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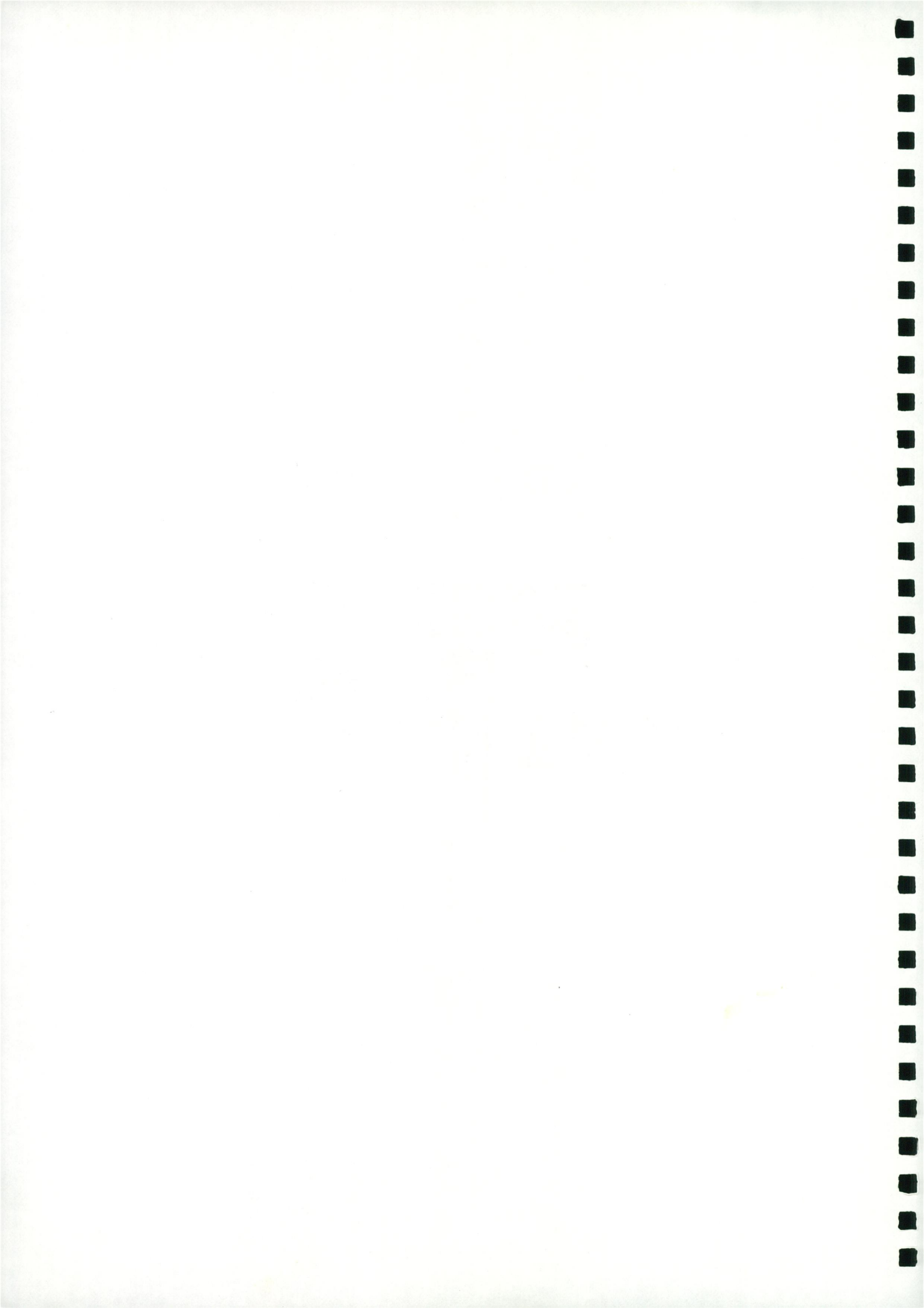
Thematic Concerns in the Work
of
Marina Abramovic

by

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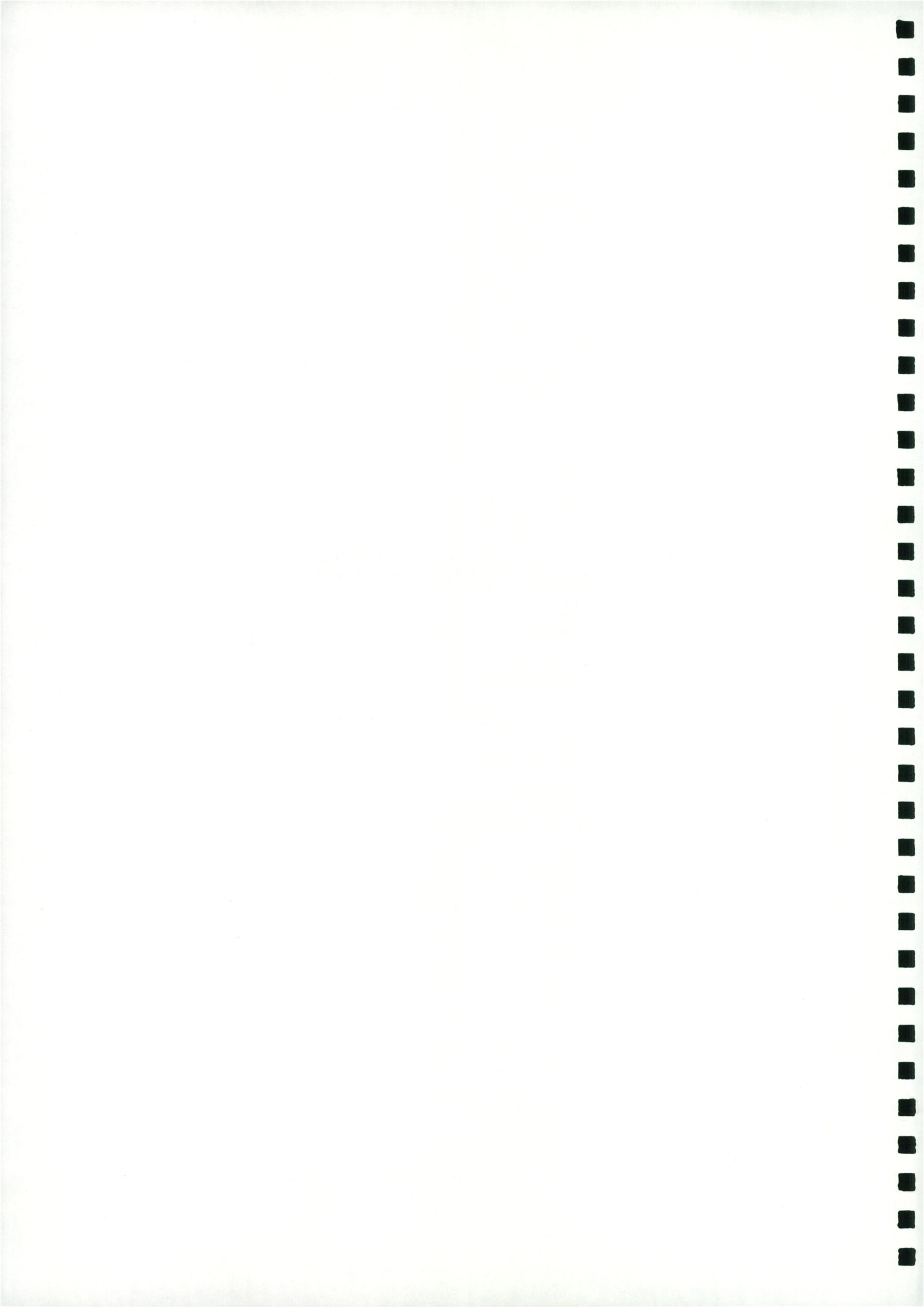
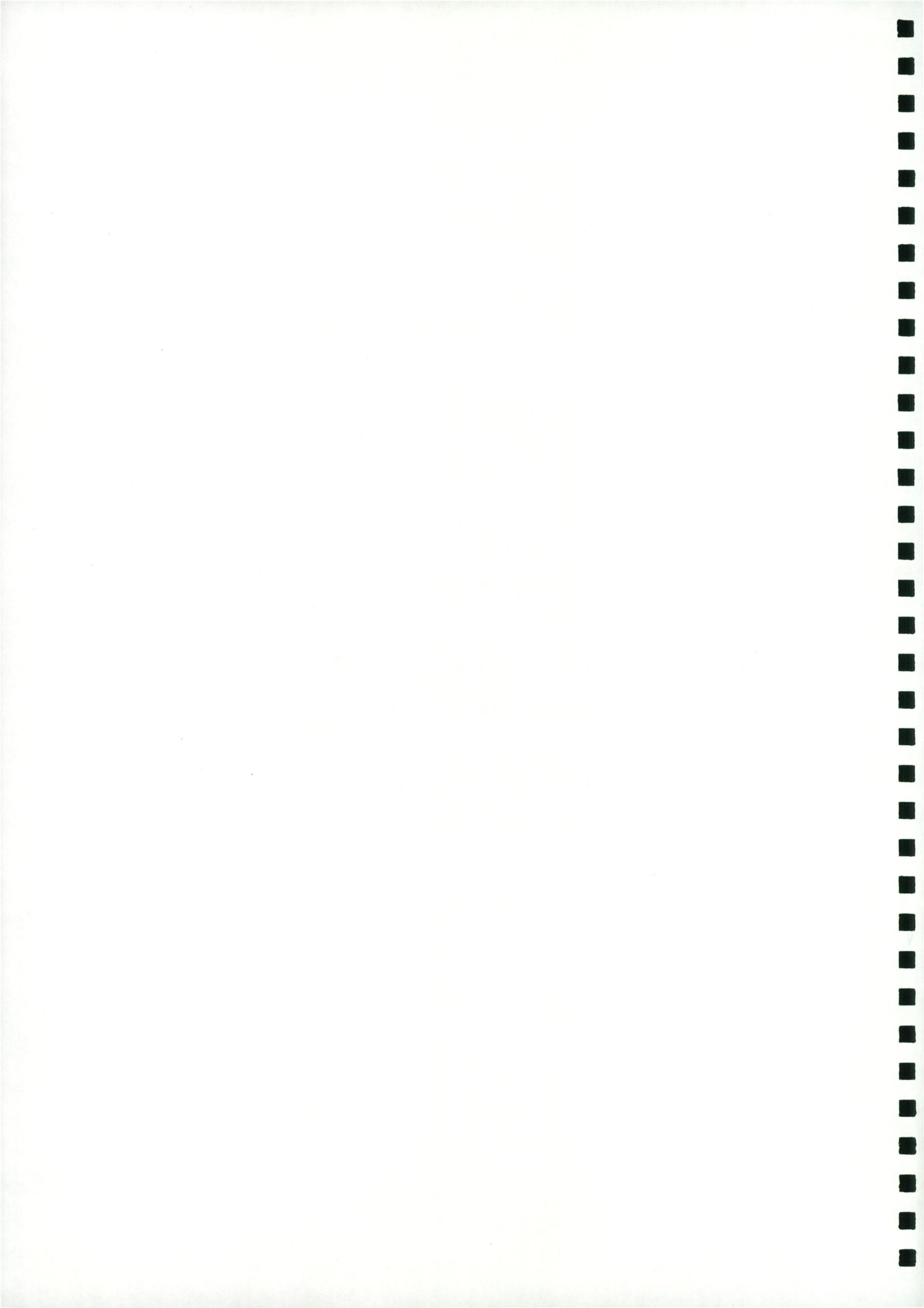


