

The Staging of the Self In the Work of Mike Parr

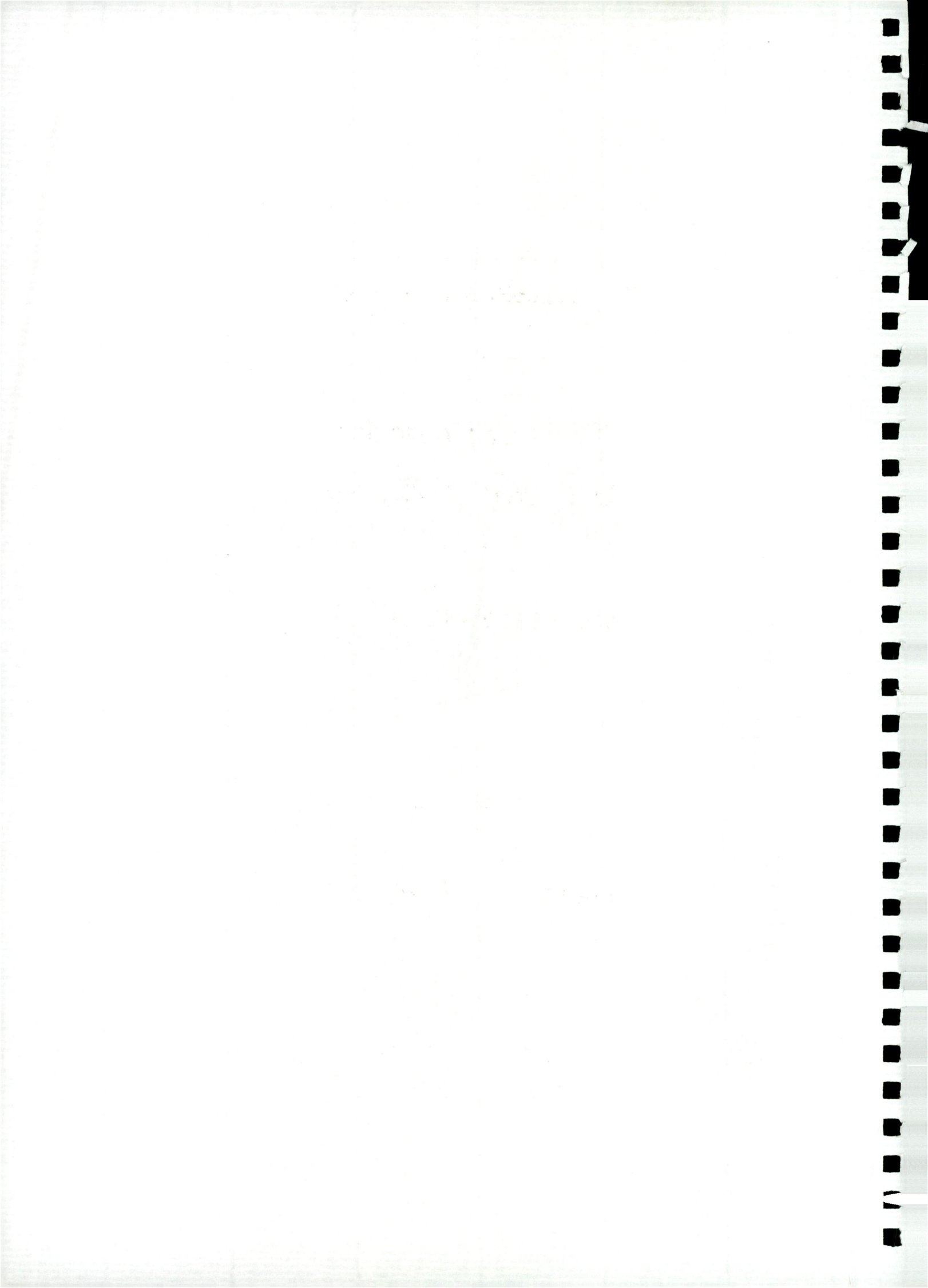
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B.A.

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The Staging of the Self

In the Work of Mike Parr

By

Catherine Mc Geary

Submitted to

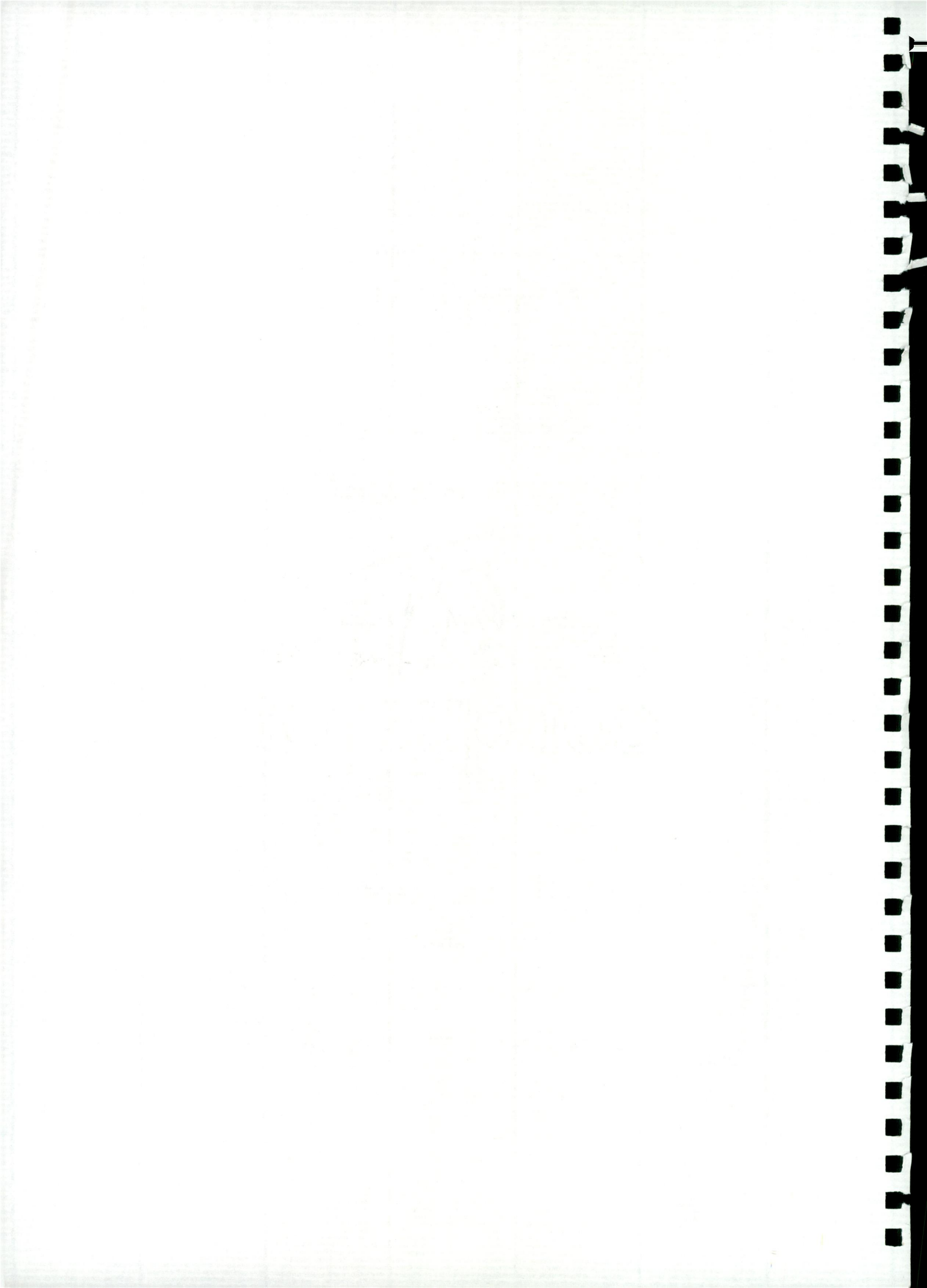
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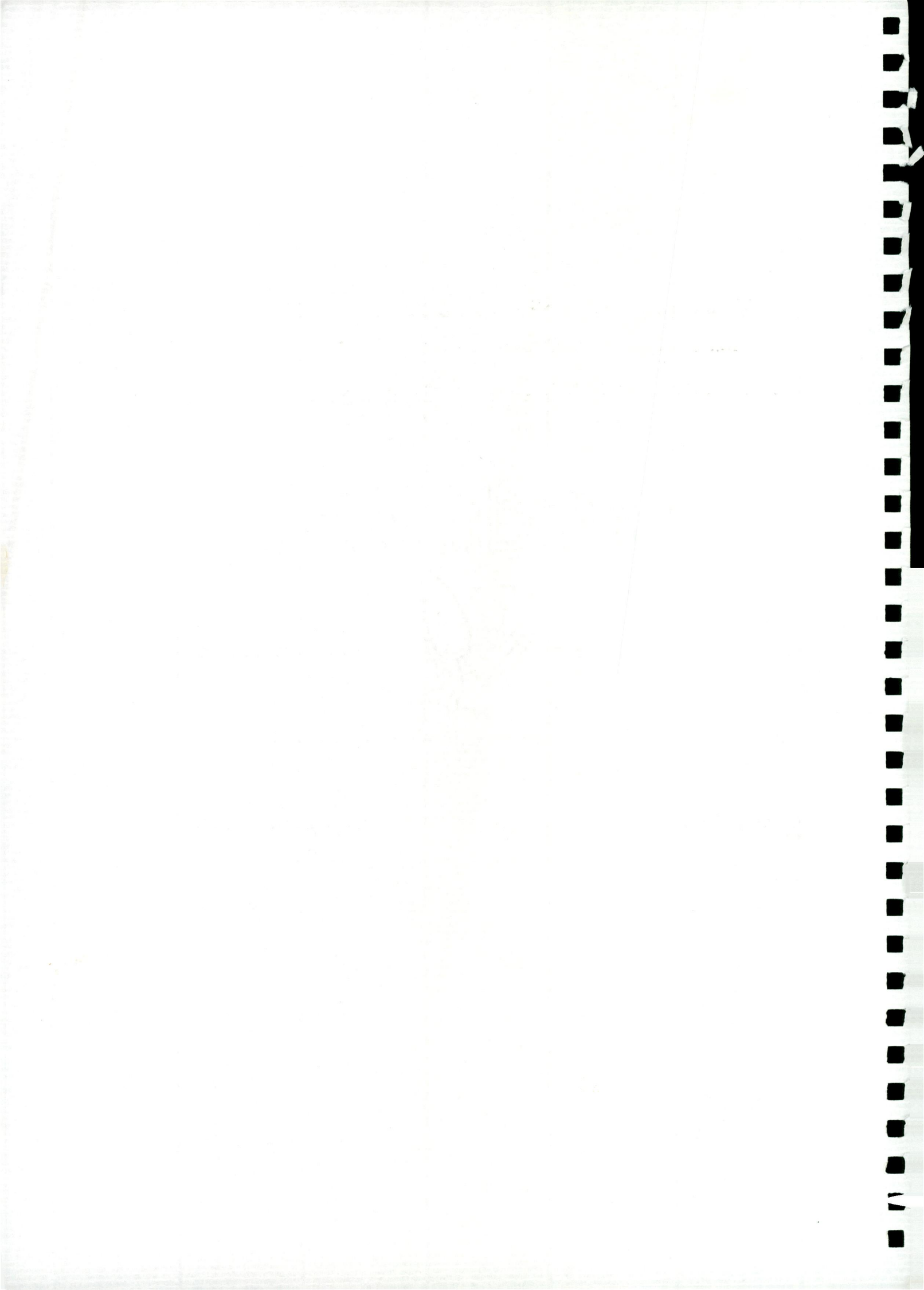
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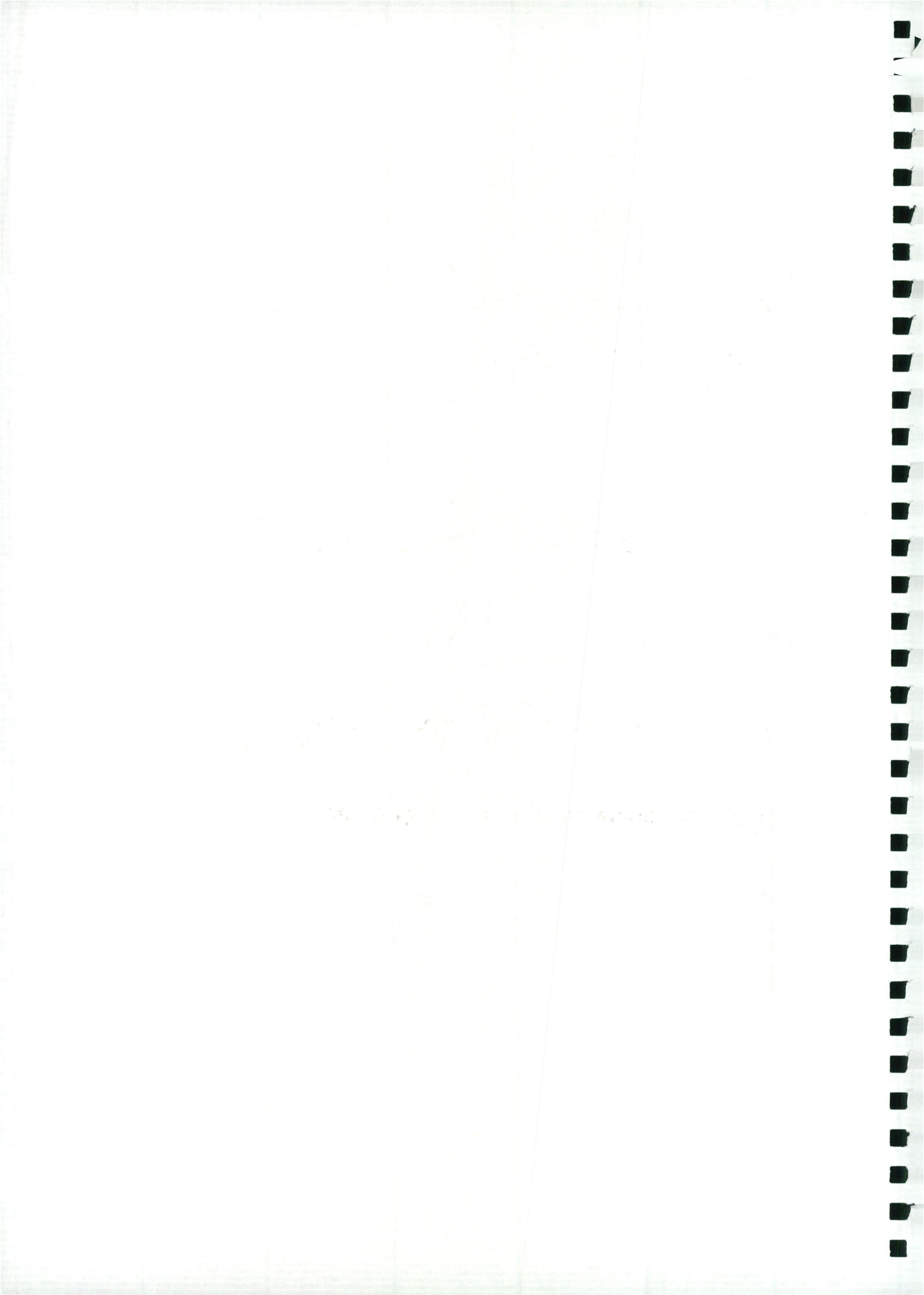
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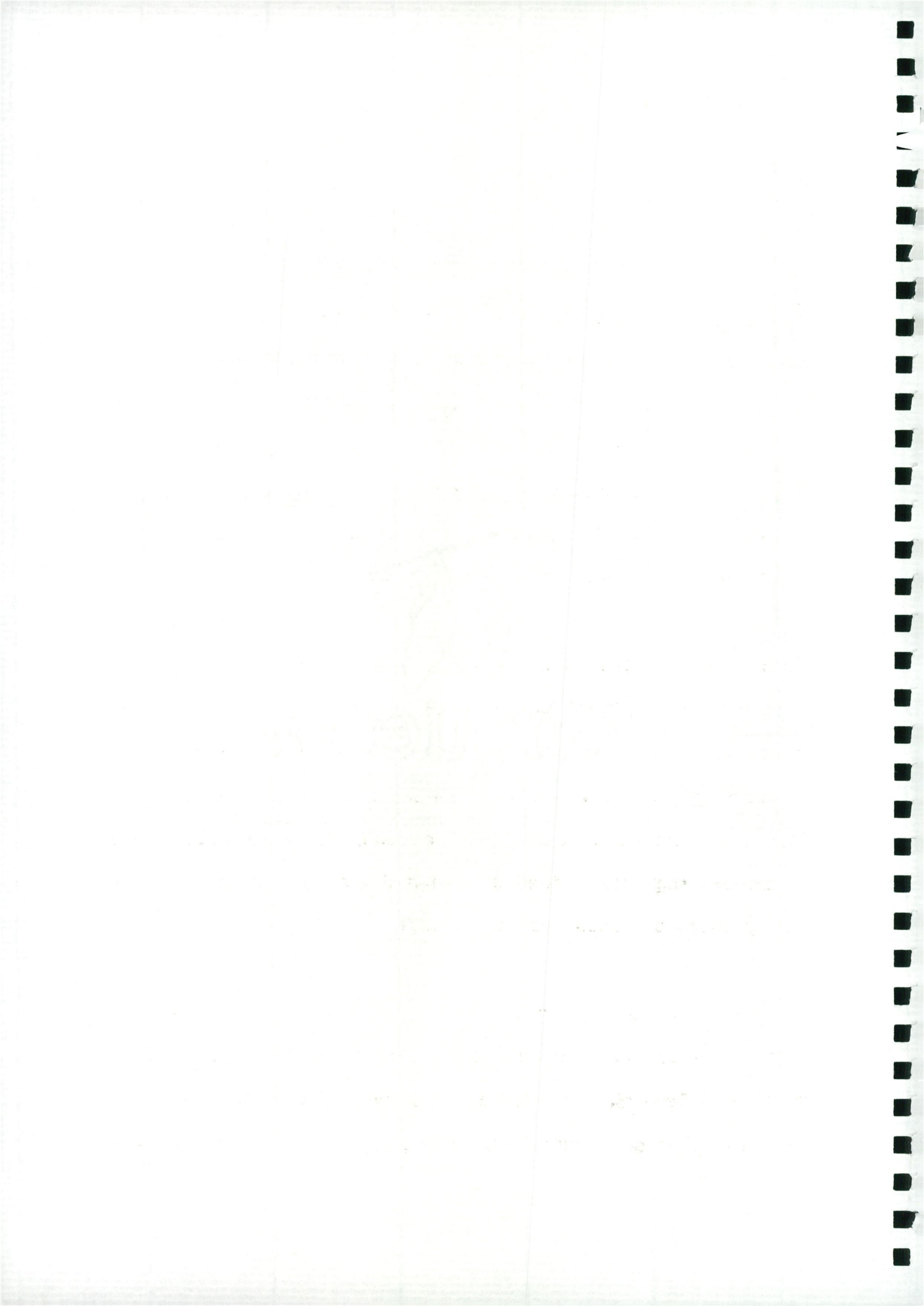
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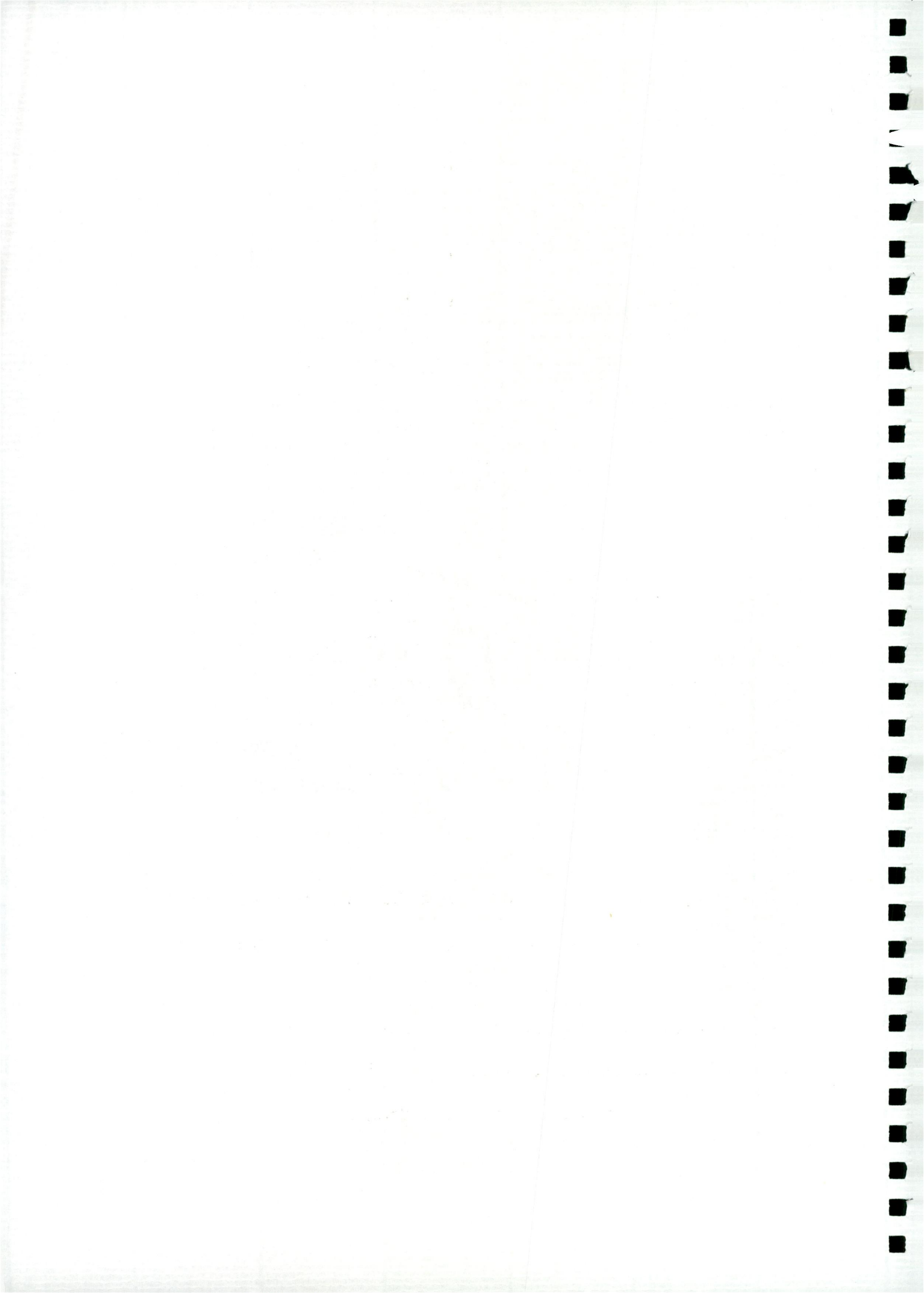


Introduction

Performance art allows artists to challenge the traditional expectations of what art should be, suggesting that experimental art that involves the senses is what makes a true experience possible. The body is an essential part of sensuous experience, as a sense organ in itself, as the brain, and our primary tool for movement and exploration of the environment. The body allows for all kinds of experiences which are interpreted by awareness and intelligence.

