are also images, textures, traces of the body in an emblematic sense. The images are arranged in five groups of three: "Menace", "Appel", "Supplication", "Erotisme" and





**MENACÉ**

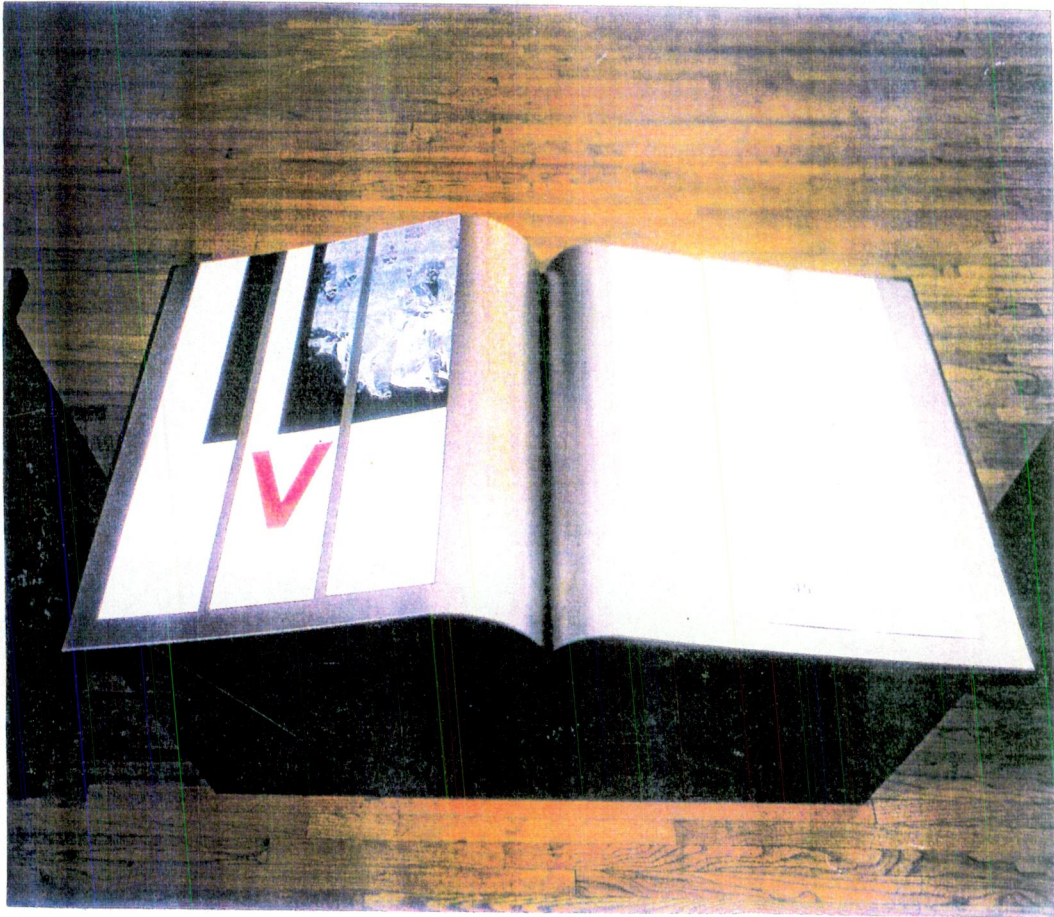


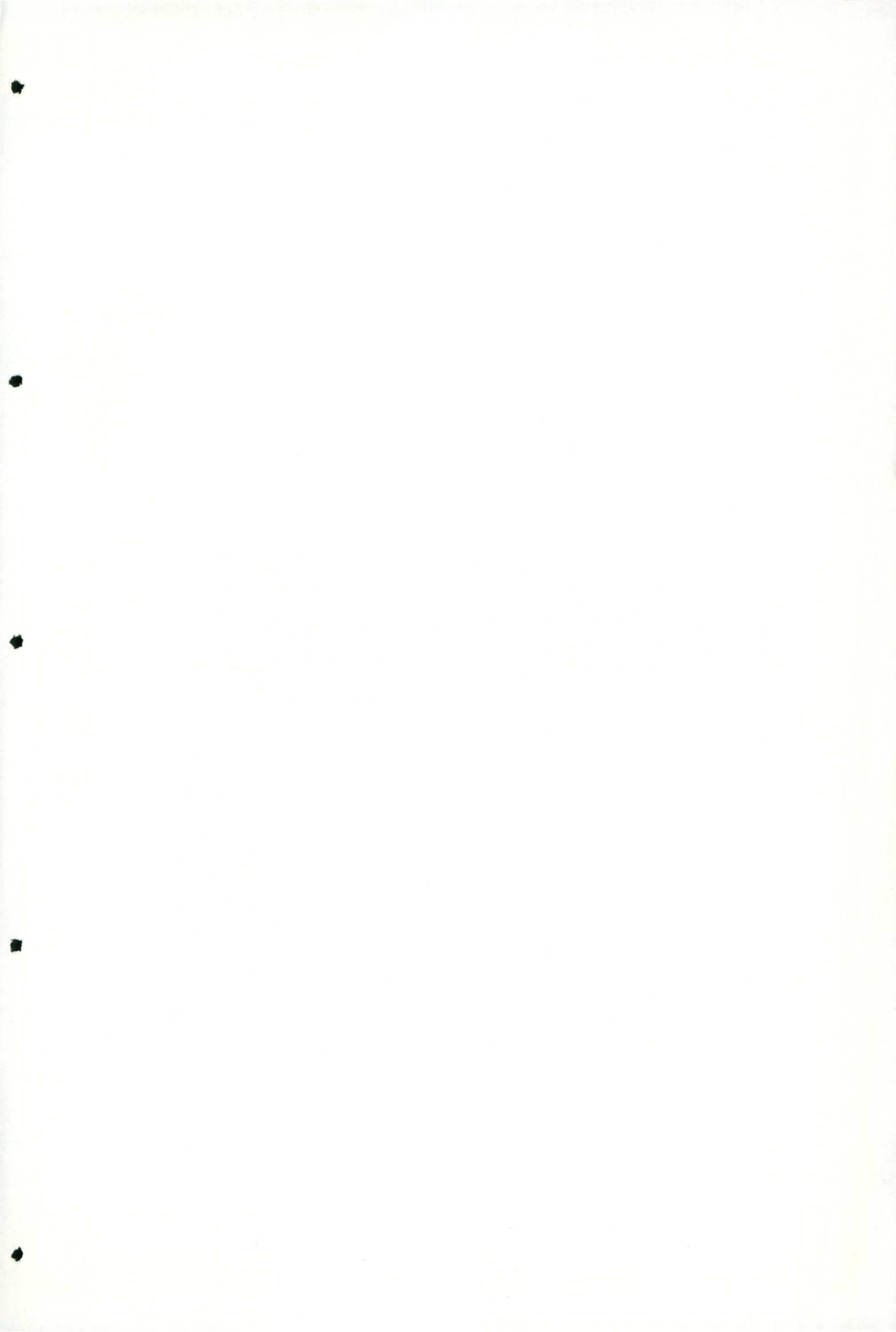
"Extase" (Plate 15) which are also the names of the poses that the nineteenth century French neuropathologist, J.M. Charcot, (attitudes passionelles), identified as expressing the symptoms of sexual desperation in his "hysterical" female patients.

PECUNIA (Money) plays on the language of classified advertisements, genres of personal fiction, greeting cards, puns and riddles, as well as first person narratives. This section charts the disposition of desire as it passes through a particular economic system and set of social relations. Kelly says Pecunia is about the "Forms within which we structure our desires." This work is divided into four sections. The work points out the Foucauldian Schema - Mater, filia, soror and coriga (mother, daughter, sister and wife) the subject positions of women within the family construct.

HISTORIA is a pseudo-documentary in the form of silk screened steel pages with a metaphor "making History" (Plate 16). Its four narratives present, in Kelly's words "the Political Body", as it is conveyed in the words of women who were 27, 20, 14 and 3 years old in 1968 and who









are reviewing their relationship to the Women's Movement. There are two short sections describing moments of collaboration and communication from women being able to "see" each other for the first time. The other section satirizes the exchanges of a group of women at a party who cannot see each other because of the ways in which they define themselves by their age. Kelly also deconstructs the conceptions of gender, race, sexuality and class in relationship to the history of feminism. In reading Historia that which we refer to as the Women's Movement is hardly a fixed moment or a uniform experience - Kelly shows us that no single moment can represent it.

POTESTAS Of Potestas (Power) Kelly states "... (it) is an extended pun on the sociological jargon of measurement. Its three dimensional graph may be comic on one level...but on another, it refers to the graph in a Derridian sense, a visual parallel to the schema of phonemic oppositions, as well as a trope for sexual difference." (Interim p.54 1990)

This monumental 3-D bar graph visualizes the information from a 1985 United Nations Report - "(Women) by virtue of an accident of birth, perform two-thirds of the (world's) work, Receive one-tenth of its income and own less than one hundredth of its property." The critic Marcia Tucker has this to say:



Potestas conveys a strong sense of how cultures create hierarchies in order to validate the deployment of power and how women experience their resulting positions.

(Tucker p.22)

Tucker also points out that the raging questions at the heart of Kelly's work are: "How can women become visible and effective? How can they encode their subjectivity into discourse - become present in the world?" Griselda Pollock discusses how Interim reposes Freud's famous question - "What do women want?" Pollock states:

By representing the desire of the woman he would not notice. Therefore through its own case histories and fragments of analysis, Interim summons a historical presence never theorized by Freud or Foucault - the feminist subject.

Pollock's discusses how the 'subject' does not automatically know herself. Mary Kelly's objects and texts in Interim reveal:

...traces of the historical, personal and theoretical processes that turned the feminine subject into an object of feminist analysis and thus produced the possibility of the feminist subject.  
(Pollock p.49)

Kelly's work has incorporated many issues, styles and voices into Interim. The viewer can interact with the work. At the same time Kelly's work is part of one of the feminist commitments,

To name what has not been named, writing what has escaped being written, making visible what has never been seen. Its aim simply is to unloose the ties that bind.  
(Tucker p.25)



### Chapter 3

Interim, Mary Kelly's work on the problem of female identity looked at middle aged women in patriarchal society. Kelly questions, recognizes and acknowledges women's own complicity in the inequities of the existing social contract. Kelly also explores and interrogates femininity and representation by addressing the issue of ageing, the period when the two are thrown into crisis. Interim is a powerful art work in which Mary Kelly challenges and documents women's complex passage through a phallogocentric culture. Interim is not specifically autobiographical whereas the work of Athena Tacha, the American sculptor, can be very personal.

In 1974 Tacha published a small booklet entitled The Process of Ageing (Fragment of an on-going thorough self-analysis and description to be completed by the end of my life). More recently Tacha published another booklet 1986/87 Reaching Fifty - The Process of Ageing 11. In both of these booklets the sculptor examines her physical deterioration, her emotional and mental attitudes and pain through her process of ageing with an astute, ruthless honesty.

In her early documentation Who is Athena, (1973-74) Tacha was searching and trying to understand who she was. "Who is Athena", Tacha states "actually compares or confronts the exterior perception from the interior perception - my own

55.



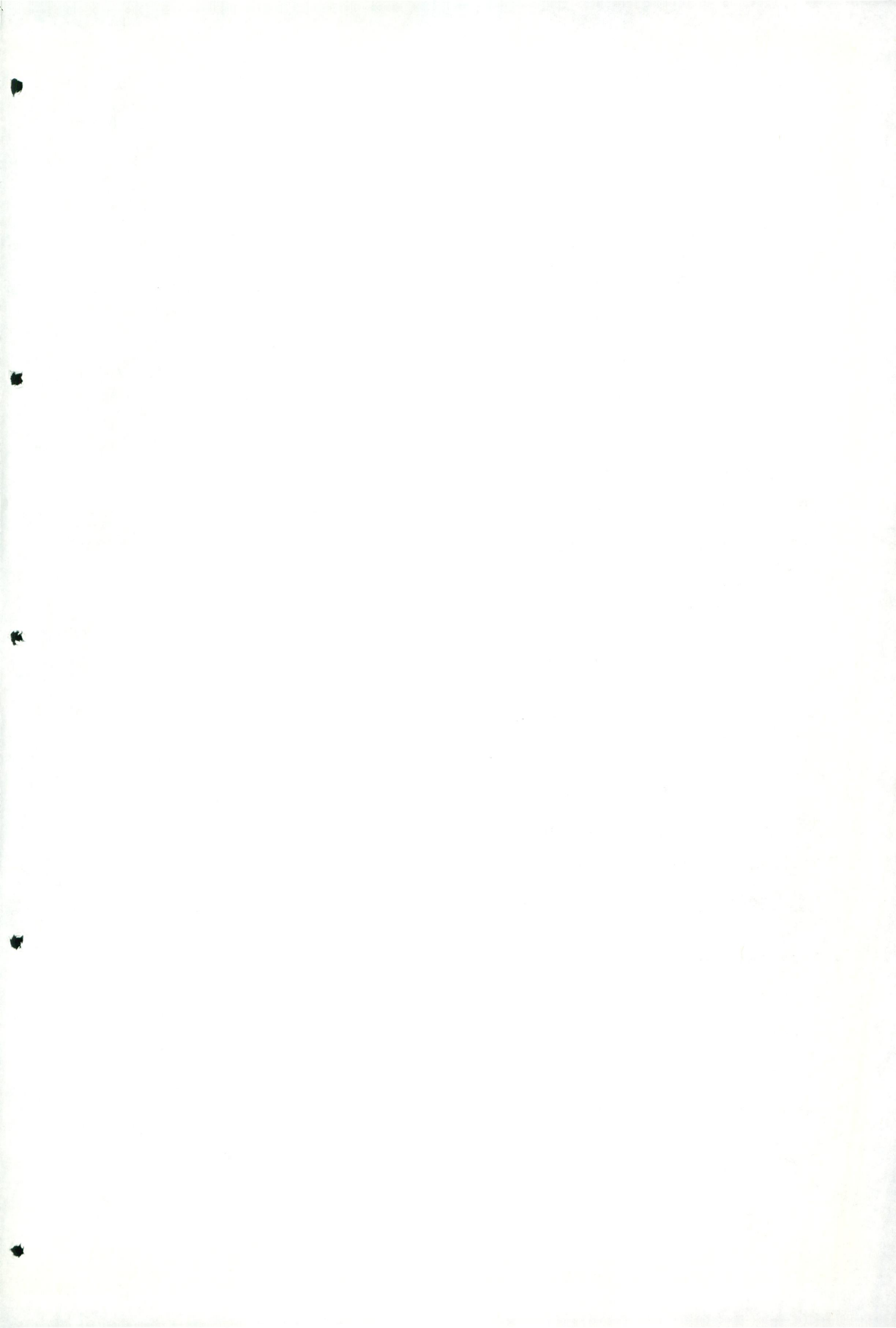
subjectivity or perception of myself." (Lynch, interview with Tacha 1994) Tacha has an insatiable curiosity about her own body - how it works, what holds everything together from her physical body to her emotions and consciousness, to what the process of life is and how she relates to it. Tacha uses her own body as an instrument for understanding reality.

Like most people, Tacha had initially a terrible fear of ageing. Her way of coping with fear was to confront it, to be truthful, clinical and observe the fear of ageing in herself, and to see to what degree the fear was reflecting reality. Tacha states:

I think the fear is justified to a degree by the realities of ageing such as becoming less capable.... primarily though, it is a socially constructed fear. (Lynch interview with Tacha 1994)

Tacha is uninhibited and open about the physical changes of her body such as the skin becoming somewhat looser and more wrinkled, her hands are drier and more bony, brown spots are appearing on them. Tacha points out to us that the biggest changes in her physical deterioration have been in her face and neck. She observes these visual changes minutely stating:

Most disturbing to me....are the changes that occurred around my mouth....worse still...the flesh of the cheeks on either side of my chin has sagged, creating two distinctly baggy areas that spoil the formerly smooth oval shape of my face.  
(Tacha 1986/87)





Throughout Tacha's texts on ageing, one is startled by the blunt honesty of her documentation of her physical changes. At times this can be quite frightening and intimidating for me as I am also middle aged and yet it is wonderfully liberating as one stops denying one's true physical self and ageing. Gloria Steinem once remarked to a reporter who commented that she did not look forty - "This is what forty looks like. We've been lying so long who would know?" (The Sunday Times, Style and Trend, Jardine, 15 May 1994 p.16)

Tacha has managed to maintain, in her project on the ageing process, not to depersonalise or dehumanize the age process or herself stating that:

I have great compassion for people and I think that if I put myself out as a specimen to be examined honestly with compassion and humour, thinking about it as a human being, I think that makes other people empathise with my descriptions.  
(Lynch interview 1994)

In writing the texts, Tacha has said that she has adopted a kind of child-like naive openness that is suitable for the subject and at the same time she has avoided using any symbolic meanings stating that "I use language like a surgeon's knife" to look at her condition. (Lynch interview 1994)

Throughout Tacha's texts the fear of been incapacitated or being ugly in any way keeps reoccurring. A good example of



these fears are in the texts My Fears 1979-80 and Reaching Fifty 1986-87. In the former text Tacha discusses her fear of serious illness stating:

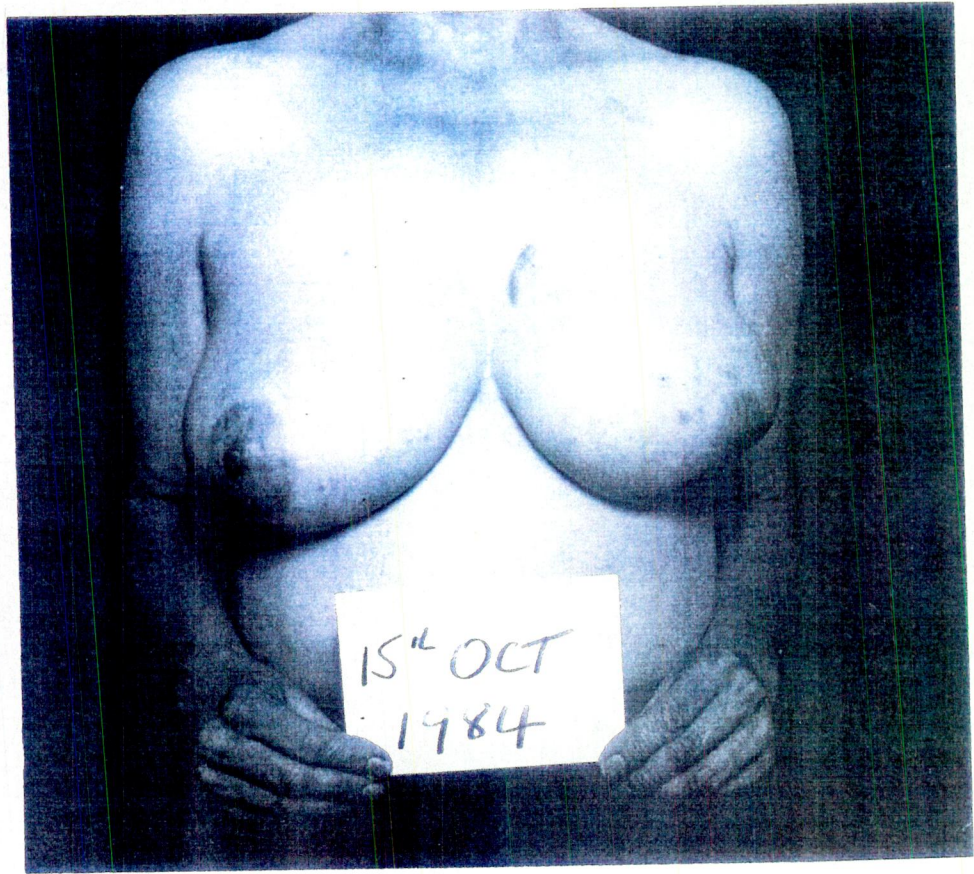
Not only for the suffering but more for the ugliness and indignity that it may cause....But I consider with real horror deformity of any sort, losing a breast from a cancer operation or all of one's hair from chemotherapy; losing a limb or getting one's face smashed up in a car accident....I could not stand causing revulsion as well as pity because of my appearance. (Tacha 1979-80)