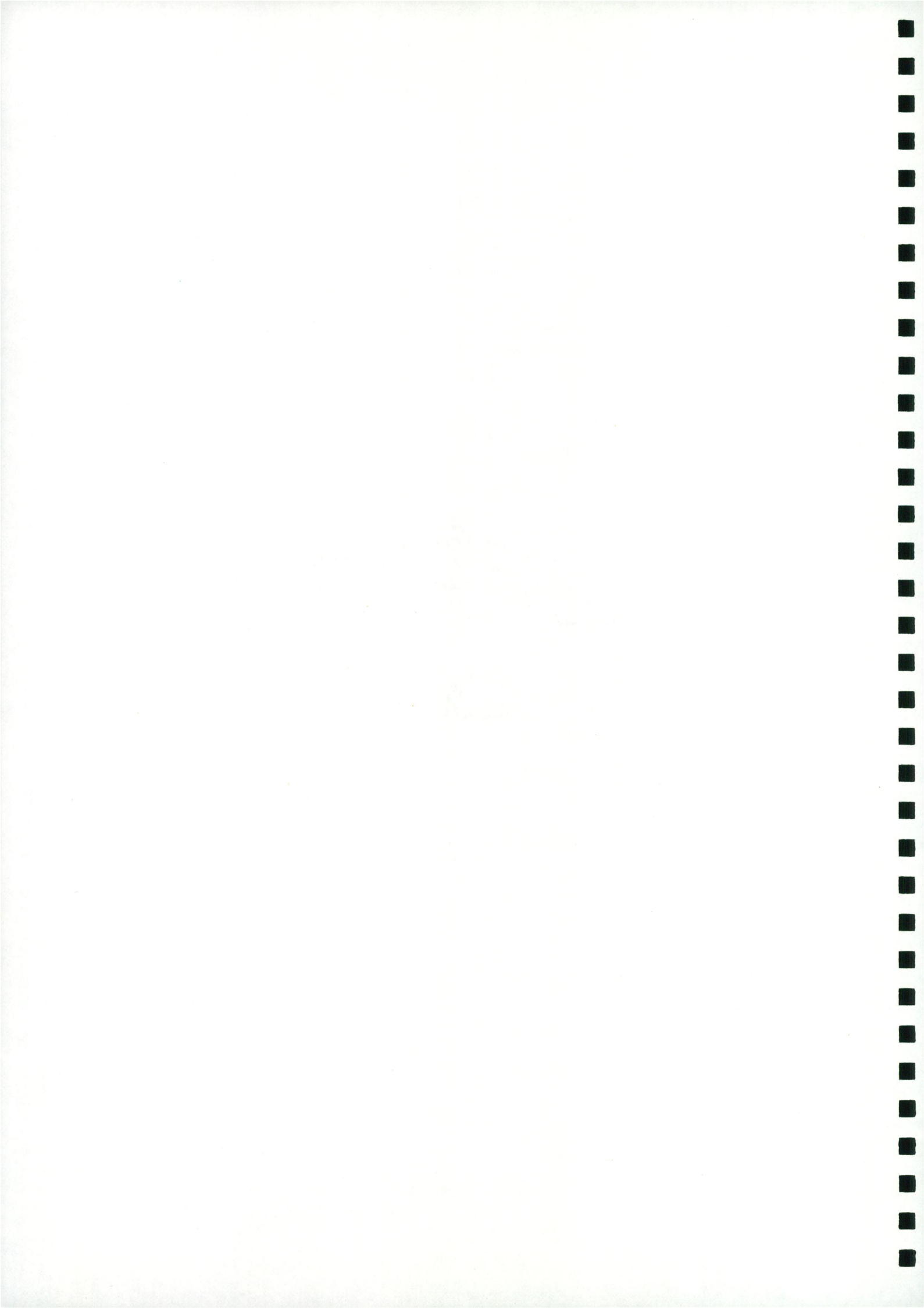
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INTRODUCTION :

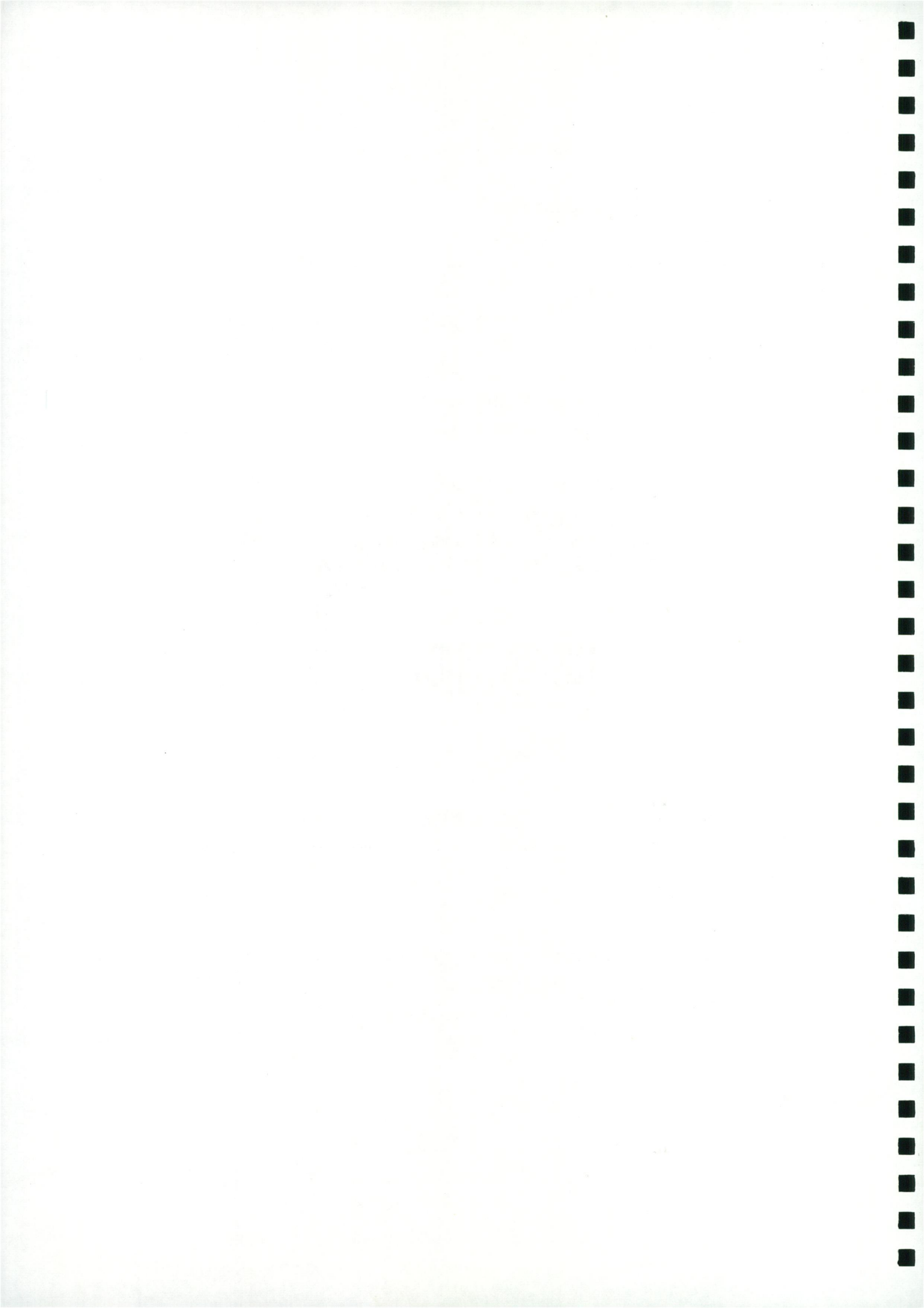
Marina Abramovic's work is a constant source of controversy and interest. Abramovic's work practice has attracted this attention, in the way she has used her body in her performance work. These performances have involved an extreme level of self inflicted cruelty. The notion of extremity and horror always seem to attract people's attention and can lead at the same time to controversy. Abramovic has worked and travelled the world in a nomadic fashion, dedicating her life from an early age to producing art works which express her life's experience. Abramovic's prolific production of art must be acknowledged as a contribution to the arts but there are aspects of her work necessitating further investigation. Some of Abramovic's explanations for the work don't seem to sit comfortably with the rigorous content of the work.

Marina Abramovic has worked in a variety of media and formats in different locations world wide (Europe, North America, Australia, China, India etc.), both as solo artist and in collaborative performance, as object maker and as the personal vehicle of her work. Although her work seems incredibly varied, each work is marked by recurring themes which this thesis will seek to describe.

Chapter One provides an introductory description of Abramovic's work, both in historical and biographical terms and a description of specific examples. These specific examples will be further discussed to elaborate concerns common to the works.

Chapter Two explore and develop the themes which emerge through a discussion of specific works. These recurring themes of pain, extreme uses of the body, endurance and different levels of consciousness or ways of being appear to link each project together.

Chapter Three will deal with aspects of man/woman opposition in the work of Abramovic and will look at the relationship of Abramovic's work that has elements with essentialism within the wider scope of feminine art practice.

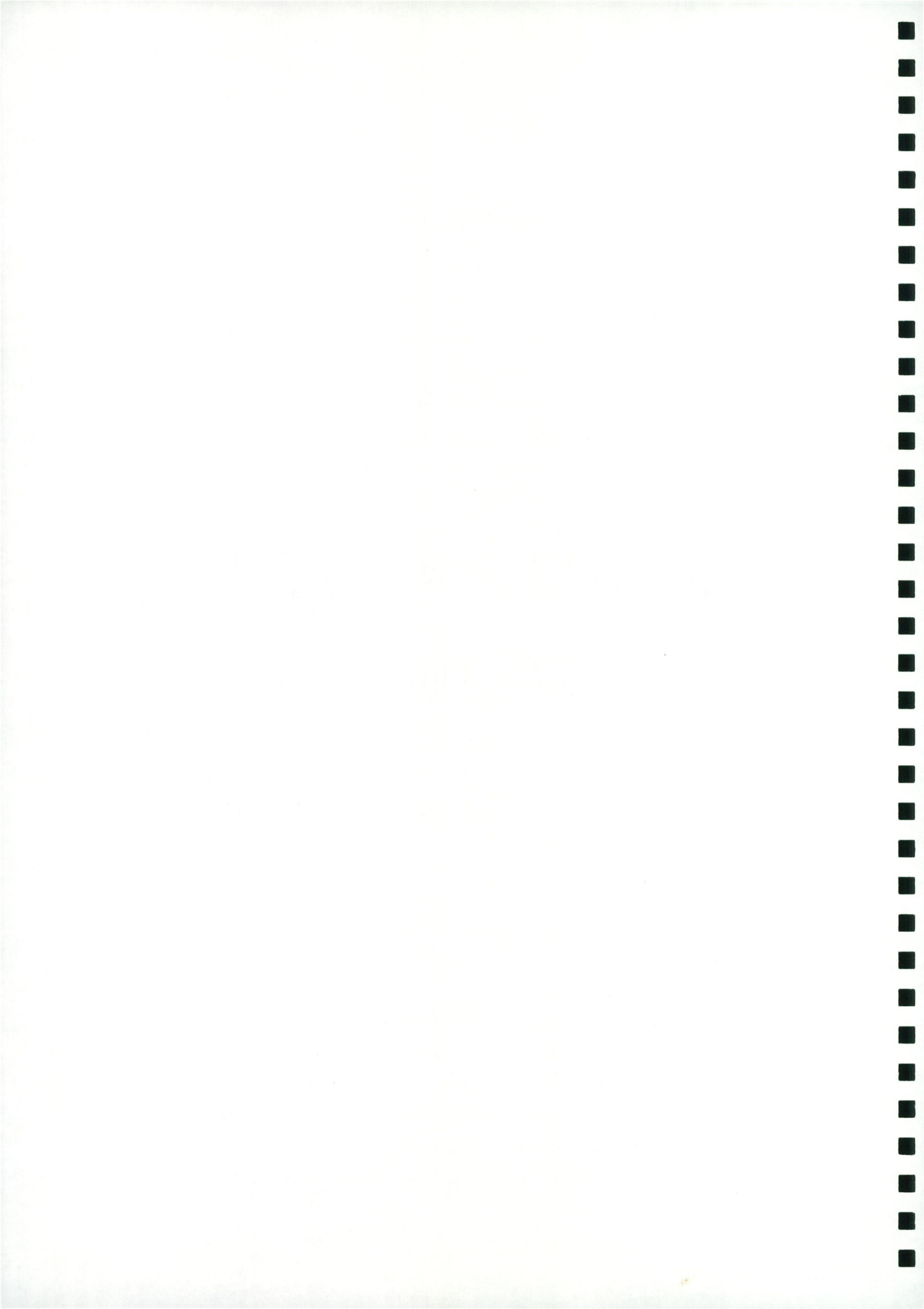


CHAPTER 1

Introduction to Marina Abramovic's work.