To comprehensively study the performance phenomena I have chosen to make a critical study of Mike Parr. I have used his work to explain certain aspects of performance, and how it raises continuous questions surrounding the use of the body as an authentic art material. An interest in theories of audience participation, critical involvement and compulsive urges to perform influenced Parr's decision to turn from writing poetry to performance art in 1971.

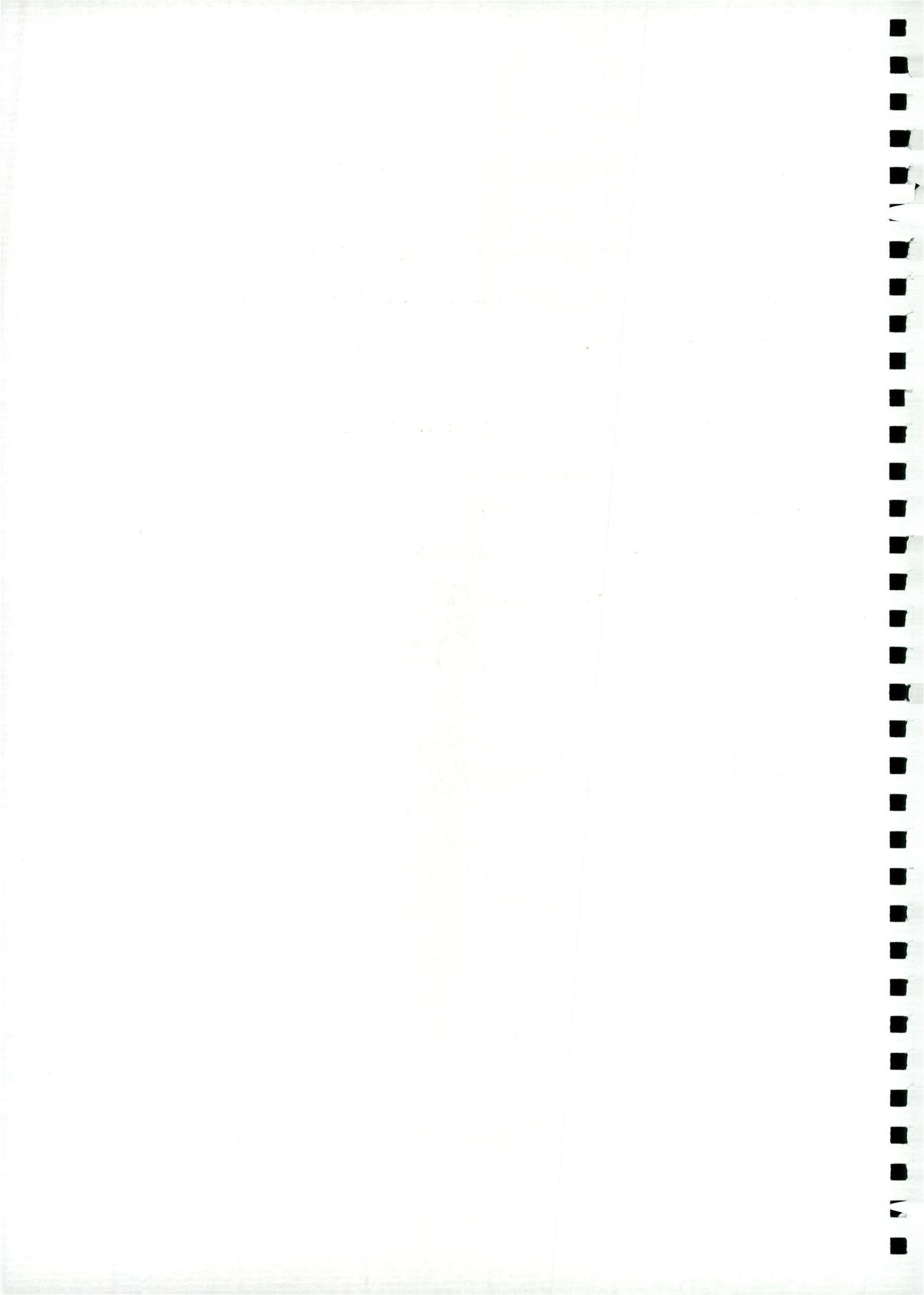
I first made the connection between the alienation of the performance artist in the art world, with Parr's disability and how that affected his practice. I have given an outline of the implications of using the body to explore different experiences and how easily they can be embedded



into a demonstration of the artist's own ego. I will deal with the way in which people seem to associate art exclusively with the beauty of the art object and how they saw performance as being far removed from this tradition. It is only throughout this century that performance has only been regarded as art. Before this performance was entertainment. The fact that it has now become art is not necessarily bad but it does mean that performance as a genre will become more problematic in some ways than it was as entertainment.

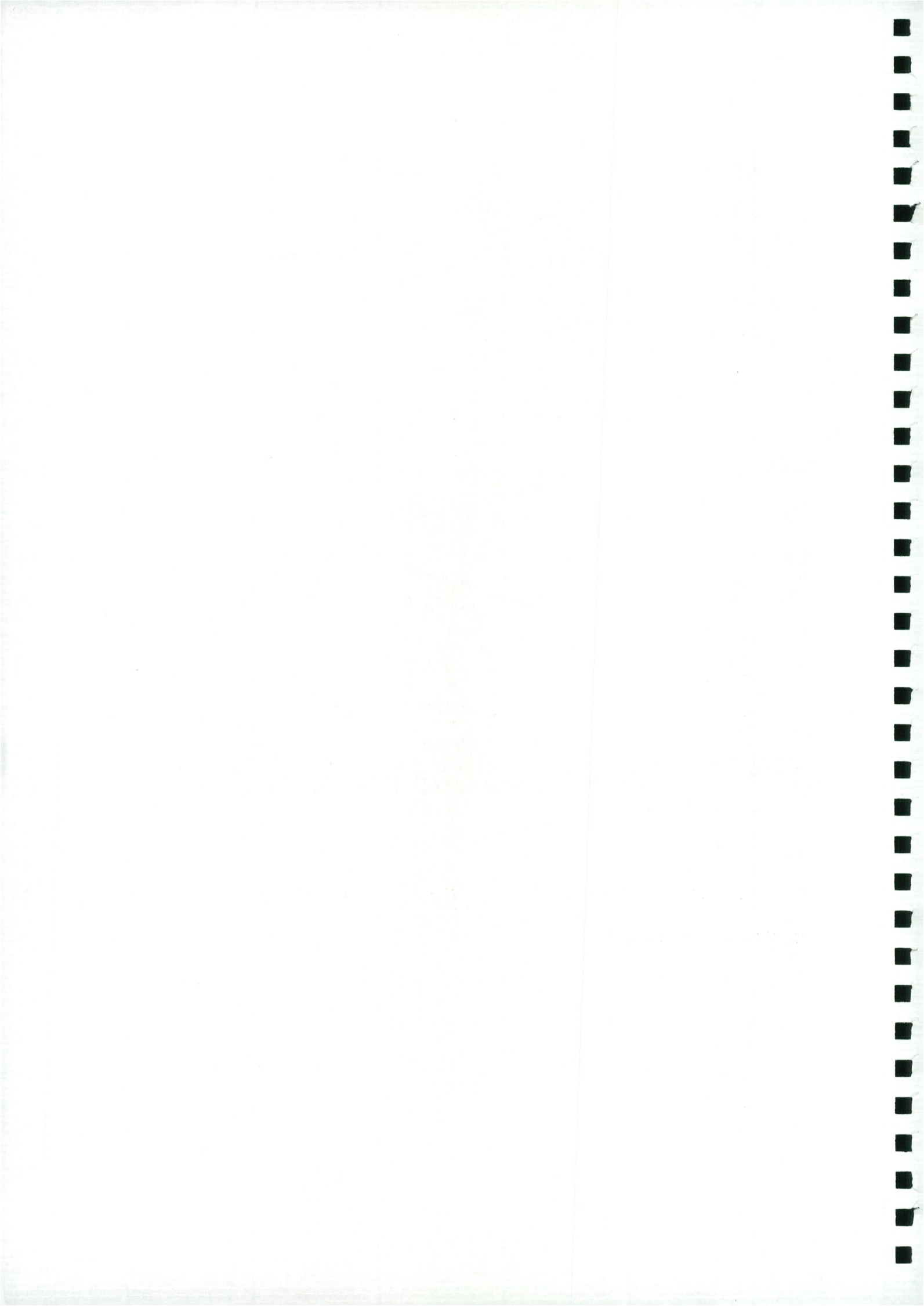
Although Parr used such theorists as Reich and Wittgenstein among others, I have concentrated on Marcuse to comprehensively study the connections made between Parr's work and theory in Chapter two. For Marcuse the truth of art lies in the way it is presented in terms of change and style. He believed in an art that was revolutionary, thus breaking through the mystified social reality, and producing change through a form of presentation that is liberating.

It is my intention to relate performance to the traditional expectations of what the audience came to expect art to be. It was to be something familiar to them, that would not upset, but move them outside their mundane lives. It is the distance between the artist and the audience that I have discussed in Chapter three. The belief that a new and specialised audience was required to understand this type of practice,



alienated this further. I want to use examples of Parr's performance to illustrate this. His artistic career is a diverse and extensive study of the body in its primary relationship to identity, society and nature. The need exists to study his work thoroughly in order to explain why he uses his body in this way.

Like most performance artists he indulged in endless readings from which he tried to find guides to his practice. He attempted to engage the audience fully in his practice, and at the same time avoid the dangers of stylisation. He believed that using the human body directly was a means of creating involvement.

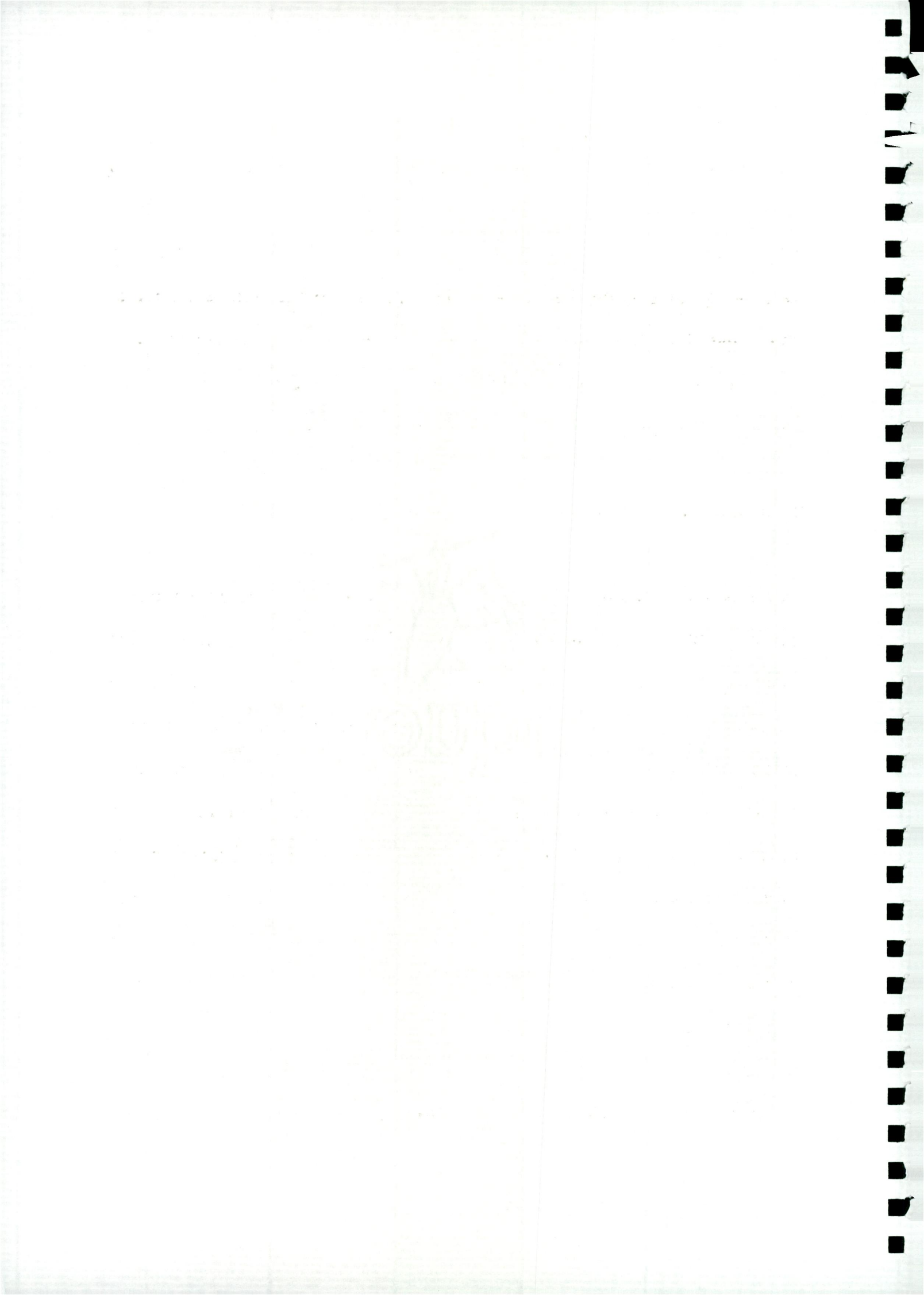


Chapter 1

The Isolating Potential of Performance

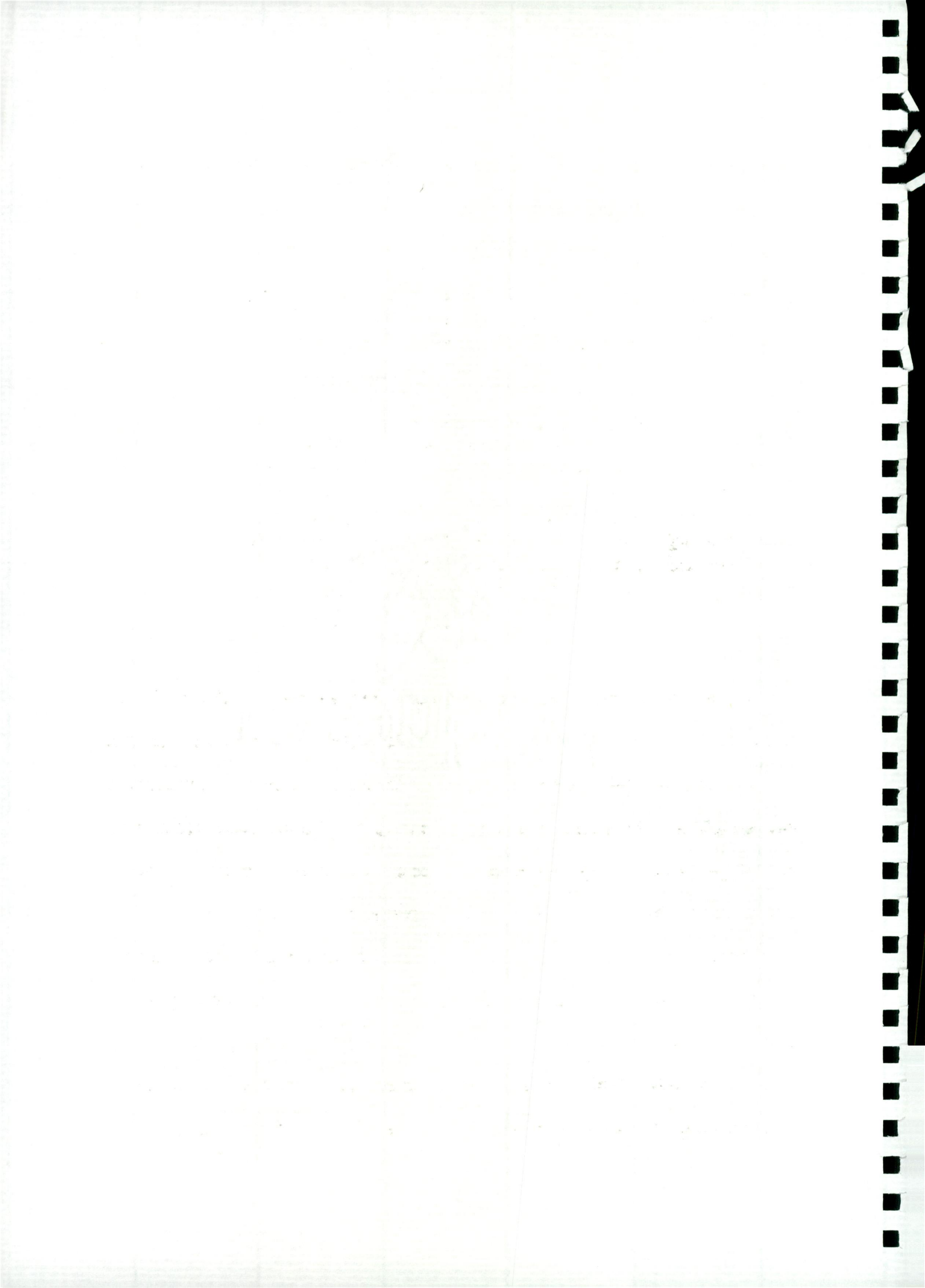
In recent years the refusal by some to accept and understand performance art making has caused problems, especially for Mike Parr. This type of art was conceived to bring people to a greater understanding of society. But instead it seems to unnerve those people who are among the non-art world audience.

For the last twenty years Mike Parr has worked unceasingly on a programme of critical art, testing our understanding of the self, the limited amount of freedom the artist has in affecting society and therefore exploring the possibility of a more social engagement. The idea of the self has many associations in art and language, 'self centred' is a judgmental metaphor for inner obsessions. There are deep concerns that I shall address. These are embedded into the specific issue of performance art, which can be set apart from other modes of art and can cause great ambiguity within the public arena. There is the issue of the relationship between artist and society and the conflict between the artists sense of art and the general public's sense of art. These matters have not been adequately addressed by the art world.



Performances are fragile works of art. They depend entirely on the audience's receptivity. Performances require experimental conditions, which should create excitement. Parr set up these experimental conditions to engage the audience in a more personal relationship with the artist, but there are always problems when you are dealing with direct emotions. Therefore higher demands should be placed on the artist. It requires constant involvement, which entails a strategy which is worked out to reduce the tension and bewilderment that seem to saturate people's response to the work.

Parr's work seemed to take on the view that art could make better those problems he himself faced in society. One problem was his disability. Being born with only one arm restricted his ability to do everything for himself. His disability restricted his ability to produce large sculptural pieces. The alienation he felt within his own community caused him much grief. He turned to performance as a means to a new kind of expression which allowed him more freedom and greater liberation. What then caused problems for Parr was the risk that the work might become too personal and be reduced to mere self-indulgence. Parr's performance works were dramas which confronted the audience with what usually remains hidden or repressed, in Parr's case that was the fears and anxieties surrounding his disability. In our society such acts are related to some kind of mental

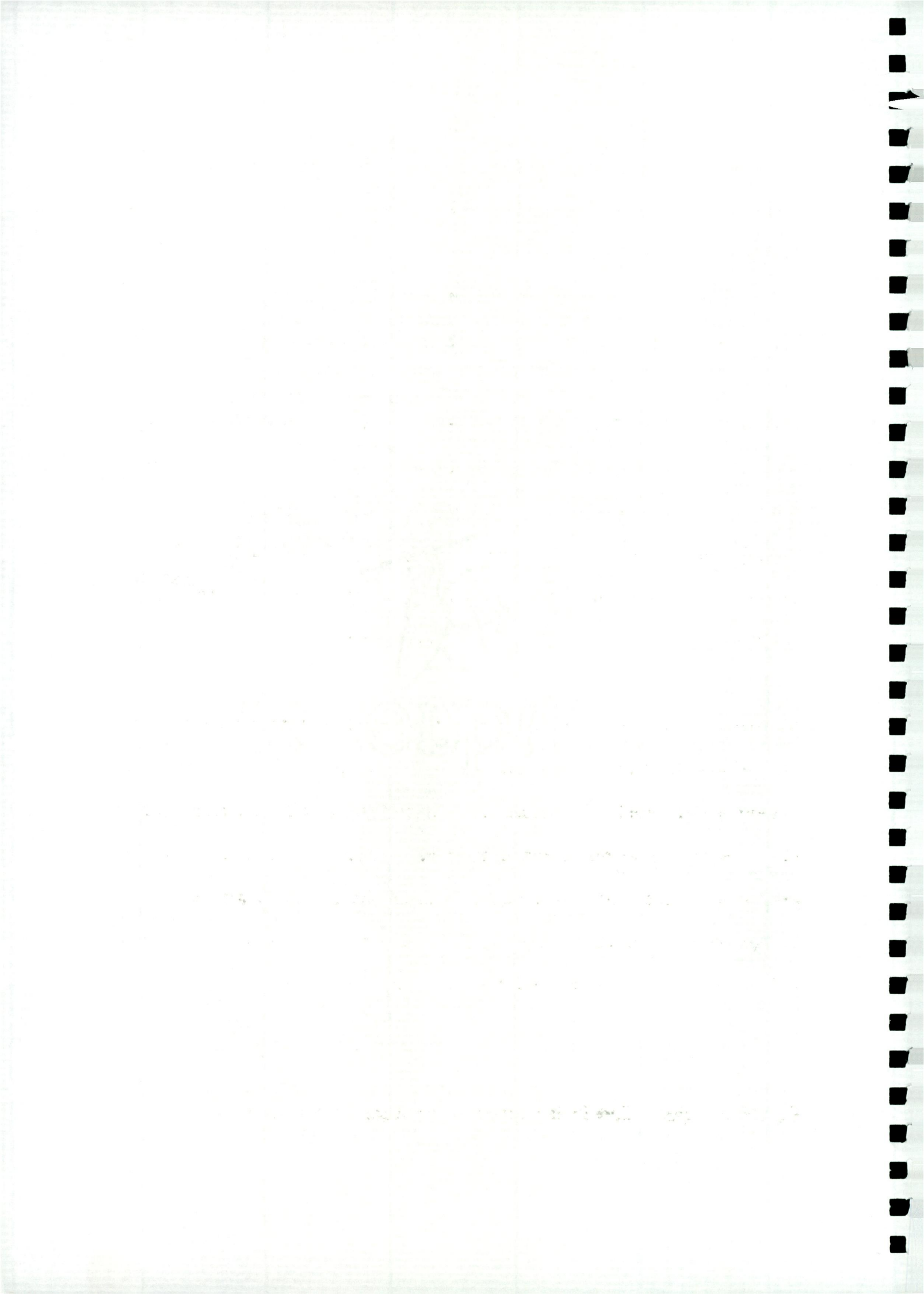


disorder, but by bringing them into an art context they become a means of expression through the body.