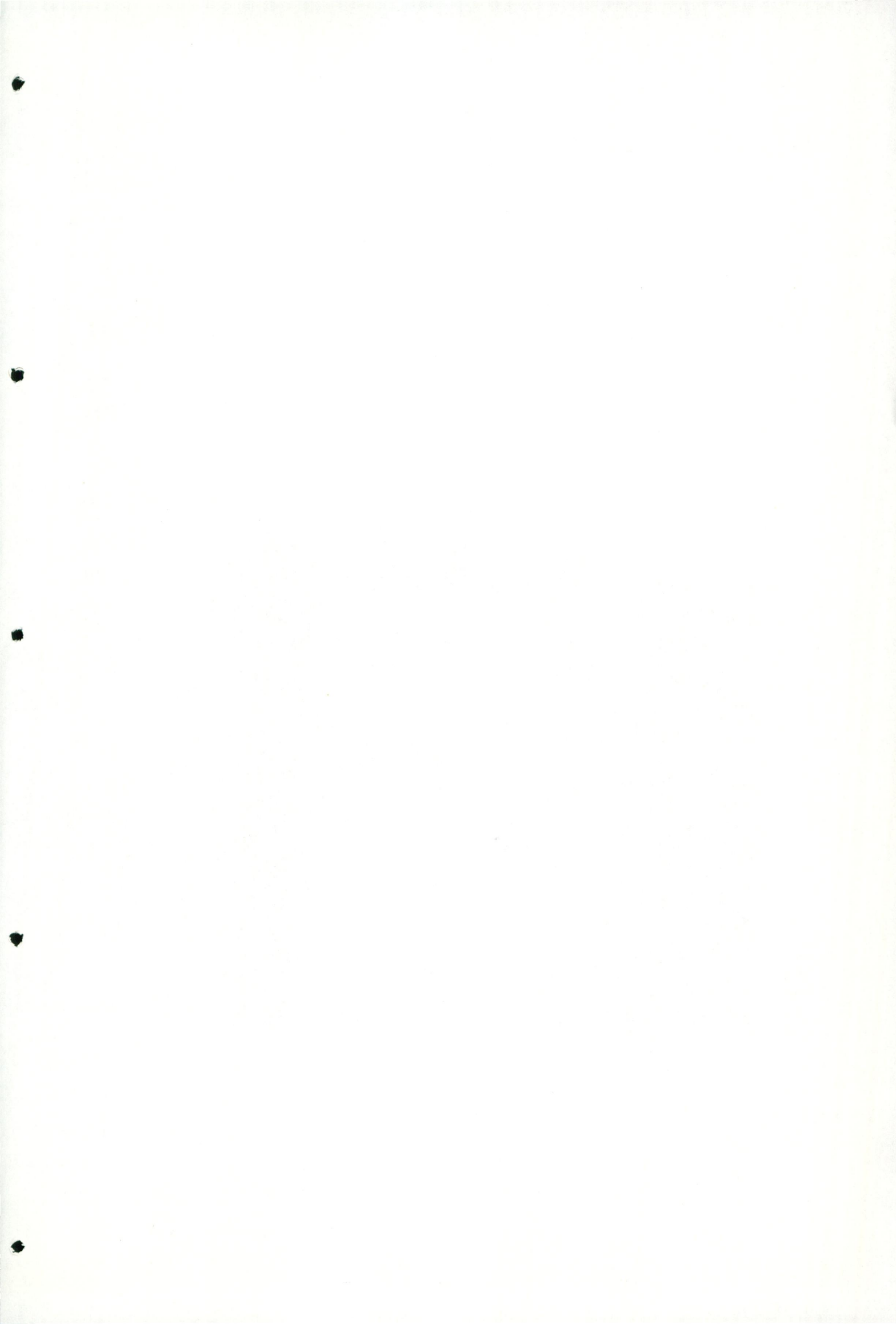
I question Tacha's fears regarding physical deformities. I am aware that these deformities are only hypothetical but has Tacha set for herself too high an 'ideal' of physical perfection? Is she strongly influenced by patriarchal culture to despise herself and her own body if it should become deformed? For too long women, whose bodies do not conform to the ideal, have been thought of and found despicable. Lynda Nead states:

Images of the female body that have been omitted from visual arts echo the lived experiences of women within the dominant society and its culture of physical perfection. (Nead p.60 1992)

The late artist, Jo Spense, (Plate 17) in a collaboration work entitled Narratives of Dis-ease made visible in public, the taboo subject - the ageing, unhealthy scarred female body exposed in five photographic images show how women who have







undergone radical surgery for the removal of a breast are offered a prosthesis to disguise and hide from the public the scarred female body aesthetically offensive, ugly and undesirable. Lynda Nead critiques Spense's work. The female body is constantly subjected to judgemental gaze:

..but in viewing the shifting subjectivity of Spense in the images, our own subjectivity is surely also disturbed and called into question. Shock identification, rejection admiration, sympathy, all these are passable responses to the images. But ultimately the pain of the imagery lies in the fact that we are not made to witness a display, but are, rather, involved in the processes through which identity is formed. (Nead p.81 1992)

If Tacha became ugly or deformed in any physical way, would it not be a challenge for her to expose and explore her deformity, to question the authorities that divide normal from deviant, desirable from loathsome and to learn to love one's body despite any so called physical ugliness or deformity?

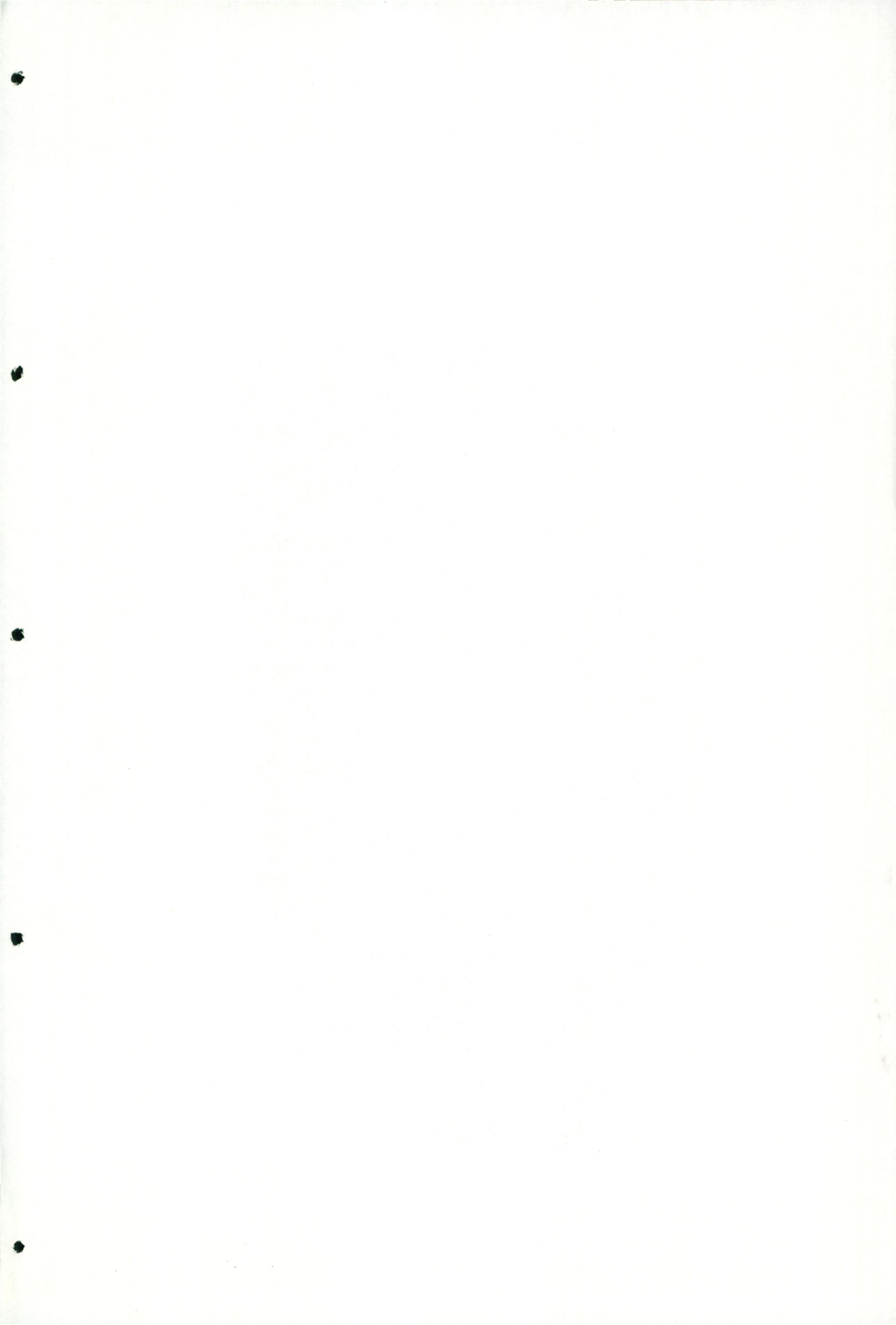
Tacha is aware that within fine art and popular culture people with disabilities are either invisible or marginalized. Desirable femininity has been constructed specifically in terms of both health and beauty within consumer culture. The image of an 'imperfect' or incomplete female body can only be managed by hiding it.

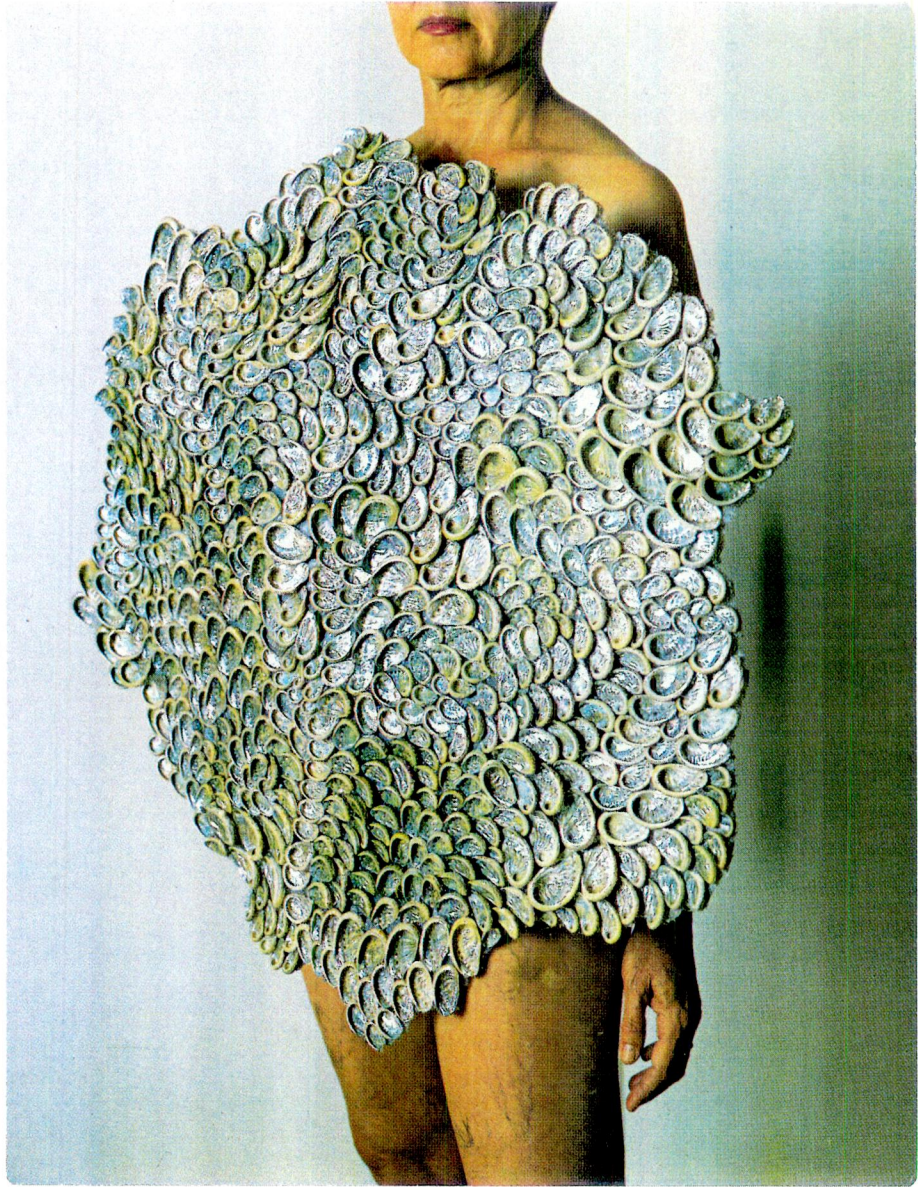
Tacha's severity on herself, and any physical defects which