This chapter provides an introductory description of the work of Marina Abramovic. This will be done by providing a background to her work, both in art historical and biographical terms and then by proceeding to a description of specific examples.

Marina Abramovic is primarily known as a performance artist. She gained recognition and a high profile for her work in the 1970s. Abramovic was born in 1946 in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. Her father came from a Montenegrin family, which practiced the Christian Orthodox faith before World War II. He was a partisan army member, a communist party member and a war hero in the Yugoslavian resistance against the German occupation. He was a highly placed colleague of Tito's (Mc Evilly, 1989, p.76). Abramovic's mother was also a partisan and became director of *The Museum of Art and the Revolution* in the capital in the early 1950s. Abramovic's parents "decided to help build the new Yugoslavia" (Abramovic, 1995, p.55). Abramovic's maternal grandfather and his two brothers were allegedly poisoned in 1938 by order of Prince Paul, the regent of King Peter of Yugoslavia because they had refused to unify the Catholic and Serbian Orthodox Churches. So, it is clear that before and during Abramovic's formative years, she was surrounded by an environment politically highly charged. Abramovic was, to some degree, isolated in her early years as a result of her mother being fanatically obsessed with cleanliness in the home. Abramovic was not encouraged to mix with other children as a child. Her mother was obsessed with the notion of germs and the risk of infection. (Abramovic, 1995, p .55) Abramovic's life swung between the extremes of her parent's secular partisanship and the Serbian Orthodox rituals of her grandmother, with whom she lived during her earlier years; ideological differences within the family often gave rise to family disputes. This generated an emotionally charged and often unstable environment, for the developing Abramovic.¹ This immediate domestic background and the larger context of post World War II Yugoslavia has contributed to the range of concerns visible in her work. These concerns were rooted in the area of identity, both culturally and psychologically. In her early teens she started to draw and paint and later studied at the Belgrade Academy of Fine Arts. For a short while in 1968,



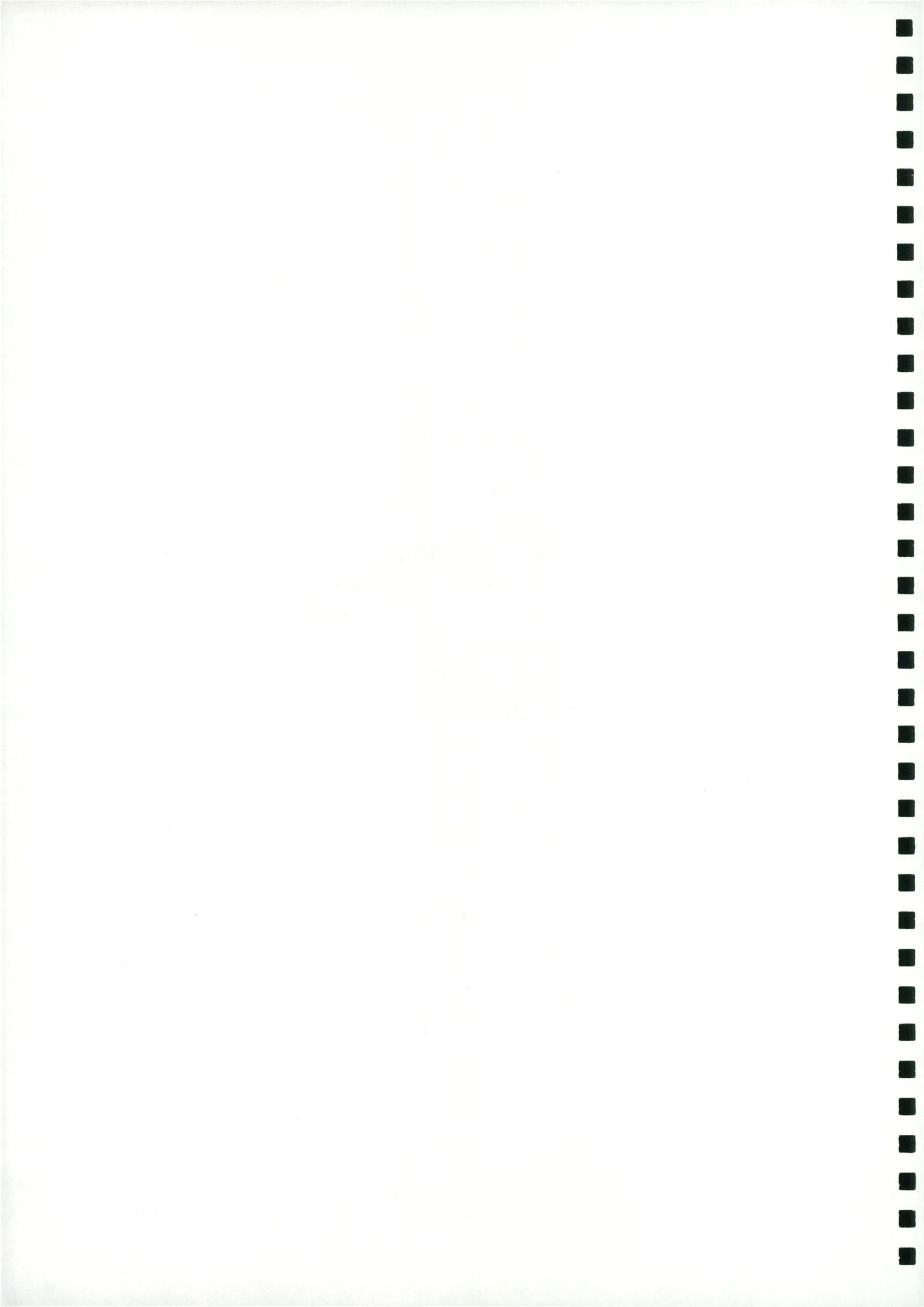
Abramovic became a significant figure in the student opposition, heading the Party cadre as part of the international student movement.

The 1970s was a very productive time for Abramovic and her work during this period was varied in terms of media and content. The work had an emphasis on the body. A great deal of Abramovic's work at this time was presented to the public of Yugoslavia and across Europe. In 1970 she produced paintings and drawings and exhibited in both solo and group shows. In 1971 she began to explore sound installation and exhibited "*Sound Environments*" in the Student Cultural Centre Gallery in Belgrade.

In 1972 Abramovic started to use her body as material in her performances. Abramovic claims to push her mind and body beyond limits of extreme. Performances done during 1974/1975 were titled simply *Rhythm* and numbered in sequence. According to Roselee Goldberg these performances were exercises in passive aggression (Goldberg, 1995, p.11) *Rhythm 10*, in the *Rhythm Series* was performed in the Villa Borghese in Rome in 1973. In this performance, Abramovic spread the fingers of her left hand on a board (Plate 1). With her right hand she repeatedly stabbed a knife into the spaces between her fingers at speed. Each time she cut herself, she changed knives and started again. The performance was recorded, after a period of time the tape was rewound and replayed, at which point she tried to repeat the whole performance including the exact rhythm and times when she had cut herself. Mc Evilly suggests this work was a play on the strength of will (Mc Evilly, 1995, p.45).

In *Rhythm 2* (1972) in Zagreb, Abramovic took psychoactive medications in front of an audience in the Gallery of Contemporary Art (Plate 2). This action put her body into an unpredictable state by using her body in an experimental way (Pejic, 1993, p.56). This moved the performative work to another stage, wherein Abramovic subjected her mind and body to drug induced experience.

In *The Lips of Thomas*, a two hour performance, Abramovic sat naked at a table. She ate a kilo of honey and drank a litre of red wine (Plate 3). She cut a star on her stomach with a razor blade, and she beat herself and lay on blocks of ice until such time as the audience felt compelled to remove her from them.



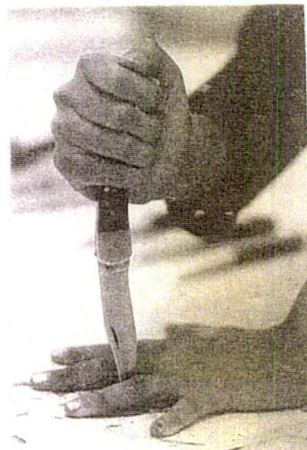


Plate 1, "Rhythm 10".

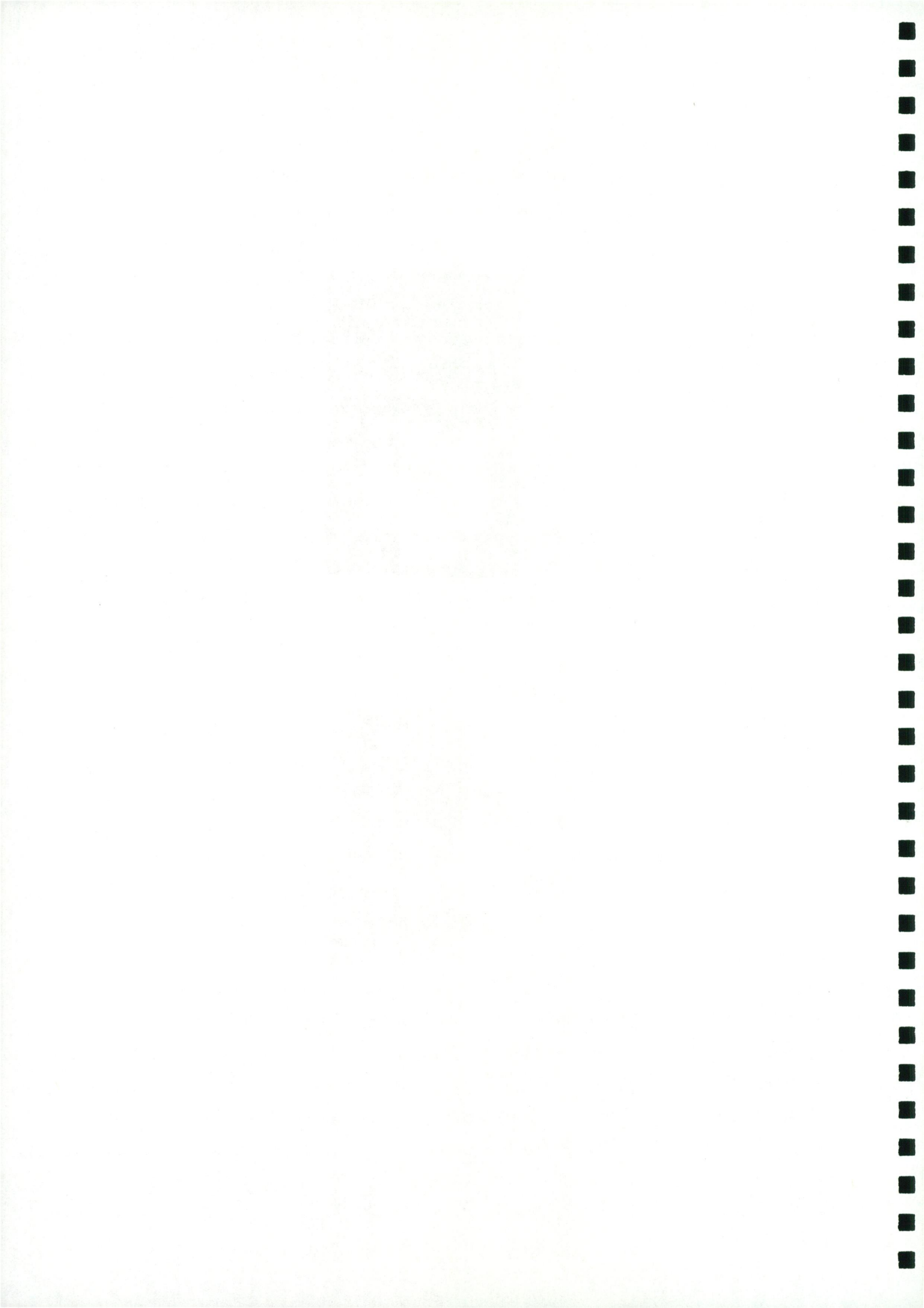




Plate 2, "Rhythm 2."