"Works of art emerge out of a complex dialogue between self and society, individual concerns of the "art world", and so forth. The artist may choose to embed his or her work into the mainstream of contemporary art, which often results in a tendency toward formalism and the attempt to carry one particular aspect of already existing art 'one step further". But the artist may also choose to turn inward, in a sense-to investigate the relationship between self and society, self and history. In short, the artist may choose to examine the position of the self in the world".

(Sondheim, 1977, p.vii, viii)

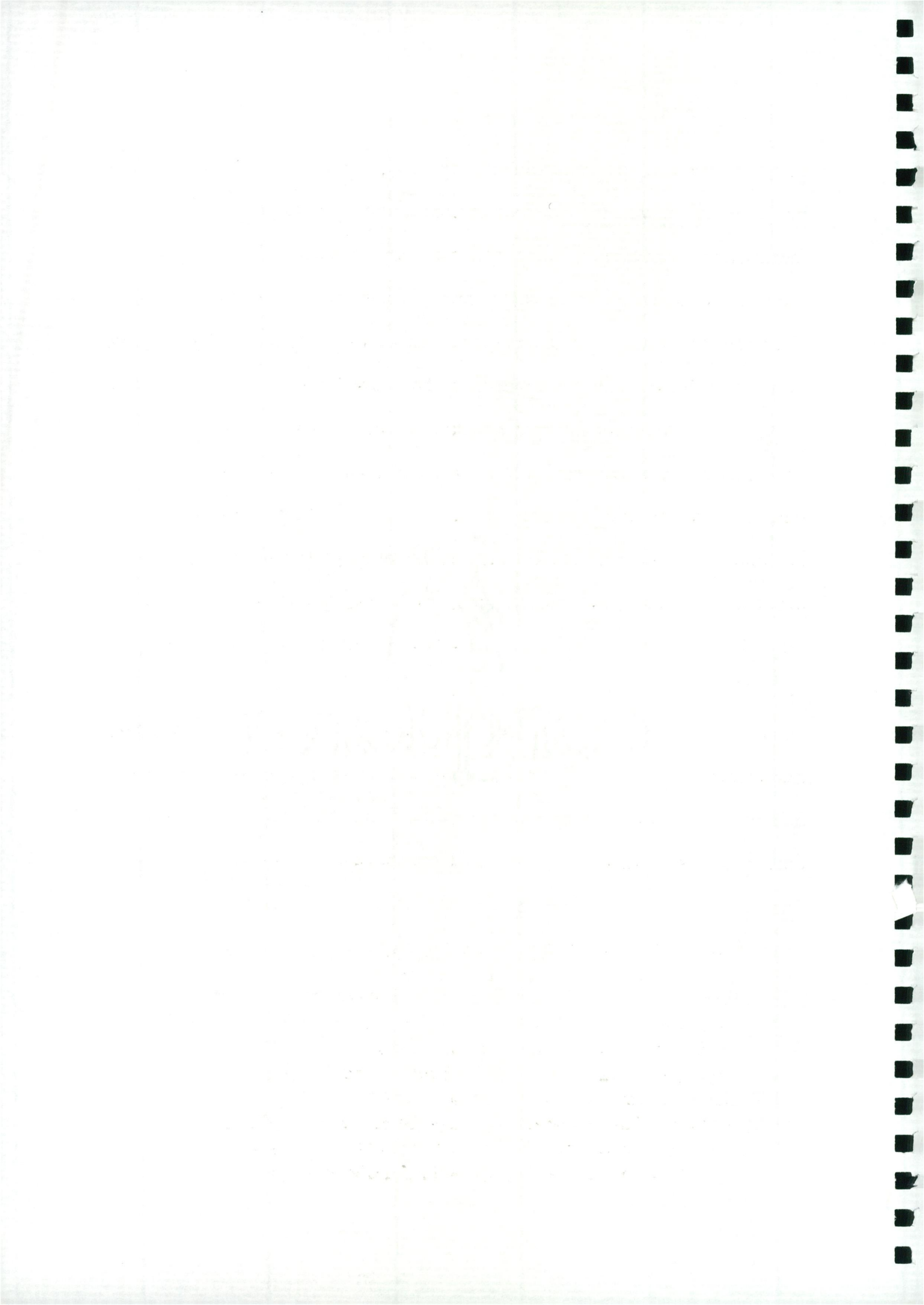
It is the willingness to accept such behaviour as art that the audience found difficult. Parr insisted that his acts were not heroic events and his assaults on the body were attempts to disrupt identity. Sometimes art which artists hope will be an interesting and even welcomed challenge to society is met with little or no response. In such ill-fated interchanges, the audience have often believed that artists were being unnecessarily obscure or confrontational and at the same time artists have felt misunderstood and unappreciated. The concern with the conventions of beauty and the experience of pleasure have come to be associated with the phenomena of art by many. The often unconscious expectations of a non-art world, a non-visually trained audience, is



that art will be somewhat familiar yet also transcendent, that it will be able to move its viewers outside their mundane lives, provide therapeutic resolution to emotional ills, and most significantly, that it will end in wonder. This view toward art stems from the traditional expectations of what art should be; that is creation of the art object. The art object is something that you can contemplate in your own time. Performance has evolved from sculpture, theatre and dance. However oblivious to its audience such work may seem, there is an important function served by difficult, innovative art which refuses to be assimilated in the process of the making of the art object. It jars the senses, challenges normal perception and destroys the illusion that the world in which we live can be easily understood.

I believe the tension created by that which cannot be easily absorbed and which therefore engenders struggle furthers the gap between the audience and artist. Therefore the artist must ask themselves how far they are willing to go to make their ideas apparent to a more diverse audience. These questions about what is acceptable in art will always be an issue. I have used Parr's work as reference only to discuss in detail these larger problems that people associate with performance art.

Parr was able to find fault himself in his work. He used his



performances as learning devices. In a way, not only was he testing his own bodily responses, he was testing the mental responses of his audiences. I think a lot of performances need to have more personal meaning for the viewer, they need to be common fantasies that make people question what kinds of experiences are possible. All deal with the same issue – the artist expanding, exploring, discovering and creating an idea of the self through art. The viewer needs to understand and become affected by the work to the extent that he or she can associate with the realities and fantasies the artist is expressing. It is a case of using examples of problems people face in their daily lives, rather than the artists own problems. For this kind of art to have any profound effect it needs to be able to cause a conscious effect within the minds of people. Parr's practice is divided into different movements and groups. One such group would be 'Rules and Displacements activities'. These are titles which categorise different groups, or are descriptive titles for a series of performances related to each other. On discussing 'Rules and Displacements' he quotes;

"You put yourself in a situation where you can explore the limits of your normally inhibited emotional condition so you can act that out. It's a process of acting out. I found that I was acting out, but I wasn't providing any language or any access, so that all people could do was either sit down and look at it or get up and walk away. So the whole 'Rules and Displacements Activities' programme has been a programme of getting people involved in the

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implications of my own behaviour, in the understanding that it will be beneficial for them in the same way as it is beneficial for me".

(Bromfield, 1989, p. 113)

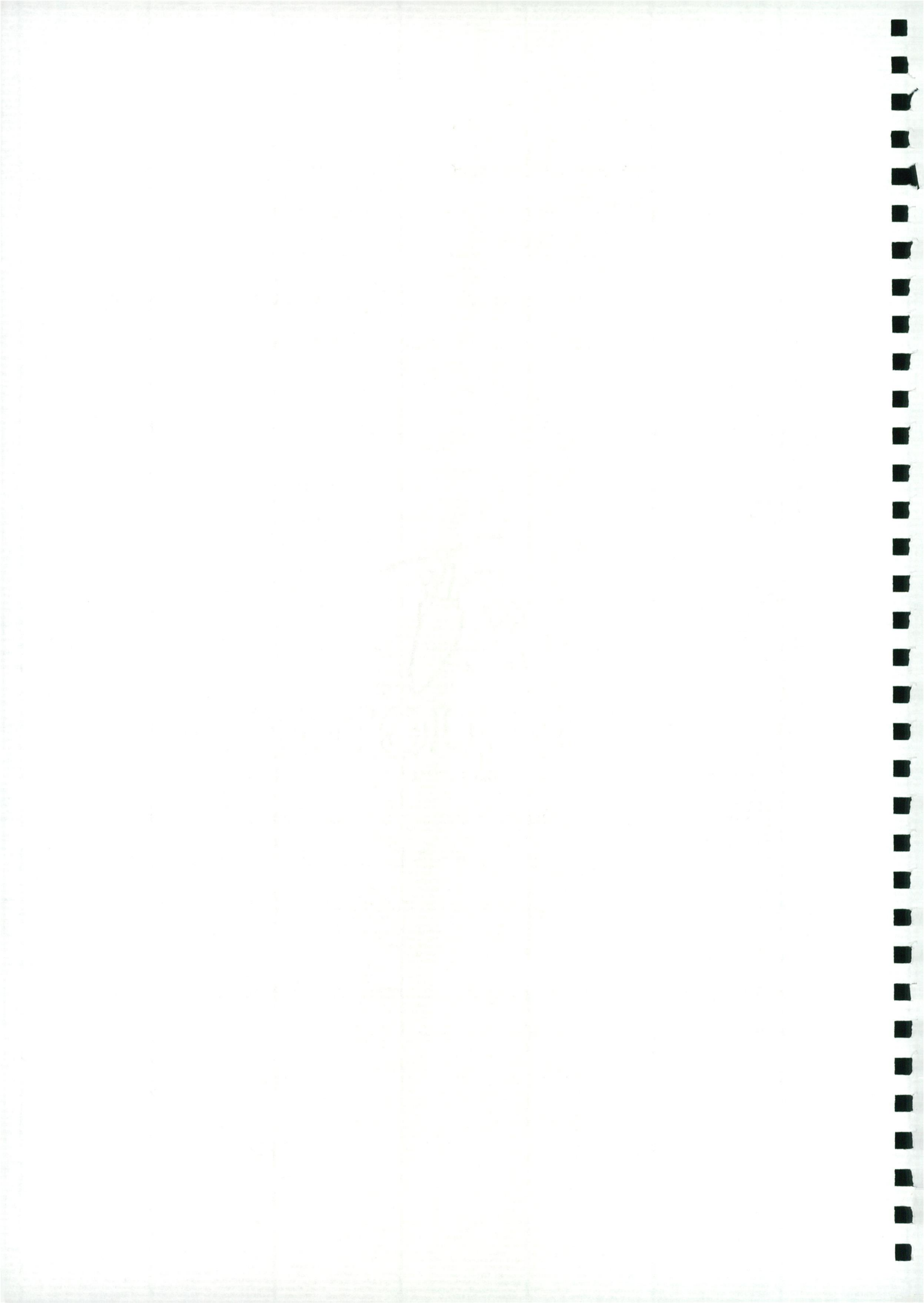
Performance art has been considered a way of bringing to life the many formal and conceptual ideas on which the making of art is based. Performance has been a way of appealing directly to a large public, as well as shocking audiences into reassessing their own notions of art and its relation to culture. When artists make issue-oriented work they try to tell others what to think. They often assume that their audience knows very little about the question they are addressing and must therefore be educated, or they assume a conservative audience that should be radicalised, or one that needs to be shocked. They rarely see in an objective way, how confrontational and alienating the form of the work actually might be to those outside. Artists must make an attempt to help the viewer through the complexity of the idea.

The challenge is more or less a permanent one, arising out of the limitations of the traditional mediums of expression, like painting for example. The urge is to escape from the constraints imposed by the conventional styles and techniques of the time; an ever hopeful

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struggle to express the inexpressible. It's that feeling for example, of extreme uncontrollable anger that we allow to build up within us, and the only way of releasing that anger is to direct it at someone. The same may occur by becoming physically abusive, allowing any repressed anger to escape through aggressive actions. There is no other more direct way of articulating something than through the body. When all promising attempts at solving a problem by traditional means have been exhausted, then the body becomes the other medium that portrays a more authentic realisation of where the solution lies.

An example of an events that would allow for free involvement from the audience is the act of holding your breath for as long as possible, (Refer to Plate 1, Hold your breath for as long as possible) holding your finger over a flame, or Hold a lighted match in your mouth until the roof of your mouth is burnt (Refer to Plate 2 Match 2). Parr gave such instructions to his audience on numerous occasions. Most of us know the outcome of such activities, we may have tried them before and found that they are uncomfortable and difficult to pursue. These acts rarely compel the audience to respond beyond the boundaries of aesthetic contemplation. They will not excite or move us, unless they result in extreme pain. Holding the breath in Reich's discussions was a sign of neurotic disorder in patients. It was the body's unwillingness to pursue such acts that Parr found interesting. Parr's way of



reversing the therapy was to balance the urge to breathe against the will to breathe.

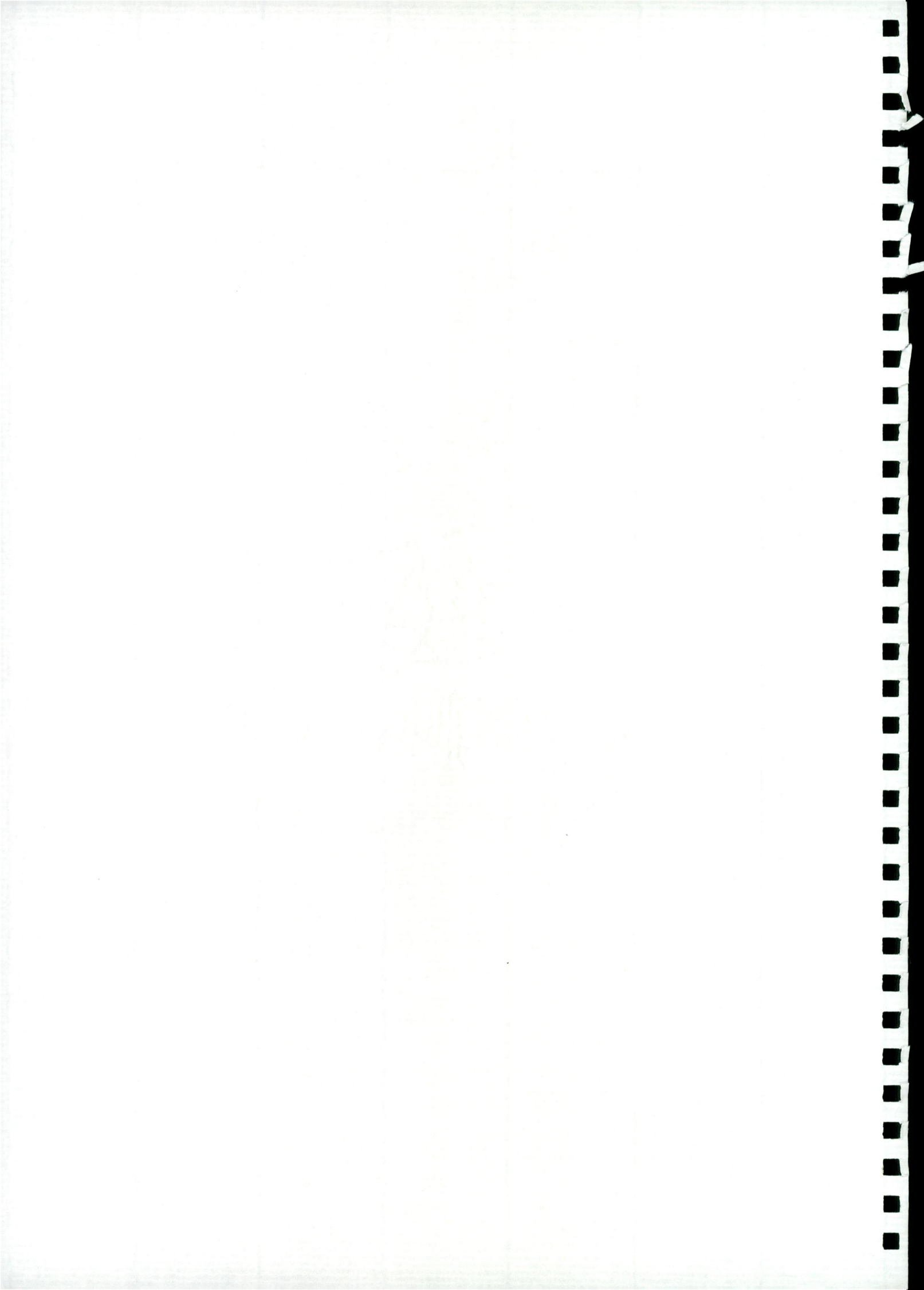


Plate 1

Hold your breath for as long as possible



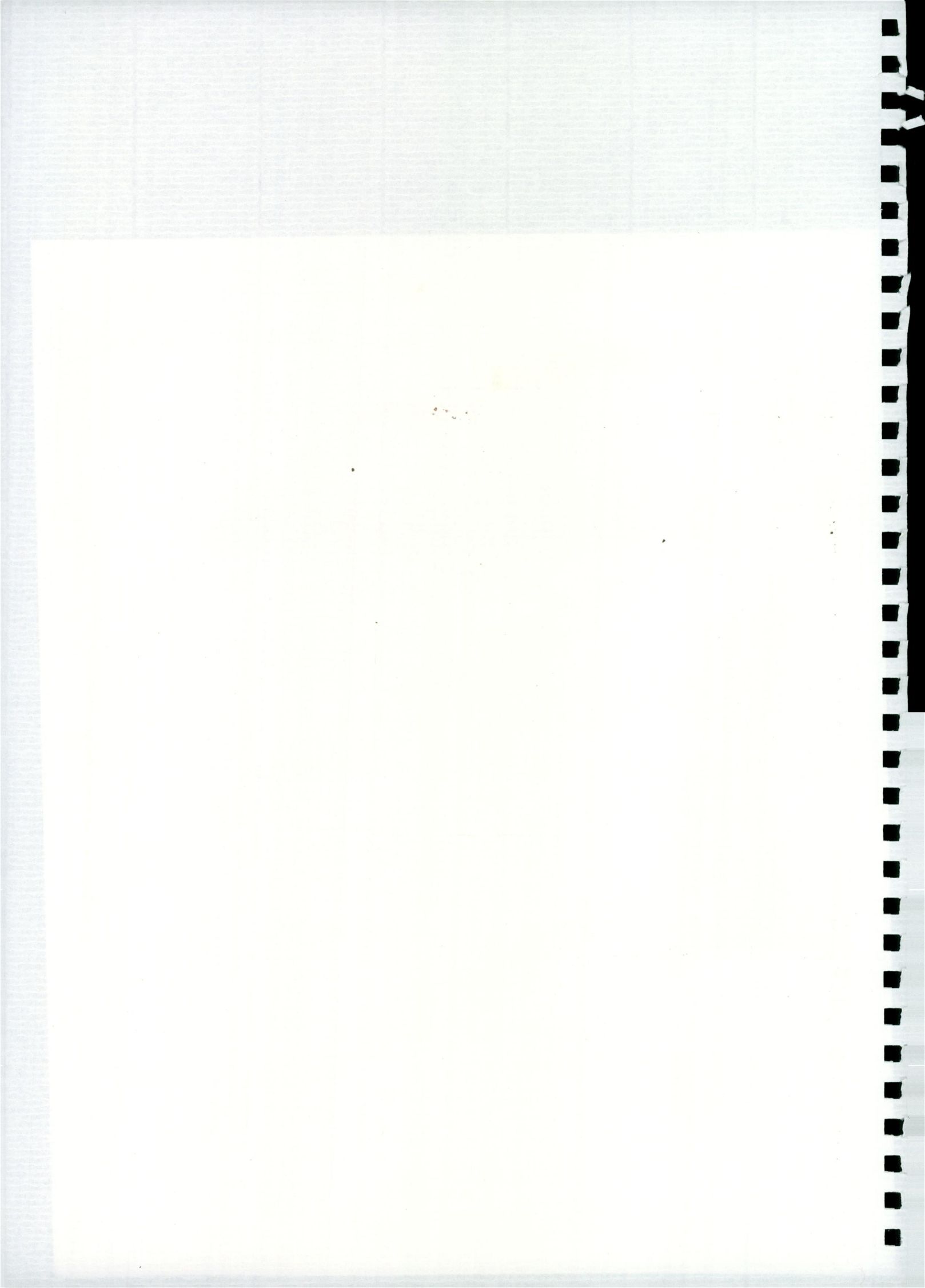


Plate 2

Match 2



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Chapter 2

Formation of the body in performance

From the beginning Parr's aim was to construct an artistic identity. He developed a practice that has its concerns in the positioning of the artist within society. He worked endlessly to build up a critical art practice that focuses on the idea rather than the act itself. It is this approach to the making of art that I want to focus primarily on here.