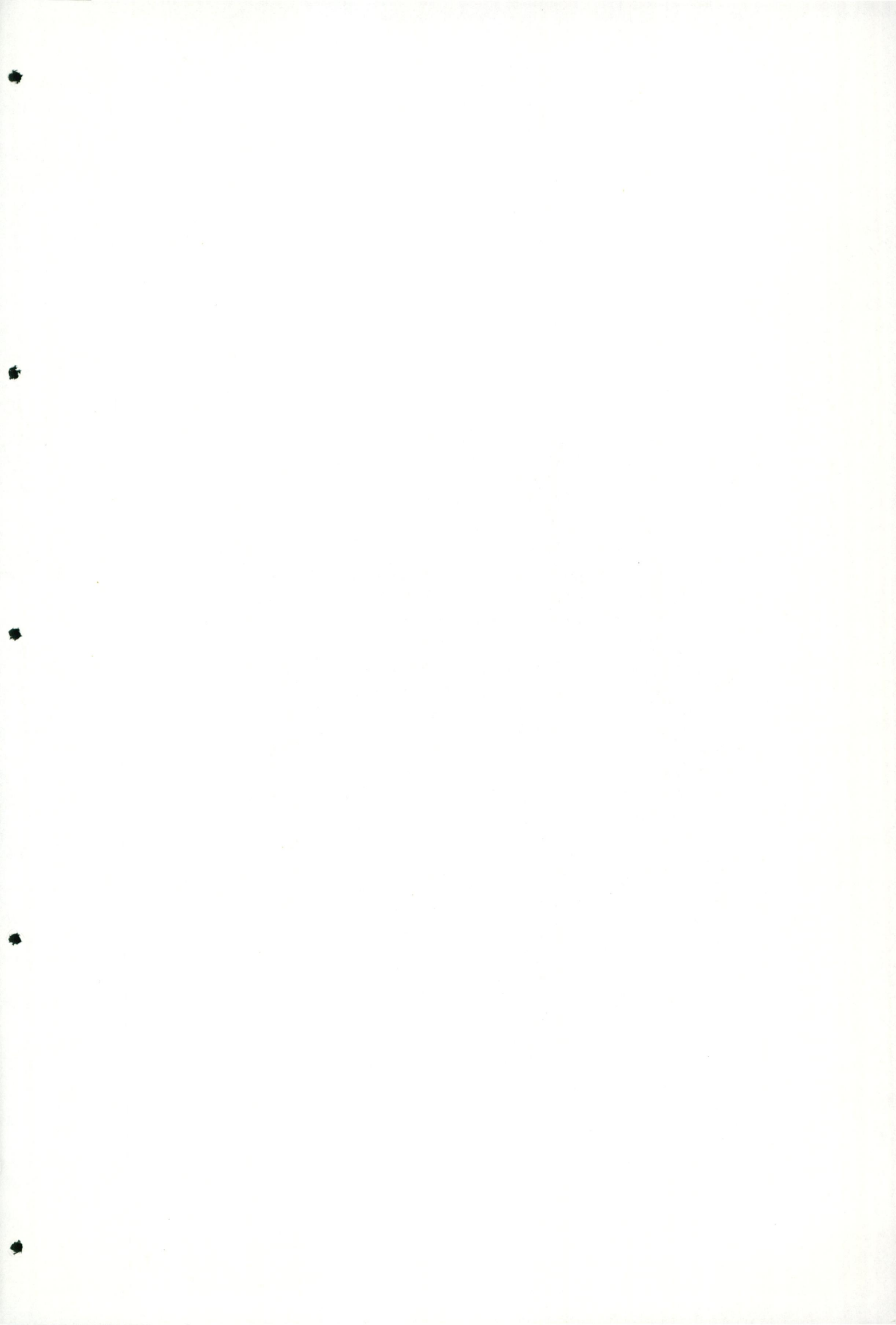




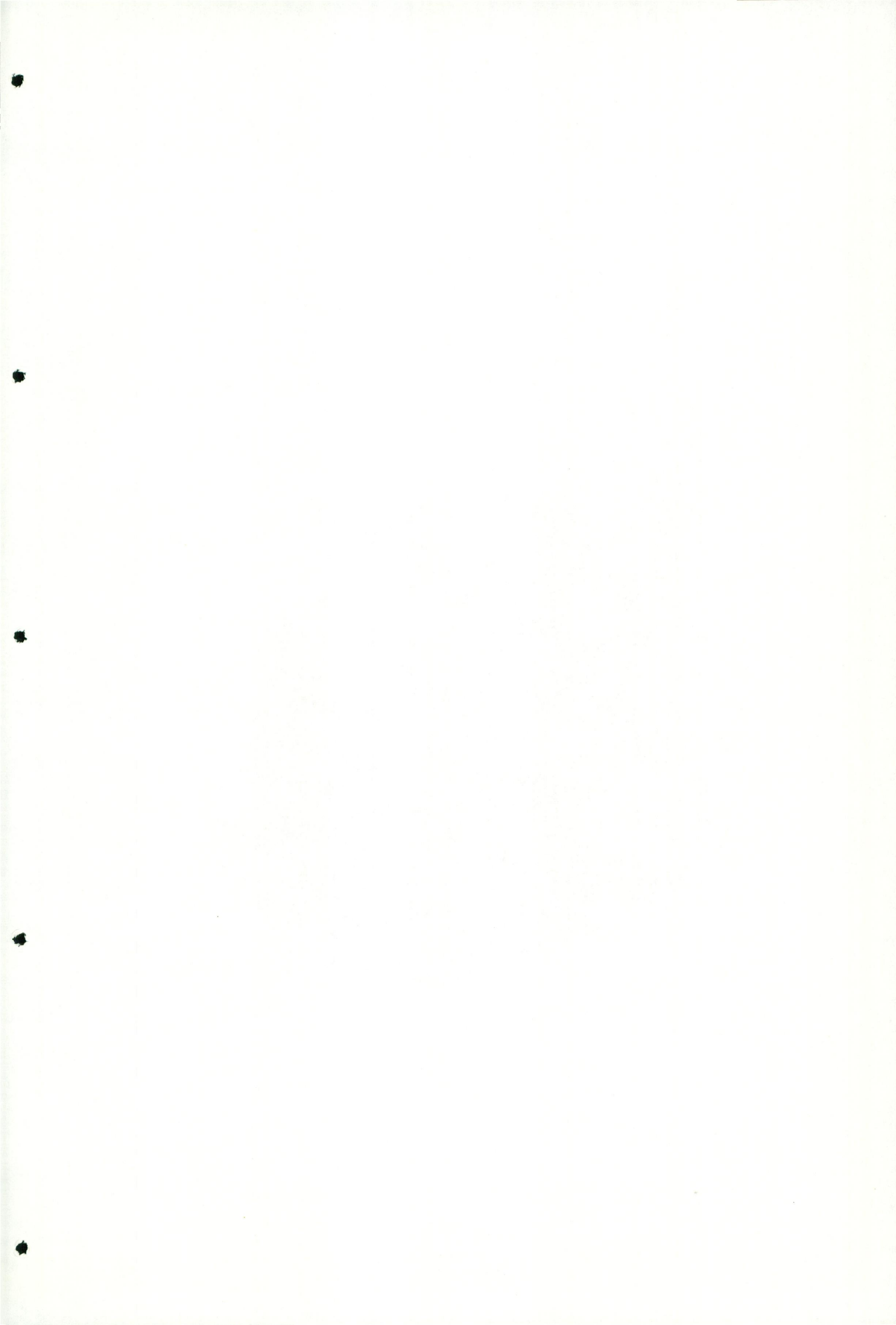




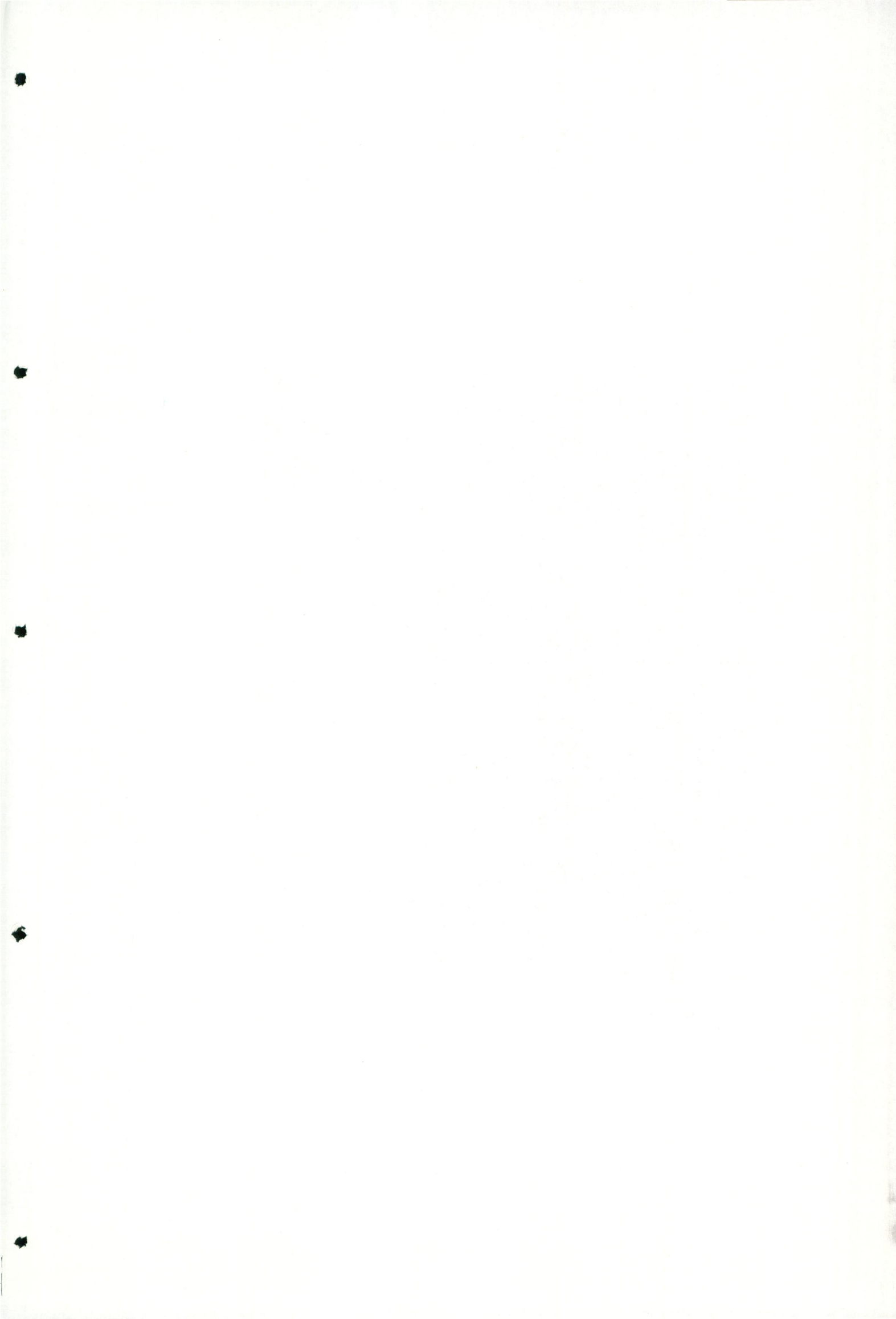














may occur, is quite daunting. But one has to remember that these texts were written fifteen years ago. Naturally, too, because she is documenting her body, she has a heightened awareness of possible tragedies that could befall her. Yet despite being so hard on herself, Tacha has a profound empathy, compassion and understanding for others who may be deformed or ill in any way. These feelings are expressed most clearly in Tacha's more recent works, which deal with the vulnerability of the female body to both disease and abuse. (Plate 18)

Tacha had written earlier that as one approaches advanced middle-age:

....one's relatives and close friends start dying or getting incapacitated, and one faces for the first time seriously, (because it feels nearer to home), real old age and death. (Tacha, *Reaching Fifty*, 1986/87)

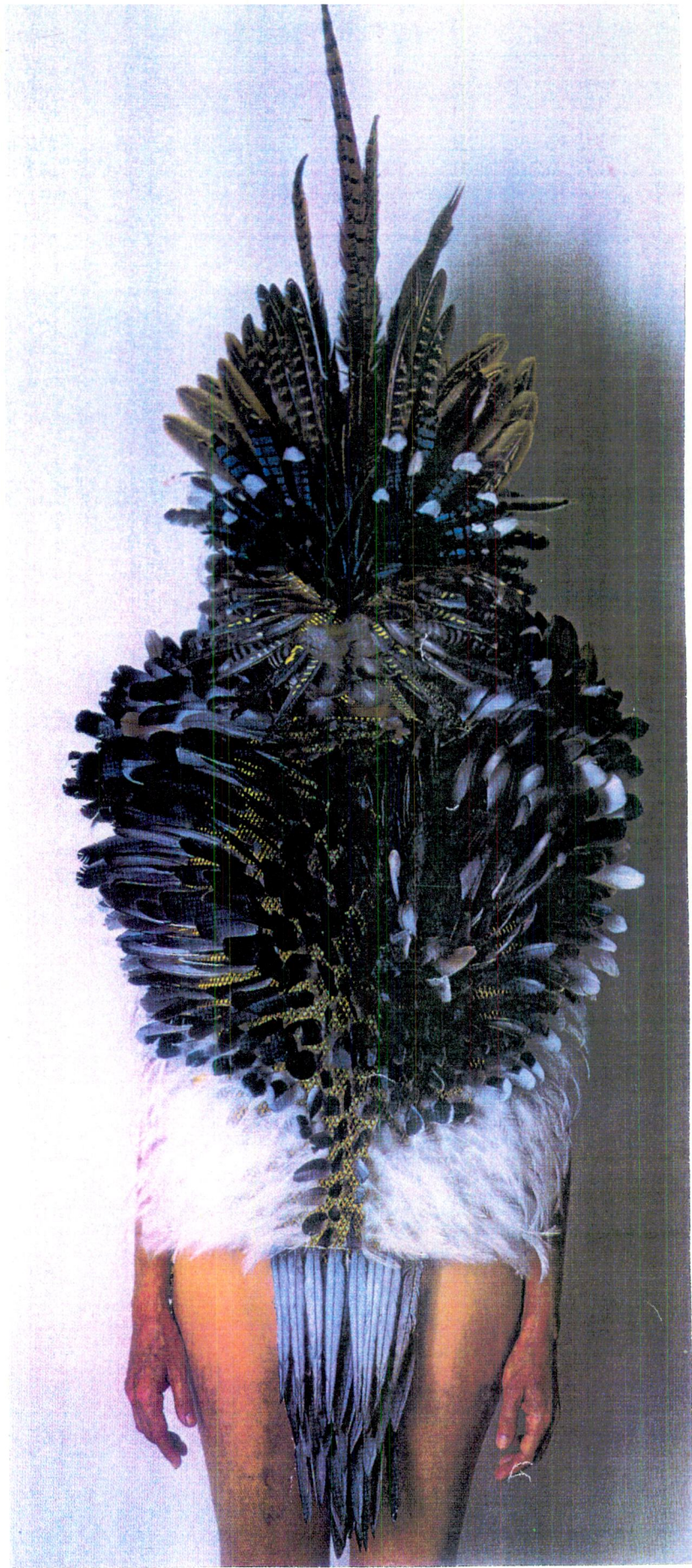
It was not until 1992 that Tacha's awareness was very much intensified, due to the loss of three close very dear women friends (one of them unexpectedly). (Plate 19). She stated:

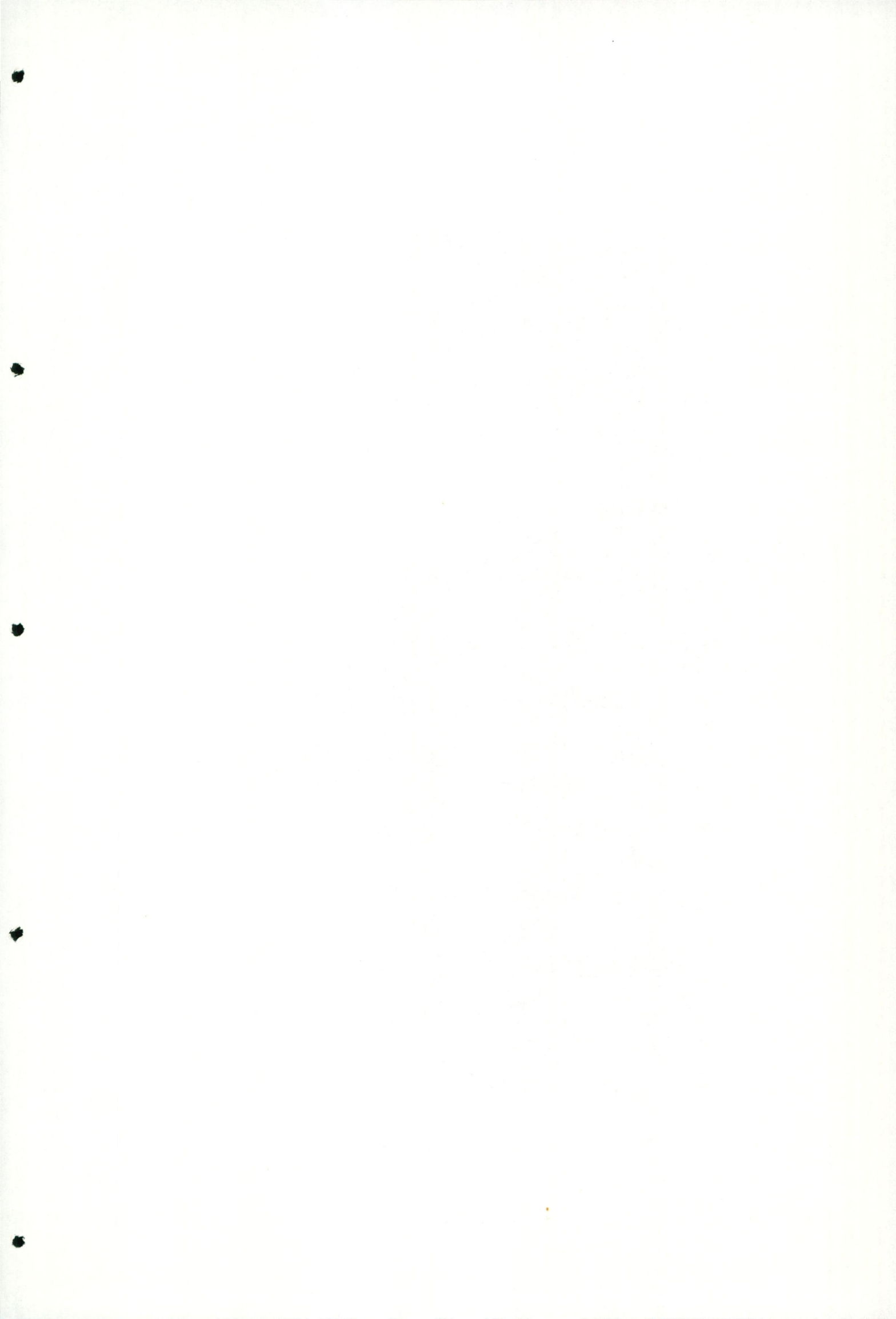
I confronted for the first time so intensely and directly, death and suffering. (Tacha, *Fashioning Life and Death*, 1994)

In order to come to terms with the tragic loss and pain and to try to understand death, these new works evolved. (Plate 20). As the work progressed, Tacha did eventually become reconciled with death. She states:

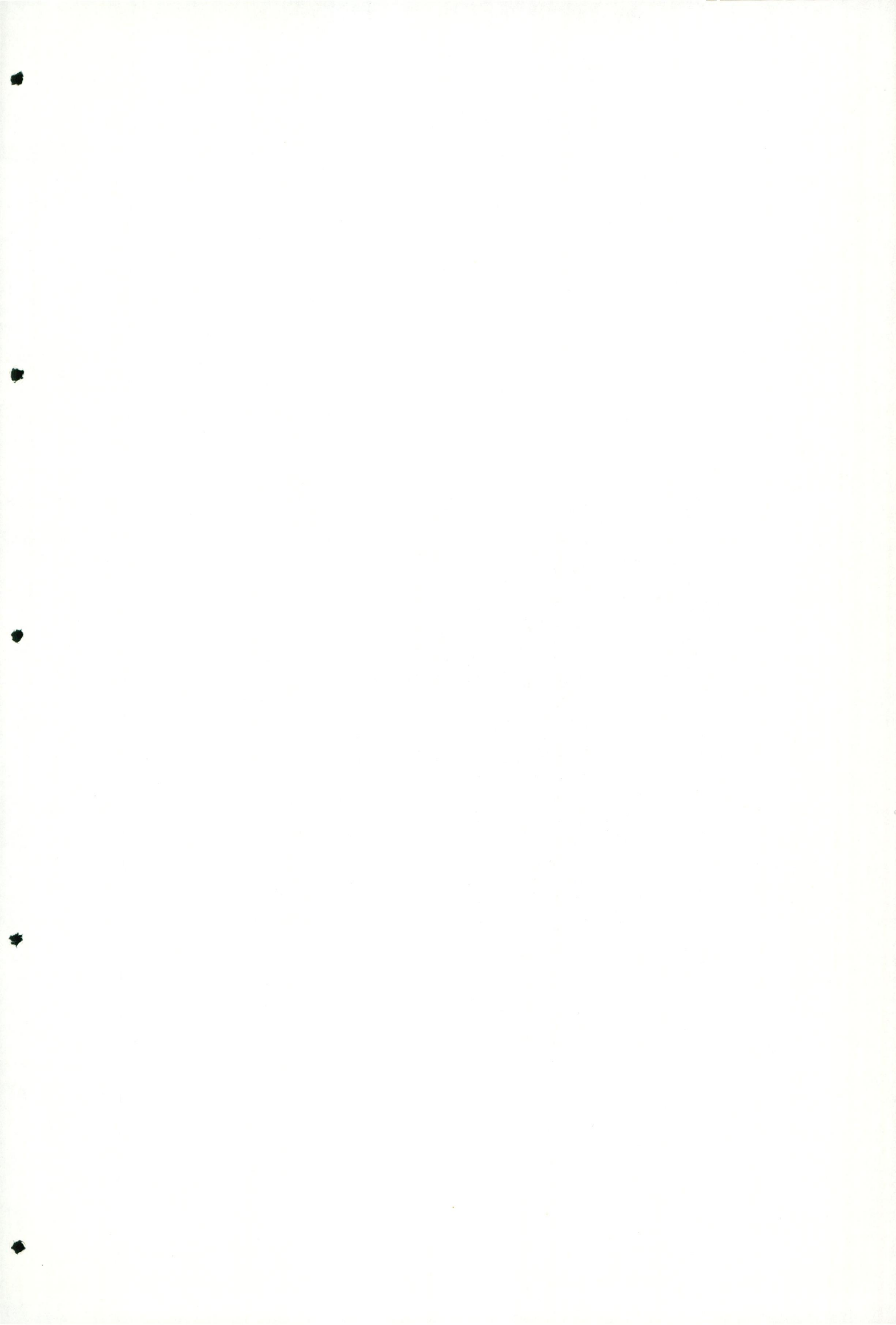
The pain moved from the personal to the social level, while the vulnerability

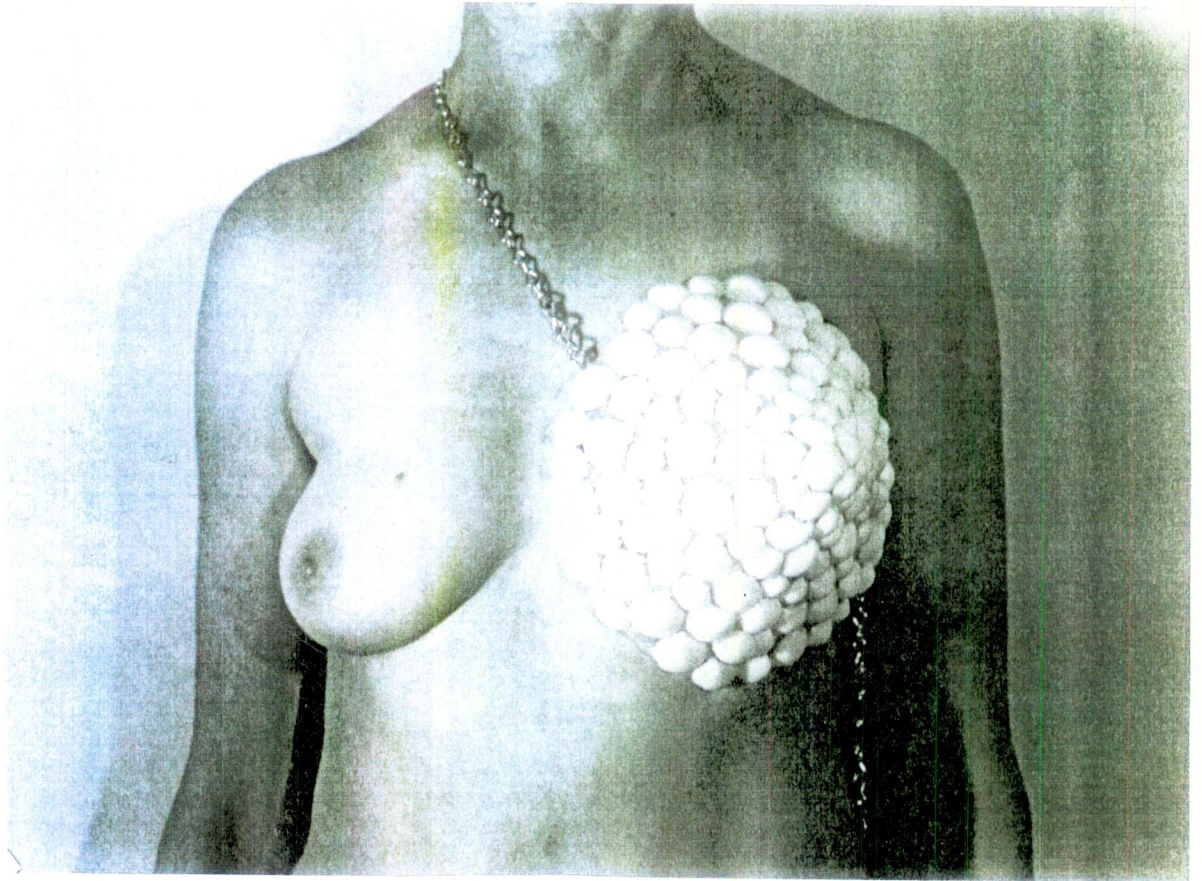


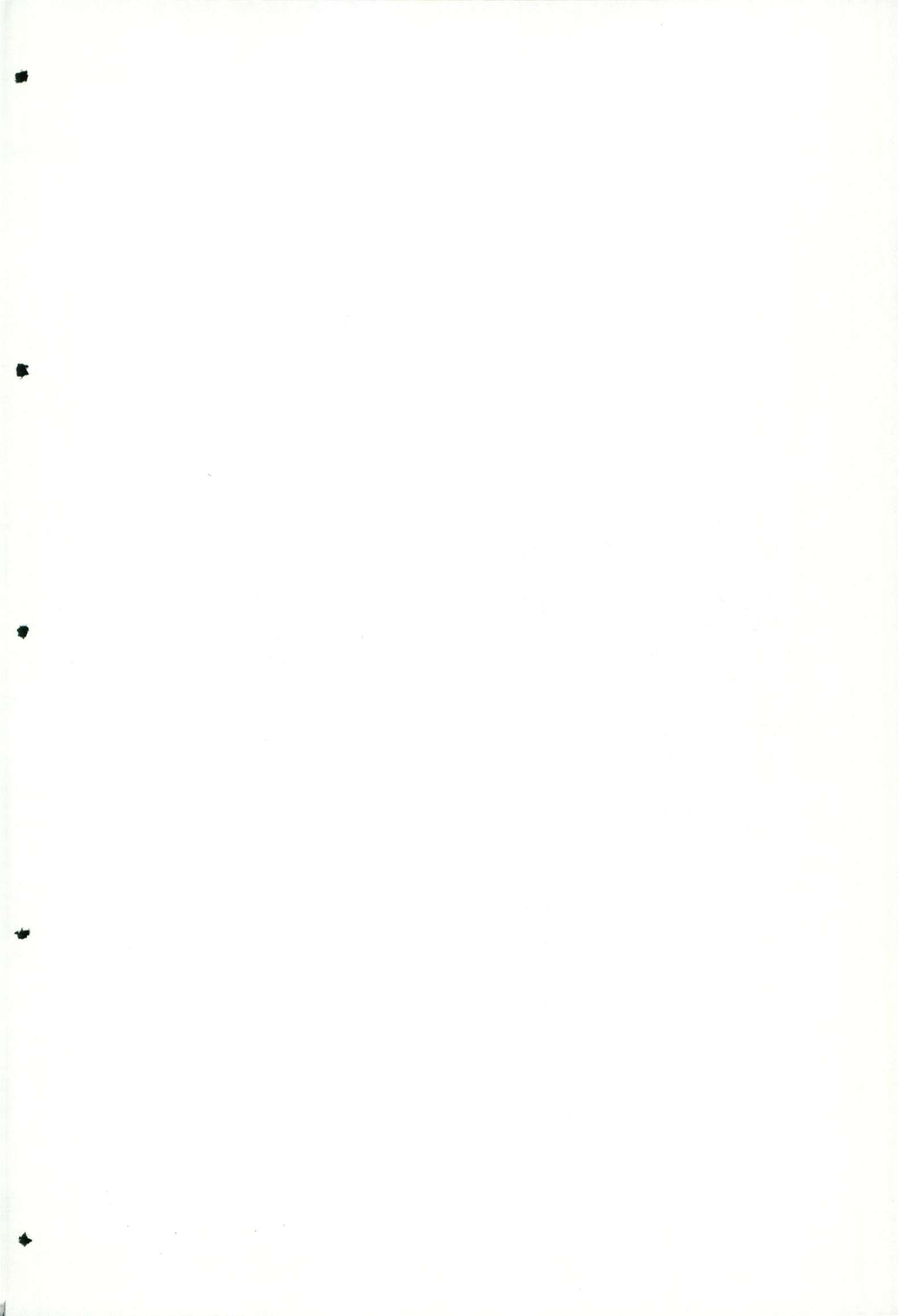


















that I had experienced in the human body extended to encompass the entire life-system. (Tacha, Fashioning Life and Death 1994) (Plate 21)

These beautiful works are both sculptural and wearable, functional and non-functional. They are created from natural materials and some recycled human-made materials, which Tacha has carefully collected over the years. Tacha felt the need to avoid predictable formats, such as an object or wall hanging. It was the physical debilitation of her dying friends that led Tacha to construct these wearable sculptures from natural organisms that have also died. The works Feathered Armor for Ellen (1992) (Plate 22), Brain Cancer Headdress for Maro 1992) (Plate 23), and Breast Cancer Patch for Chole (Plate 24), are armours that cannot protect the women from ageing, disease or death; nor can these defend them against violence. They are vulnerable and impermanent, reinforcing the temporality of the female and human on earth, (Plate 25): "Private memorials to tragic individual deaths", (Tacha, Fashioning Life and Death, Cat., 1994).