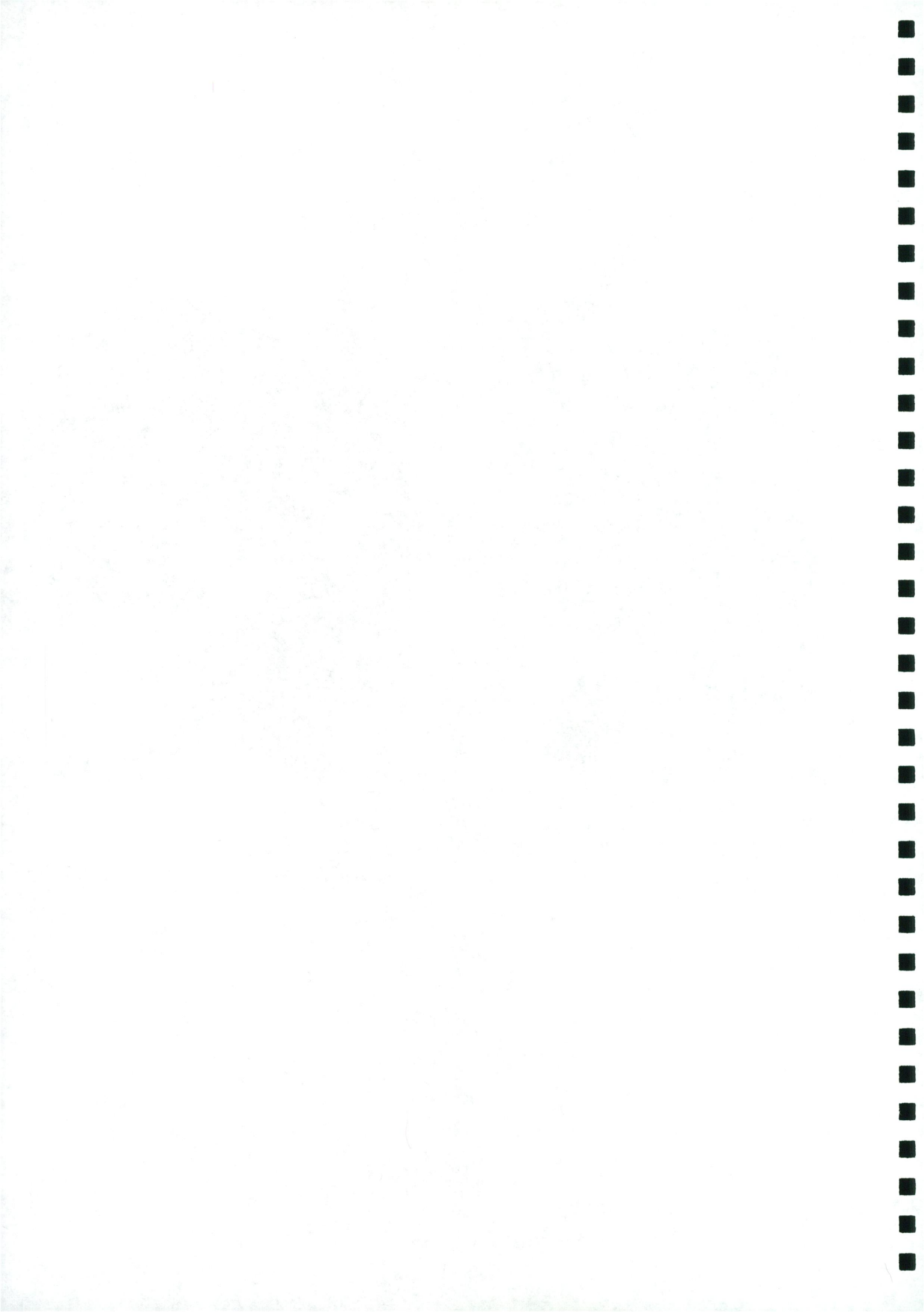
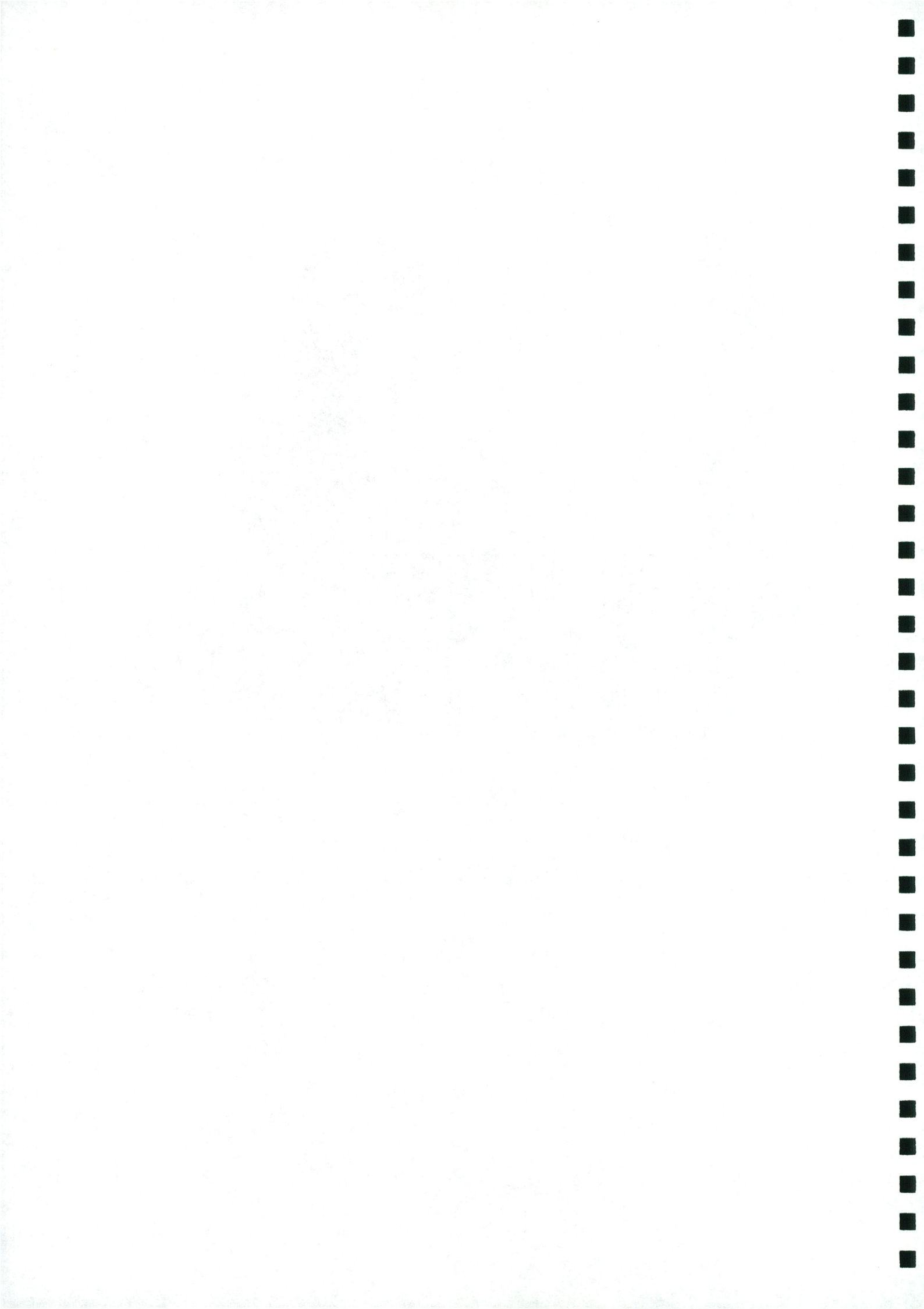




Plate 3, *"The Lips of Thomas"*



The performances performed in 1975 were *Freeing the Voice*, *Freeing the Body*, and *Freeing the Memory*. In *Freeing the Voice* Abramovic lay on her back screaming for eight hours until she lost her voice (Plate 4). In *Freeing the Body* Abramovic wrapped her head in a black scarf, her body naked moving to the beat of a black African drummer, after eight hours finally collapsed (Plate 5). In *Freeing the Memory* Abramovic sat on a chair with her head tilted backwards continuously speaking whatever came into her head, to the point where she could no longer bring a word to mind (Plate 6). This process took one and a half hours.

From 1976 -1988 Abramovic worked collaboratively with the West German photographer and performance artist Uwe Lapsiepen, known as Ulay. These works were called *Relation Works*, one of which was *Relation in Time* (1977), where both artists sat back to back for seventeen hours they were connected to each other by their intertwined long hair (Plate 7 Top image after one hour bottom image after seventeen hours.) This series puts emphasis on discipline and ordeal and other "mystical sensitivities" (Abramovic, 1995,p.46)

From these works, it is clear that Marina Abramovic's work of the 1970s, led her through a diversity of media and expression, from paintings to solo performance. In this period she also worked collaboratively with her partner Ulay. All of the work was body orientated, progressively worked through the senses and different levels of consciousness and subconsciousness.

Performance art in the 1970's

The performance medium provided artists during the 1970's with an alternative platform from which to articulate issues of feminism and/ or other radical content (Taylor,1995,p.26). At this time the body replaced the other commonly used materials and, in doing so, took a position of being an intangible unsaleable commodity. Indeed, many avant garde and progressive artists at this time went as far as positioning themselves against the market. This development of practice derived at some "distance from Dada, alternative theatre and the happenings movement", presented itself as an oppositional critical and avant garde practice (Taylor, 1995, p.26). According to Lucy Lippard, European body and performance art was different from what was being performed in North America. The work done in Europe was more challenging in terms of