From 1972 onwards, Parr began to work closely with Peter Kennedy, another performance artist in Australia at that time. This was to become a very close working relationship. Among other things, Kennedy was to offer Parr some initial insights into the idea of the performance as a work of visual art together with the use of technical and electronic media. Parr was soon to become one of the first artists to grasp the idea that video was and should be treated as an artistic medium. His video images became the medium for his artistic practice, the video camera become an extension of the senses, a new kind of eye. It was the relentless quality in the technical media, in particular the video camera which was the foil for his work on identity and the human body as the primary site for works of art. The camera itself is treated

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like a body in several sequences he performed, like when he held a camera at arms length while filming his face for a long time. This was an endurance piece as well as illustrating how the camera could actually be brought into the performance space, recording his facial expressions. The performance ended when he could no longer hold the camera.

Throughout Mike Parr's practice he used every valuable experience and each performance as a continuous development. In a way he used his art as a learning process, his mistakes became a mechanism to inspire new ideas.

The writings of Herbert Marcuse and Wilhelm Reich became of particular importance to him, and it is this relationship between Marcuse's theories and Parr's performance that are discussed in this chapter. This will consider the problems he faced as an artist in Australia and how he found the solutions to them in these writings.

Following a detailed reading of Herbert Marcuse's, 'The Aesthetic Dimension', which became valuable to Mike Parr, I have attempted to relate some of his performances to that of Marcuse's writings on the interpretation and truth of art, in order to fully understand his ideas. In 1973 Parr began to work towards a critical art practice that was to

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concern the positioning of the body in his art. He observed that artists always break down theory, taking from it only what they value. But his use of theory could be regarded as confused. In a way every artist at that time used whatever information they had to build a strong background for their ideas. Though Reich and Marcuse were very fashionable in the late 1960's and early 1970's Parr's use of their ideas in his practice were specific and original. Aspects of Parr's attitudes towards performance were very close to the arguments Reich and Marcuse presented. Both offered accounts of empowering and exploitative behaviour. He used their writings as a means of promoting the liberation of his art. Both pointed out that control was no longer achieved by force but by relating the inner needs of individuals to the demands of their culture. Both recognised that human nature was increasingly being modified to fill society's needs. It was their theories that had considerable influence in Parr's development over his practice. He often found precise echoes to his own experiences Parr matched their accounts to his own concerns with the consequent decrease of available spaces for free expression in art.

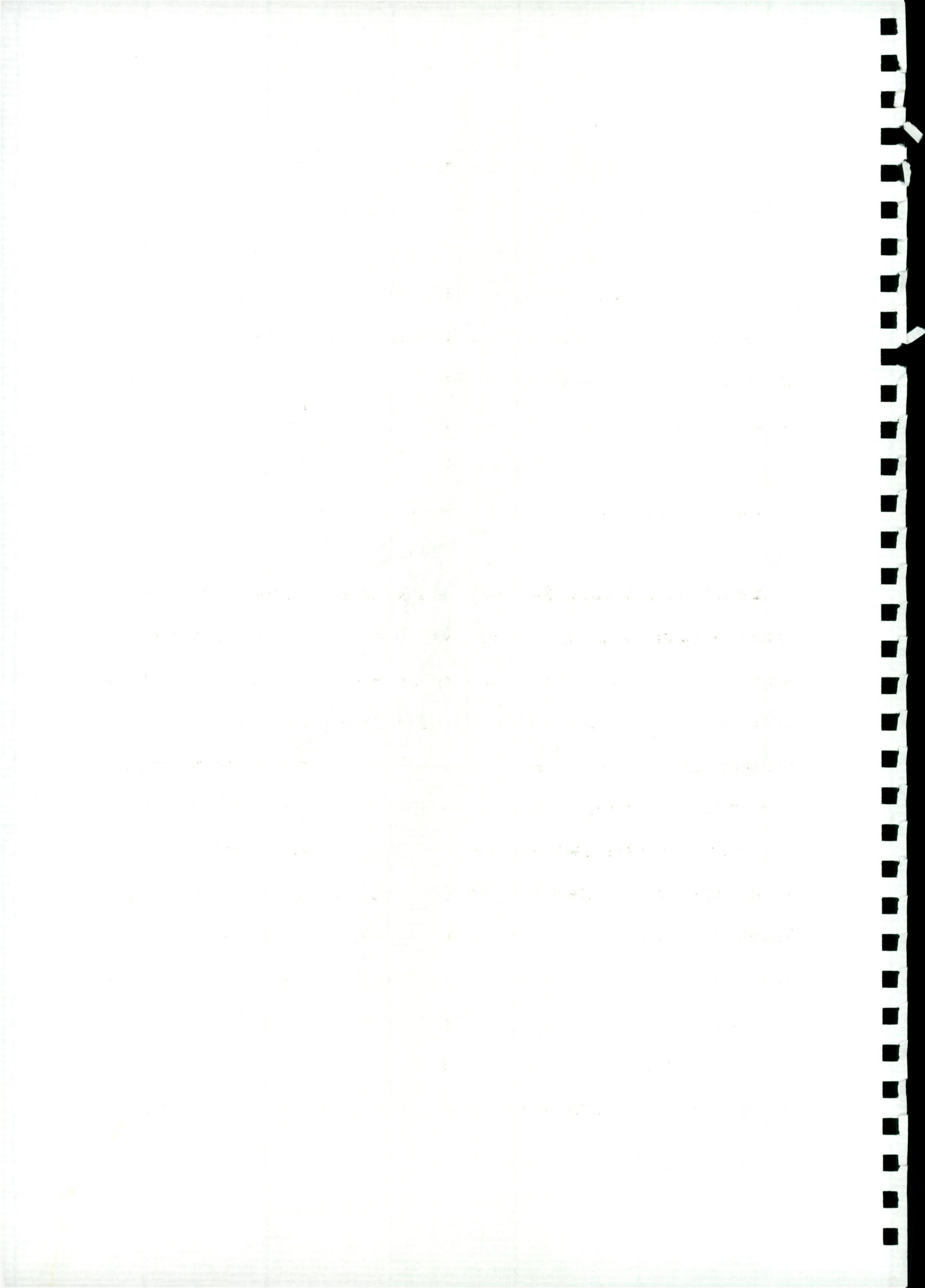
A number of quotations from both writers are scattered throughout notebooks he kept of performances. Most of these performances were experimental. He worked them through in his head until they made sense to him, then he performed them. In his notebooks he added

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related text from Marcuse's books that he felt were relevant to him, these in a way backed up his ideas and then further explained what the performances achieved. These notebooks were personal records of his performances, they were a form of documentation for his own benefit, like a diary of events that he could refer to in the future. But none of these texts were available to his audience. The audience had to take what information they were given and then quietly re-evaluate it in their own time.

Marcuse believed in radical change, which was rooted in the subjectivity of individuals themselves, in their intelligence and their passions. It is of course easy to quickly understand most of what Parr did, when given a detailed account of the events that took place followed by a descriptive evaluation of its contents. This is provided in 'Identities', a catalogue of the artistic life and works of Mike Parr from his earlier work through to the present, written by David Bromfield. To leaf through such books written for the benefit of the artist is to become impressed by the richness of his ideas. They are autobiographical, in a sense that we only read what the artist wants to reveal. We have to make our own conclusions from it, either we agree that what we have read is justified, or we need to form our own opinions, and see the piece in reality. It is important to be critically aware when reading such text. The problem becomes more of a concern



with documentation, and the relationship between the performance and the audience. I mean in what sense does this document represent the audience's experience and point of view? After all to perform these works was to attempt to establish a new relationship with the audience. You could compare this to reading a review of a film following the first showing, or reading an introduction to that film before we actually see it. This valuable insight to what the film is about, gives us an indication of who its main characters will be and help us become familiar with what we are about to see.

What was unique about Parr was his willingness to engage in a debate following each performance, with his audience. These debates that followed the performances were very valuable from the viewer's point of view. Parr would invite the audience to contribute their own opinions about what had taken place. It was a method of eliminating any confusion the viewer might have. It was these informal extensions of his performances that uncovered his inner thoughts, none of which would have been obvious to an audience who were not artistically informed, or were unfamiliar with the writings of Reich and Marcuse. They would allow Parr to inform his audience of his knowledge of Reich and Marcuse, and the way he incorporated their theories into his work. It is this obstacle to understand subjective aspects that has caused problems within the performance art context. How easy it would be to

leave a performance with a feeling of anger at not having been able to interpret the meaning behind the work. The audience at times came to these performances to be entertained and were disappointed instead, at having to think.

Parr never accepted that art must inevitably remain self referential. Although when you watch someone perform on a stage and that person is using their own body to portray a message to his audience, it is difficult to associate what we see to anything other than that persons own personal fears and obsessions. Take for example, Drainage System 2. The performance goes as follows:

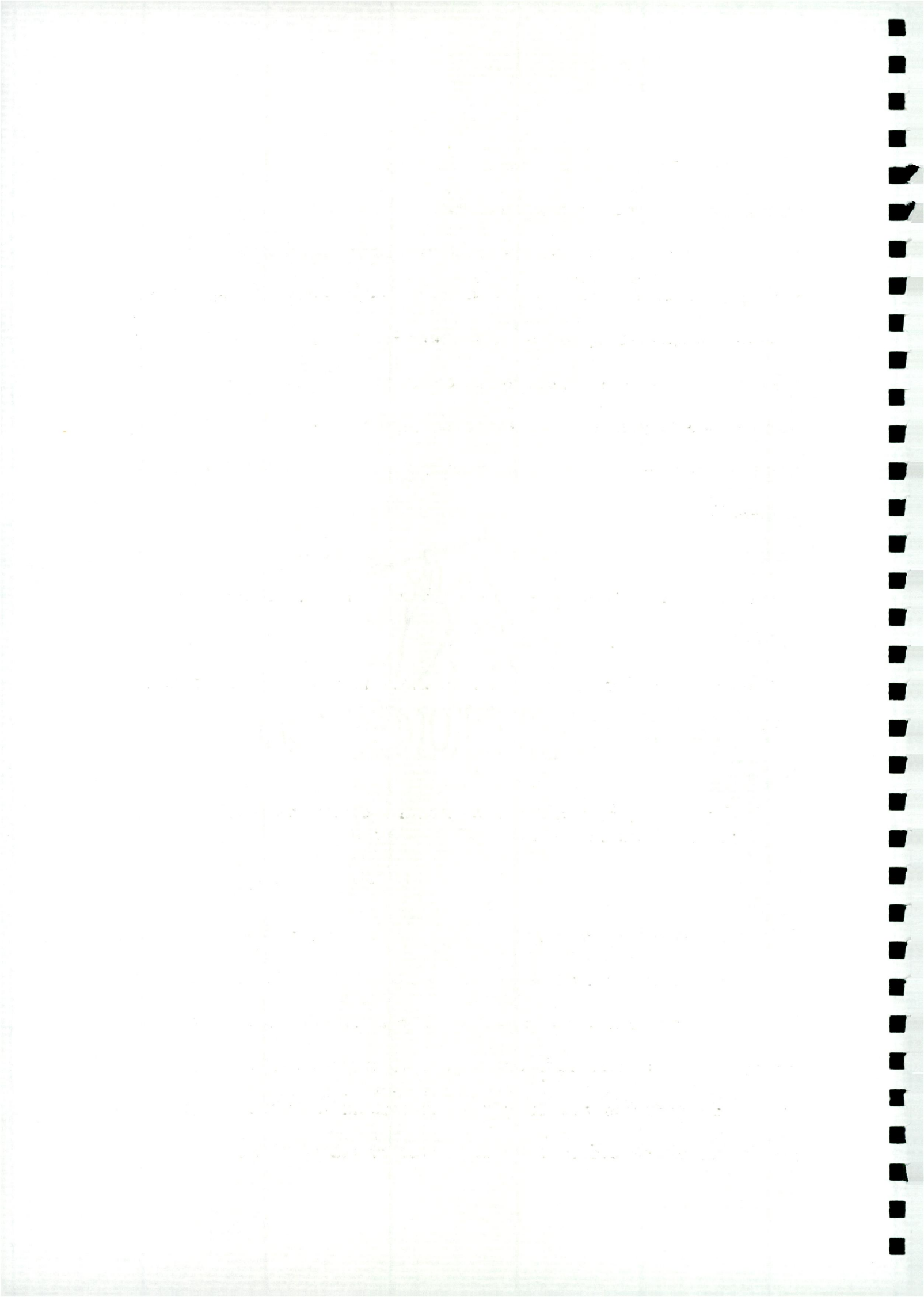
*stand on your head....
so that the blood drains
into your head.*

Drainage system 2

*continue drinking water
until your stomach is
completely distended
and you can drink no more.
Urinate over a period of
time. The work is complete
when you are again thirsty.....*

(Bromfield, 1989, p57)

The two pieces were a development from one another. They both concern the process of bodily response. The artist becoming the only



truly satisfied observer of what he has done. He can only determine the outcome of such an act. The audience can only look on and witness the effect the performance has on Parr. They could then question, is this art? Parr describes the first piece as being a demonstration of physical processes operating within the body. The body becomes a metaphor for a landscape in which a more conventional 'drainage system' would operate. He was using his body to demonstrate how the body in its relation to nature could be used to illustrate this connection.

Let us consider another example of a performance that could be difficult to interpret given that there was little immediate information available to the audience other than the presence of Mike Parr.

***" stare at a light without blinking. Close your eyes.
in the darkness see the light revolving."***

(Bromfield,1972, p.47)

This was performed in front of an audience without sound, words or text. At first this can be regarded as a therapeutic exercise; a way of testing the body and the mind. A lot of Parr's performances were about testing the body and self, but were also more direct attacks on the body. By attacking the body he was making a statement about the positioning of the artist's body in society or more particularly what

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was regarded as socially acceptable. What we are confronted with in this performance is quite simplistic with little initial reference to anything within the act itself. It really comes down to the psychology of Parr's response. Here the relationship of the act to the audience, is not as important as the relationship of the act to the person performing it. So you could say that a true understanding of such a piece can only be achieved by acting it out oneself. This piece could then be referred to as being self referential, although this was something Parr apparently tried to avoid.

In an attempt to deal with the implications of this central problem of performance, Parr borrowed several strategies from Marcuse. His use of repetition was derived from the notion of the operational or performative nature of contemporary social reality. Marcuse's belief is that art should not reflect that which already exists, and in a sense that which is already familiar. It becomes impersonal. We see this in painting and in sculpture, but sometimes too in performance and video art. The key to this particular failure, is not content but rather a refusal to embody that content in an aesthetically challenging form that would further the question, push the viewer or the reader to a more complex, more emotional, understanding of the problems posed by the work. It would appear that Marcuse is not so much interested in restricting formal possibilities as he is in adapting work that, in its

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refusal to simulate the present reality, encourages people to imagine what might carry them beyond this reality. Parr's use of this theory can be assimilated in his argument founded on the idea that, however radical it may seem to do away with traditional forms of art, the shock effect will ultimately disappear if the artwork reproduces the experience of daily life. For Marcuse as well as for Parr the idea is crucial to the meaning of art itself. Marcuse writes:

"In this sense, renunciation of the aesthetic form is abdication of responsibility. It deprives art of the very form in which it can create that other reality within the established one—the cosmos of hope."

(Marcuse, 1979, p.52)

This can be compared to one of his later pieces where he branded the word artist on his arm with a hot iron. This piece can be more easily translated. By using a branding iron the body could demonstrate the idea of the amount of social control involved in the notion of 'being an artist' as opposed to simply making art.(Refer to Plates 3 and, 4 'Branding' and Branding Iron'). But this was a little more obvious, as it was a direct attack on the body, therefore the shock effect had a greater impact on the audience. More profoundly, it could be saying to the audience, I am an artist and therefore to prove that my function is to reform language I shall brand that language on my body.