In 1973, Tacha produced a text called My Mother : A Psychological Portrait. Tacha's mother was sixty-three at the time of this project, an ageing woman. Tacha has stated that: "It exposes me to reveal my mother in her full truth." (Lynch interview 1994). I would like to discuss the following extract from the text:





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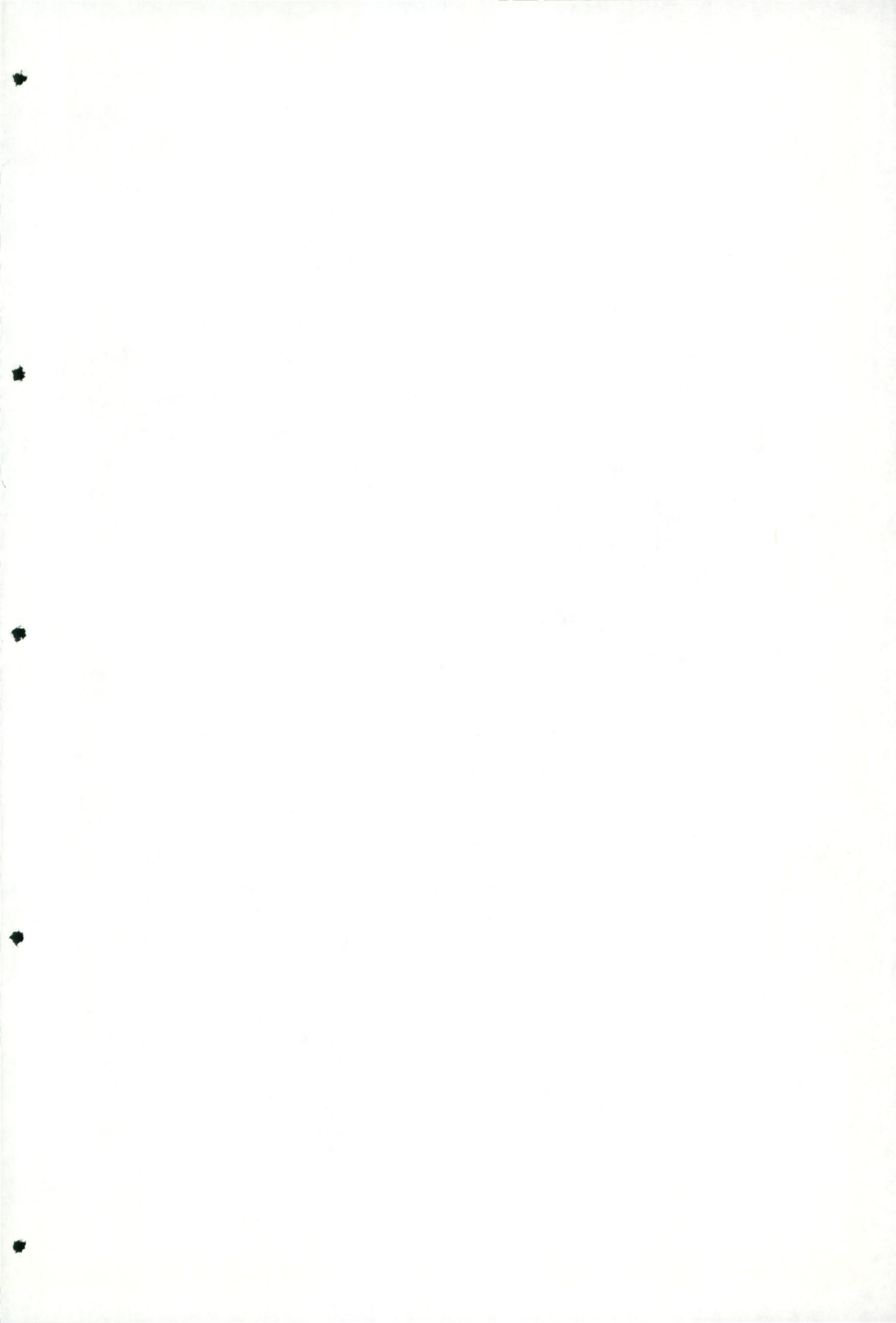


My mother is an amazing phenomenon.... everything shows on her face, everything comes out. She has absolutely no inhibitions, no sense of shame, embarrassment, or dignity. She has no hesitation about falling asleep or crying like a baby in the midst of a crowd and no qualms about peeing, farting, straining to defecate or scratching her bottom in front of her family. Not only that, but she also shows plainly on her face (by screwing up her features) the mixture of effort and satisfaction involved in such activities. (Tacha, 1973)

For some these physical changes are part of the human condition. They are/have been hidden - 'a taboo subject'. This is part of the human tragedy that we are not perfect 'ideals' like the 'Sieve of Tucca' which is impenetrable and does not leak. The water-filled sieve is a metaphor for the ideal hermetically sealed female body. Is that the type of woman Tacha would like her mother to be?

Tacha's critique on her mother's lack of intellectual ability would appear to far outweigh her admiration for her mother, despite the fact that she has stated that she finds her mother, in many ways, endearing and admirable. In her comments in her text, Tacha exposes her intellectual superiority and pride in her intellectualism (on par with her father) over power with her mother, stating:

Above all it amazes me to no end that such a person exists. (Tacha 1973)

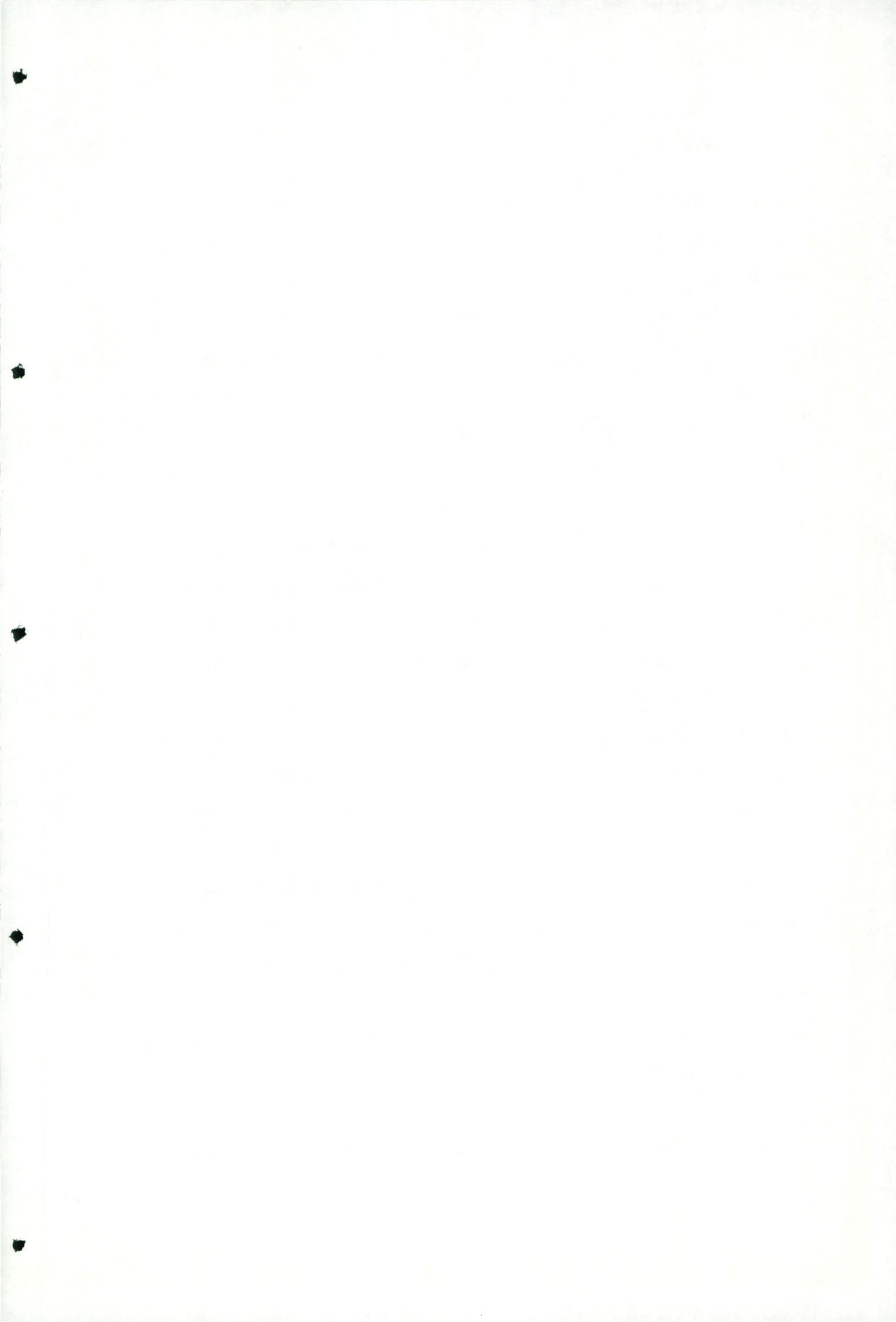




One would wonder is Tacha complete? Or perhaps she needs to embrace both the physical and the intellectual to have more empathy with her mother's character. Tacha is full of contradictions. She is very frank. She is questioning all the time. She does not skirt around any issues, as her more recent works have shown. Tacha has developed a greater consciousness of the irrational side of the human condition and fuller acceptance of her own emotions and vulnerability.

Tacha is a confident woman, very aware of the many fears around menopause, which men have created to make women feel useless and to subjugate them. One has to admire Tacha for her openness and honesty in her texts in facing such issues as the menopause and the feelings of being sexually unattractive, and death. Tacha claims: "I did not fear menopause and I certainly would not allow it to put me down." (Lynch interview 1994)

Tacha understands that the many depictions of the female were and are, to a great extent, artificial and are social constructs. Today these social constructs can be fought because there is no need for them. They are defunct. Women are more than mere reproductive machines. Tacha does not have fear around being sexually unattractive, mainly because she did not want to have children and it was less traumatic for her when she reached menopause. Although Tacha states:

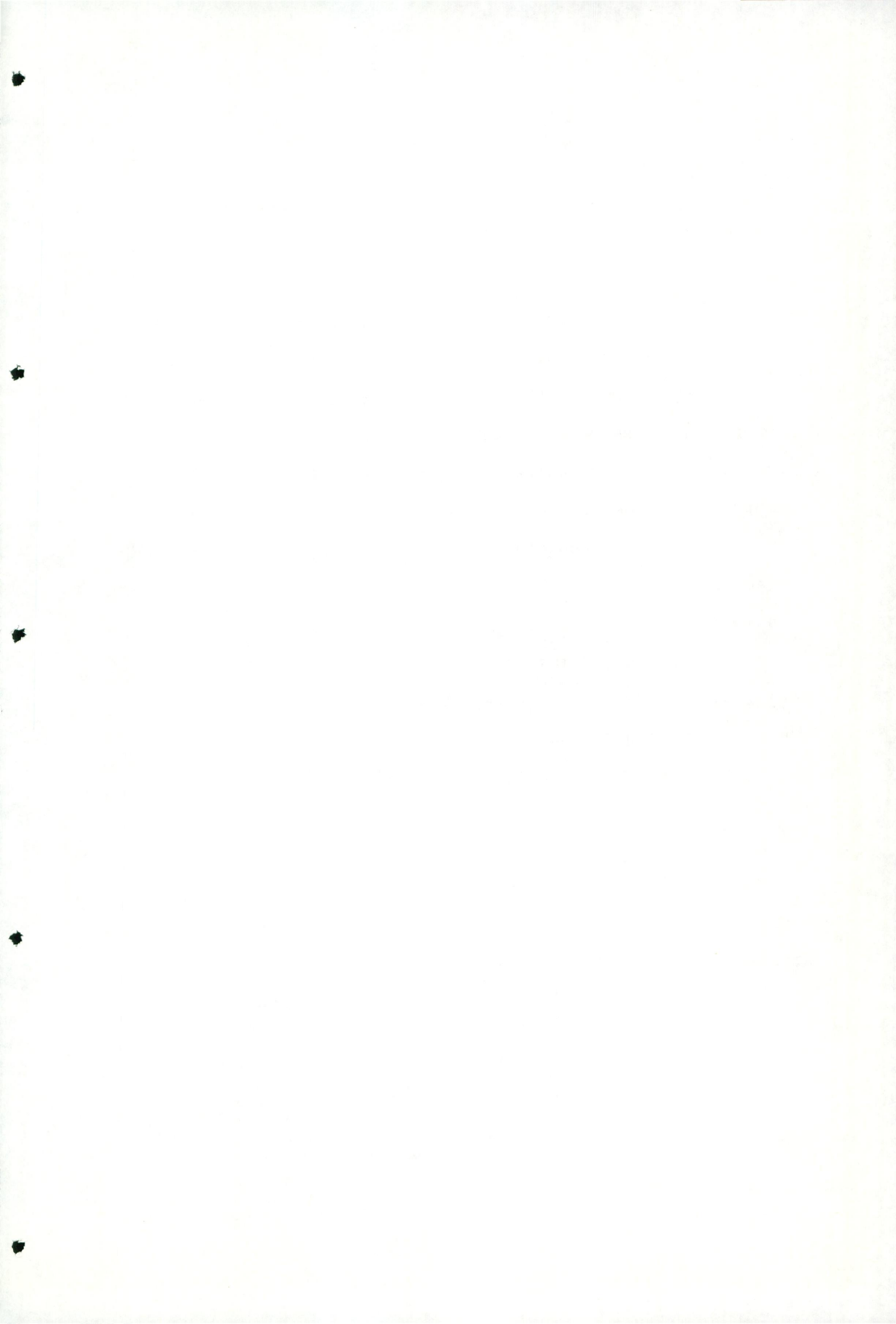


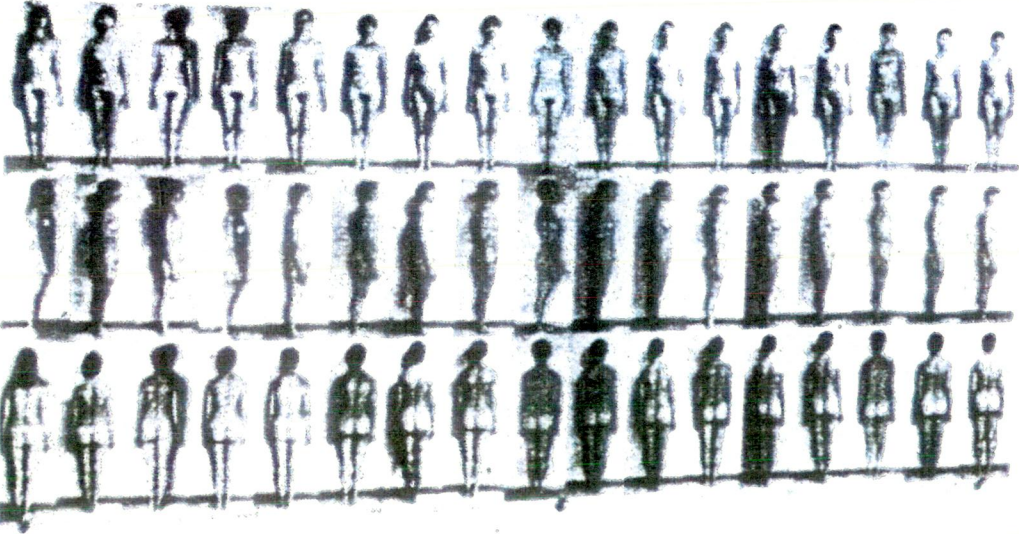
I did have my uterus removed - it was a shock to realise that there was no way now, no going back, no way of changing my decision. After then it was up to me. From that point on my genes were dead. They weren't going to survive, the genes that I carried from both my parents' family. (Lynch interview 1994)

That terminal decision did shock Tacha but she believes very much in the product of the mind and of the spirit and also a belief that the work she leaves behind as an artist is equally important and good.

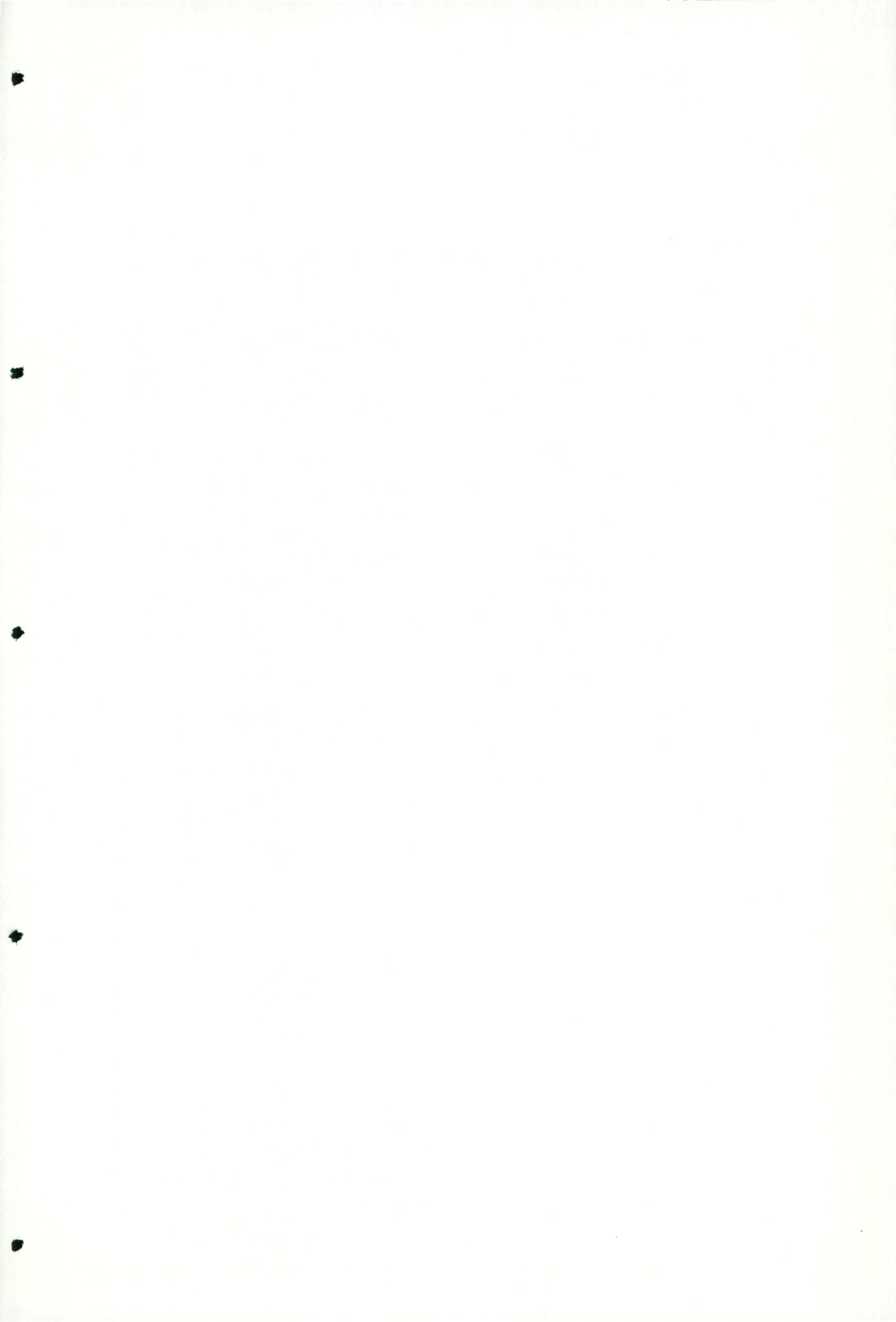
Tacha has also photographed her body and face since 1972. (Plate 26) This project is on-going until her death. The photographs consist of three facial photographs - front face, side view and a photograph of the artist laughing. Also three photographs of the artist's body - front view, side view and back view. (Plate 27) In a discussion with the artist, I mentioned to her that her body, by cultural definitions, was a 'good' body and if she would have had problems showing her body if it had not been an attractive body. Tacha was honest in saying that - "Maybe more so or maybe not, I don't know." The incentive that makes her document her body's ageing process is to fight fear and she would find it more difficult to expose a deformed or scarred body. (Plate 28).