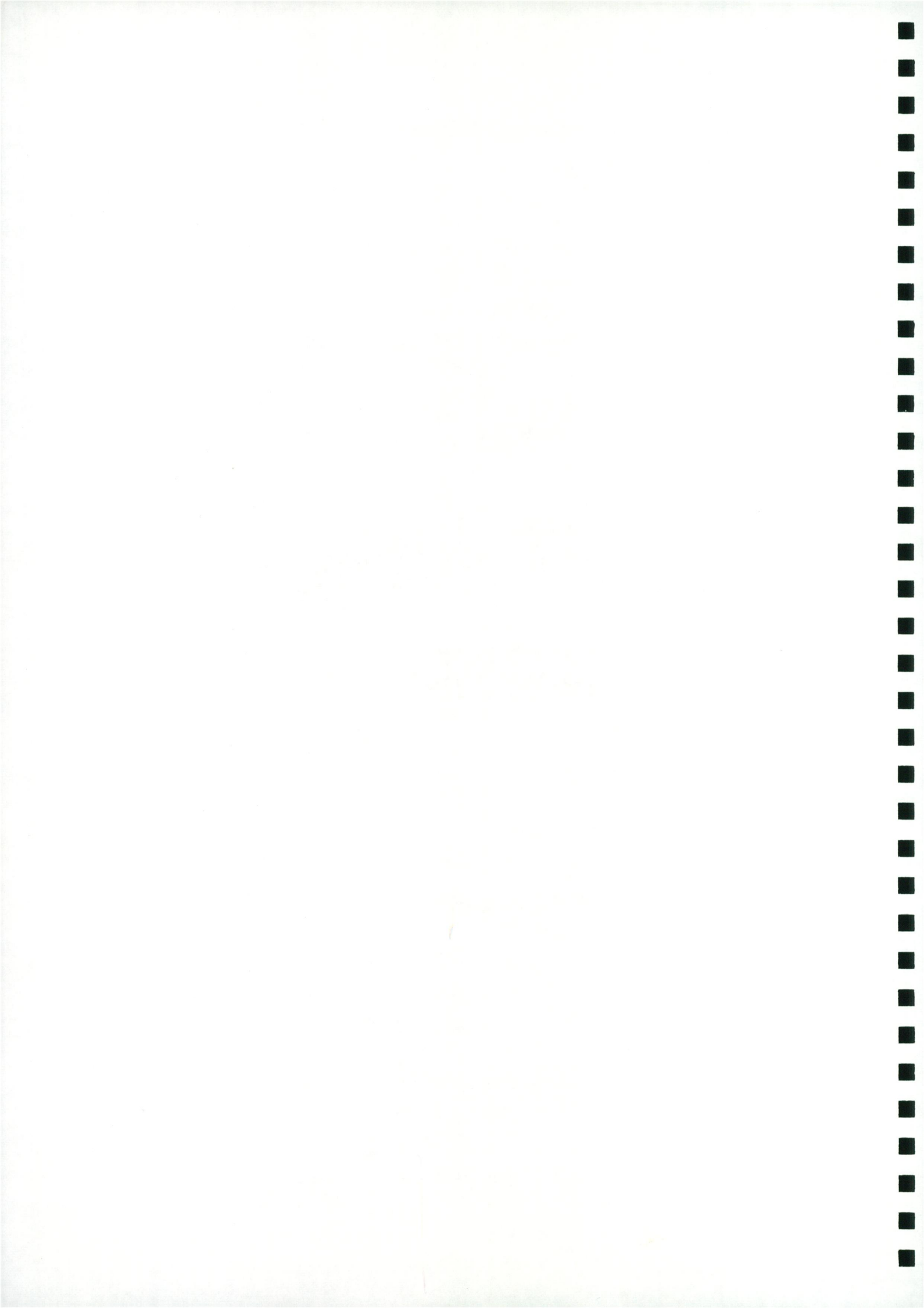




Plate 4, *"Freeing the Voice"*.

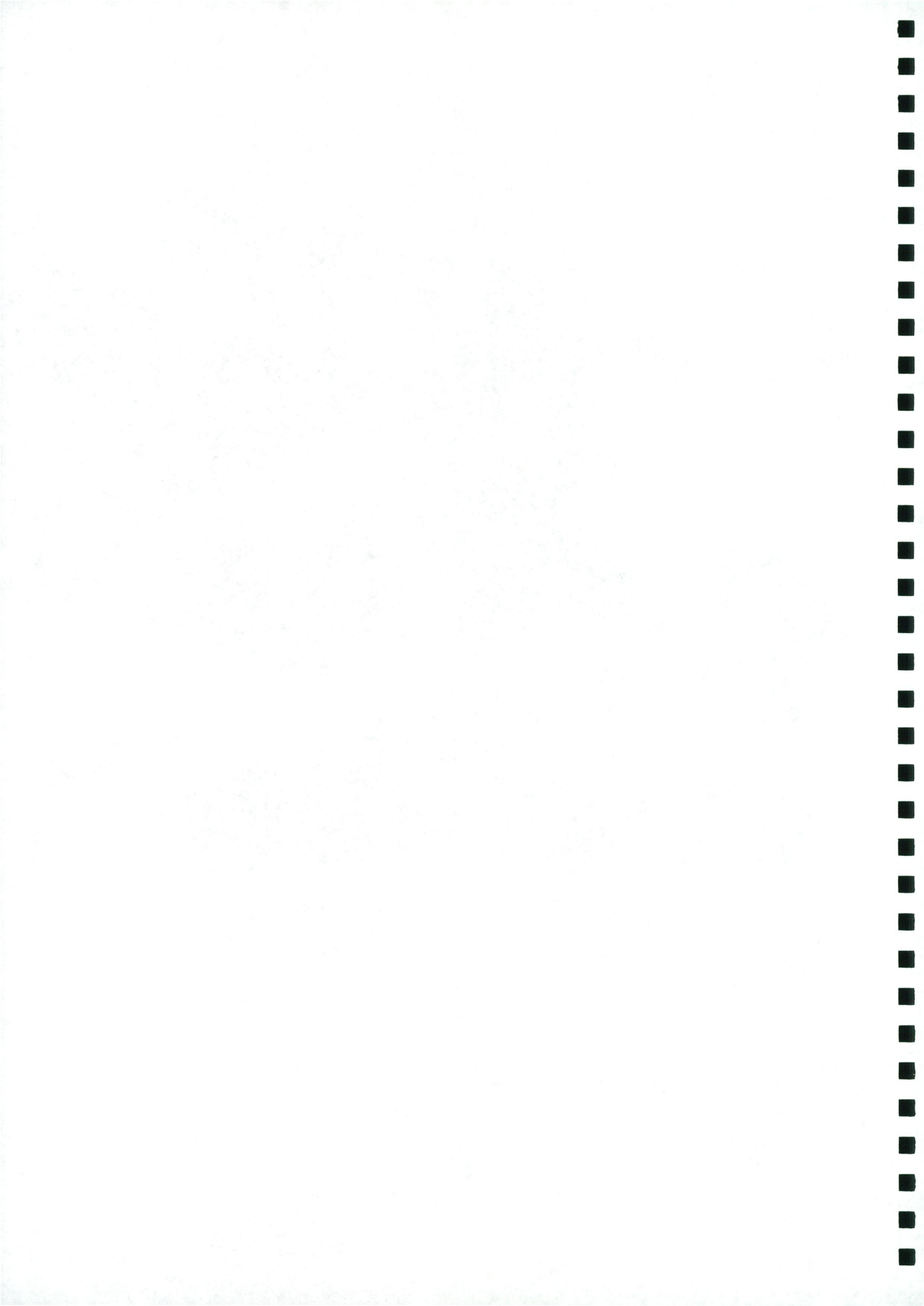




Plate 5, "*Freeing the Body.*"

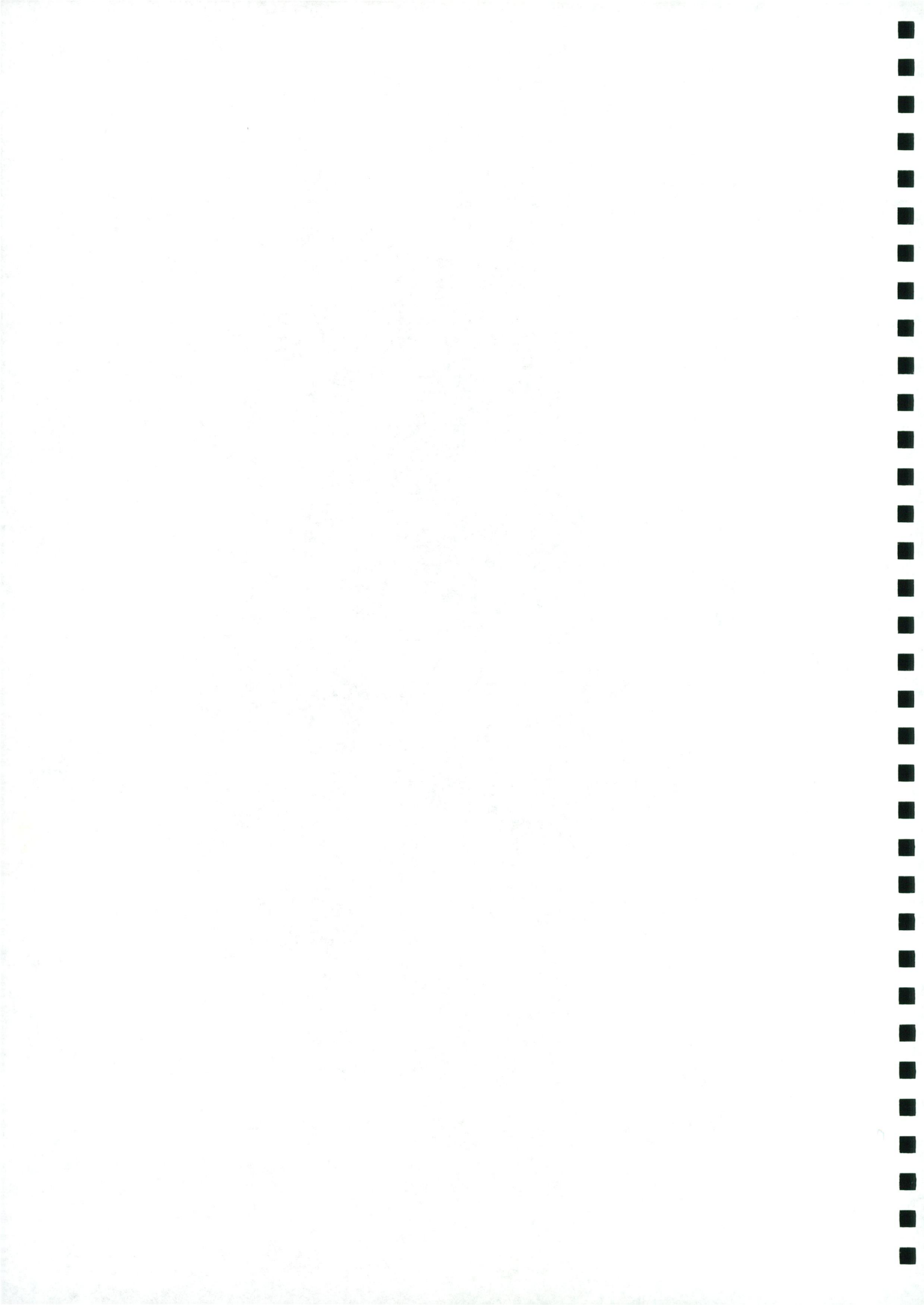
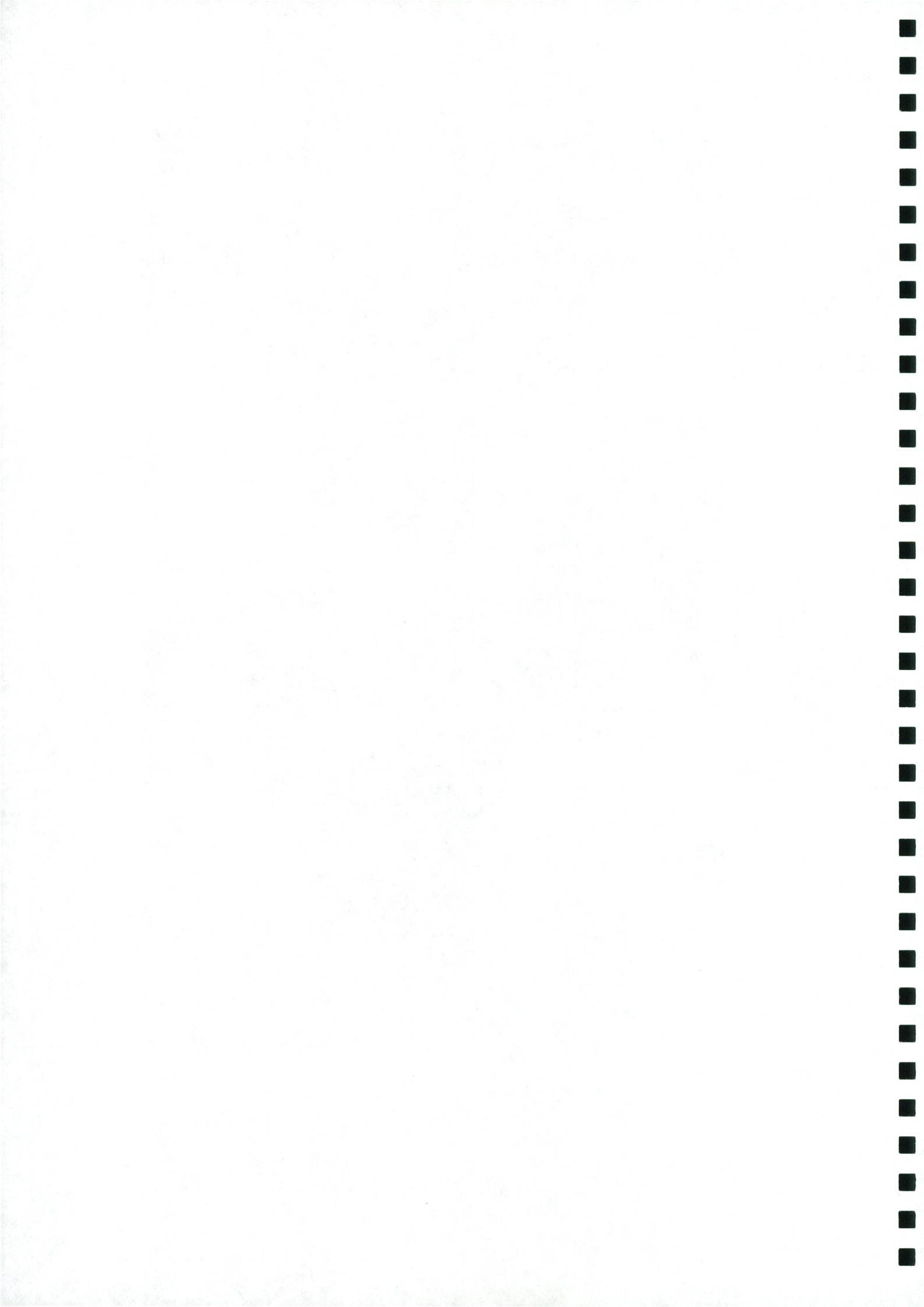




Plate 6, *"Freeing the Memory"*.