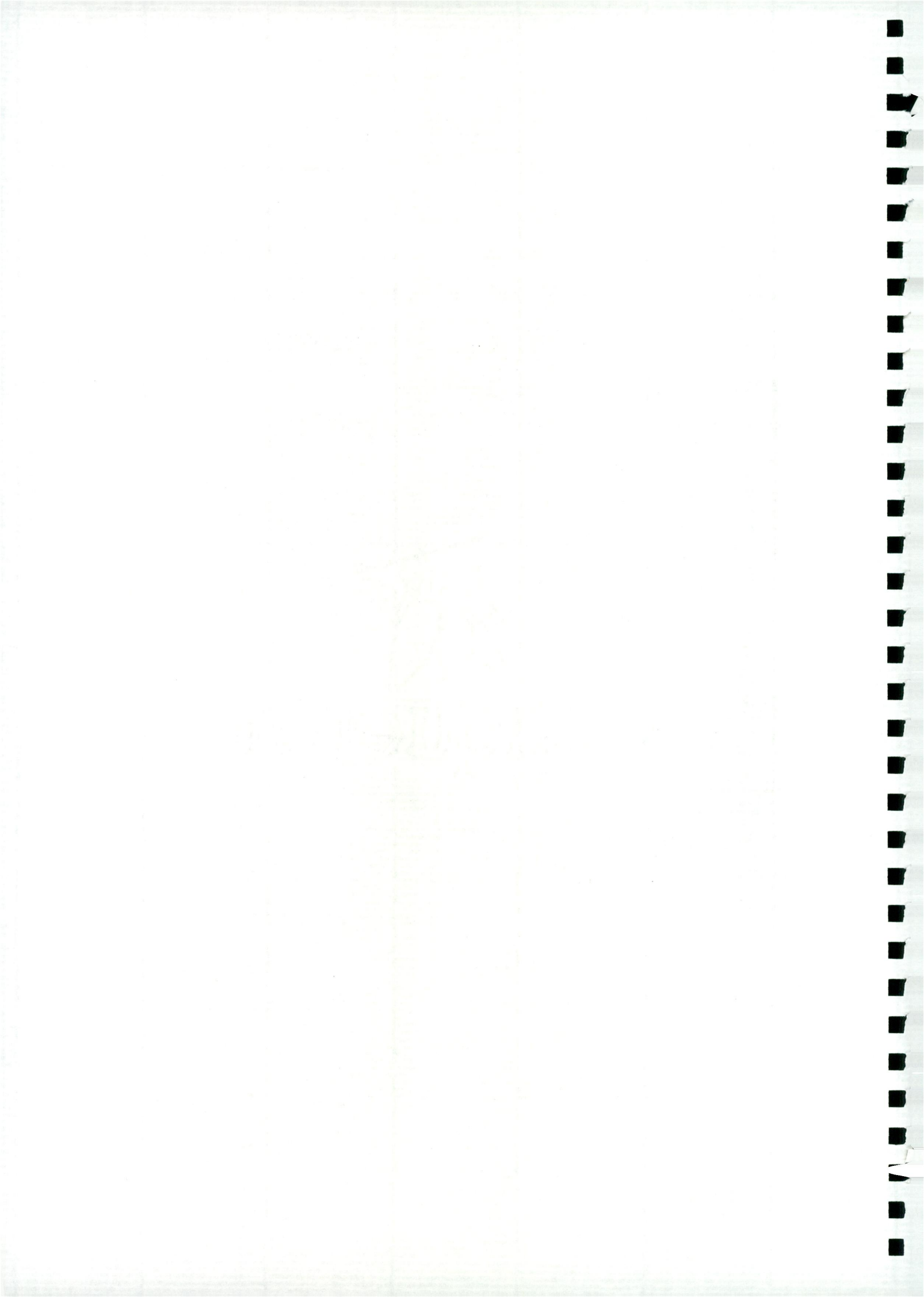


Plate 3

Branding



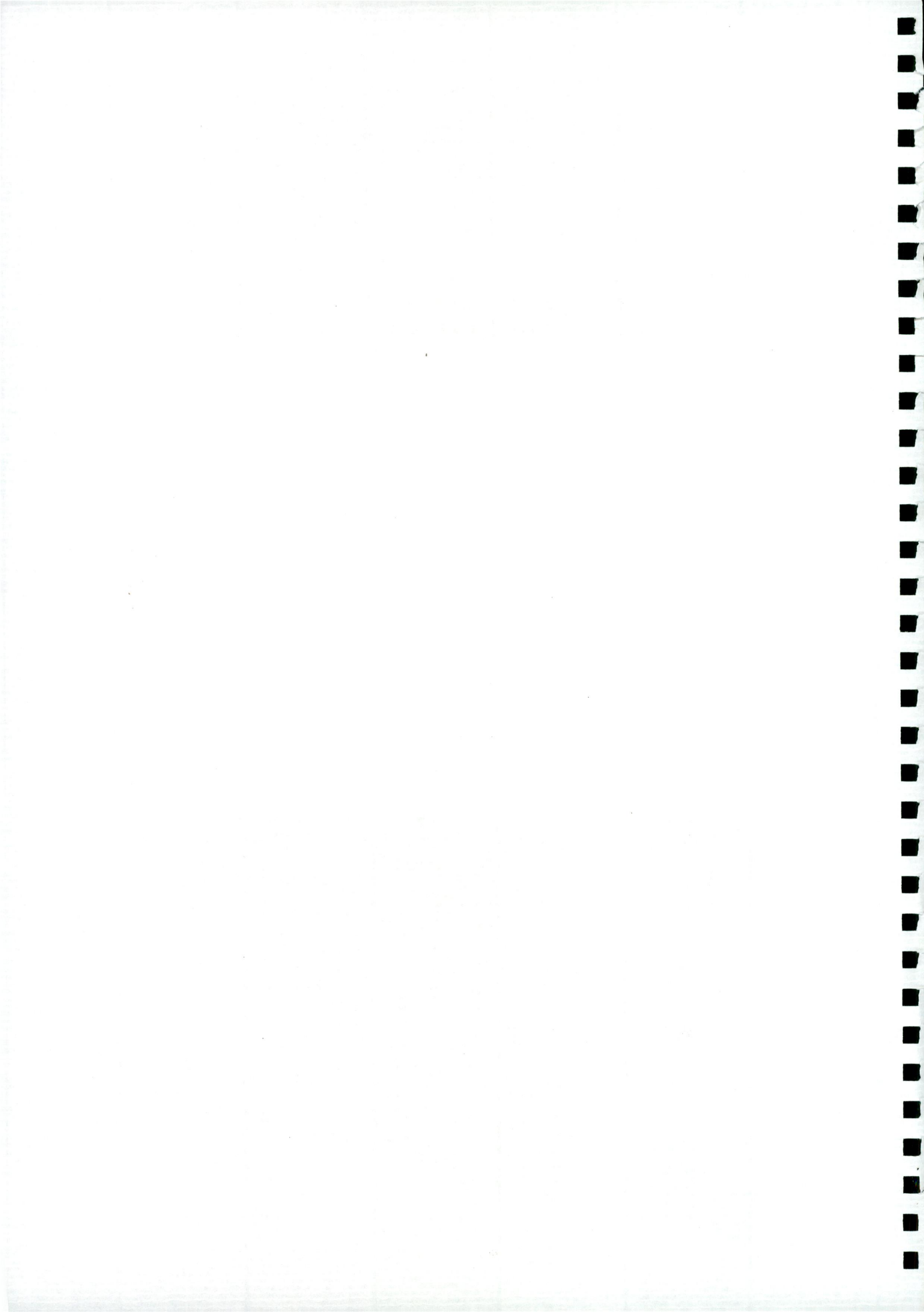
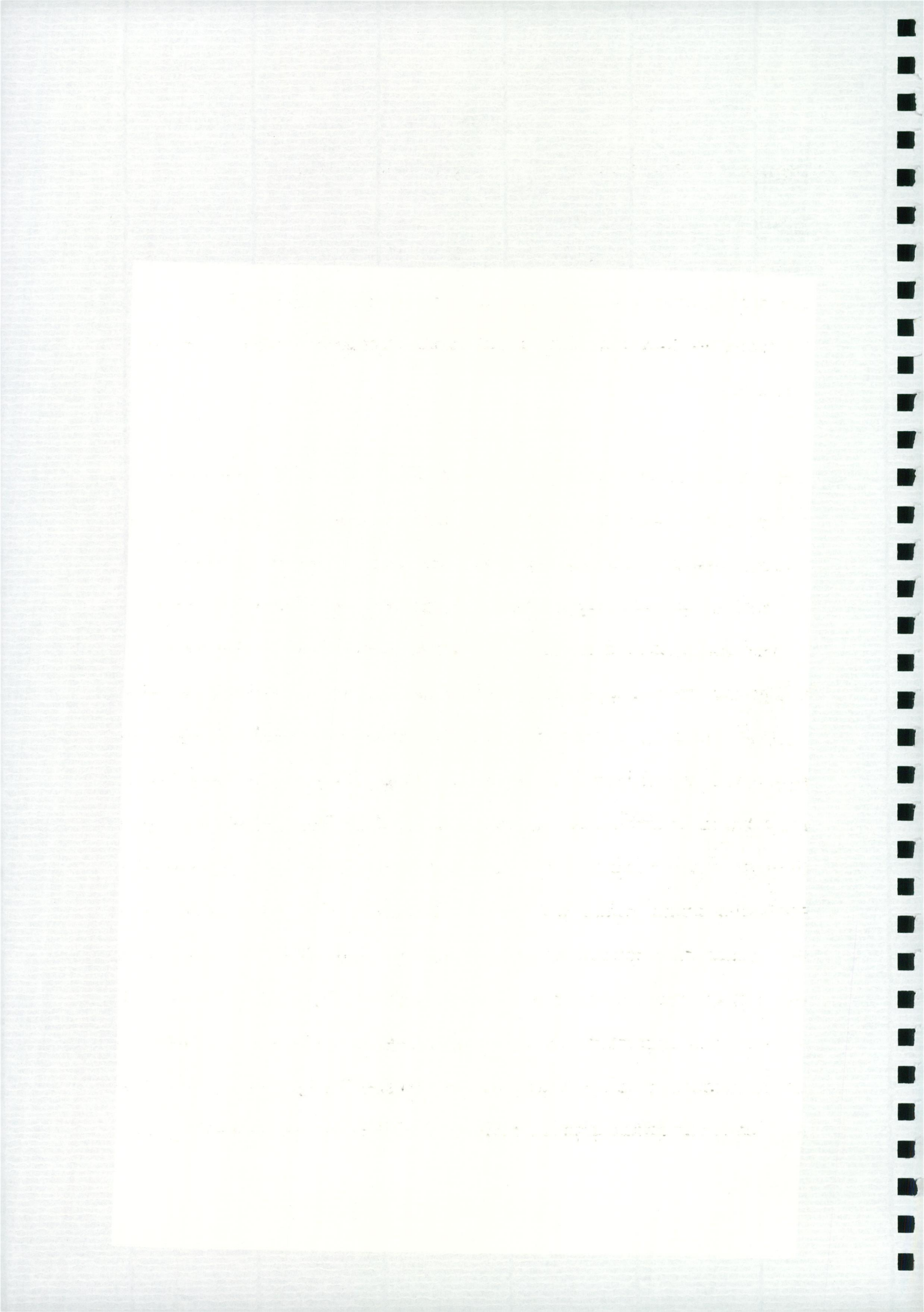


Plate 4

Branding Iron





Amidst an almost universal feeling of powerlessness to change the world Parr was changing what he had control over, his own body. One thing is for certain, pain is a uniquely personal experience. It elevates the repressions we encounter in our daily lives. This kind of experience functions to free the body from social restraints, imposed on us by society.

The traditional theatrical arrangement, of separating the spectator and the performer, asks the observer to feel the emotions of the characters through empathy and identification. However, while performance art is a form of artistic expression like theatre and dance, it does not necessarily involve a spectacle or show. Art refuses to be easy. It posits the often contradictory nature of what exists around us, which appears less and less familiar to those untrained to read the complexity of the world in which they live. So you could say that art must be focused directly on the issues of daily life, and try to help us through these complexities. At this moment there is a great deal of confusion about where art fits into society, what function it serves and where its emphasis should be placed. And within the complex art world itself there is a very particular debate about what is politically viable. The argument Marcuse presents in his efforts to examine the actual function of art, as well as the function it might serve, demands a careful, somewhat detailed review, and it is in the Aesthetic

1. The first part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions. It emphasizes that proper record-keeping is essential for the integrity of the financial system and for the ability to detect and prevent fraud. The text notes that without reliable records, it would be difficult to verify the accuracy of financial statements and to identify any irregularities.

2. The second part of the document focuses on the role of internal controls in ensuring the reliability of financial information. It describes how internal controls are designed to prevent errors and fraud by establishing a clear separation of duties and by requiring proper authorization for all transactions. The document also highlights the importance of regular audits to test the effectiveness of these controls and to provide assurance to management and external stakeholders.

3. The third part of the document discusses the impact of technology on financial reporting. It notes that the use of computerized systems has significantly improved the efficiency and accuracy of financial data collection and processing. However, it also points out that the use of technology introduces new risks, such as data security and system failures, which must be carefully managed to ensure the continued reliability of the financial system.

4. The fourth part of the document addresses the challenges of financial reporting in a global context. It discusses the differences in accounting standards and practices across different countries and the need for harmonization to facilitate cross-border transactions and investment. The text also mentions the importance of transparency and disclosure in financial reporting to build trust and confidence among investors and other stakeholders.

5. The fifth part of the document concludes by summarizing the key points discussed and emphasizing the need for continuous improvement in financial reporting practices. It calls for a commitment to high standards of accuracy, integrity, and transparency in all financial reporting activities.

6. The sixth part of the document provides a detailed overview of the various components of a financial statement, including the balance sheet, income statement, and cash flow statement. It explains how these statements are prepared and how they relate to each other, providing a comprehensive view of the company's financial performance and position. The text also discusses the importance of understanding the underlying assumptions and accounting policies used in the preparation of these statements.

7. The seventh part of the document discusses the role of financial reporting in decision-making. It notes that financial statements provide valuable information that is used by management, investors, and other stakeholders to make informed decisions about the company's future. The text emphasizes the need for accurate and timely financial reporting to support effective decision-making and to ensure the long-term success of the organization.

Dimension that Mike Parr found this description, and in which he placed his trust.

In discussing Marcuse's theories I am also referring to that which is very close to Parr's ideas of what art should be. In studying these theories it became easier to understand where most of Mike Parr's ideas about art in society came from. Marcuse was quite clear that art need not represent the social relations of production directly. Rather the indirect ways in which art represents these social relations may well prove to be more significant and profound. For Marcuse art is a location, a designated imaginative space where freedom is experienced.

"The truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of the established reality (i.e., of those who establish it)to define what is real. In this rupture, which is the achievement of the aesthetic form, the fictitious world of art appears as true reality."

(Marcuse, 1979, p.9)

All Parr's performances were a demonstration of his belief that art is a reminder of what a truly integrated experience of oneself in society might be like, a sense of purpose beyond alienation. An important aspect for Parr was that the other is discovered, indeed to some extent created or defined, during the process of making a work of art. By discovering his own hidden desires through this process of art making

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he would push the viewer to discover their own. Therefore the audience was encouraged to take on this role of artist and explore these experiences for themselves. For the only true realisation of such acts is to perform them oneself. The audience may not particularly want to concern themselves with these activities, they want the artist to perform them. Parr set up these performances so that he could act them himself, therefore the audience believed that Parr was the only person they were designed for. Parr's artistic career until the early 1980's can be understood as a series of attempts to articulate his 'other' in which he acted as his own hero.

Parr's performances were concerned with social as well as self aggressions. He observed that in his performances 'the eye of the audience', became 'the eye of God'. His missing arm added a special clarity to this relationship which was dramatised in 'Arm chop', where he made a representation of his missing arm and dramatically chopped it off before a stunned audience. (Refer to Plate 5, 'Cathartic Action')

The performance goes as follows:

"Sitting down in front of the audience, with my fake arm draped casually on a bench, I picked up the tomahawk and abruptly hacked off my arm (which had been filled with blood and meat so that the blood and meat spurted everywhere supporting the illusion). I felt that I was in a state of shock afterwards. My sister and wife came forward and began cleaning

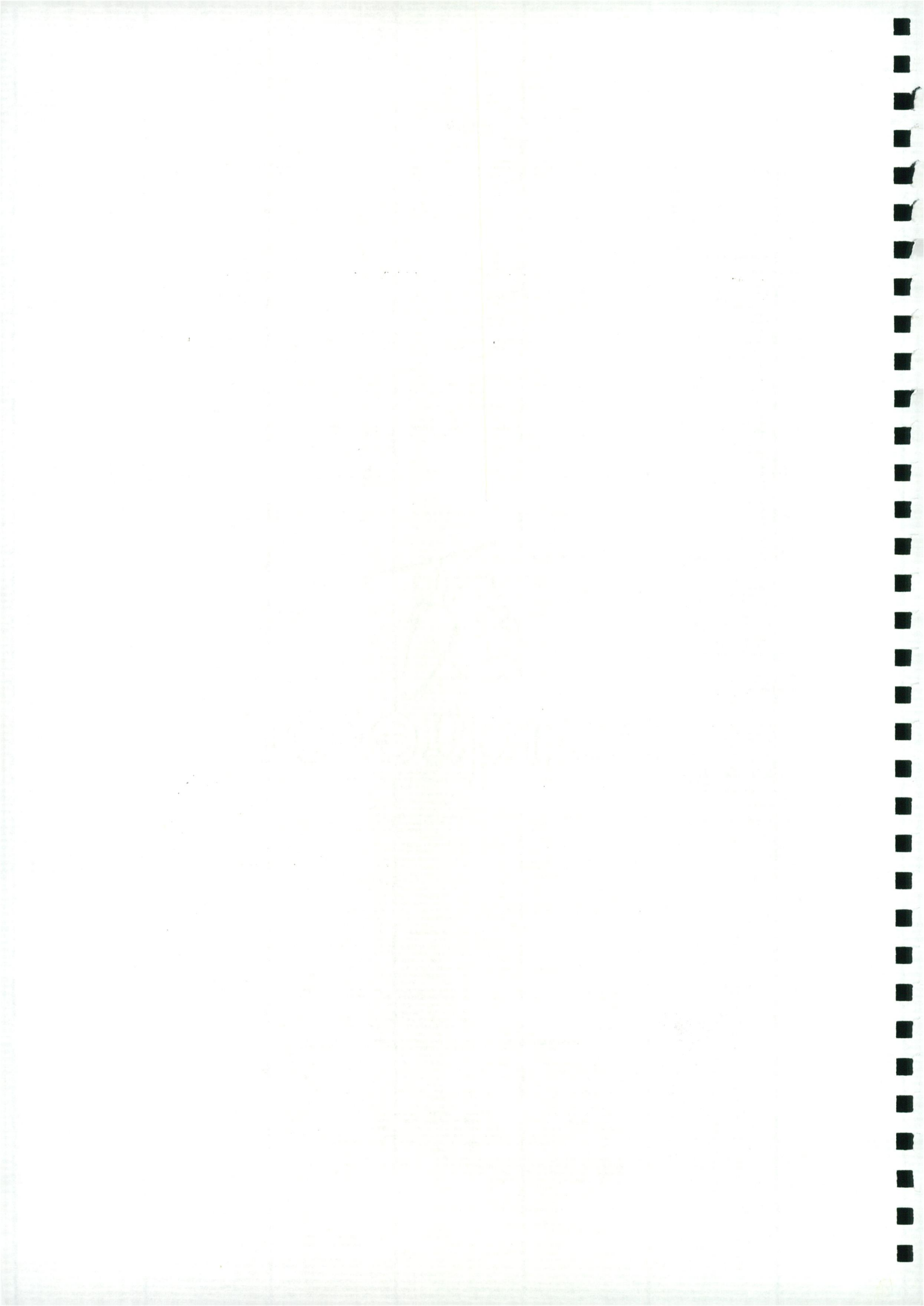
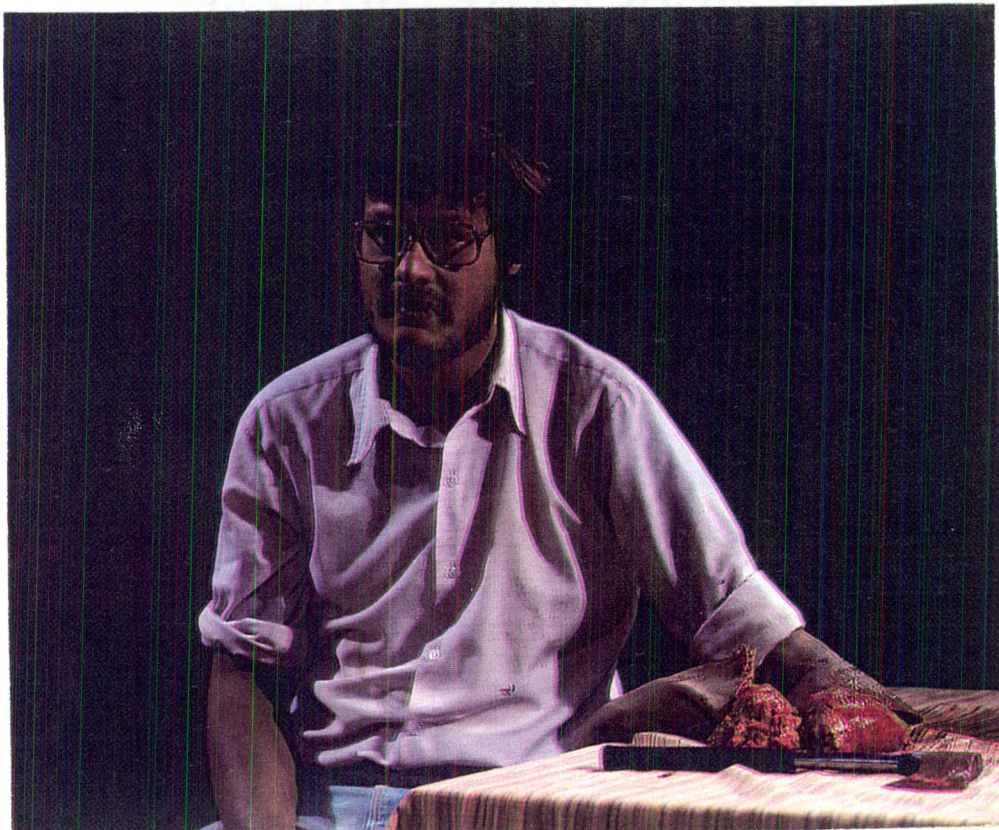
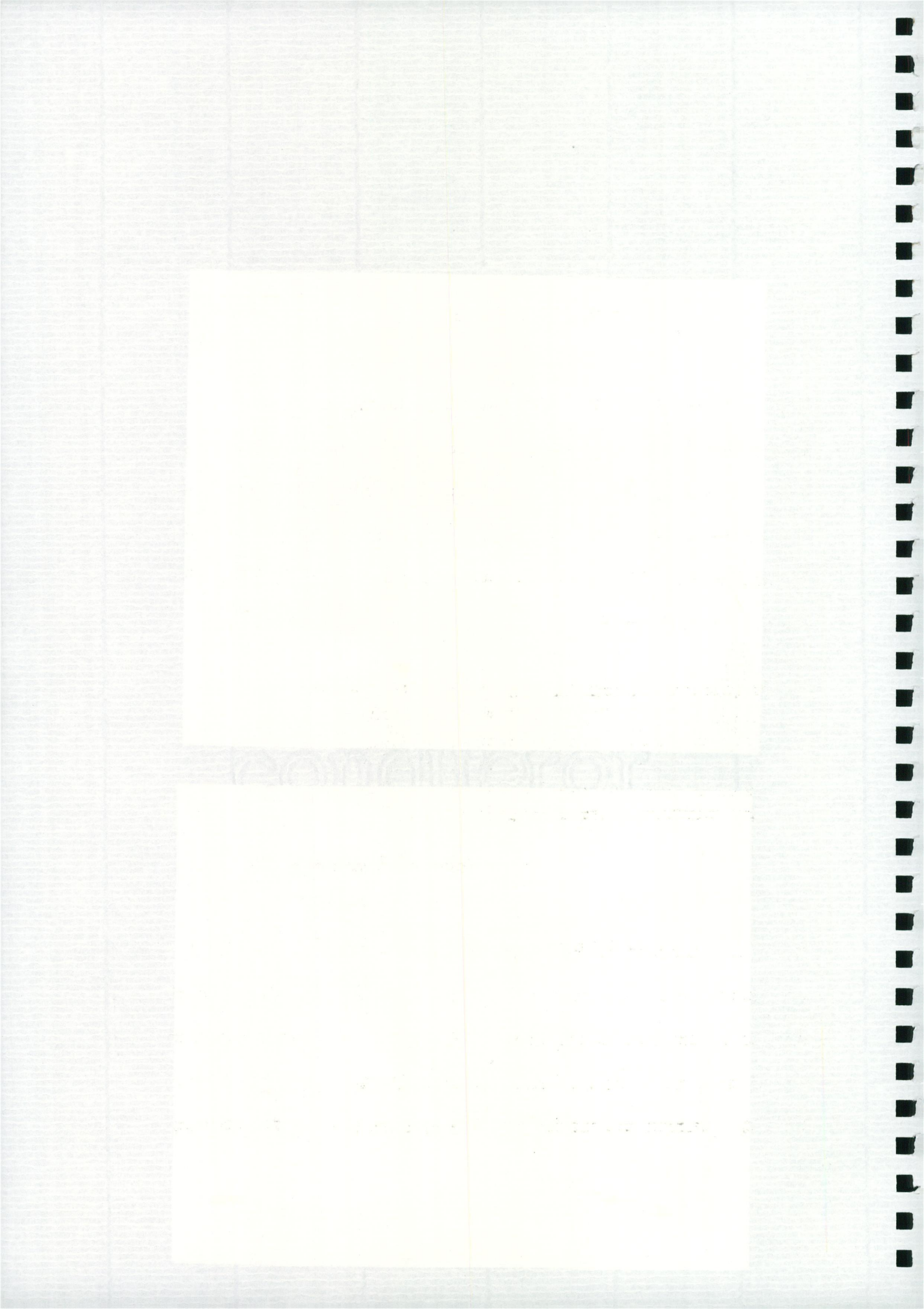


Plate 5

Cathartic Action





me as I sat frozen and mt sister attached a pink woollen arm to my stump (which she had knitted especially) to replace the prosthesis cut away. Afterwards I talked for a long time with the audience."

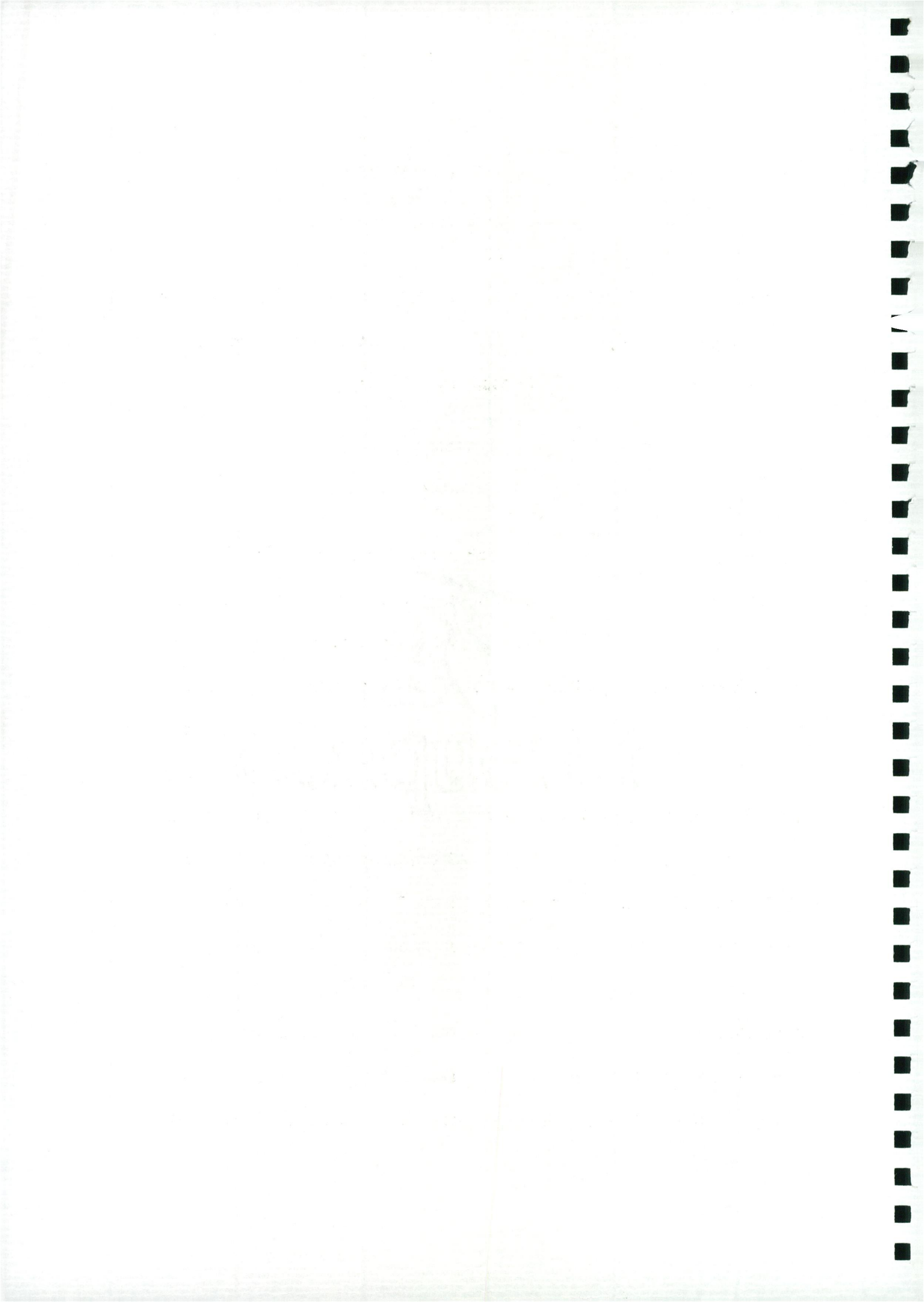
(Bromfield, 1989, p.126)

This stemmed from something primal, a trauma acted out. In a way it was a type of therapy, a way of dealing with his inner fears. Not only was he acting out displaced castration fears, he was making a statement about the patriarchal, authority that he believed was saturating art. This was the final rejection of all his obsessions and fears. In 1975 he stated;

"I became convinced that the basic cause was my disability. It was as though my disability was associated with castration. The self aggression behaviour was a case of confronting a primitive fear of mutilation, by giving into it.