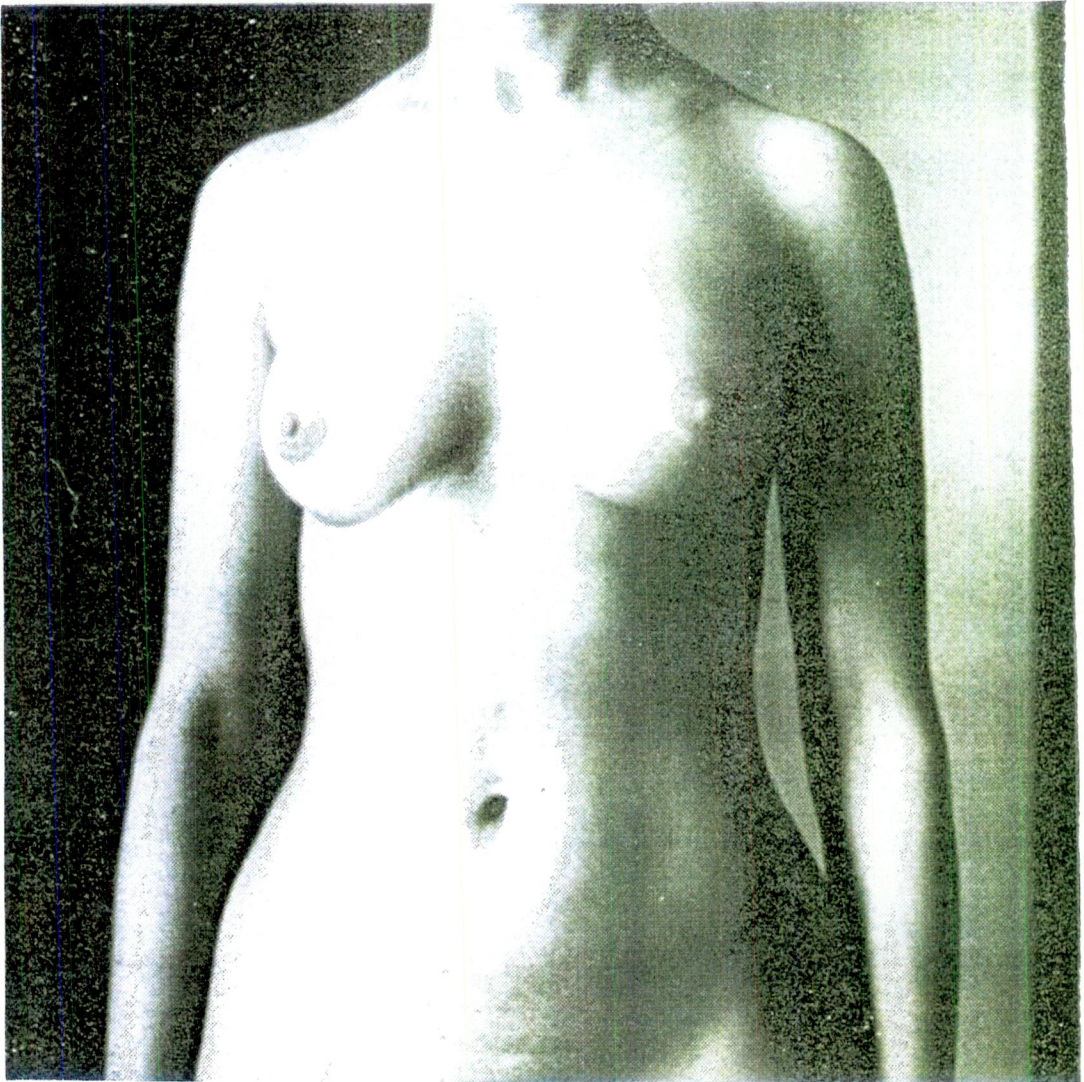
Tacha also does not find showing her body as problematic nor

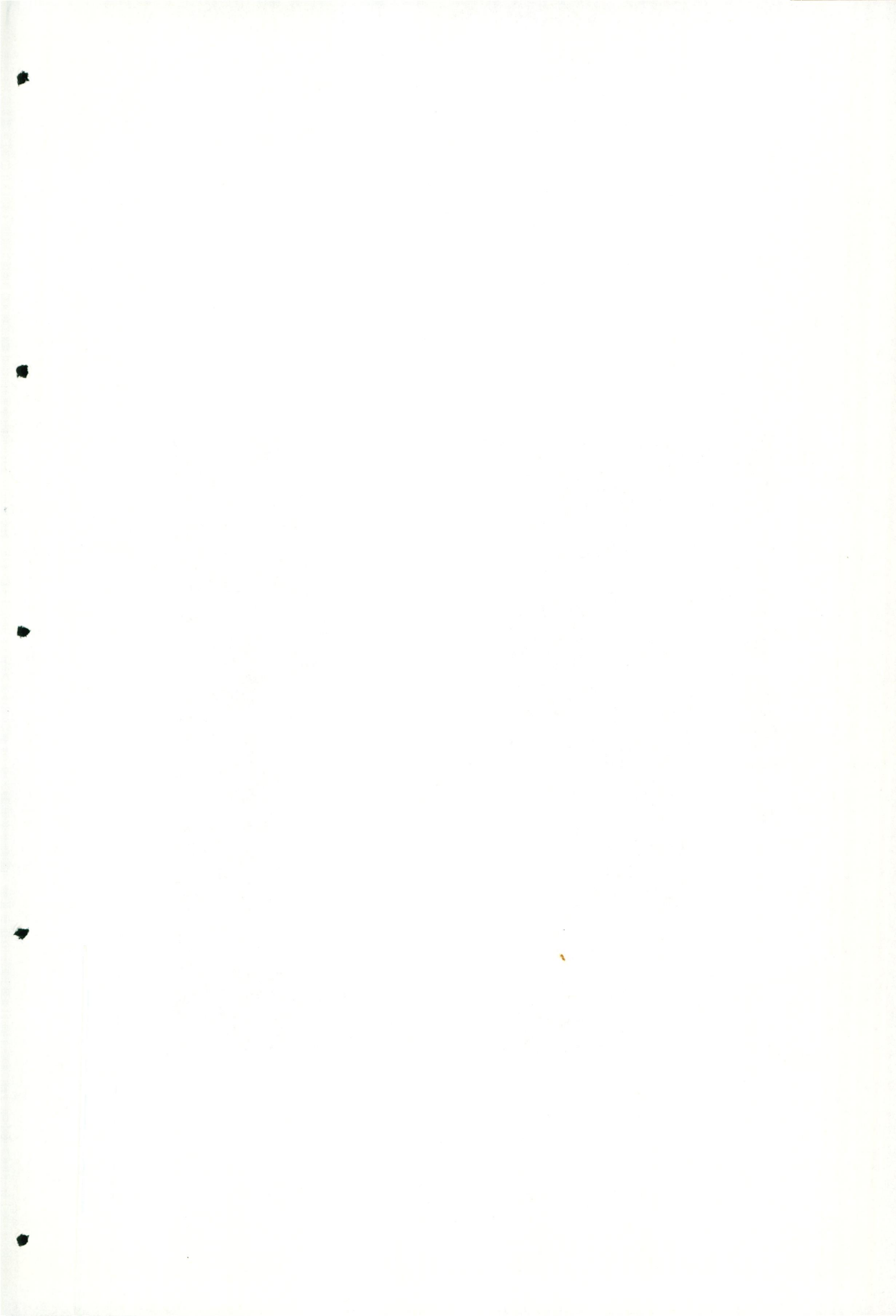




75.









does she believe that the photographs of her ageing body can be used for sexual manipulation. She uses the images of her body to demonstrate the process of ageing, not to demonstrate sexual differences or gender differences. She states:

I don't think that it is impossible to use the image of a naked woman without avoiding political or absolutely sexist interpretation. But I think because we are so dominated by sex and desire and pornography, people always look at the naked body as if it was an object of desire and I think it is our culture.  
(Lynch interview 1994)

Tacha has pointed out that eliminating the bodies of females who do not conform to the ideals of the dominant culture contributes to their invisibility. She argues:

We do not want to eliminate, we want to show it for what it is and therefore not as a sexual object of the man's desire and not as an idealized body by man's manipulation.  
(Lynch interview 1994)

Athena Tacha is an artist who has had the courage to look at her body in all its aspects and is determined to keep documenting and photographing its deterioration. She has astute powers of observation and leaves no stone unturned.

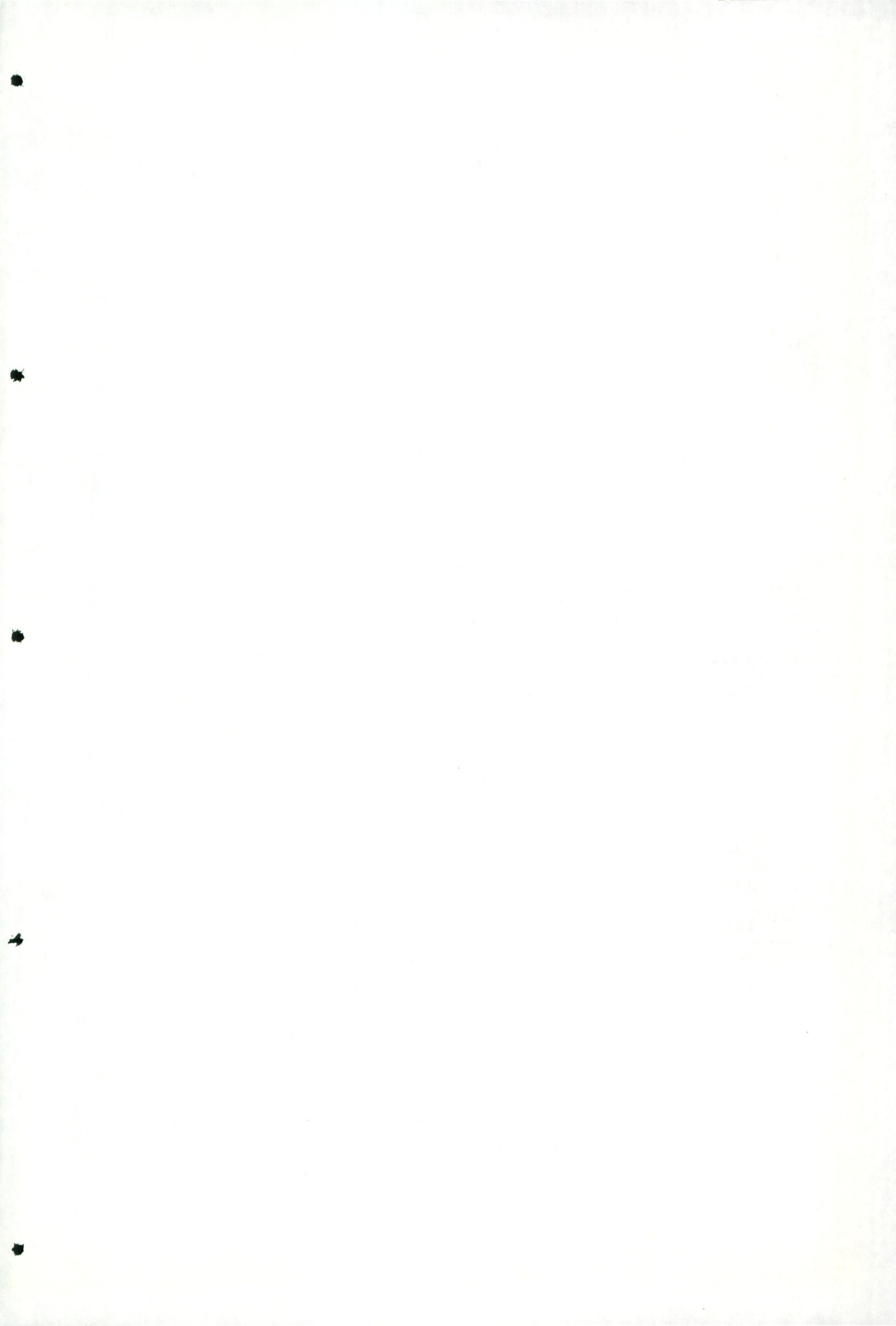


Tacha is not afraid to expose her vulnerability or her fears. She has tremendous empathy with nature and life - a willingness to become one with it saying:

It is the source of my great pleasure in nature and of my willingness to become one with it (this is the only way that I can face death without fear). (Tacha Identity 1990/1)

In our society, the stigma of age has become a powerful one. Athena Tacha is determined to fight it through her work, to fight how we are encouraged to despise ageing in ourselves and in others.

Athena Tacha and Mary Kelly are, perhaps, the only feminist artists who have had the courage to look at the middle aged and ageing female in their work. It is powerful, emotive and pioneering work to expose being an ageing female in a patriarchal culture.



## CONCLUSION

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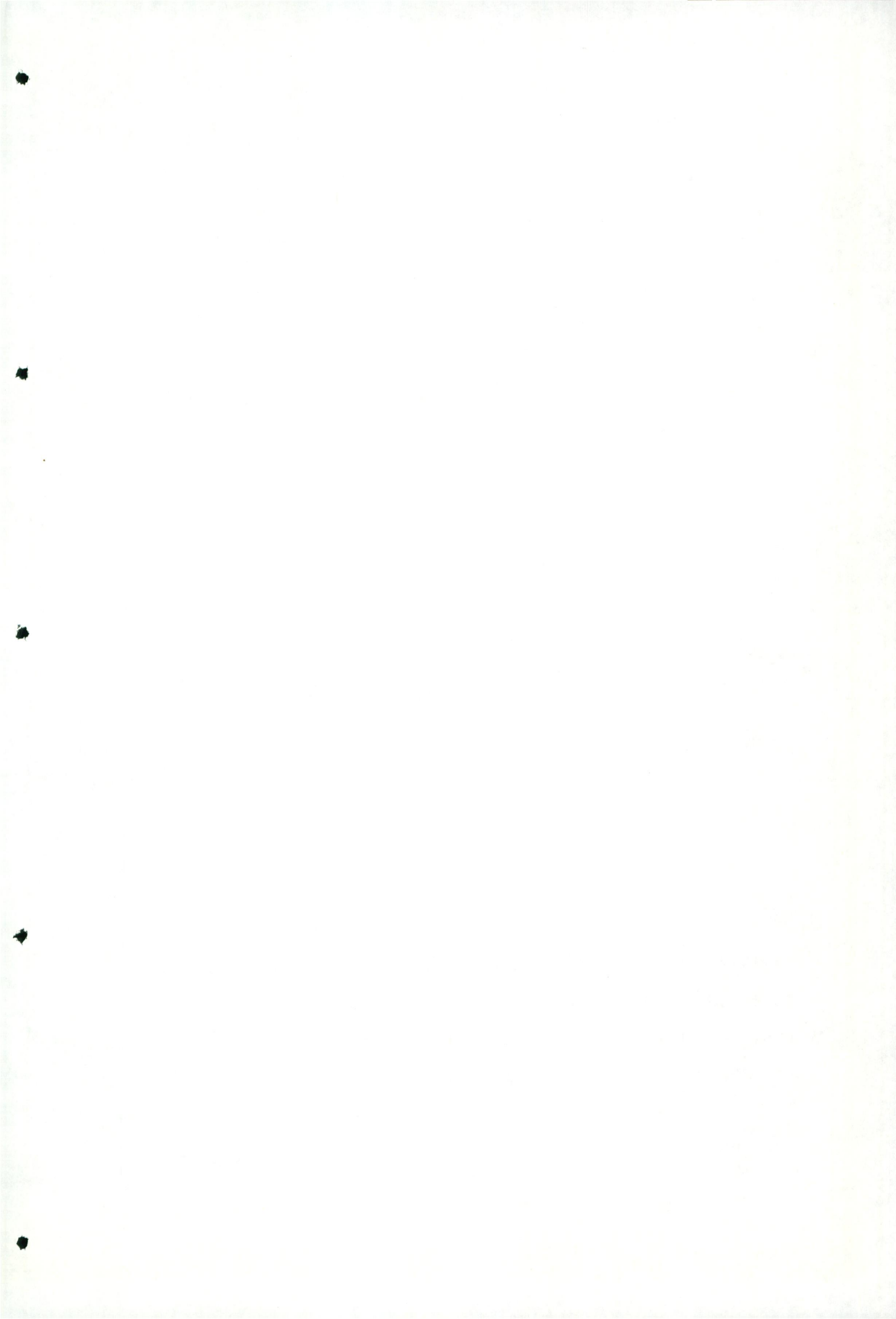
As can be seen from this thesis, the ageing female in contemporary patriarchal culture has to contend with both ageism and sexism. She is vulnerable to immense pressure to deny and ward off the signs of ageing. Older women are encouraged, by numerous advertising campaigns, film and T.V., to emulate the glamorous Hollywood stars or fashion models.

The women's movement has brought to light many issues over the past twenty-five years regarding sexism, racism, ageism and many other forms of oppression. Feminist art critics and artists have exposed the abuse of the female body, both in high culture and low. Many older women are examining and looking at how they can internalise ageing which keeps them feeling that being old is not O.K. The feminist artists, Kelly and Tacha, have questioned older women's place in contemporary patriarchal culture, which glorifies youth and is always seeking the eternal fountain of youth. Both Kelly and Tacha, in their work, confront these issues fearlessly, exploring the cultural and psychic experiences by being a middle aged woman and an ageing woman, between the end of child-bearing and old age, in a phallogentric society.

Women are learning to celebrate their strengths and wisdom



as they age, also challenging the negative labels put on mother-in-laws, stepmothers and older women in general. Older women are moving into positions which could make a difference in society's attitudes towards the ageing female. But change is very slow indeed, and a lot more radical disruption is required from feminist artists and critics. Let us hope that the best is yet to come.