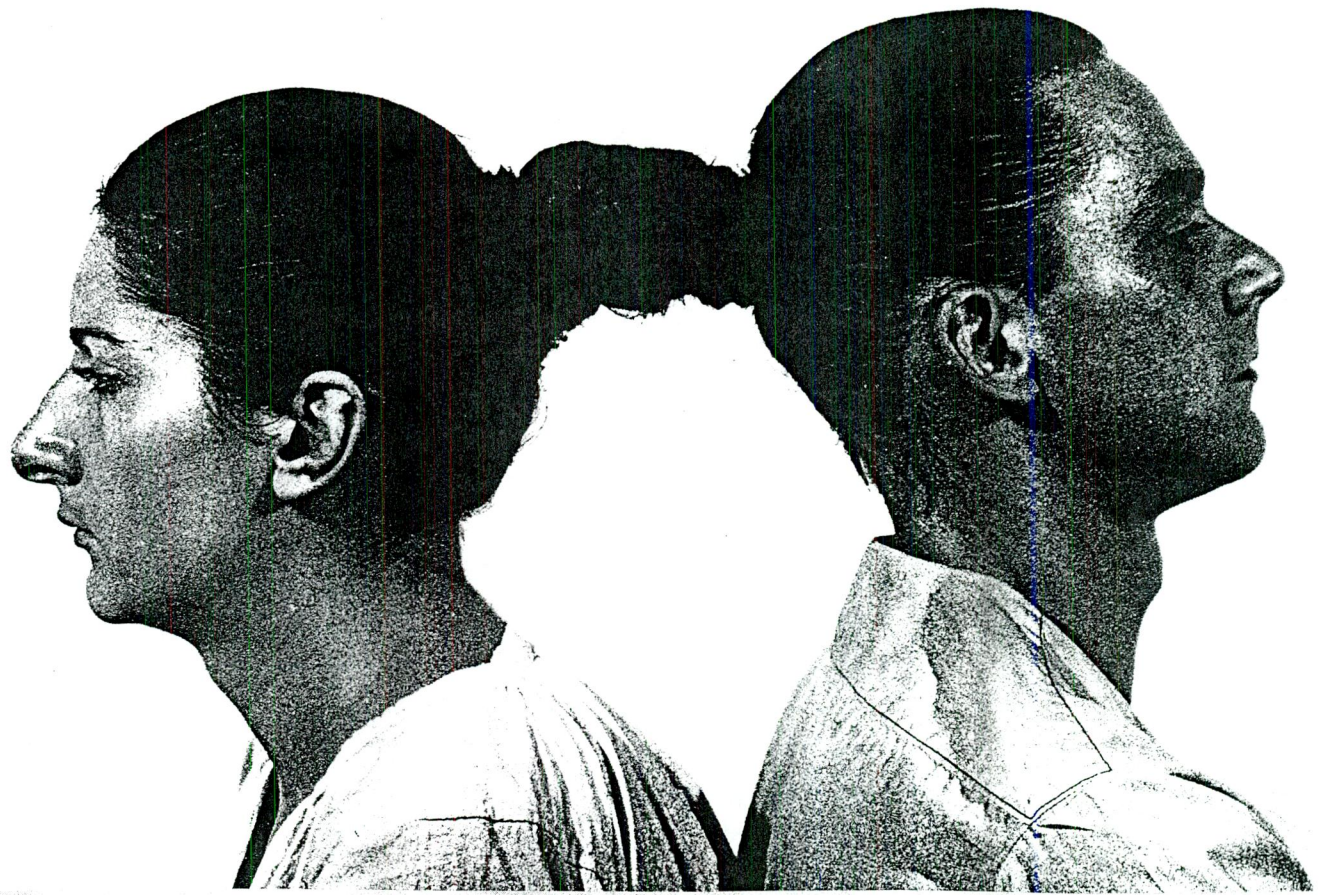
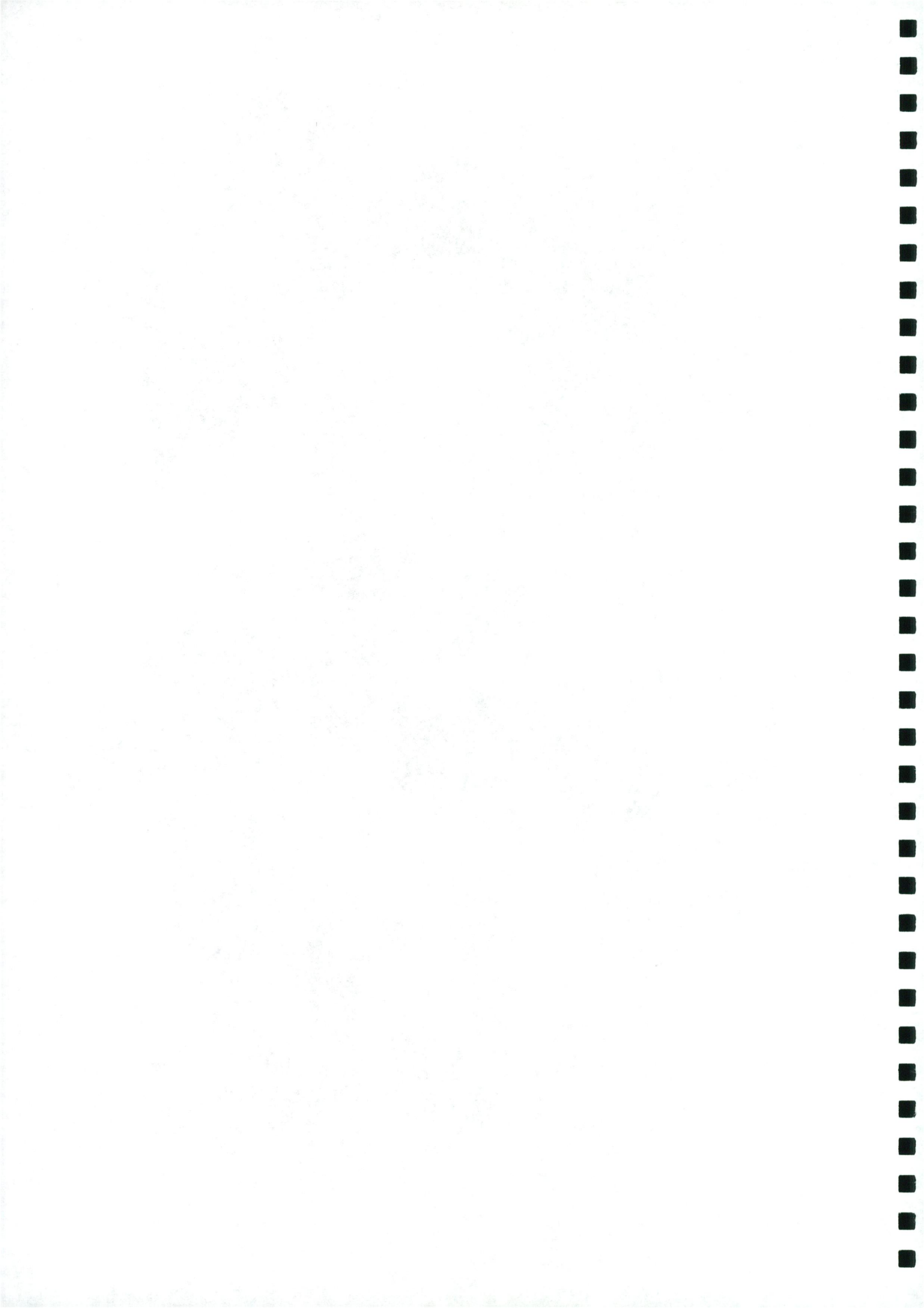
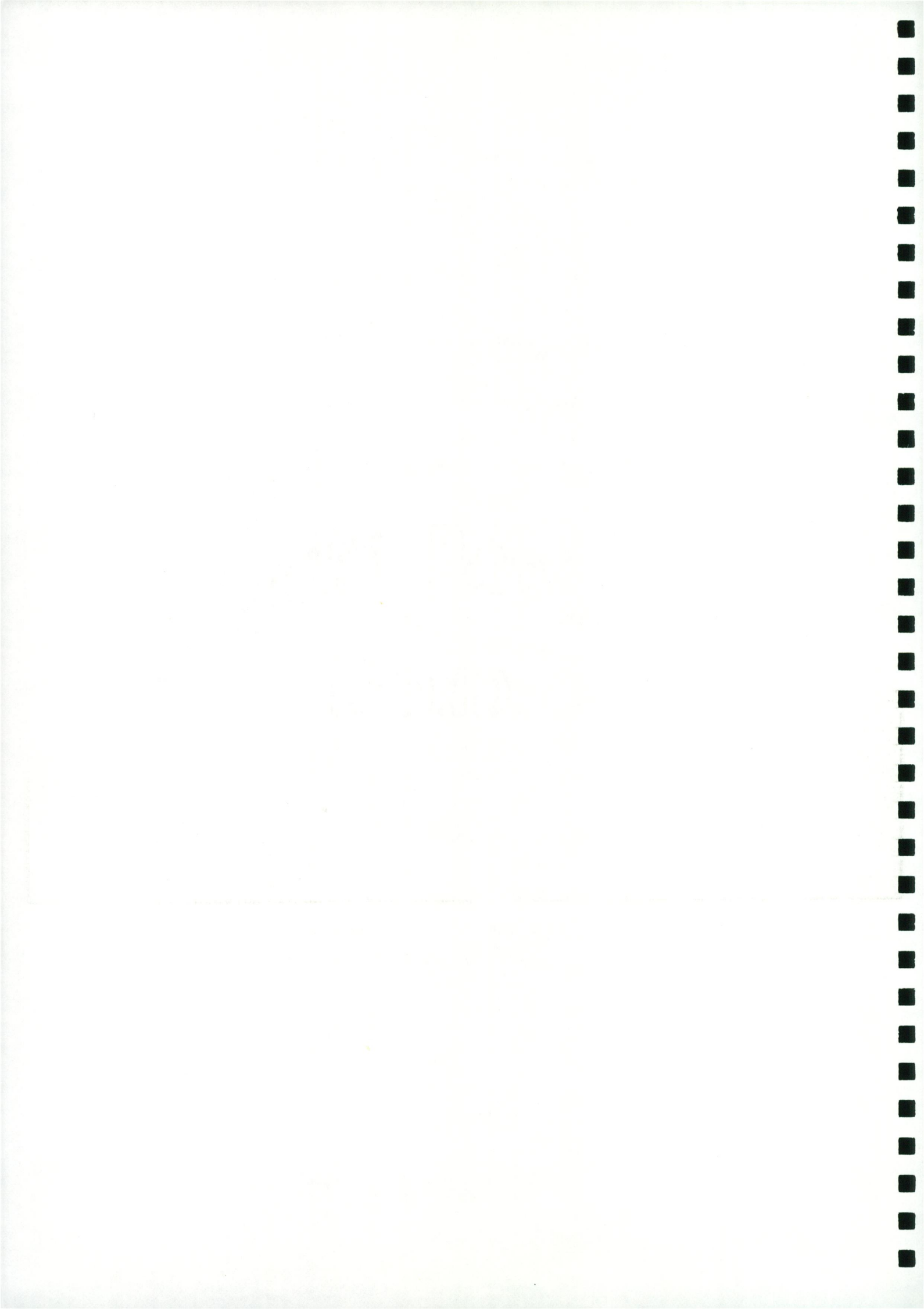


Plate 7, "Relation in Time."



it's physicality and in its the work tackling of issues of pain, trauma and rape. The concerns of artists in Europe "seemed to contain pointers to the different social and philosophical traditions and their contemporary crisis, on the two continents". (Taylor, 1995 , P.20) European performance artists at this time challenged the dominant institutions of cultural power and their systems. These latter institutions controlled and created situations whereby particular codes and styles of art practice predicted to the artists only an acceptable and saleable art forms, under thee specific terms and conditions of those institution. This in turn dictated marketability to the art market.