(Bromfield, 1989, p.87)

Since the concept of the 'other' is reflective, it can also apply to the potentially liberating role of art and the artist. Parr increasingly aspired to this role in the early 1980's. Once he had realised that the 'other' is in all of us he began to seek liberation through it rather than from it, pushing the viewer to discover their own hidden desire's.



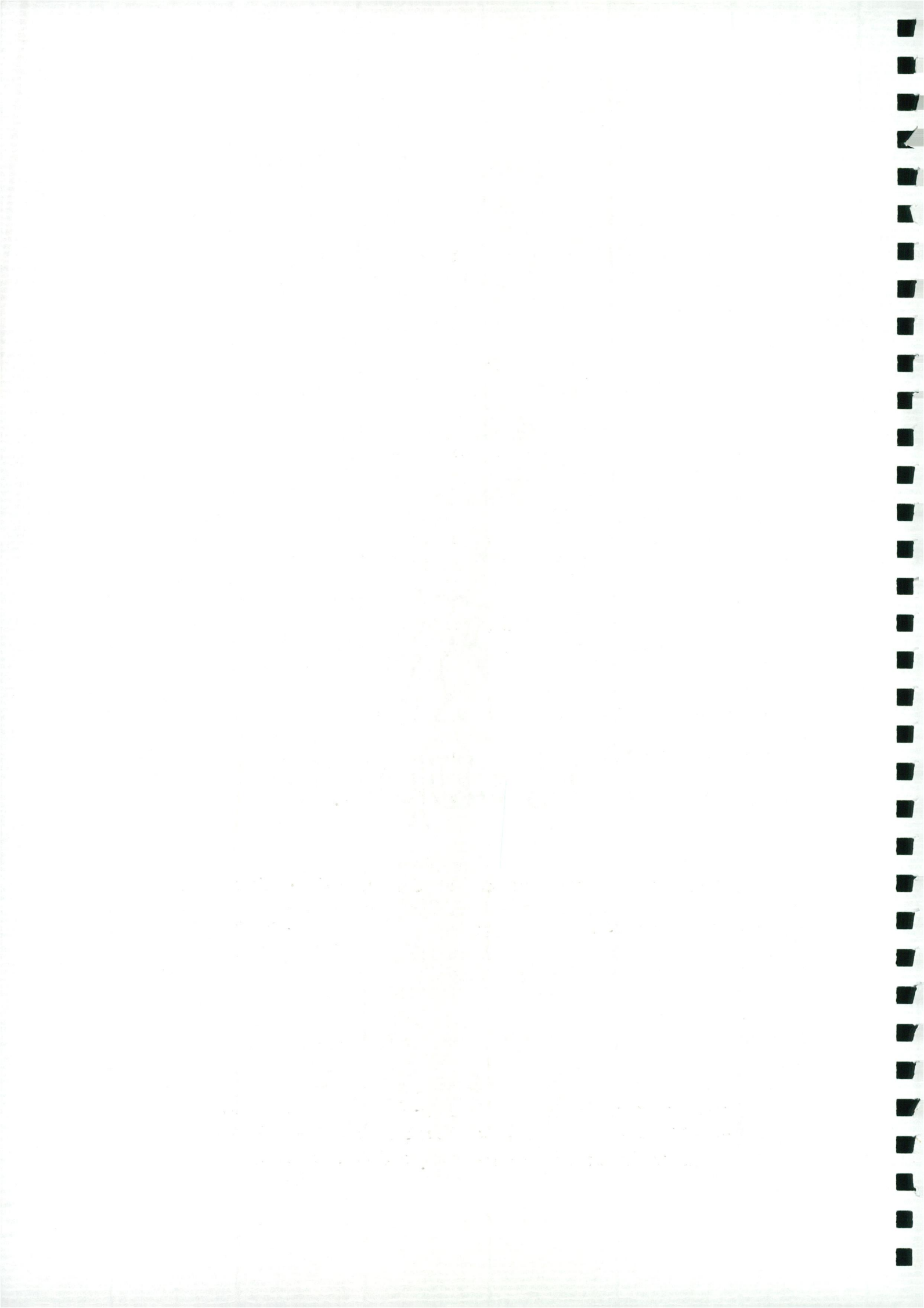
The act of observing art may effect people in different ways. It may be accepted, or completely rejected. If it sometimes involves them, they may even abandon it. The artist can never really predict how the audience will react. Marcuse's apprehension that art should not reach a large public directly is difficult and confusing. By adapting such a strategy Parr is distancing himself even further.

Within a society where alienation exists the value of art is often discounted. Within capitalism the only justifiable place for art is as an object which can be bought, speculated upon and sold for a profit, or it might serve as diversion or entertainment. This concept of art may imply that art should move people and be pleasing to the eye. Instead Parr's performance art has gone beyond the pleasure principal and it is this shift that is difficult to accept. Successfully executed art stands as both part of and not part of the society out of which it has emerged. This is why when art is effective in Marcuse's terms it appeals to people with progressive interests. Marcuse as well as Parr does not expect or want experience to be easy. On the contrary he rejects the notion that art should try to reach a large audience directly. He does not think that art is life or that it should attempt to appear as simulated reality. If art comes too close to reality it runs the risk of becoming mundane and if this occurs its function as rejection of the existing world is abandoned. Although Parr tried to reach his audience

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directly through his art, to adapt the opinions that Marcuse presents contradicts this aim. If he is going to engage an audience in such a way that they actually form the work, that experience has to be easy.

It becomes clear that Parr has quite a liberating view about art, a view that it is sometimes difficult to imagine could ever become effective . At the time 'The Aesthetic Dimension' was written those theories were barely accepted. When we read them now in the context of Mike Parr, most become more relevant to existing society. Art should help people become assimilated into society, but at each turn should challenge the assumptions of that society. Within Marcuse's concept of the aesthetic dimension, there are two necessary conditions. The first is that the artist has a responsibility to help society deal with hidden conflicts and contradictions and the second is that the work must embody hope in whatever way possible. Parr believed that art should clarify its social value, thereby anticipating and controlling the critical reaction to it. The more people alienate themselves from their own inner needs and desires the more fragmented they will be in relation to the society in which they live and work, and the more they need the powerful experience of art. This art that they depend on to help them to uncover their needs and desires must therefore do that in a way that will have a transformative effect on them, and not increase their fears, causing them to reject this art that they thought could



heal.

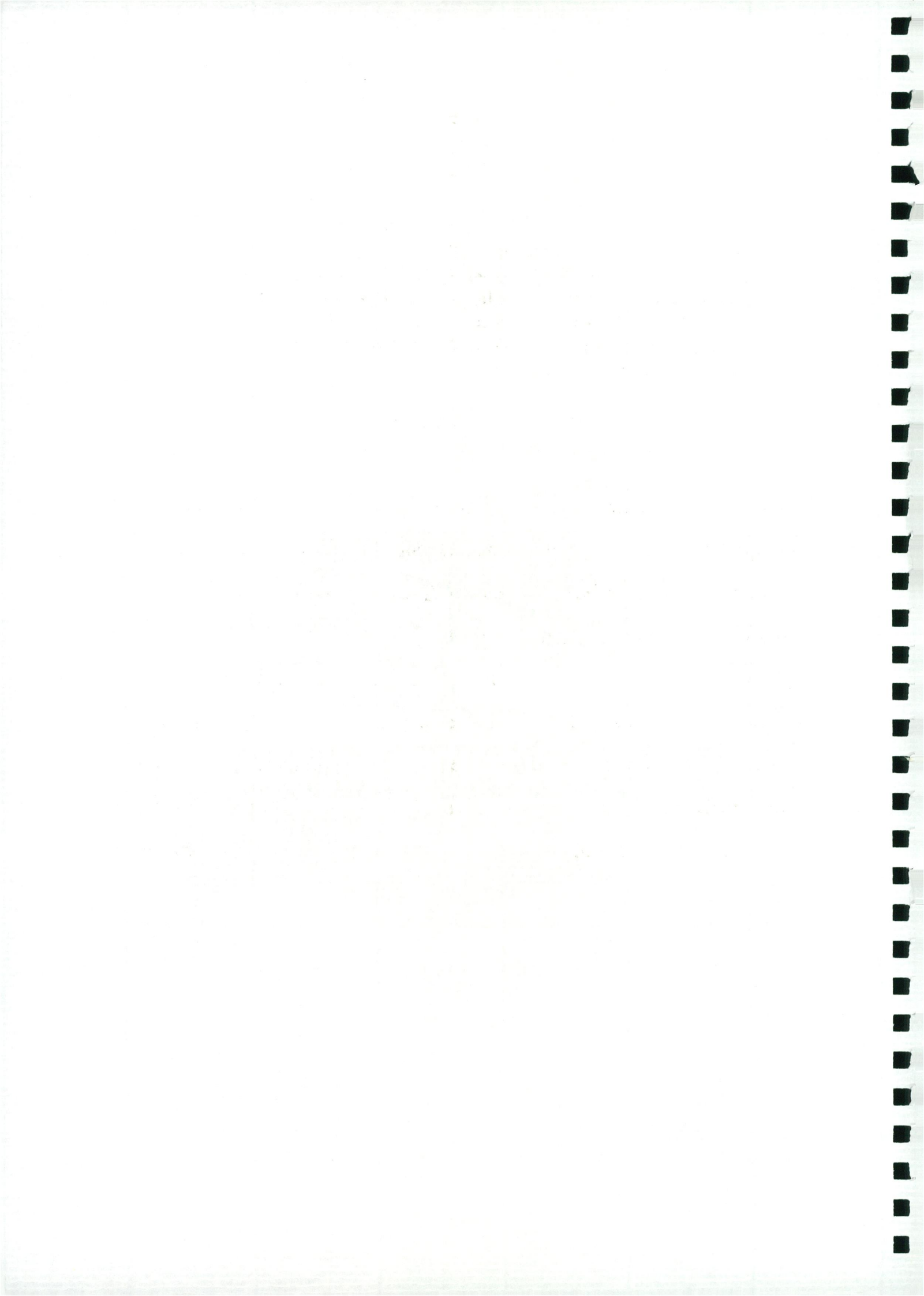
"Art cannot change the world, but it can help to change the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world."

(Marcuse, 1979, p.32)

The function of art is not to be politely absorbed but rather to challenge and disrupt. The debate Marcuse entered into almost twenty years ago remains relevant and continues today. As the world that artists live in becomes more complex, as the demands made on us all increase, his work on this subject could provide an endless source of inspiration, not necessarily for the answers it provides but rather for the range of questions it engages. It has been made clear that artists must position themselves in relation to their own identities, the social issues that surround them and the world in which they live.

The best record of Parr's development is contained in his notebooks. A number of comments record the change in his attitude to the problem of the social responsibility of the artist and the value of art. In 1972 Parr wrote:

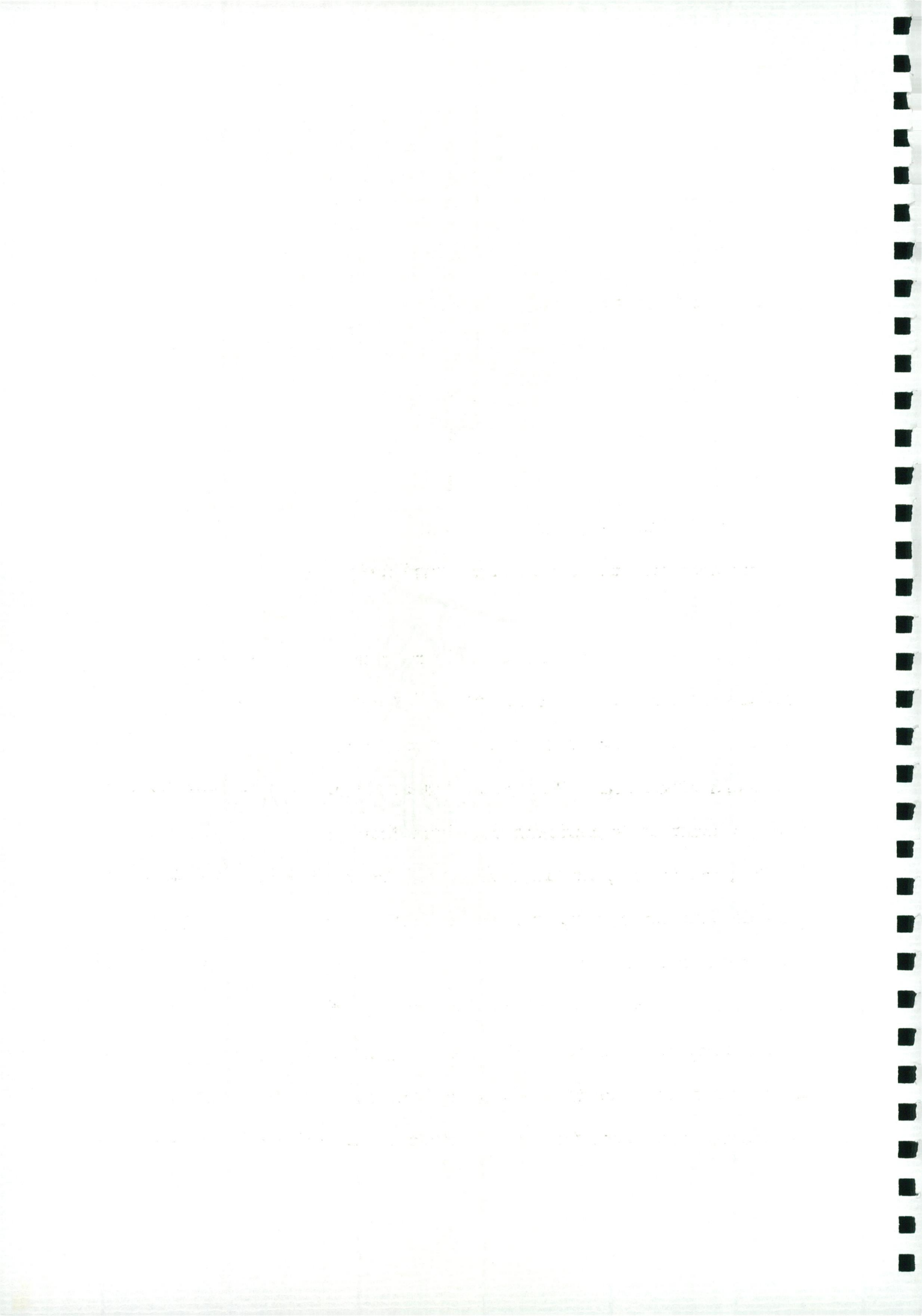
"However to argue that alienation is the natural condition of the creative, artistic intellect is to effectively annul the real importance of that



intellect by mythologising it. For it is now obvious even to artists that this romantic alienation from society promotes a discussion of the creative, artistic intellect from all the important areas of decision making within the society in order to assert a more general influence on society. It is now necessary for the artist to renounce all traditional forms of expression and to look only to the immediate relevance of his ideas."

(Bromfield...1989, p.52)

Marcuse's argument parallels the discoveries which Parr had made through his practices. He began to concern himself increasingly with performance works which use the body as a measurement for different experiences within the human physic. Parr believed that art could operate beyond its own realm by allowing both artist and audience to realise practical ways to escape socially imposed versions of reality. From 1973 he attempted to build a critical art practice that would do more than reject the current order of things. That practice still involved a specialised audience. An audience that is artistically educated.

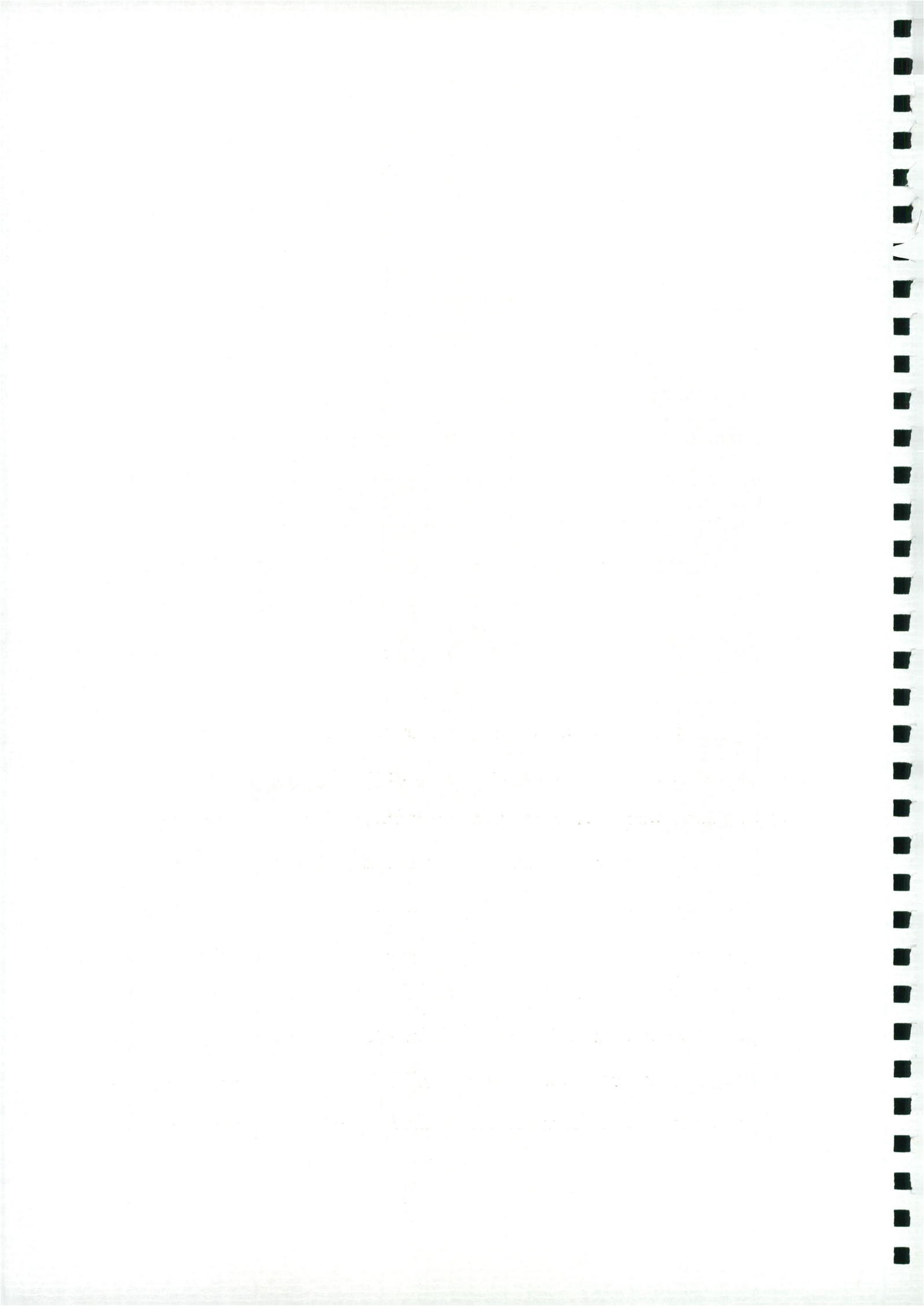


Chapter 3

The Artist and the Audience

Art has increasingly become the concern of the artist and the bafflement of the public. But there is no easy public art; there is only private, difficult art that is accessible to the public willing to make the effort . There is something unpleasant in the realisation that the true audience for this new art is so small and so specialised.