## APPENDIX

Questions on the work of:

### Athena Tacha's 'The Process of Ageing'

**Cabrini Lynch: What inspired you/made you look at your own body initially?**

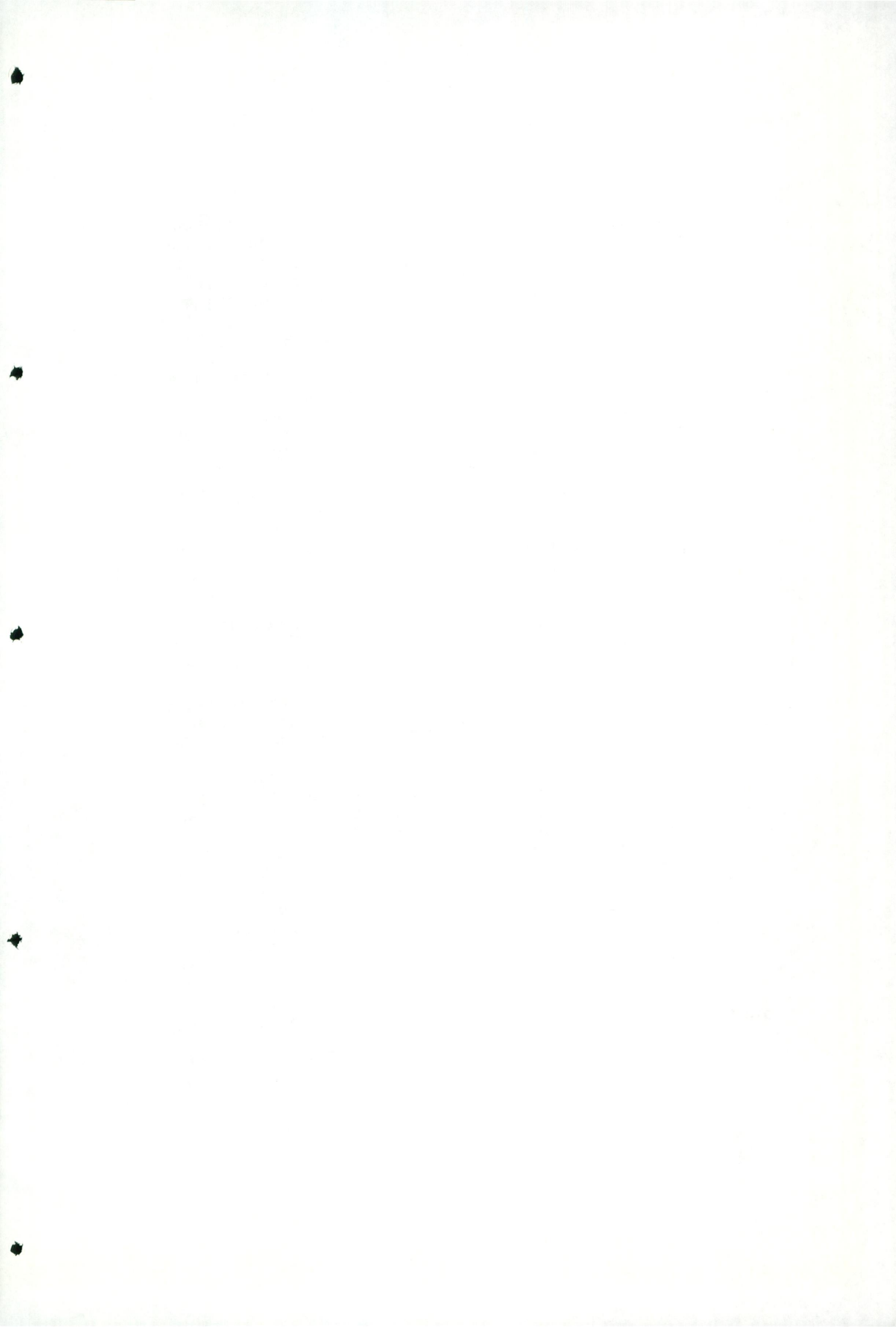
Athena Tacha: Well, I have an interest in observing everything around me including my own body and understanding reality. Not just looking at it with curiosity but trying to understand how it works, what holds everything together from my own brain, my consciousness, my body and the whole universe. I study extensively cosmology and astro physics and sub-atomic physics because I want to understand what is out there - the process of life and how I relate to it. So ageing is part of it - my own body was an instrument for understanding reality.

**In 1974 you published Process of Ageing. What prompted you to start this process? To ask the question - who is Athena?**

That same wish to understand who I am, and the work that I called Who is Athena actually compares or confronts the exterior perception from the interior perception - my own subjective perception of myself. I answer the questions myself. I tried to figure out a number of questions that were more or less essential as I perceived trying to understand a person. I selected the best friends that I had from my husband or the people who knew me the best, and I was extremely surprised to see the diversity of answers which shows that the exterior perception of the same person by different people is tremendously varied. The majority of them answered my questionnaire anonymously. However, I guessed from the answers who the people were because they were mirroring themselves to a degree. So the perception of who we are, is really very much dependent on the other person.

**Were they very honest?**

I think they were all very honest. And that is partly why I selected those people, although again it looked as if the people were a little vain about themselves. It came out in their answering about me. Some people were a little resentful of some of my achievements, a little



grudge came out in some of the answers, although I know that they were fond of me. All of them were friends. Obviously I didn't ask my enemies - people I know who can't stand me, but it would have been possibly prejudicial, although obviously this was also prejudicial in a favourable way because my two best friends and husband were involved. I asked men and women - I tried to balance it equally. I asked several couples and I asked them to answer separately so it was an interesting experience.

**You mention that you were watching for the first signs of ageing since you were in High School. Why were you? Was it curiosity, as an artist, to search, to look, to observe the colour, the change of form, the structure etc? Was there ever a trace of vanity or fear of wrinkles?**

All of those. I was very afraid of ageing and I was watching carefully when the wrinkles started appearing and once they became inevitable and multiplied to a big extent I just took it as a fact. I thought the only way to cope with my fear would be to be open about it, to be totally truthful about it, clinical about it and observe it, and see to what degree the fear was reflecting reality and I think the fear is justified to a degree by the realities of ageing. It is being looked down upon by other people as useless when you are slightly deaf, slightly slow. You know everybody gets slower, everybody gets hard of hearing. You do lose your eyesight, one starts losing ones eyesight in the late forties so that for the moment it is for me a very annoying thing because I have to look for glasses all the time. I can't even see the numbers on the telephone without glasses. So that is the first sign of age that is definitely a handicap and so all those handicaps naturally make other people look down upon the aged. On the other hand the other part of it, our society, at least American society more than any other, has such a cult of the youth that they don't want even to accept age. They put the old into institutions and shut them off so that they don't see them. They don't want to accept death either. I mean it is a society that is eternally young and the idols that they create - Hollywood, the entertainment industry, television and advertisements promote that eternal youthfulness and they create idols that are totally false - somebody has to take them down.

**Like even in aged women - aged film stars - you will still see Sophia Loren and others looking very pulled. You would wonder where has everything gone.**



Well there are some actresses that I don't think did anything to their faces who look more beautiful. Katherine Hepburn - her aged face was magnificent and she just died. She had Parkinson's disease, and both of my parents have Parkinsons, so I am very aware of the signs and symptoms of it, so she was extraordinarily brave. She is the kind of role model that women need. Sometimes you can't tell face lifts of course. They are very skilfully done, but usually you can because it looks artificial and it looks as if the face is tight and sometimes people remain with a permanent smile like Zsa Zsa Gabor and also Nancy Reagan, who has a permanent smile from her face lifts. I don't really mind other people having them but I don't think I would want to.

**Did you worry as you noticed your face ageing?**

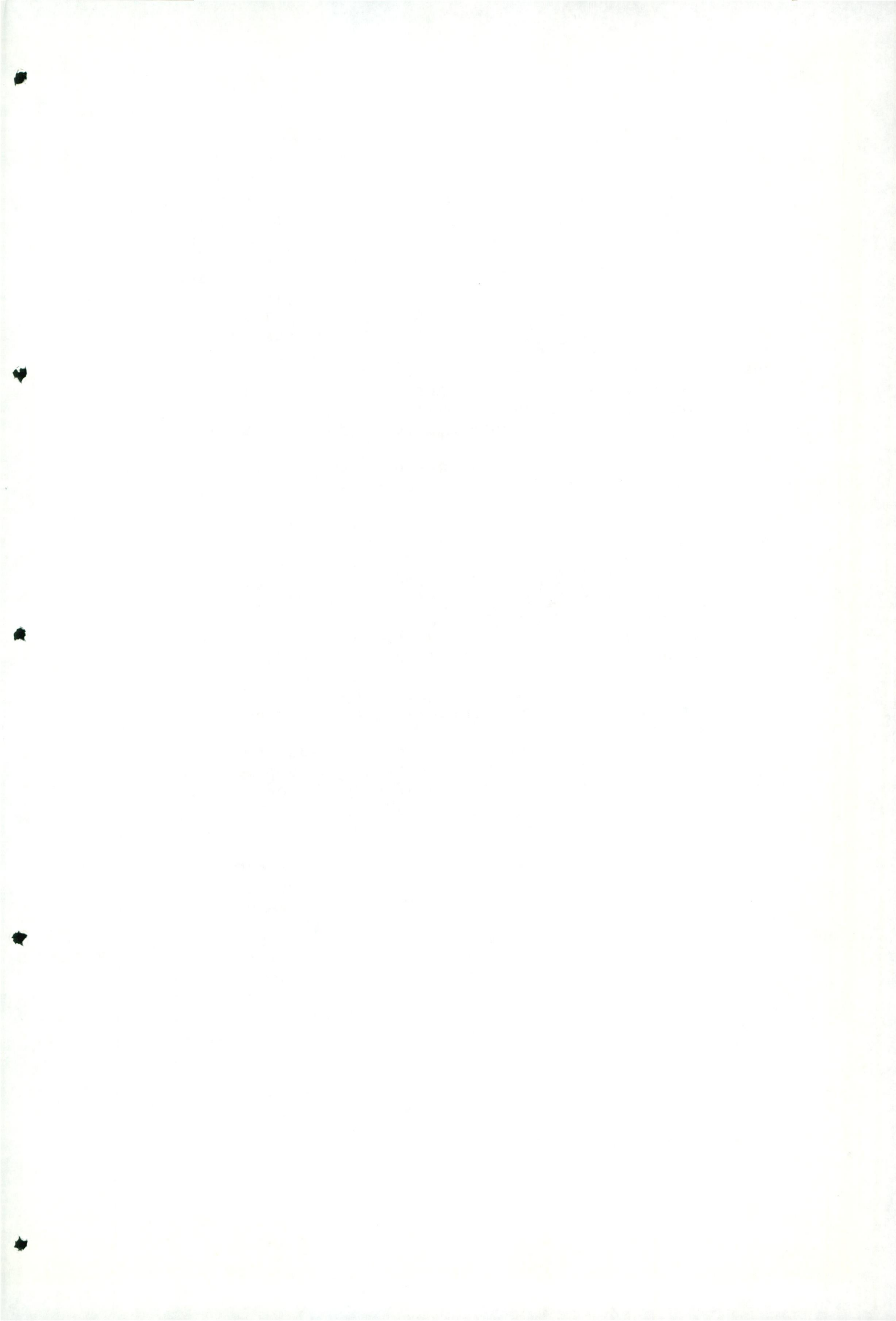
Of course I did and that's why I wrote those things and that's why I am doing this work because I am exorcising my fear of ageing but also examining the conditions for real ageing and then mythical ageing which is the constructive fears that are especially created for women.

**What compelled you to examine yourself so thoroughly and honestly and to document yourself so truthfully?**

Well partly my inherent love of truth and openness and also my wish to fight fear. As you know, I wrote a little booklet about my fear and I think that everything that you understand and examine you conquer to a degree. I think I have less fear because I have done that work and because I thought about it and I know what to expect and what is happening. I also know how much of it is fiction and how much of it is reality.

**What gave you the courage not to depersonalise or dehumanize the age process or yourself?**

I have great compassion for people and I think that if I put myself out as a specimen to be examined honestly, with compassion and humour, that makes other people empathise with my description. Very few people who read my work were untouched although they felt my use of language was awkward - of course I am a foreigner and it is a little awkward - but I think also I am adopting a kind of childlike, slightly naive, openness in the writing that I find simply appropriate for this kind of subject and I am not using symbolic meanings. I use language like a surgeon's knife and I look at my condition and I told myself I don't want to make anyone else uncomfortable. I have some subjects that I don't think I am ready to cope



with, such as my sexual fantasies or my first sexual experience, which I do want to expose. I do want to have the courage to be honest about it but I don't know yet when I will do it. I think maybe when I am older.

**Why choose to examine yourself, rather than someone else?**

First of all I know myself better than anybody else, therefore I am a good specimen - human specimen - to examine and expose but also I avoid hurting anybody else that way. The only thing I wrote about somebody else was about my mother. My mother was alive still but she didn't read English and therefore I wasn't afraid and nobody here knows her so I wasn't afraid of her being exposed. The only other thing that I did which I felt exposed others a little was the family of my husband, and I think it was a little hurtful to his brother.

**Having lived for about thirty-five years in America, how did you find the attitude of critics, artists and historians towards the depiction of the female?**

It differs between feminist critics and artists and historians like Linda Nochlin and other people, and males of course. I think that even the feminist critics are looking differentially at the female nude from the male nude. My tendency would be to try to reach a stage like Linda Nochlin was describing where it wouldn't make a difference whether you look at the male nude or the female nude or a dressed male or a female dressed. I think reproduction was such an essential thing in the human race because that was the weapon to survive, reproducing profusely, because each natural catastrophe destroyed whole populations and therefore the phenomenon of Life developed the system of profuse reproduction in order to enable each species to survive. While we were really struggling on earth to survive it was so important to reproduce that it was understood that females had to be reproductive machines and the male who didn't have to carry the offspring, had to do the other tasks such as fighting and providing food, and the female had to constantly reproduce. At the same time, in some societies, the female reproduce and yet the males took the credit of it because they always thought it was their son and the females took the blame when it was a daughter, instead of now when they know that the sex is defined by male sperm. So, because the females were put in that subjugated position due to the need of reproduction and had subservient roles in society, they became the tool of manipulation by the males. If they were beyond fifty and unable to reproduce they were cast off, thrown out, were





not needed, therefore ageing of females became the very crucial item of discrimination. Then in the science of youth, with a younger woman, it is easier to excite a male even an old male, therefore if the society needed reproduction and the male had to get an erection, they needed younger and younger females in order for this and so the need for creating the science of condemning female ageing was a kind of justified need. Now that the human population has exploded and we don't need to reproduce anymore, this becomes obsolete because females are not any more reproductive machines. We don't need reproduction. We have plenty - enough as it is, therefore this frees the woman from the obligation to society and to herself to feel that she has to reproduce. Even the maternal instinct is part of that - of the reproductive machinery and females have been conditioned by nature and by society that they really need the cuddling, need the children and of course also your dreams tell you that, that your only way to survive, to keep your dreams merging with someone else's dreams and keeping something of you alive. I mean it is instinct against death. Somehow understanding all that process, made me understand that all of those depictions of the female were to a great deal artificial and social constructs and therefore we could fight them now once reproductivity is inessential in the survival of the species because we have become so dominant a species on earth that there is no way that we will get extinct by not reproducing profusely. So we can fight these social constructs because there is no need for it. They are defunct.

**How did you become involved with other feminist artists, critics and the feminists art movement generally?**

Well I felt the need to fight for those rights of the woman, the rights to be a human being rather than a reproductive machine and subjugated sexually to the man and therefore socially deprived and depressed and I joined forces with other women because I felt the need to fight for justice and for freedom and equality, and I have fought for other groups too. I mean I have always fought for the underdog and I am supporting other causes, from South Africans fighting against oppression to the plight of the homeless, but of course I have to fight foremost for the rights that are part of me and I am female living right now and I have felt all that persecution and oppression, so that is why I joined forces and it is like all oppressed groups, community underground.



**Many advertisements for cosmetics, skin care, hair colouring etc. denigrate and reproach women's ageing process as something to be hidden, concealed or postponed for as long as possible. What are your views on these issues?**

That is definitely the truth and I think the reason behind it is financial. I mean cosmetics have become a huge consumer industry and advertising always finds the weak spot of people and exploits this. Obviously women have been brainwashed to think that they are useless if they are old. Therefore they have to hide their age and men will not look at them if they are old. Men have been brainwashed also to think that young women are the desire of life for the reasons that I explained earlier. The profit involved in this industry is extraordinary. They use women, not only brainwash them through advertisement, but in many other psychological manipulations. They convince them that they will help them hide their age, which is doubtful at best.

**If cosmetics don't work, is there some other way to delay the onset of ageing?**

I think the best thing you can do to not age is to not worry and not work. Lazybones cheerful people are the ones who age the less. Fatigue and stress are the two major evils for ageing. I mean I feel I looked ten years younger than I was until I was about forty-eight years and at that point so many bad things happened to me. Even if I worked like hell and slept very little but a lot of things happened together and it really aged me ten years instantly. In two years I felt ten years older. As I work hard to accomplish what I want to accomplish I feel my face sagging by the minute. And I feel so tired. I haven't had a real vacation since my childhood. So I think people who don't worry about anything, don't care about anything and are easy going, don't accomplish anything, those are the people who don't age. I can't sleep for worrying and that's what has aged me. On the other hand I have a tremendous amount of energy going constantly and that revives you and keeps you alive and keeps you well and young to a degree. You age externally but your mind is alive.

**Advertisements, T.V. and the media generally construct negative images of older women's bodies, e.g. 'Equalia' helps to prevent premature ageing. 'Oil of Ulay' helps keep skin young looking etc. ..Strategies such as these manipulate older women into 'passing' for being younger.**



**Do you think we fail to confront the reality of ageing in all its aspects?**

Well we would all like to look younger. I must say that I do try to preserve myself. In other words I'm proud of having kept the same waist line as when I was at school and I fight for it. I do diet. I even fast a whole day, no food at all, when I feel that I need to lose a couple of pounds, especially after fifty you can gain so easily without eating extra. I have imposed upon myself a certain discipline. I don't want to look matronly. I don't want to look middle aged spread person. That may be a prejudice on my part. I do exercise, I do yoga and I swim in order to keep my body young. Now I don't think that is deceitful or that it is a bad thing. I think it is a good thing to try to preserve yourself as much as possible. But that is different from deceiving with external application or devises that fashion and advertisement in the media and especially industry of cosmetics try to make the women do and sell to women. The fashion industry goes to the other extreme of making you so skinny that you are not a woman. You are an adolescent boy. I think definitely that 'passing' for being younger is something that I would fight, especially with the brainwashing that is going on.

**Cynthia Rich has this to say about passing... "Passing is one of the most serious threats to selfhood...our true identity, never acted out can lose its substance, its meaning, even for ourselves. Denial to the outside world and relief at its success...blurs into denial of self.." Would you agree with this statement? Could you discuss your own lack of denial of your own ageing process?**

I agree fully, and I think that trying to appear younger or something that you are not is one of the most serious threats to selfhood. That is why I don't dye my hair. I have never hidden my age. People often say "you don't need to say that you are fifty". Yes I do, because I need to show to people what a woman of fifty can look or is and I despise people who hide their age and especially women who do it and I understand the reason. They are forced by society but I think that if we had the courage not to be afraid of our age, that would make younger women less afraid. My students are twenty and they are worried about becoming thirty and I say "at thirty you are not you yet, you have to pass thirty to become yourself". At least I didn't become myself until aged thirty-five.

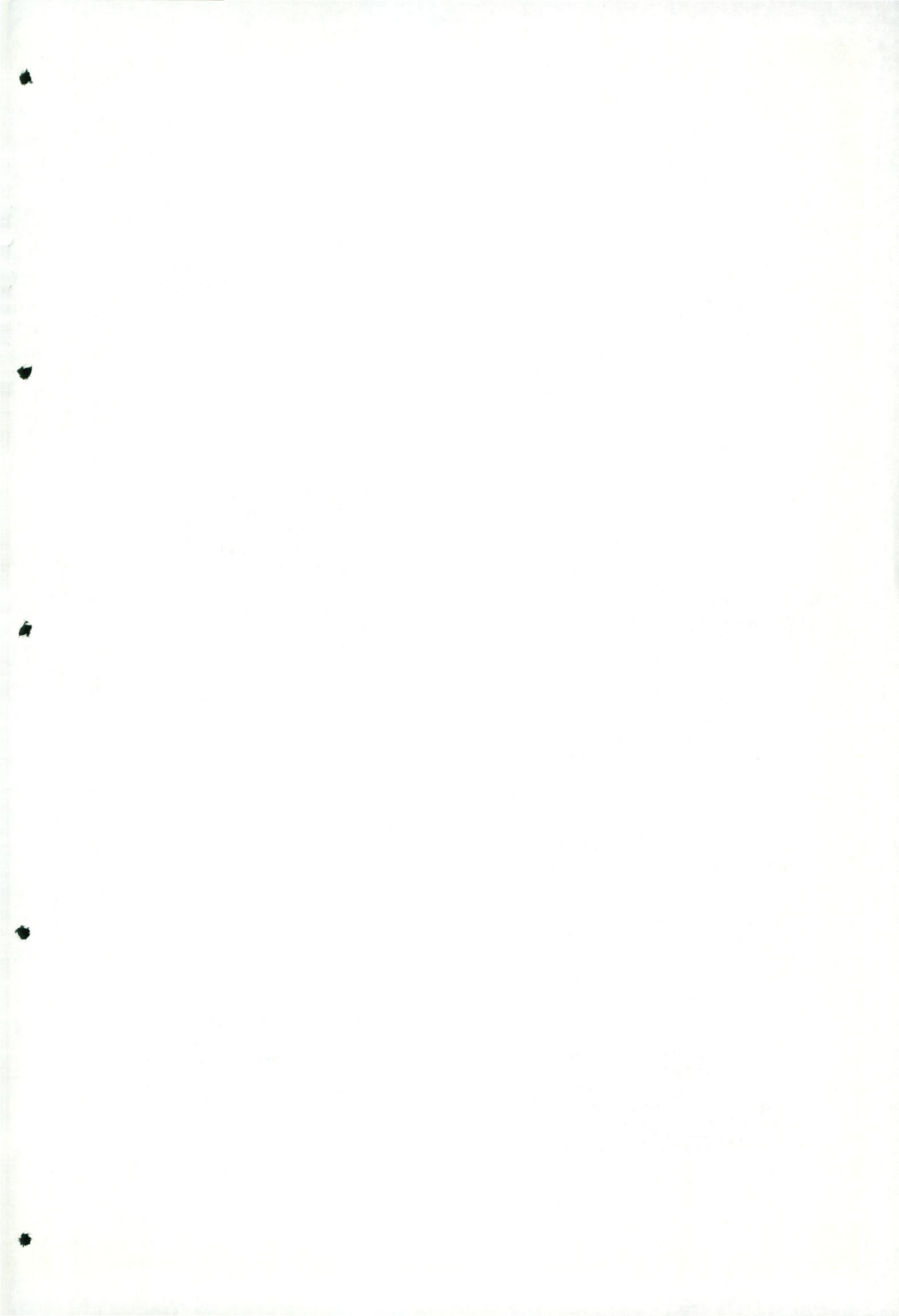


In your own documentation piece on Reaching Fifty..The Process of Ageing 11 you scrutinise yourself in minute detail. You mention that your sleeping problems may be due to extraordinarily stressful conditions or you may have entered the menopause. I would like to discuss the fear many women have about the menopause; the powerful and mysterious taboo in our society as regards the menopause and the feelings of being sexually unattractive.