Although Abramovic is renowned for her performance work she has also worked in a variety of media, from painting through to a broad spectrum of sculpture media, sound, video and photography. Her first solo show was in painting (1965), entitled *Truck Accidents, Centre of Workers Union*, Belgrade, Yugoslavia. Abramovic's sculpture work ranges from a use of resin, for a work entitled *The Lovers* , exhibited at The Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (1989) (Plate 8). Abramovic has used copper, hair and crystal in an installation at Jean Bernier Gallery, Athens, entitled *God Punishing* (Plate 9). Video is another medium which she has incorporated in her work *Becoming Visible* an installation exhibited at Mediale, Deichtorhallen, Hamburg in 1993. Abramovic also exhibited in the area of photography taking part in a group show in 1983 entitled *60' 80 Attitudes/ Concepts / Images* and exhibiting polaroids at The Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands. Abramovic has also incorporated the use of live animals in her performance works such as horses and snakes. *Kaiserschnitt* (1978) from *The Relation Work Series* part of an International Performance Symposium in the Wiener Reitinstitut, Vienna (Plate 10) saw Abramovic and Ulay attached themselves to a horse with the use of ropes. These few examples illustrate the range of areas and media to which Abramovic's work practice has extended during her career to date.



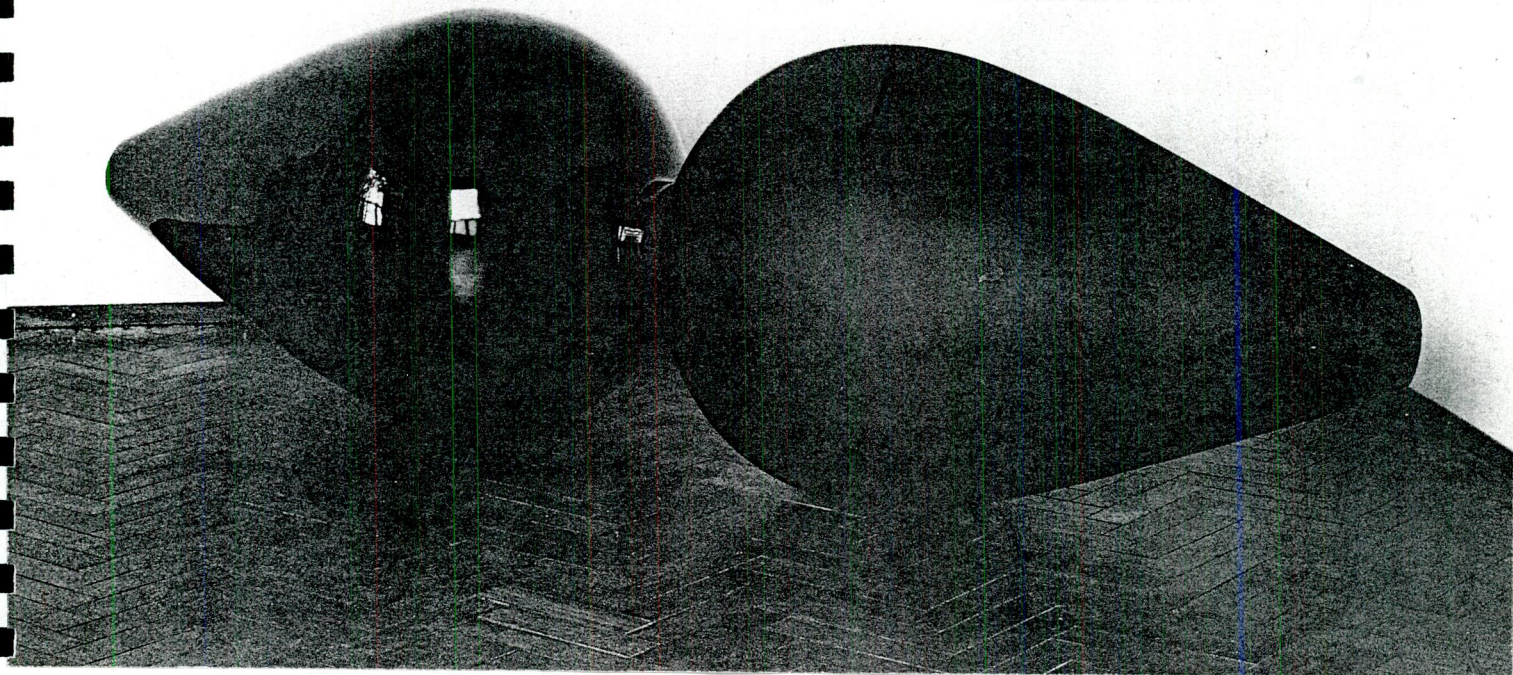
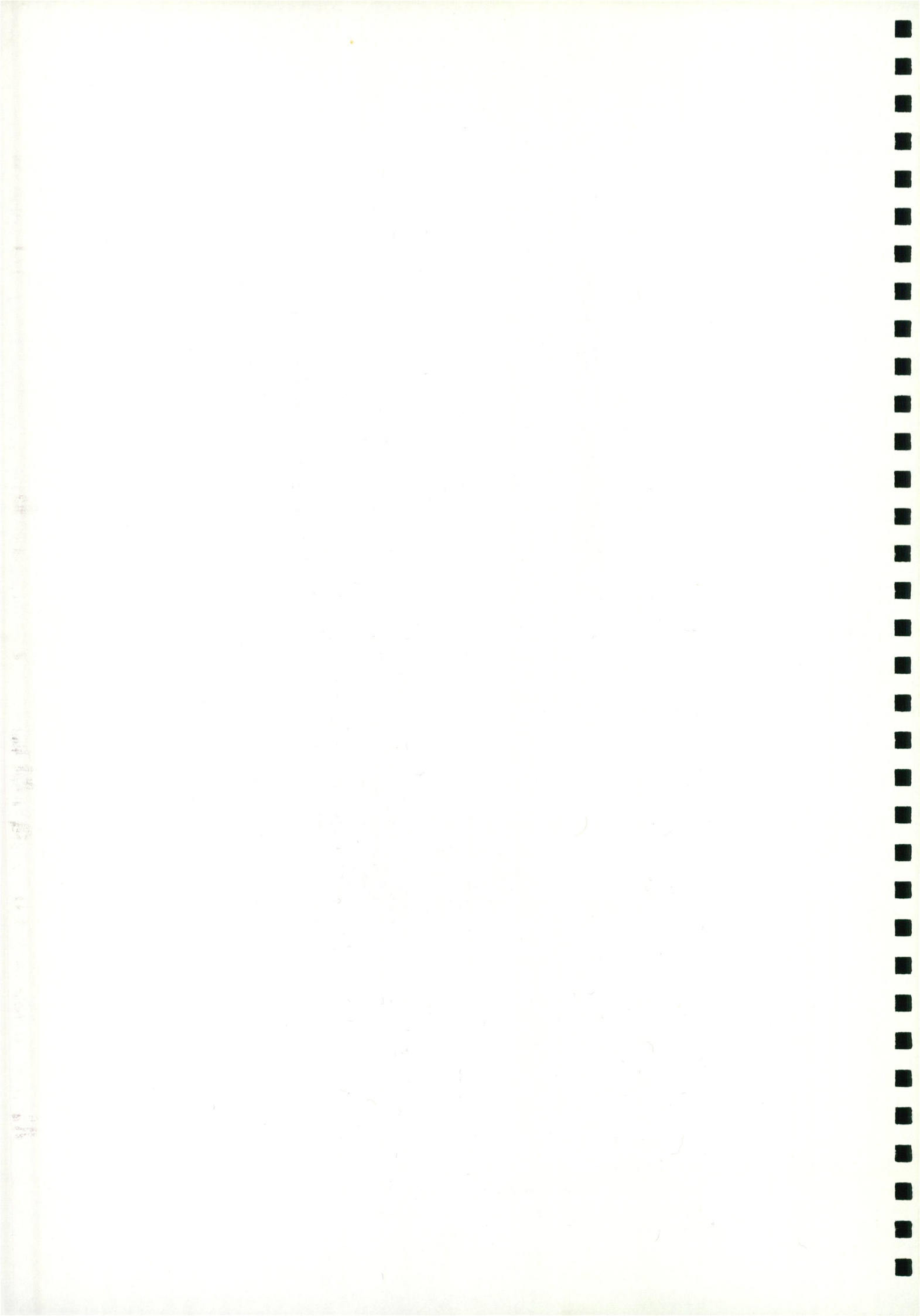


Plate 8, "The Lovers."





Plate 9, "God Punishing."