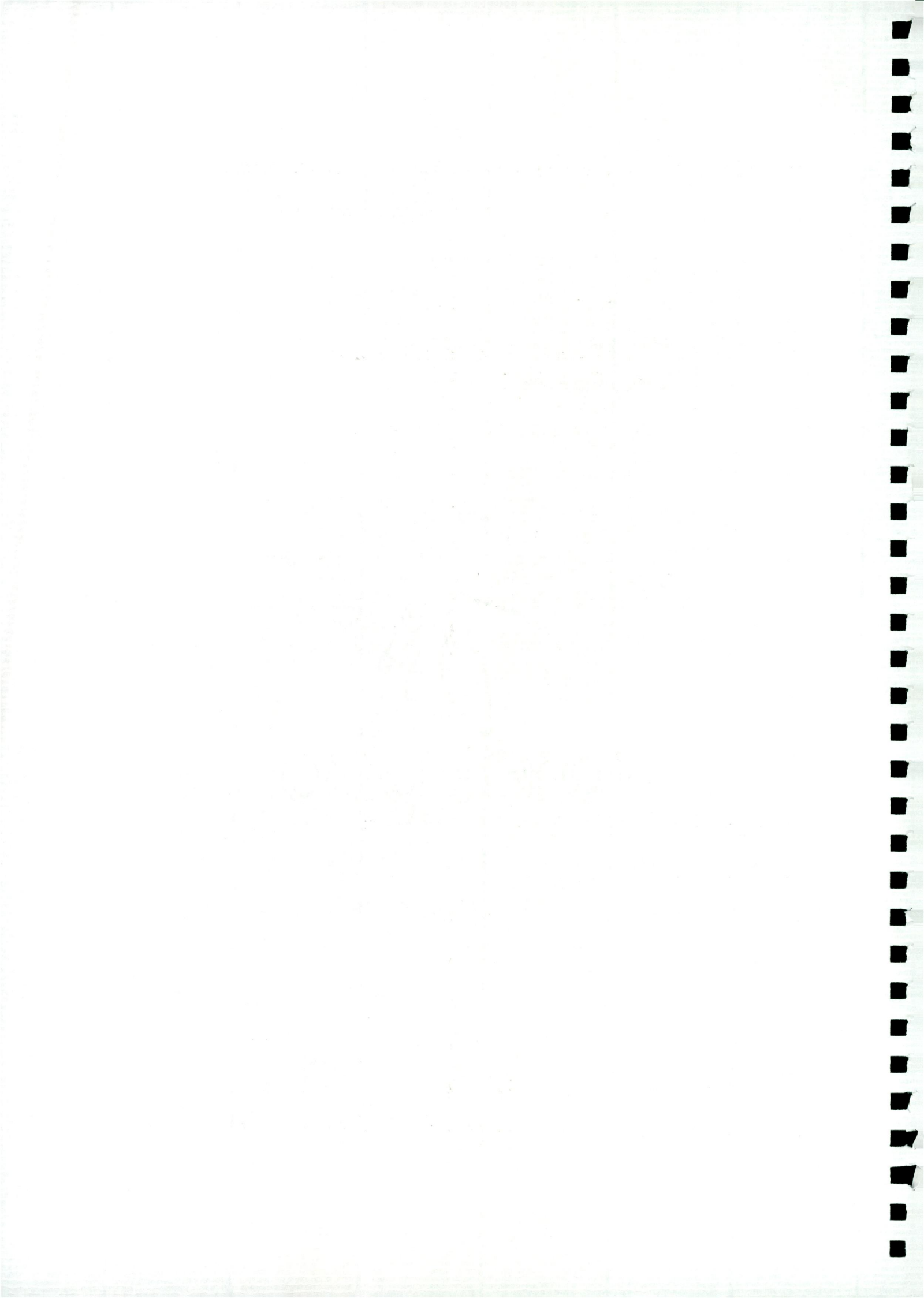
In referring to 'a specialised audience' I am referring to the people who were themselves participating and familiar with Parr's work. In Parr's case his followers constituted those people he was close to; his own close colleagues. They were a great support to him when he first became involved in performance. From then he formed 'Inhibodress', which became a continuous sequence of exhibitions which were greeted with acclaim by the critics and by an increasing group of supporters who became known as 'the Inhibodress crowd'. Inhibodress became a laboratory for performance art and the investigation of the human body and identity. These small groups of independent artists were all associated in dealing with the human body in art. They needed to remove themselves from the institutionalised art world that did not



allow them the freedom they could achieve through performance. So these groups became alienated from the art world, and from the public who were accustomed to looking at art.

Due to these new groups being formed a new art audience was needed. So therefore the audience itself became a specialised one. This was an audience that was willing to make an effort to come to the performances, who were already familiar with the practice such as critics, and those artists already engaged in the practice. The unpleasantness comes from the notion of a perfect audience or a perfect art, or rather an ideal relationship between the great democratic public and the artist performing his social function.

Despite all the education available through our art museums, and college art history departments, the process remains slow and true understanding rare. Whether this situation is ideal or necessary is a matter for speculation. It has been the situation for several decades. It is unreasonable to expect the audience to transform itself into whatever the artist wants. Some spectators react enthusiastically to a performance if they recognise it to have particular meaning to them. We know that the participation of the spectator depends on personal interests, on familiarity with this type of events. The following piece is an example of a performance that tended to engage members of the



audience as part of a spectacle, rather than active participant. The performance goes as follows:

The participants were arranged, leaning back over chairs, so that their faces looked to the ceiling. Their faces were roughly parallel with the floor. Simultaneously, the following actions were carried out by other members of the audience. The performers taut stomachs were bared and melted cheese was poured over their stomachs. Bread was stuffed into the performers noses and long matches were then fixed in their noses. The matches were lit and while the flames burned towards the participants eyes an effort was made (which failed) to staple atrocity images (photographs) over the performers mouths.

(Bromfield,1989,p.70)

Although this work provided a new and exhilarating encounter with the artist it had sadistic implications. Here was an artist using his audiences as bodies in which he could investigate his own suppressed fantasies. This was a demonstration of the artists power, to control and inflict a coded practice on the bodies of others. The images he used are not clearly stated, but are described as being images of the misuse and partition of the body. This performance was part of the 'Subjective and Objective Images' series performed in Neuchatel. (Refer to Plate 6,

Subjective and Objective Images') Another performance in this series was;

I poured and licked honey from the participants' eyes, ears and mouths as I moved over the participants' bodies attempting to mask simple thoughts on their flesh (scratching and attempting to write on their bodies snatches of emotion)

(Bromfield, 1989, p.70)

Such acts are bound to cause objections among an audience that knew very little about what was taking place. These situations Parr set up, portrayed a distinct uncertainty on his part. It was obvious that he was unsure of the consequences of such actions. When a group is not given clear signals about what is taking place the continuity of the events tends to fall apart rather than have any significance.

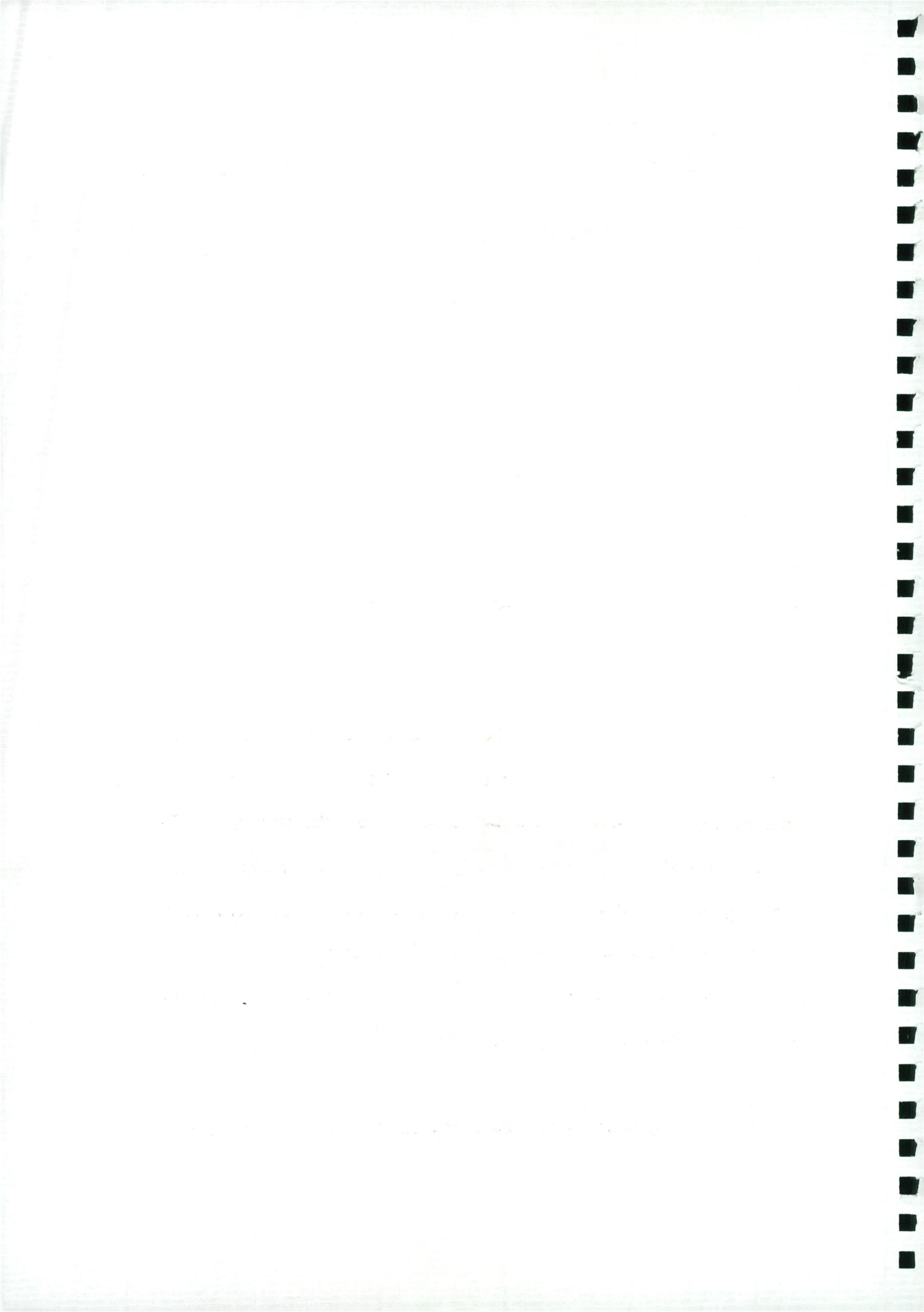
It is apparent that within the short history of performance art, artists initially attempted to distinguish between their actions and those of theatre. Although these distinctions may always prove to be problematic, they need to be stated. Early 1970's performance art was more concerned with actual presentation rather than with the illusions then associated with representation; the focus on real time and space



Plate 6

Subjective and Objective Images



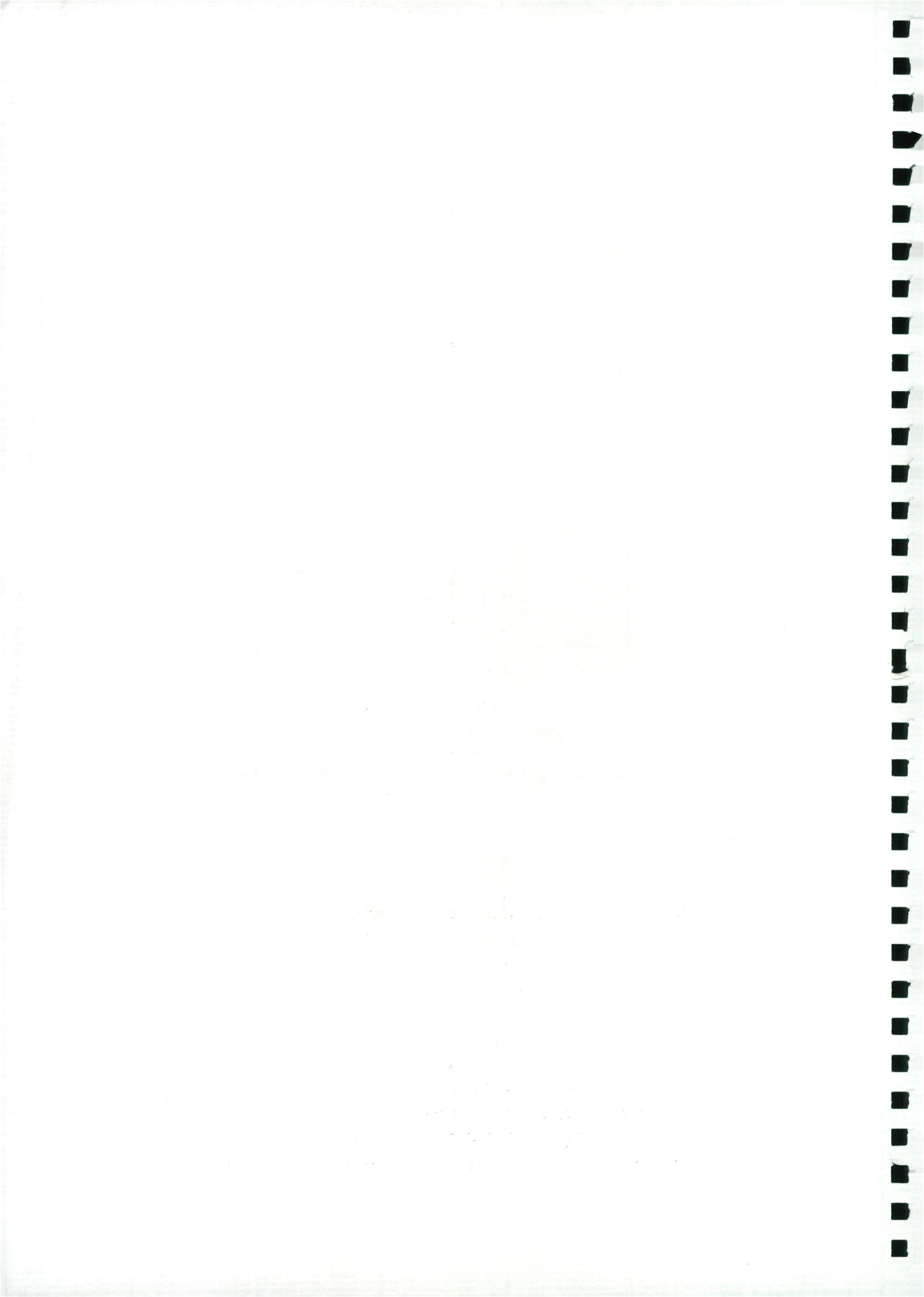


on action rather than imitation, was presented as a way of cutting through the distance which separated artists from spectators. If performance is different from other modes of art, it is invariably the presence of the artist before the audience that marks the distinction.

However it must be acknowledged that it was the means of representation that changed; the way in which artists presented their ideas was difficult, not primarily the issues they were exploring. The new modes of presentation, which often appeared fragmented and incomplete to the spectator who was more accustomed to contemplating art objects, enabled different aspects of creation and invention to be investigated.

It is interesting to discover how Mike Parr tried to narrow the distance between artist and audience, and how he saw this as a major problem and so took it on in order to resolve it. For Parr the rebellious nature of some art one was the only one in which it could be shown to have any social value. For him art could and should make space for sociability in these special moments. For not only could performance change the audience's ideas about art, it changed the way art could be viewed, by actually allowing the viewer to participate in it.

One performance which would be useful to discuss in detail here on the

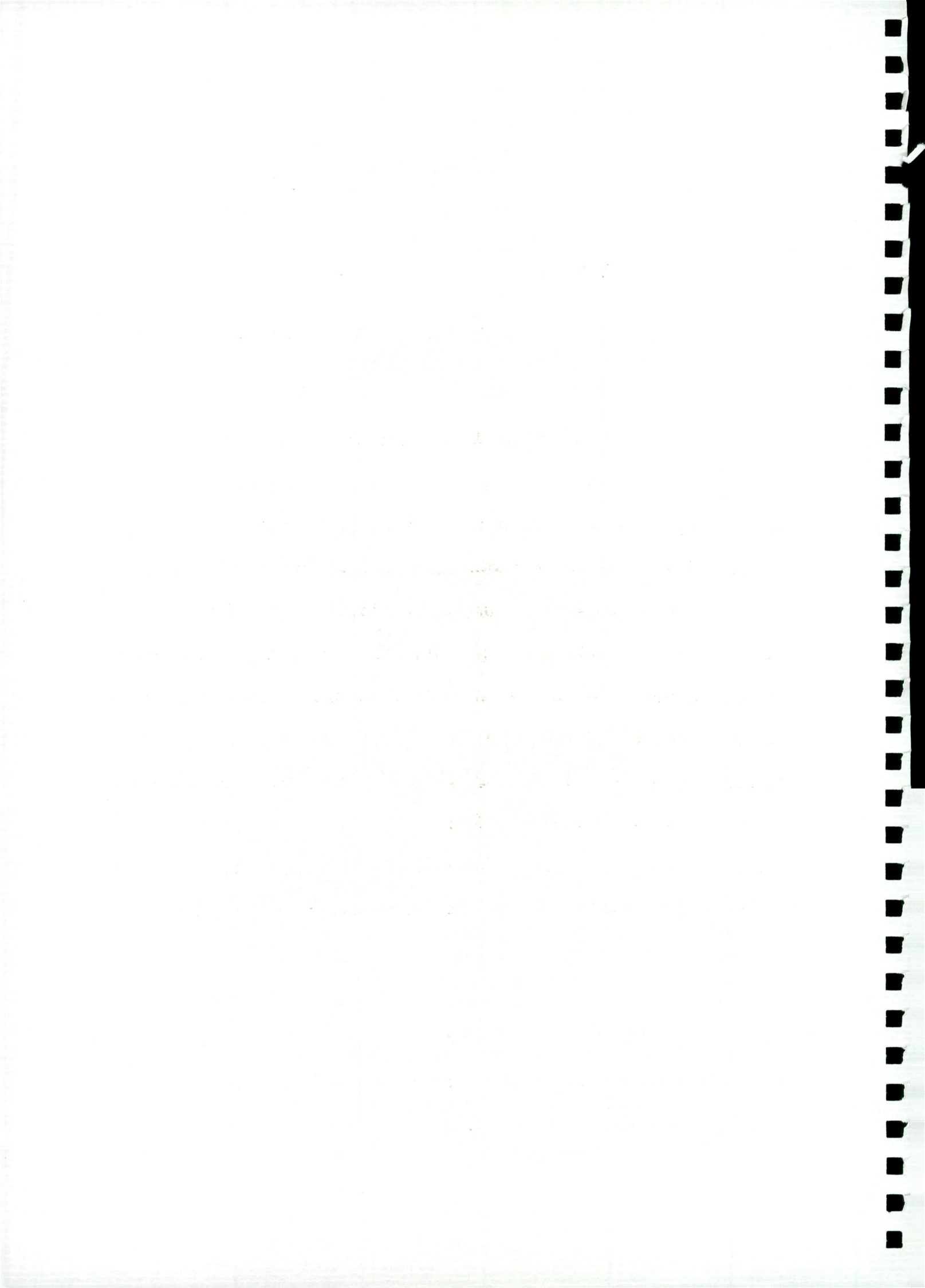


issue of audience and artist relationship was the one performed in 1972 in collaboration with Peter Kennedy. The performance goes as follows:

***' sit on a chair in a room, bear your left shoulder.
Let a friend bite into your shoulder
until blood appears'.***

Peter Kennedy bit into Mike Parr's upper arm as hard as he could for three minutes or so. No blood was drawn. Parr's body shook with great pain, and the performance stopped only when Kennedy could no longer continue biting. Before the performance commenced, Parr made a formal statement that the work had no sadistic or masochistic intention. Although there were no such intentions stated it could be difficult to read the performance otherwise. Terry Smith, the Australian art critic and writer, was present at the performance. He reported that

""My own response moved through four, intermixing stages. It began with a recognition of the absurdity of the situation (two men before a battery of cameras and spotlights, sitting on chairs against the corner wall of a converted factory in Woolloomooloo, one biting the other), then amusement at this absurdity (obviously defensive). Then, as Parr's agony increased, disgust and repulsion, followed by nausea. At this moment two people fainted. My nausea was then



modified by a rising feeling of something like admiration for a man pursuing to such lengths something very important to him (or was this a 'fearful awe' of pain?). At that moment the work finished amid stunned silence, and I have yet to formulate a coherent response to it."

(Marsh, Oxford, 1993 , p41)

This describes an audience reaction which moved from awkwardness and amusement at the absurdity of the event, to disgust and fear as Parr's agony increased. At a point of maximum tension two people fainted. This performance shows quite directly the kinds of reactions that can be achieved through such a performance. Even those people who were familiar with such performances found the whole event difficult to comprehend. It demonstrates the connections made between artist and audience in moments of such intensity. It also involved a large audience, instead of those events which were staged in front of a very small crowd. Parr recalls Smith's response as "very agitated". Smith kept demanding; "why did we let this happen?". He thus invoked the audience's sense of moral responsibility for the event. The performance was disturbing for more than moral reasons. If it has an identifiable theme it is the relationship between aggression, friendship and identity. Terry Smith asked, 'why we so strenuously reject the causing of physical pain?. The performance crossed friendship and trust in the most extreme form. Parr was frequently

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accused of neglecting the masochistic or sadistic implications of his performance pieces and challenged to justify them. He never offered a ready made interpretation, he merely described the work and its intentions. So this stresses that even though it is shocking and repulsive, it is this shock effect that will cause thought processes to occur much quicker than say the same act portrayed in a painting. It is the same effect that is achieved when we watch a film and are moved by its characters. The film has worked if we come out feeling certain emotions that the actors have felt. So it could be said then that violence causes a much more direct and effective response. Parr argued that the audience;

"had to accept some sort of responsibility, they were culpable in a way, a part of what happens. It didn't matter if they walked out, attacked me or what. The idea of art being remote from you was over".

(Marsh, Oxford, 1993,p.42)

I believe that the performance was justifiable in that it caused the right response. It is only natural that people should reject violence in this way. No-one wants to be confronted with such extreme pain, especially when the event took place in front of the audience, in the same room. But no-one made any attempt to stop the performance, nor was it their responsibility to do so. If someone were to have stopped



the performance mid way through, would this have then demonstrated the audience's role in or responsibility to society. There is a sense of guilt on the part of the audience for allowing this to happen. There is a difficulty in watching such an act. When it is the causing of real pain and it is not an illusion. When Parr made the decision to perform any of his acts he obviously knew what he was going to do, and that meant he was not putting himself in any danger. There is a point when the audience realises this, and so their fears are removed.

Audience response to performance artworks is generally more aggressive and active than the response to other visual art forms, such as painting or sculpture. The responses to performance range from outrage to anxiety and boredom. The audience expects the artist to be some heroic figure which they look up to. They believe the artist is going to straighten out for us what we don't understand, these actions he incorporates into the work are going to benefit us in some way. The artist in that situation has got to do something absolute. When the artist decides to absorb the energy of the audience, and persuade the audience to come toward him in such a way that he can absorb the audience's anxieties and present the audience back with that anxiety, that has to be a totally genuine thing. I was thinking about how there is a gap between exposing the complete process of how you do something and all the anxieties that go with it. There's a very critical

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point at which it cannot become an experience that people can deal with because it's just the artist's own personal sickness or anxiety. People can look and say, "you have these problems, and these problems need attention." When it really works I think, it has to do with anxieties that are real. The audience wants to find a solution to their dilemmas in the work. They see that as the artist's function in society. So the artist has to take this into account when they perform the work. The work cannot look so self centred. It would make people just think rather than reject this behaviour as some kind of mental disorder.