That is the most powerful thing and it relates to those deeper needs for reproductivity that I discussed earlier. Now with the menopause men tried to create a fear around it because they wanted to make women feel useless after that. They wanted to guarantee that they had younger women at their disposal and therefore all the psychiatrists in the late nineteenth century who created the myth of hysterics - hysterical woman - created also the fear of menopause.

**Could you describe the experience of your own menopause?**

Well first of all I had a kind of lightening effect that I never knew when it happened and if it happened because I had my uterus removed earlier. I had an unwanted pregnancy aged forty-five - in 1979 - and I decided to have an abortion and I had a condition of the uterus so they couldn't remove successfully the pregnant matter and my doctor was afraid that it may be malignant and he suggested that they remove the uterus. I didn't have any intention to have children. It was a serious operation and I didn't do it lightly. Because they removed the uterus and not the ovaries, I never knew at what point I stopped menstruating. So I didn't know when my menopause occurred although I assumed it was around the fifties. That however points out that it was the worst period of my life - several deaths of close people, my mother and my aunt, my husband's father, my uncle. I mean one after the other, so that was a bad period for me. It was also when my body was passing through the natural process of menopause. Whatever depression or difficulties I felt in that period, I don't attribute to the menopause but I attribute to the other components, but maybe the menopause contributed. Sleeplessness is often a symptom of menopause. I accept it because I haven't had any other problems. When the doctor said we can't try to have another child for six months we have to wait. And the only time that I felt very vulnerable emotionally was after my miscarriage. I think it does something to you.





**Are there aspects of your life which you consider too private to expose in your work?**

The only thing that I want privately are things that are repulsive like going to the toilet. Everything that would disgust somebody else. I mean disgusts even me, I don't like smelling foul, but something like that I want to be private about. Anything else that is human that everybody shares I mean everybody fears pain about period or abortion or what ever, or all those human decisions or human pain, I don't really mind being open about it, because I think that helps others. All of that analysis, self analysis, helps other people and I do it because of that. I do it partly because it is therapeutic for me but I wouldn't need to publish that. I think I do it because people can learn from it and it would help their life. I don't think that art should be an ego trip. It should be more than that, it should be healing or expanding process for others.

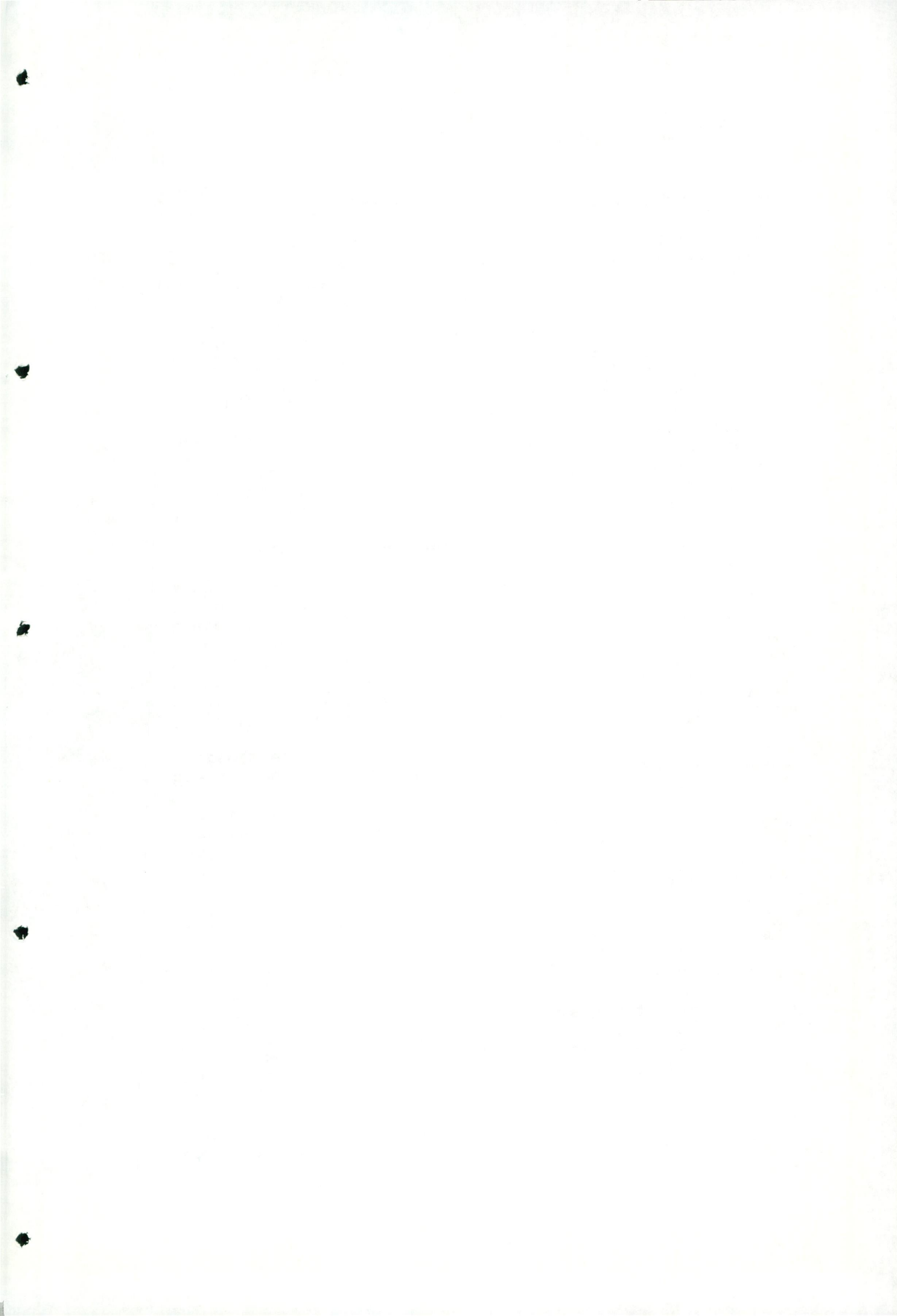
**How do you feel about the possible loss of your own sexual attractiveness?**

About the feelings of being sexually unattractive, I'm not as afraid of that as most women are because I didn't want to have children and so it was less traumatic for me to reach the age where I can't have children. I believe very much in the product of the mind and of the spirit and therefore I think what I am leaving behind as an artist, or communicate to other people while I live through my mind and my behaviour and my art, is equally good.

**To what extent do you regret not having had a child?**

Well, you never know whether your child will be a satisfying human being. It could turn out to become a drug addict, criminal, let alone in those days when I was pregnant, it could have been a mongoloid or a deformed child of any sort. Nowadays they test everything and you know ahead of time. I have two friends who had a mongoloid child and it was a tremendous drain on their life and so that all those responsibilities about children and then the world changing so fast that it won't be a very hospitable environment for the human species in the twenty first century. So what right do I have to bring into it a new human being. Will they be thankful for that or not? So therefore I never really regretted not having children and I am very happy about that because it could have been terrible if I was sad about it. But I am not.

**Has sex played a pivotal role in your life or in your work?**



I don't think that sex is all that important in life. You can have a wonderful life even without having sex and in fact I had always leaned to becoming a yogi hermit and have studied the philosophy and practice of yoga and I was thinking that when I reach the fifties I might, if my husband would prefer to have a younger wife, we can divorce and I can become a recluse, intellectual and he can go marry a younger wife. I haven't done it. Maybe I'm kidding myself and maybe I am scared of doing it and maybe it is fiction. Maybe also our marriage hasn't reached that crisis to do it and I may do it later at age sixty, I don't know. Maybe I am afraid of ageing alone. I try to think that I am not and that is why I do work and keep my job and salary because I want to be totally independent. I want to be at any point free to give him a divorce and free to request one if I feel the need to become a yogi hermit. So I think the individual should have the freedom to be what they think will fulfil them best. But the nice thing about our marriage is that we matured, we both care more about our work and about our creative capabilities and leave enough leeway to the other person to develop and therefore we haven't split - we haven't felt the need to split.

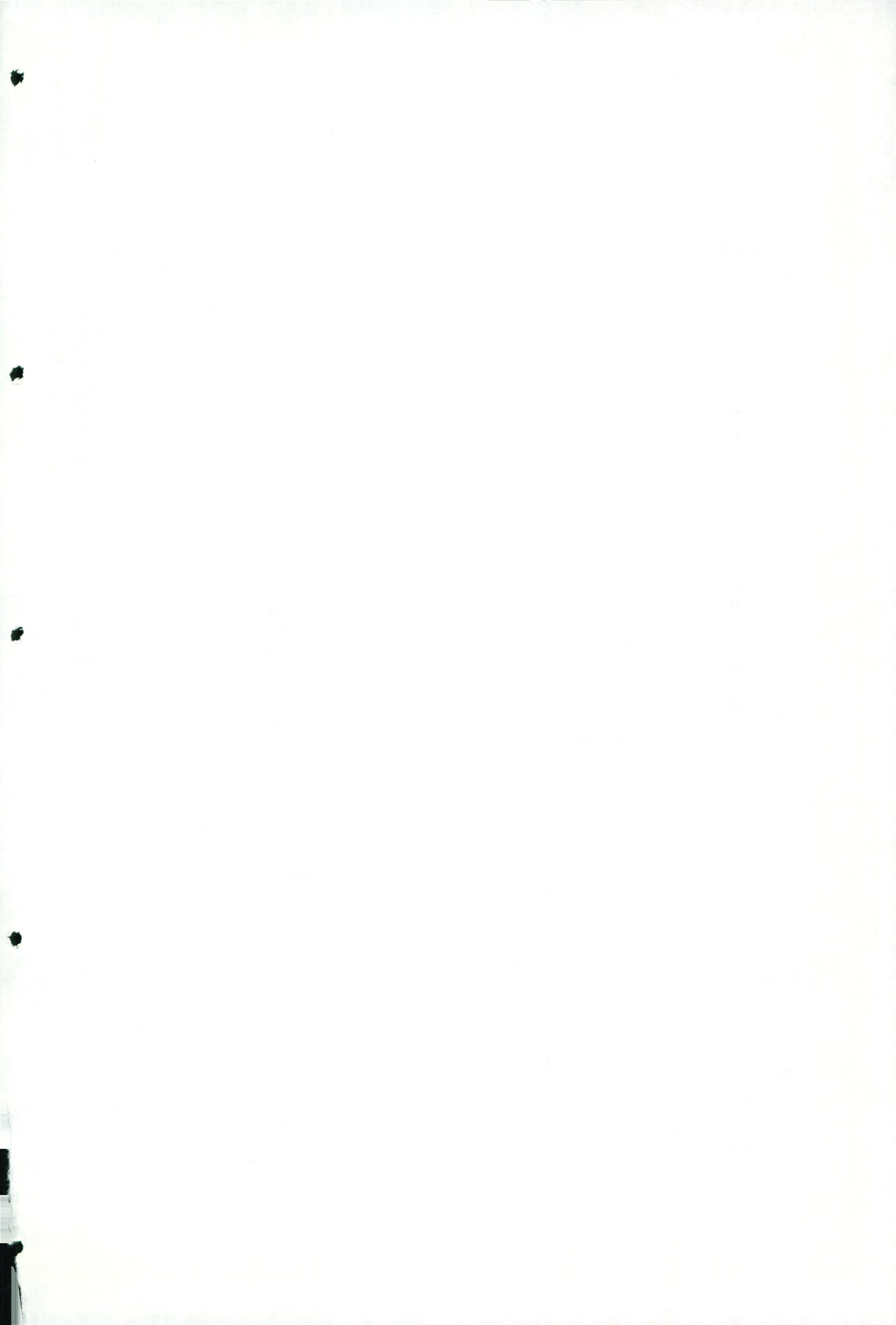
**What is the influence of the pornography industry been on our perception of sexual attractiveness?**

The industry of pornography also has overplayed the role of sex. Once there was freedom of sexuality which they exploited and they are playing up to it with the magazines, the shows, the girlies and the one thing and another and of course it is exploiting women to a great extent. There is some pornography for women and liberated women and lesbians think that maybe they have the equal amount of right of having their pornographic magazines, but I think all of them are victims, both men and women - lesbians and gays - are victims of the porno industry and are very exploited. That fear of being sexually unattractive has been cultivated. However it is important to show that women can, if they want, be sexually attractive at any age but I think also it is not an imperative need for everybody to be. I think people should accept the facts of ageing with grace and I think people who accept it without fear and at the same time trying to preserve their strength and their qualities as much as possible. I do believe in exercising and preserving your body in good condition to the very end. I don't think you should let go and become a hideous person when you age. There is no reason to, you can be attractive not by hiding your age and not by becoming someone else.



I have extracted two statements from your text:..."most of the problems of middle age are in fact related to sexuality and the fear of loss of it."... and that ..."women are afraid of losing their power of attraction and, indirectly, the pleasure of sex and any control over males that they can have through it. In past societies females were outcast after fifty, as worthless reproductive machines.." Do you think in our society today that the patriarchal view sees the menopause as the cancellation of the only important female functions namely attracting, stimulating, gratifying and nurturing man/children? That these functions supposedly constitute women's happiness?

Yes I think they still do. Those attitudes are so ingrained even though they are unnecessary and defunct. They were at some point necessary; now they are absolutely obsolete and yet they are so ingrained in our society and the patriarchal system is still so powerful that they still promote the same ideas to us. It is up to us to try put them down and expose them and I think feminist critics do, although I think a number of critics are of the second generation of feminism are victims partly to some of this brainwashing. For instance fashion or being attractive in a modish way - punk way - tempts a lot of feminist critics. They adopt some of these attitudes that the fashion industry is cultivating or male institutions are cultivating. I don't say that all feminists should dress like men or become lesbian or become unattractive but I think there is a point where you show that you are victimised by the cosmetic and fashion industry rather than braving them and managing to be attractive without them or at least exposing them which is what I try to do here. A lot of feminist critics don't realise that they fall victims in the promotion of sexuality, in the promotion of attractiveness, being fashionable and all of that and I think I want to see through those devices of the male power. If I can cultivate an attitude that I am not afraid of being unattractive sexually so what. I mean it is a pleasure, I've had it, I may have it again but it is not the powerful motive of my life. I have other things that interest me more and therefore my intellectual interests, my art, are much more important to me than my sexual pleasure or my sexual attractiveness or whatever. Perhaps I feel that way because I have had a satisfying sexual life and a satisfying emotional life and maybe if you have been deprived you will never get over it and you constantly long for more and you are afraid of losing your attractiveness. I think people should understand that sexual unattractiveness, especially if socially constructed and a myth, is not to be feared.



**Do you think that the stigma of age is a powerful one?**

Yes it still is and we really have to keep fighting about it. In fact I notice it every time I say my age. I probably still look a little younger than my age and I can pass for late forties or early fifties and when I tell them that I am fifty-eight something changes in their eyes, the way they look at me and I think God dammit I still have to fight for it - to make them see that I am the same person before I told them my age and after I told them my age. Fifty-eight is not that old. You are not decrepit, you are still full of life and full of power and I don't feel that I am much different from when I was thirty-five or even twenty-five. In fact I dive and swim a helluva lot better than I swum when I was twenty-five. One gains experience even in physical skills. I do yoga a helluva lot better than when I was twenty-five. I can stand on my head and I couldn't do it then. People have to learn that ageing is not that fearful.

**You state that much of the fear of ageing is due to fear of future suffering, decrepitude, loss of one's capacities etc. and that you are certainly terrified of the possibility of becoming totally incapable of tending to your basic physical needs. You consider such existing below human dignity and unworthy of prolonging. Do you think that you would be tempted to end your own life under such circumstances? Or do you think you would be similar to your own mother and aunt who both were bedridden before death and accept your state? Or continue documenting, examining and scrutinising your own physical body and feelings under such circumstances?**

This is a very complex question and the last part is the most interesting. Yes I think I would be tempted to end my own life under such circumstances. So I may not do it, but I am studying the possibility. I bought a book called 'Final Exit' which gives you a number of easy solutions to die. The guy who wrote this book suggests various ways of achieving an easy death when you are at that stage and want to die. I haven't read it yet but my husband bought it for me because I wanted to have it and I feel kind of relieved that such a book exists, but whether I will do it or not, God knows, because we were talking about that yesterday and what you are saying here about it - maybe if I have my mind still and I find it an interesting thing to do to document my condition and scrutinise the physical, intellectual and emotional changes that happen in those circumstances, maybe I won't have the use of my hands if I am totally paralysed, maybe my urine escapes without my control, but if my mind is there and I can have a tape recorder to dictate things that I think may be interesting





then I may prolong that situation and not want to die. I hope if I do it I do it because of that and not because I am afraid of dying. One shouldn't be afraid of dying.

**Or living? What about living?**

Well you are right, but yet I don't want to reach a point that either I am a terrible burden to the people who take care of me or the point of indignity. Somehow I think, much as I like to be totally open, I think there will be things that I would find undignified like not being able to hold your bowels or your urine, not being able to get up and go to the toilet by yourself. I mean I feel that anything that is impinging about my sufficiency and becomes a burden to others, I don't enjoy. It may need a different kind of courage.

**But what about a sort of humility that can come, or surrender or spiritual feeling?**

I know I don't exclude that. I may be too hung up on my pride and independence.

**The female nude is dense with meaning in our patriarchal culture. When one mentions 'nude' it is automatically assumed to be a female nude body of a certain idealistic aesthetic of physical perfection. What compelled you to document your ageing naked body visually and photographically? Why did you not continue recording your bodily process all in text?**

What compelled me I suppose was I was working a lot with my body, hands, faces and expressions which were studies of the movable part of our face and hands in terms of creating means of communication becoming expressive instruments; and at the same time I started auditing more the ageing symptoms; and therefore I thought I should start recording it; and after I recorded it I went back to my memory of the age sixteen which is the first time I felt my body had matured. I then tried to track all those memories back and eventually wrote the first text. So it was curiosity and fear of ageing I think, but also the wish to document the process for other people to lose their fear.

**By contemporary cultural definitions you have a 'good' body. If you had a heavier, scarred large body similar to the feminist artist Jo Spence, whose work concerns a working-class woman, ageing and with a scarred body, do you think that you would still have documented your body?**



I think probably more so because it would have been more difficult and would have taken more courage. I think the incentive that makes me document my ageing process is to fight fear for me and for others and therefore it would have been more difficult to expose myself if I was deformed or scarred like Jo Spence.