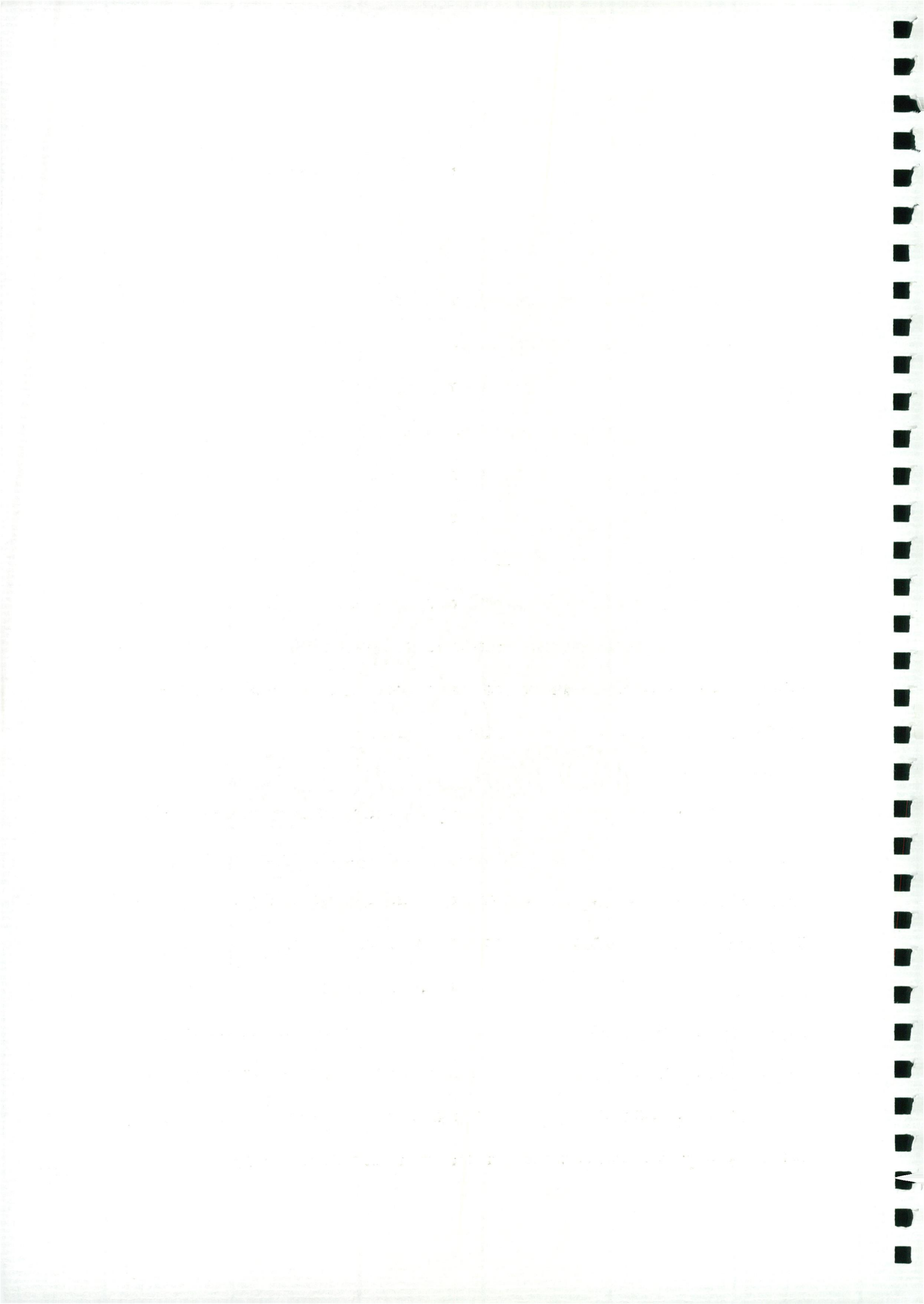
The decision to perform live before an audience rather than to work isolated in a studio, removed from any direct relationship with the public is an important factor in coming to grips with the phenomenon of performance. In performing live before an audience the artist is going to challenge the viewer's perceptions of art and the limits of those perceptions. Bringing people to art, also removes performance from other traditional modes of art, where the viewer normally makes the decision when and where they will look at art. Performance can only last for the length of time it is performed, it does not exist after that, only in the form of video or photographs. It can therefore be concluded that the audience is the important factor, and in order for performance to become more accessible the distance that exists between artist and spectator needs to be reduced.

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Conclusion

The study of what experiences could be achieved and what impact these experiences could have on the artist was the foremost concern of Mike Parr. He is interested in discovering the limitations of the body and the mind. It is apparent that artists have been grappling with ways in which to analyse the position of the subject in society and explore different aspects of subjectivity. Parr achieved this by indulging in activities that allowed for a new kind of experience. He did not regard his work being in any way a demonstration of his unique personality. His use of the body in his work was the only liberating material that allowed greater freedom for expression. Hence, he engaged in performance art with a view both to creating art and to creating himself, and achieving self-liberation

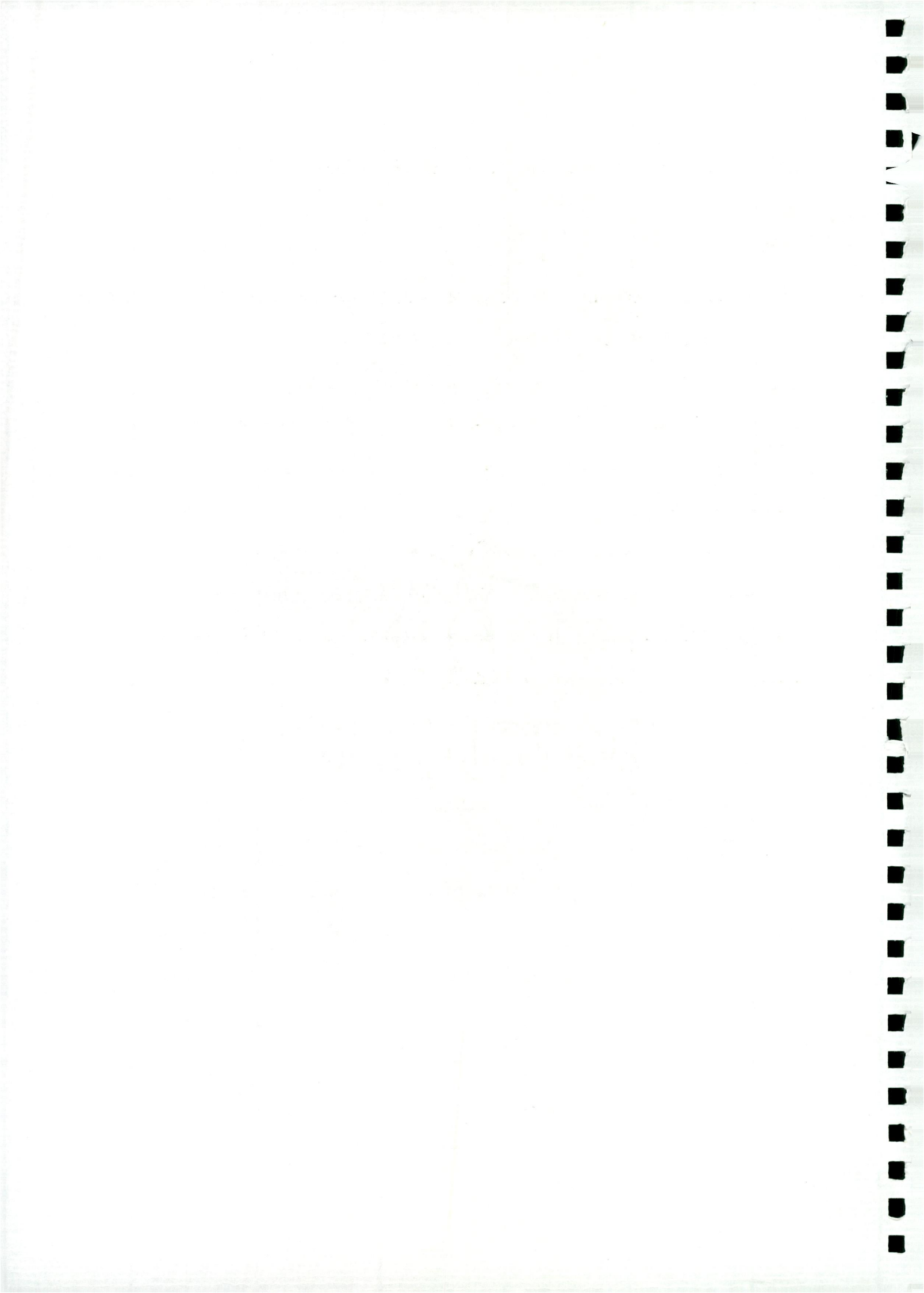
While performance artists can be reasonably sure of communicating with the audience, they cannot be so certain of achieving audience participation, since performances confront audiences with unusual experiences with which they are not always familiar. In Parr's case the audience needed to engage in an intellectual rather than an emotional way. His use of theory is difficult to interpret, a specialised audience was required. Although his central aim was to bridge the gap



between spectator and artist, he sometimes created alienation between the two.

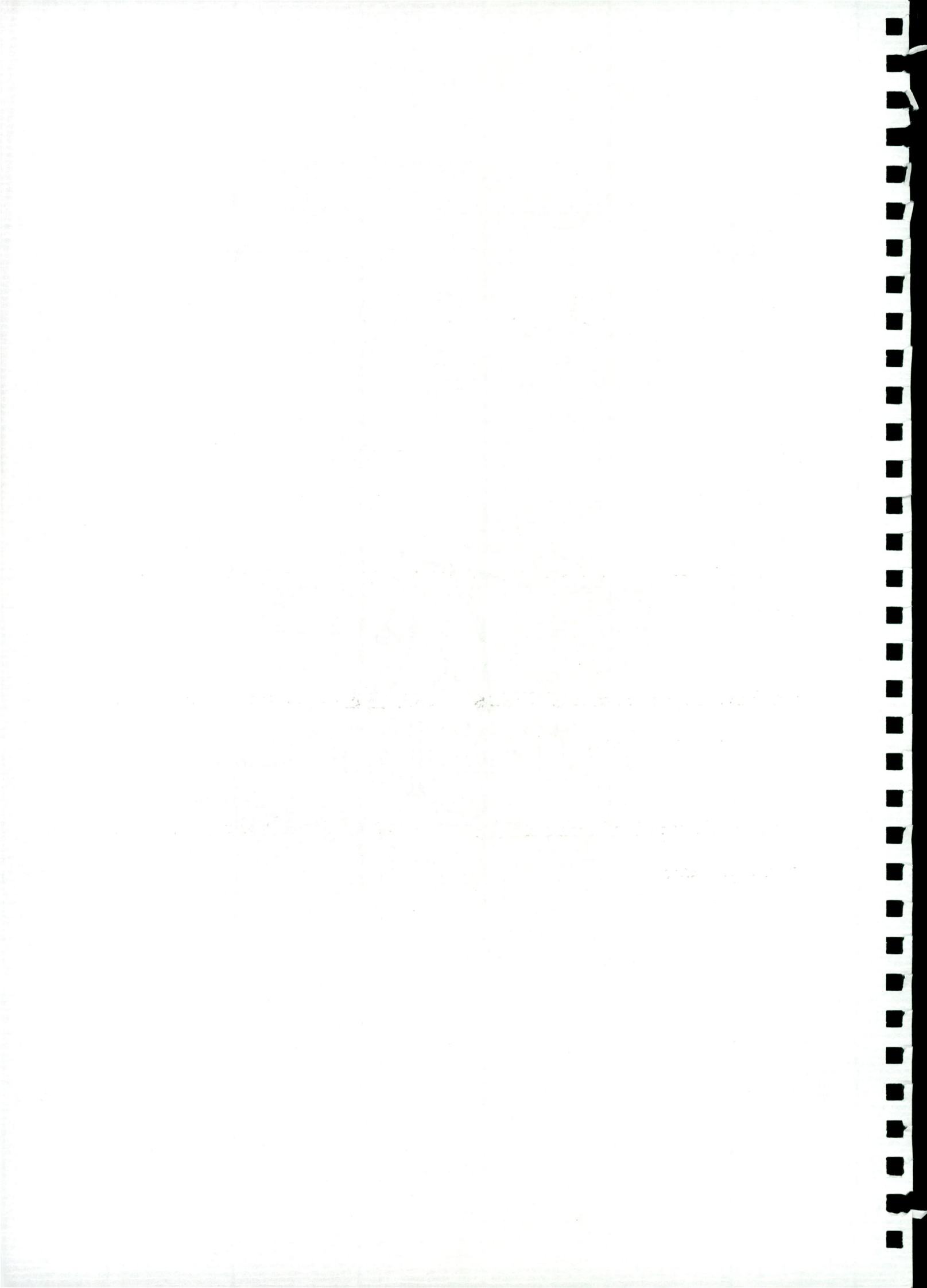
In the sixties, performance works which aimed to break the boundary between art and life, succeeded in removing art from its institutional settings and introduced the materials and behaviour of everyday life into the context of art. In its efforts it tried to assimilate less with the traditional limitations of making art objects so that the artist could now delight in almost any activity. Unfortunately the audience was unwilling to accept any activity as art. The reasons artists decide to adopt performance are to be found in each individual artist and further in each performance. Performance art raised, and continues to raise serious questions about the nature of art, art's audience, the role of the artist, and even of the critics themselves.

Parr's attempt to change the isolating potential of performance art into a new form of communication has in some ways been achieved. His aim was to prove that art was no longer remote from the people, in that they could now join the artist in engaging in it. His theory was that any experience which was outside our normally inhabited lives could be regarded as art. Marcuse's concept was that art's critical function was to contribute to the struggle for liberation. The spectator, who once associated art with the the art object, was now seeing a new difficult art appearing and many were not willing to accept it. A performance



like a film may be difficult to interpret initially. But after a time when the spectator sees the performance a number of times they will undoubtedly notice aspects which they did not appreciate on earlier occasions. This can only occur though if the performance is in the form of documentation.

Practice and theory overlap in performance art. It is a practice that is fraught with problems. Parr's return to painting for the present only demonstrates his return to the self-portrait. His work has been frequently attacked as 'obsessive', driven by compulsive personal necessities, which sometimes completely outweighed artistic value. But for him the only road to a truthful and authentic discourse was through the body and his own intellect.



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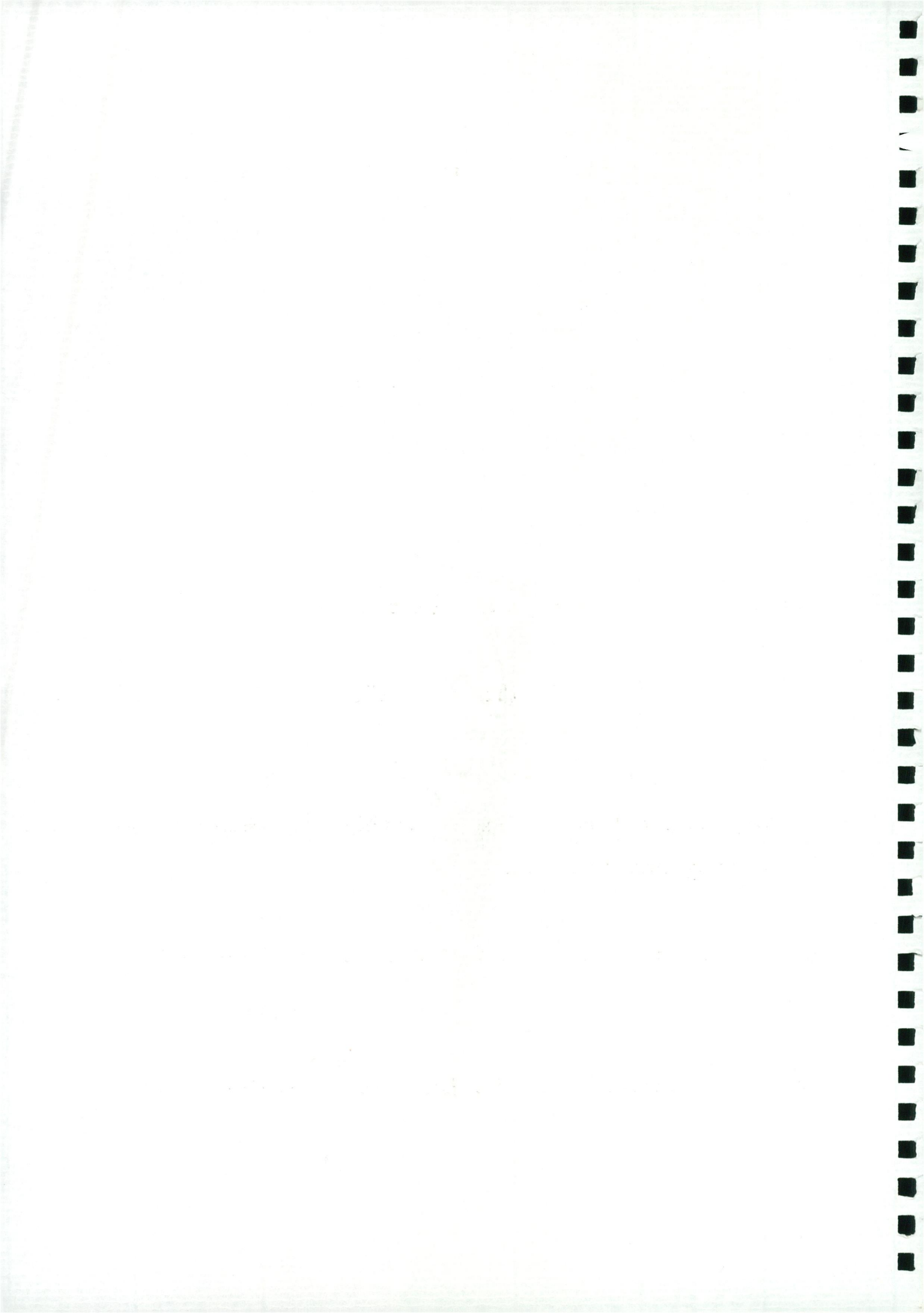
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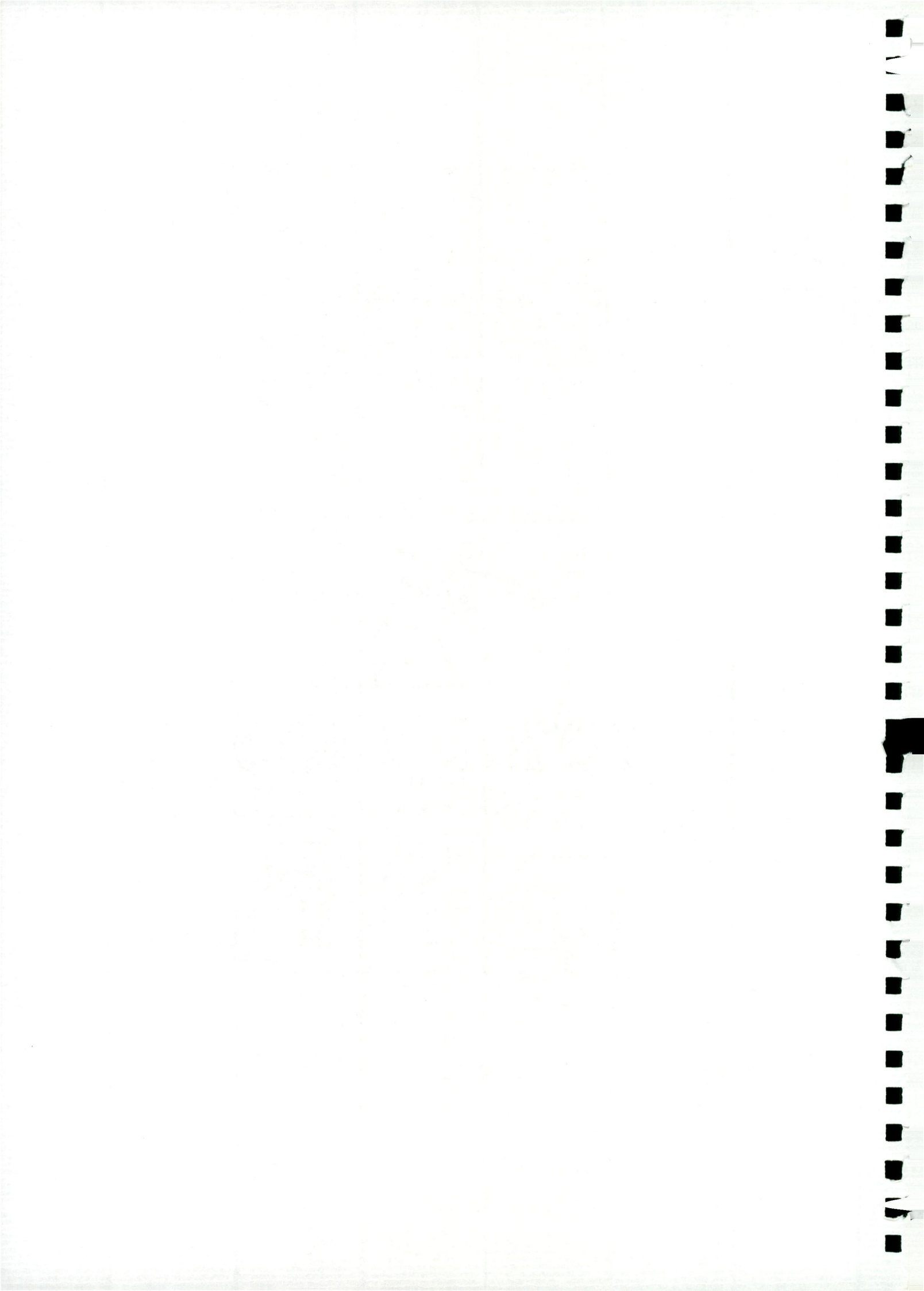
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