**Yes, she had a lump removed from her breast and had quite a dent.**

Well that was relatively minor. I mean you could have worse than that. You could have a shrunken hand, or you can be deformed for life from a terrible automobile accident. So I do have a good body as you say but first I fight for it to keep it in that state but also it gets bad, it starts getting a belly and a little hump. Of course the conditions of photographing myself every year, once a year I do it, I am not that systematic to do it with exact same light, exact same background or the exact same day of the year, because it is difficult enough as it is to get my husband photographing once a year. Sometimes the next year I look younger than the previous year. It is an effect of lighting or photography but overall the sequences are convincing.  
(Looking at photographs)

**Have you lipstick on?**

I do always wear lipstick. I don't have very intense lipstick I always have a little bit although my lips are not that pale but because I started that way I do have it on. We travel a lot and some years we are in Rome, some years in London but generally the damage to weathering is showing. It is changing gradually more and more and the wrinkles under the eyes, on the mouth and chin are showing and the general impression comes through. My body is generally younger than my face. The knees have sagged, my breasts haven't sagged at all, the skin is developing some wrinkly areas (the first photograph is 1972 and the last is 1989) there isn't that much difference, in fact I lost some of my hips and my knees are wrinklier and I stand more in a yoga position and I was standing more in a soldier position (younger) but otherwise you see very little difference. The backs show even less difference because you don't see the face and the neck. Maybe the profile shows more development. In my body I feel that is the weakest point. I have a little more belly. My breasts are a little lower, the right one especially.

**The art historian, Linda Nochlin, states in her book**

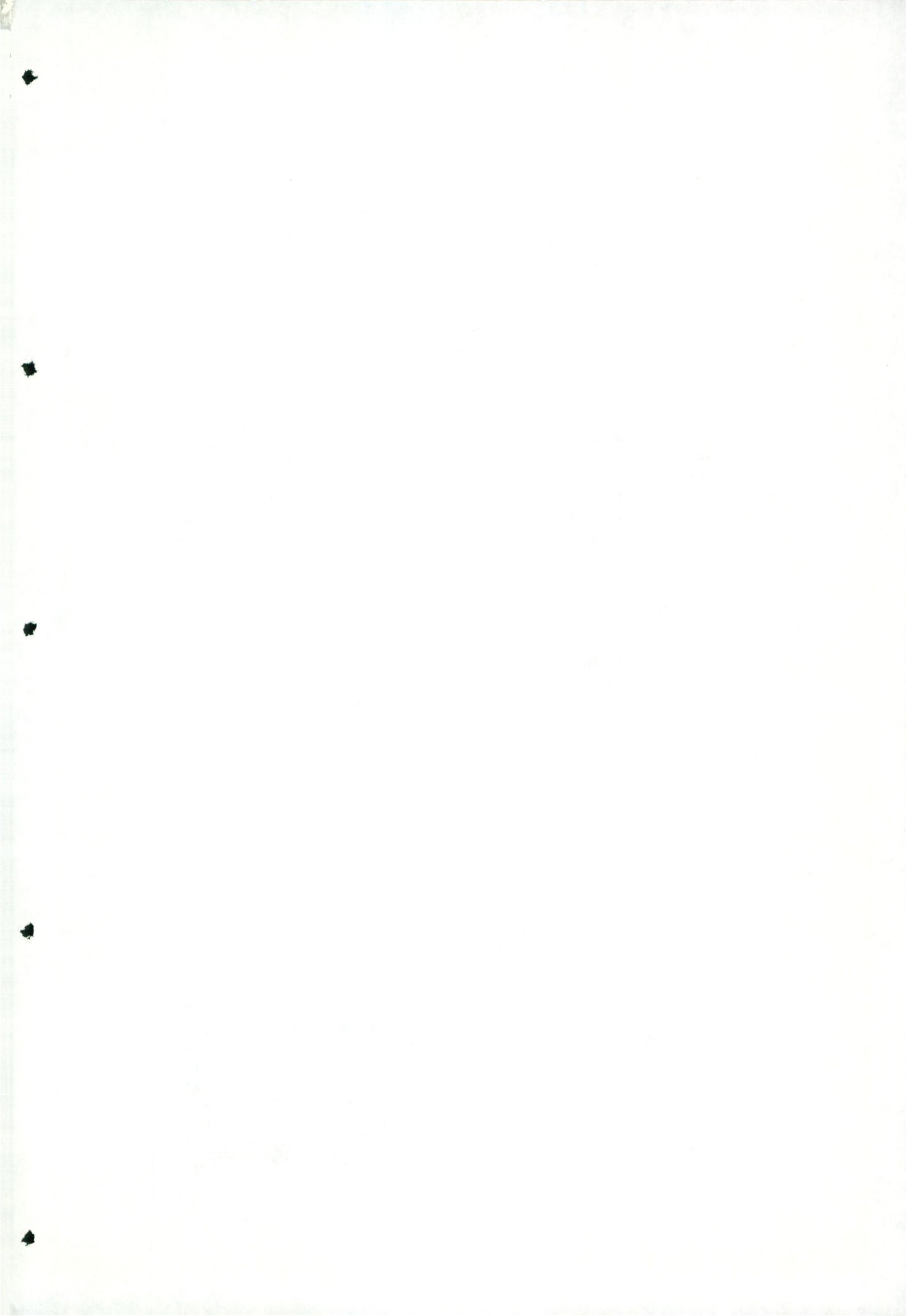


**'Women, Art and Power'** that "In Utopia - that is to say, in a world in which the power structure was such that both men and women equally could be represented clothed or unclothed in a variety of poses and position without any implications of domination or submission - in a world of total and so to speak unconscious equality, the female nude would not be problematic. In our world it is." Did you find documenting your body which is a female nude, problematic?

I don't think so. The reason is because I removed the sexual implications from my photography of the body. I avoided it consciously by treating my nude like a clinical specimen, a little bit like a butterfly that an entomologist pins on a board. Our culture lends us to believe that you can't be objective, no matter what you do you are always subjective. I try to be because I try to avoid leading to interpretations that force their sexual desire when I do this study of ageing and therefore my nude is like a mug-shot of a wanted prisoner, so that is why it has not been problematic for me. I don't think I am shy about having it in an exhibition, I had it in my records that I was present at the opening. I wouldn't mind posing in the nude even in front of my students because I am what I am. I am there. That's what it is. I am not giving any wiggles of my hips to make myself attractive or pretending I am something else or posing as a sexual object. I think the intention is very important and that's what changes the female nude into a sexual object - the intention behind the painters who paint it, as well as the viewer of course who is trained to look at it as an object of desire.

**Peter Gidal has stated: "I do not see how...there is any possibility of using the image of a naked woman...other than in an absolutely sexist and politically repressive patriarchal way...."** There have been also voices within the women's movement that have suggested that under patriarchy the female body cannot be shown without being appropriated for the dominant ideologies of gender and sexual difference. Would you agree?

Well again I think it is a matter of intention. I mean do you think looking at those photographs that my ageing body could be appropriated for sexual manipulation? I think I am treating it as I would have treated any animal body, my dog, my cat or my husband. I mean any male body as well. Using it as an image to demonstrate the process of ageing not to demonstrate sexual differences or gender differences. It could happen to a man's body. I have that body available to show. I don't think that it is impossible to use the image of a naked woman without



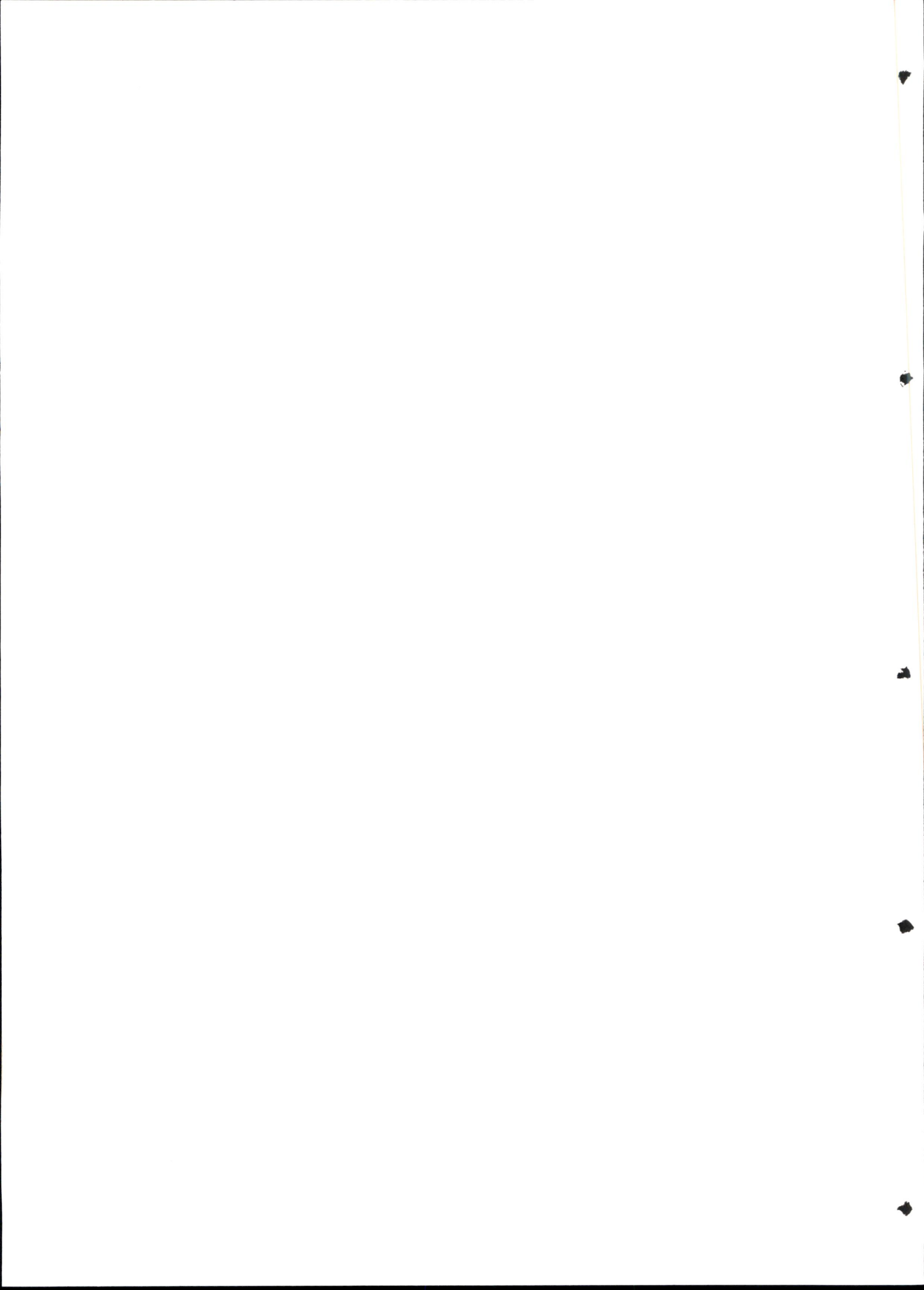
avoiding politically or absolutely sexist interpretation. But I think because we are so dominated by sex and desire and pornography, people always look at the naked body as if it was an object of desire and I think it is our culture. Because religion has played a great role in distancing us from the naked human body and making it appear sinful to control sexuality and moral behaviour, they had to invent the notion of sin which was very deep into Judaism and Christian culture, so we have associated always the naked body with sexuality when it is the natural thing - that's how I want to see it and that is how ancient Greeks saw it. I mean all those naked young men and they never had fig leaves. The west put fig leaves on them.

**Would you agree that denying visibility to 'the female body' as a universal category perpetuates the invisibility of women whose bodies do not conform to the ideals of the dominant culture?**

Absolutely. Yes, you are very right there. First of all eliminating the body imagery art or otherwise, the female body would contribute to the invisibility. We don't want to eliminate it, we want to show it for what it is and therefore not as a sexual object of the man's desire and not as an idealised body by man's manipulation but for the animal body that it is, natural and female. That is why I like using photography because it is supposed to be an eclectic medium, although we all know that it isn't, but in a way we believe it when we see it as it is reality more than if it was a painting or drawing which can be more manipulated. I think that we have to indeed show women whose bodies do not conform to the ideals of the dominant culture.

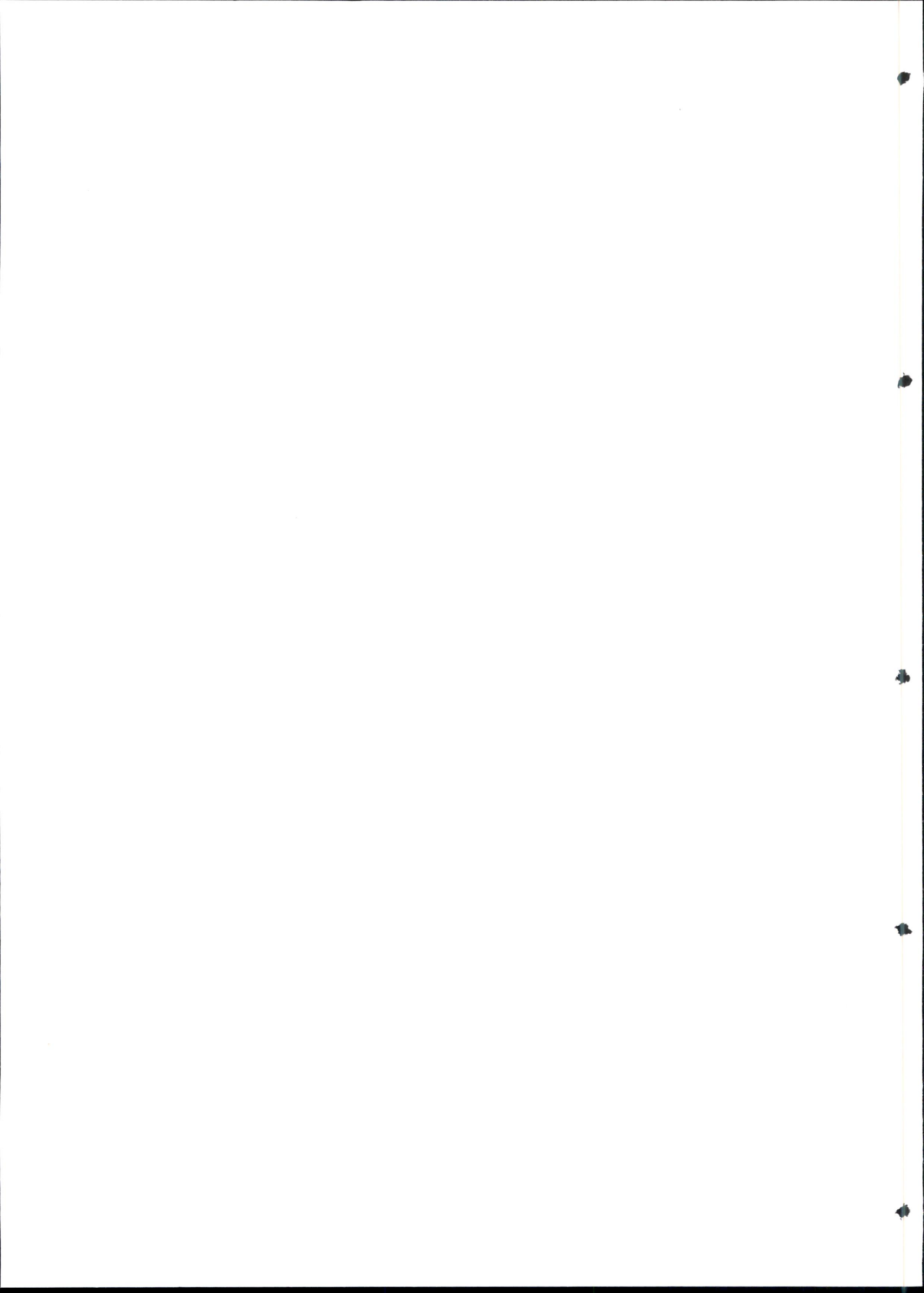
**As a feminist artist who makes images from your own body, how do you feel having exposed and made visible in public the taboo subject of the process of the ageing female body, your body?**

I feel good about it and I wish I could find ways to do it more because it is needed. More is needed to be done and I wish I could think of more ways of doing it. Of course that's not my only pursuit in my art because I am doing a lot of other things. It looks as if it is a very important subject in this culture and very important for feminism. Susan Saunders wrote a beautiful article/essay on ageing and discrimination about ageing. In fact I discovered it only last year and I forget its title but I was amazed she wrote it the year before my first Process of Ageing. It seems to me that the more people deal with the subject the more useful it will be, for men and for





women because men need to be educated too. They are the ones who are more brainwashed about the beauty of youth and the necessity for women to be youthful in order to be attractive sexually or even attractive at all, independantly of sexuality. People don't even conceive beauty in age, they think age is ugly. I find old faces very beautiful, equally beautiful to youthful faces and the older the more touching and the more beautiful they can become like olive trees or plane trees. People don't mind age in trees. They admire it. They find an old tree beautiful but they cannot accept it in their own species. They are scared of it. I think we have to try and point out the truth about ageing to people.



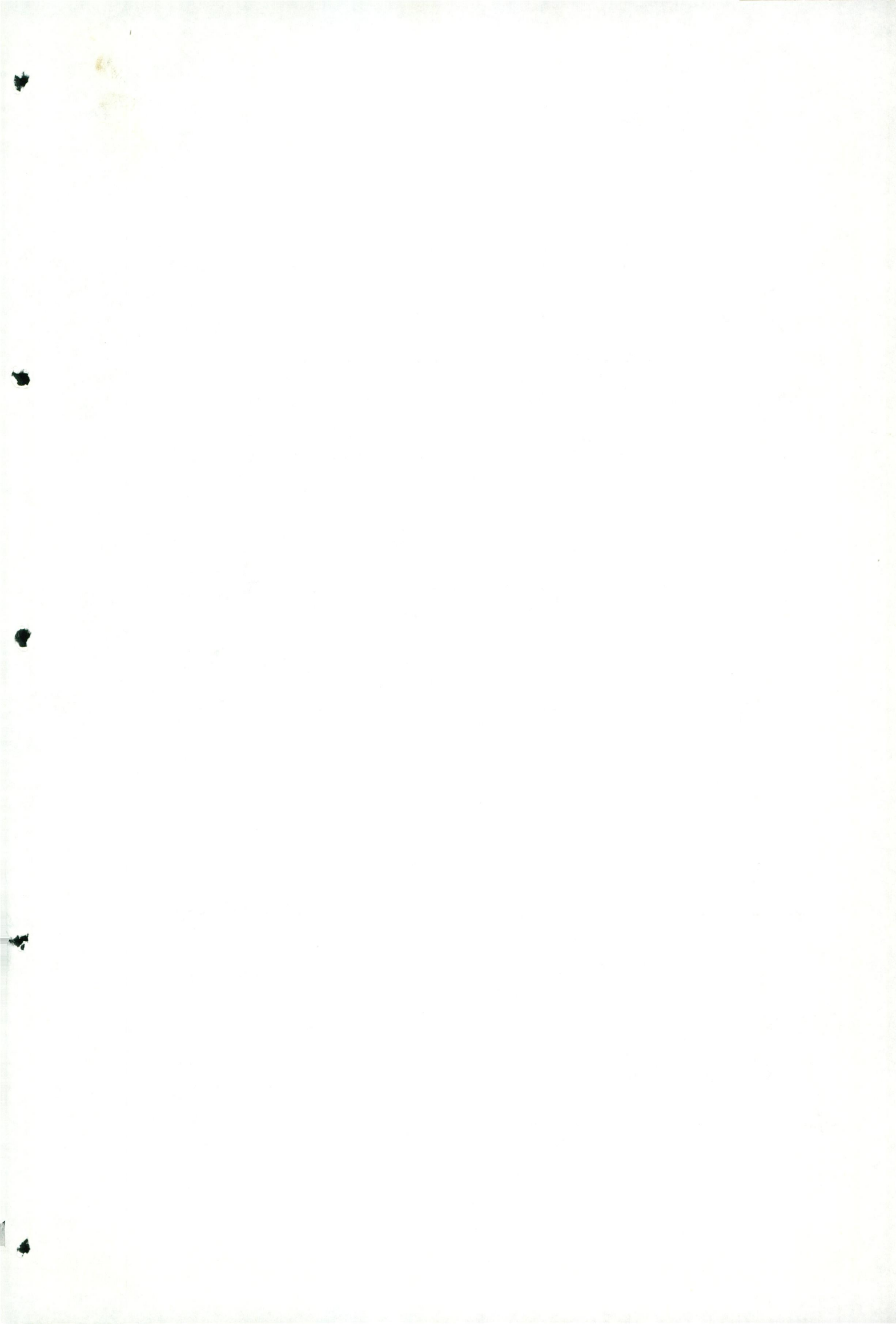
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