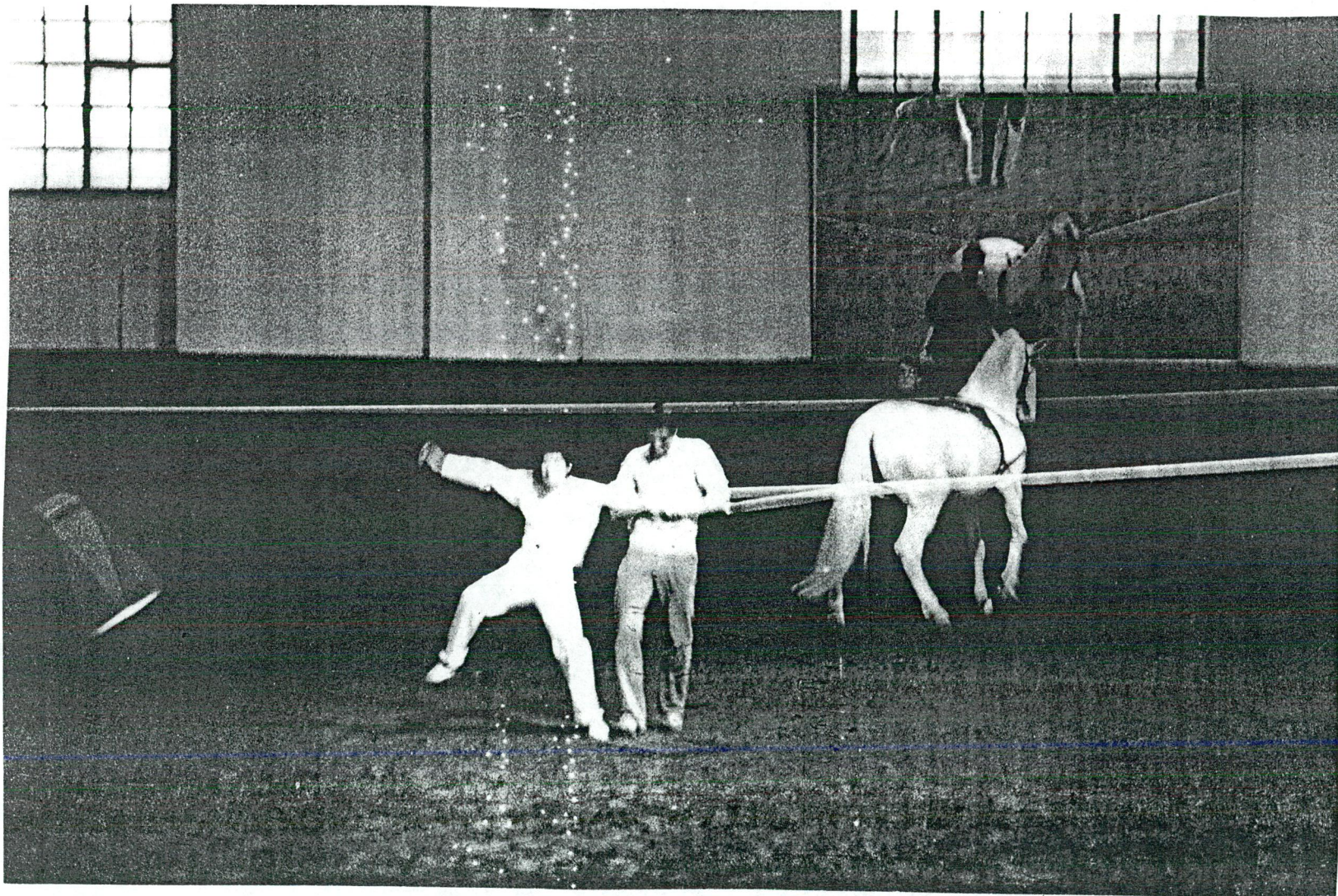
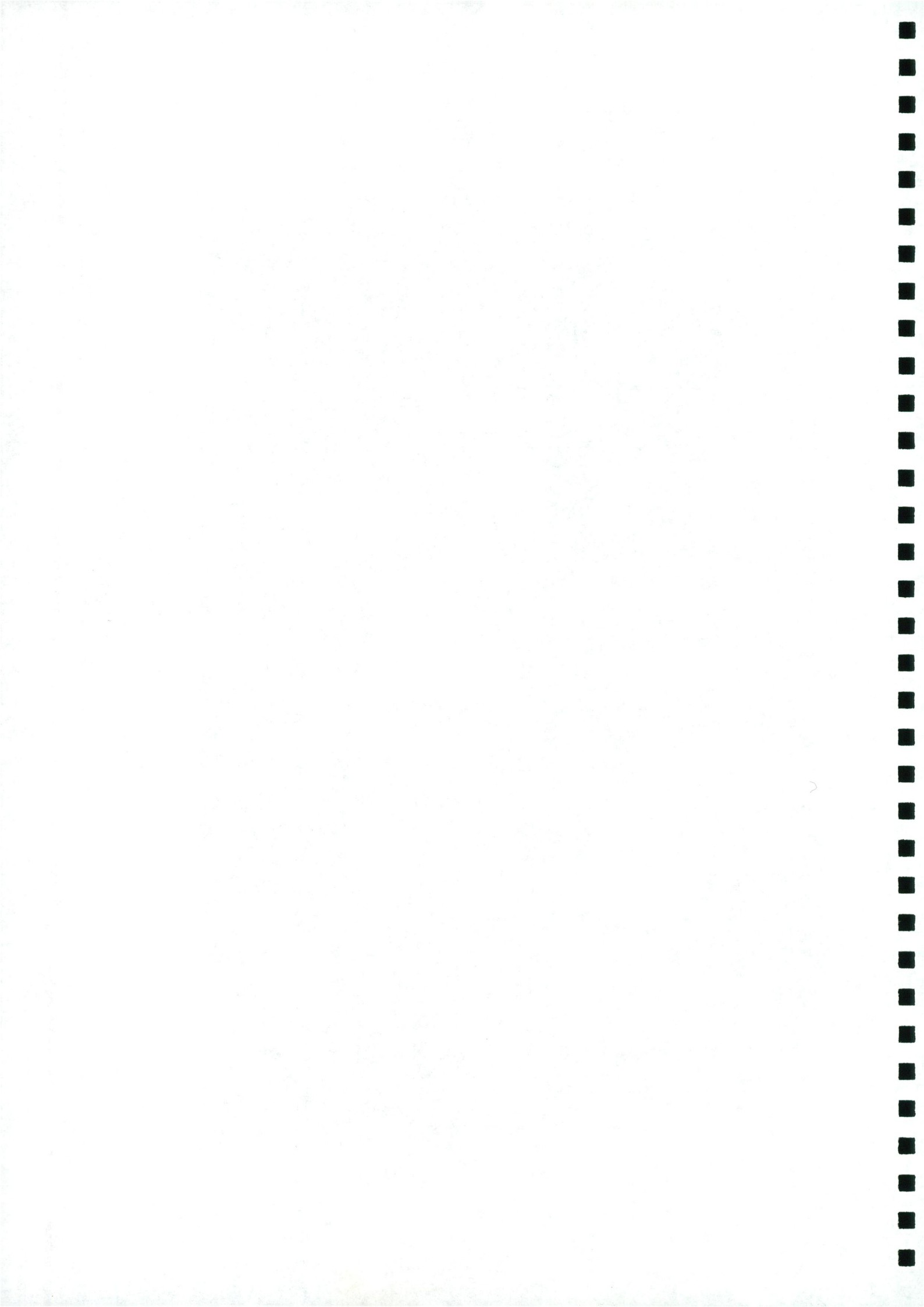


Plate 10, "Kaiserschnitt", from *The Relation Work*



The following discussion will describe three specific examples of Abramovic's work. These have been selected for reasons of diversity in terms of content, representation and media. These pieces are *Rhythm O*, Naples, (1974), *The Lovers*, *The Great Wall Project* (1986), and elements from *Cleaning the House, Exhibition*, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, Ireland. (1995\96).

"Catharsis is the outcome of such highly charged events, and it carries with it the notion that staged pain or crisis is a learning tool of the examined life". (Goldberg R,1995, p.16).

Rhythm O

Rhythm O, performed in 1974, was an intense and dangerous act, performed before a randomly selected audience in Naples, some of whom were familiar with performance art. The gallery director announced that the Artist would remain completely passive for six hours, from 8pm to 2pm, during which time visitors could do whatever they wanted with or to her. In a written instruction to the audience placed in the gallery during the performance, she stated "I am the object" (Pejic,1993, p68). By confronting her audience as a woman who performs "objectness", Abramovic presented her audience with two possibilities, one being to observe an artistic object, or to become the work, based on their action. In taking an active part the audience was confronted with its own behaviour. In this instance Abramovic, manipulates the role of the audience and they become very much part of the performance. According to Chrissie Iles, Abramovic presents herself and her body as "*passive object*" and becomes a kind of fetish object, upon which the audience allows itself to express and project fear, desire and hatred. Abramovic became a representative for the "classic triad of mother, madonna and whore". (Abramovic,1995, p.40). There were seventy two objects laid on the table, ranging from a gun, an axe, a rose with thorns, a lamb's bone, grapes, a saw, a newspaper, a fork, a bottle of perfume, chains, a feather, nail scissors, a book, a pin, and a bell (Abramovic,1995, p.21). Abramovic stood passively while viewers turned her, moved her, lifted her, someone put a thorny rose stem in her hand (Plate 11, 12). After three hours had elapsed the viewers had cut Abramovic's clothes from her body and had cut her flesh with razor blades. A man opened Abramovic's shirt and exposed her breasts. He then held her face in his hands and kissed face (Plate 13, 14). "*Rhythm O* was a kind of self- sacrifice in which the artist was both sacrificer

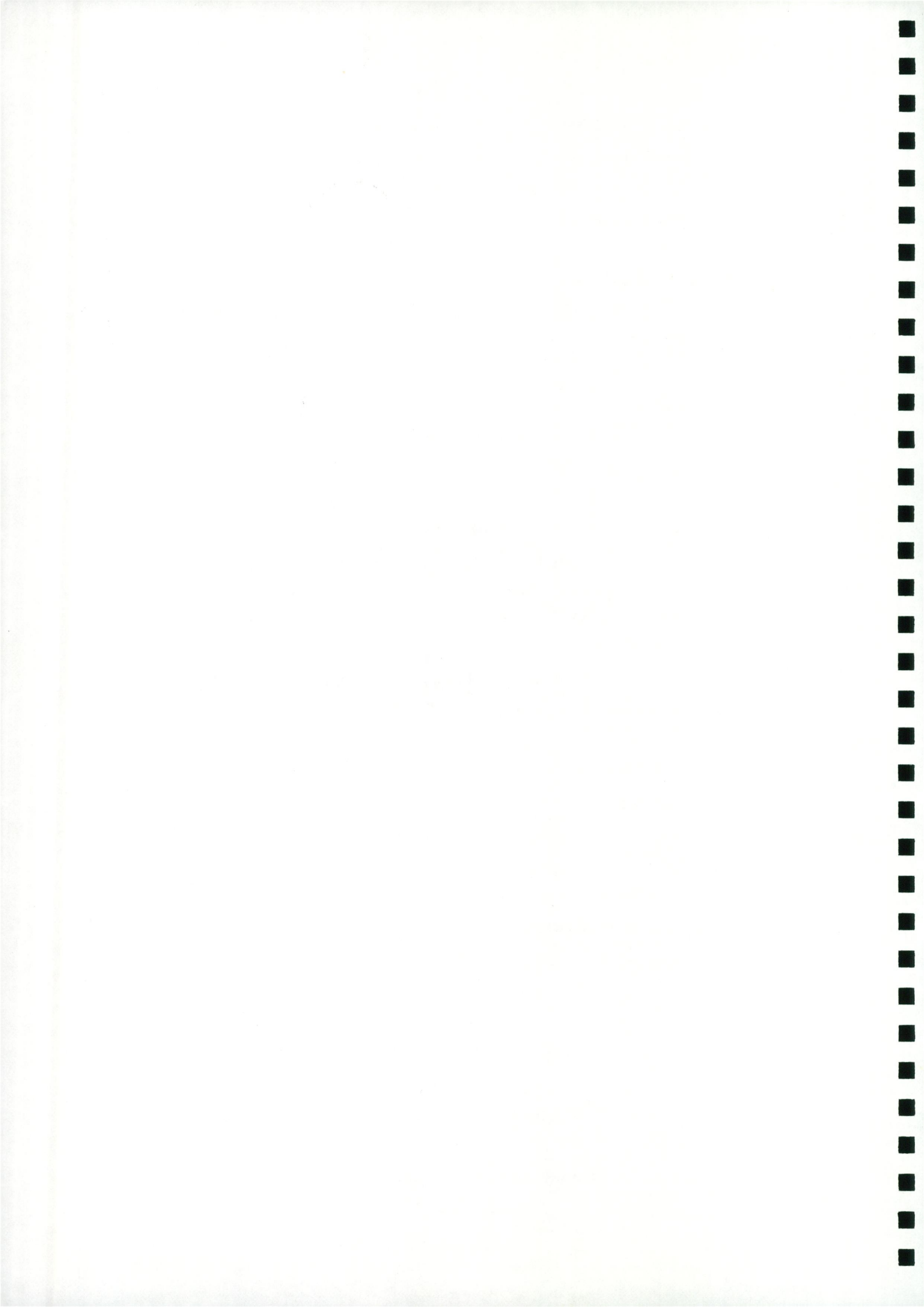




Plate 11, 12, "Rhythm O".

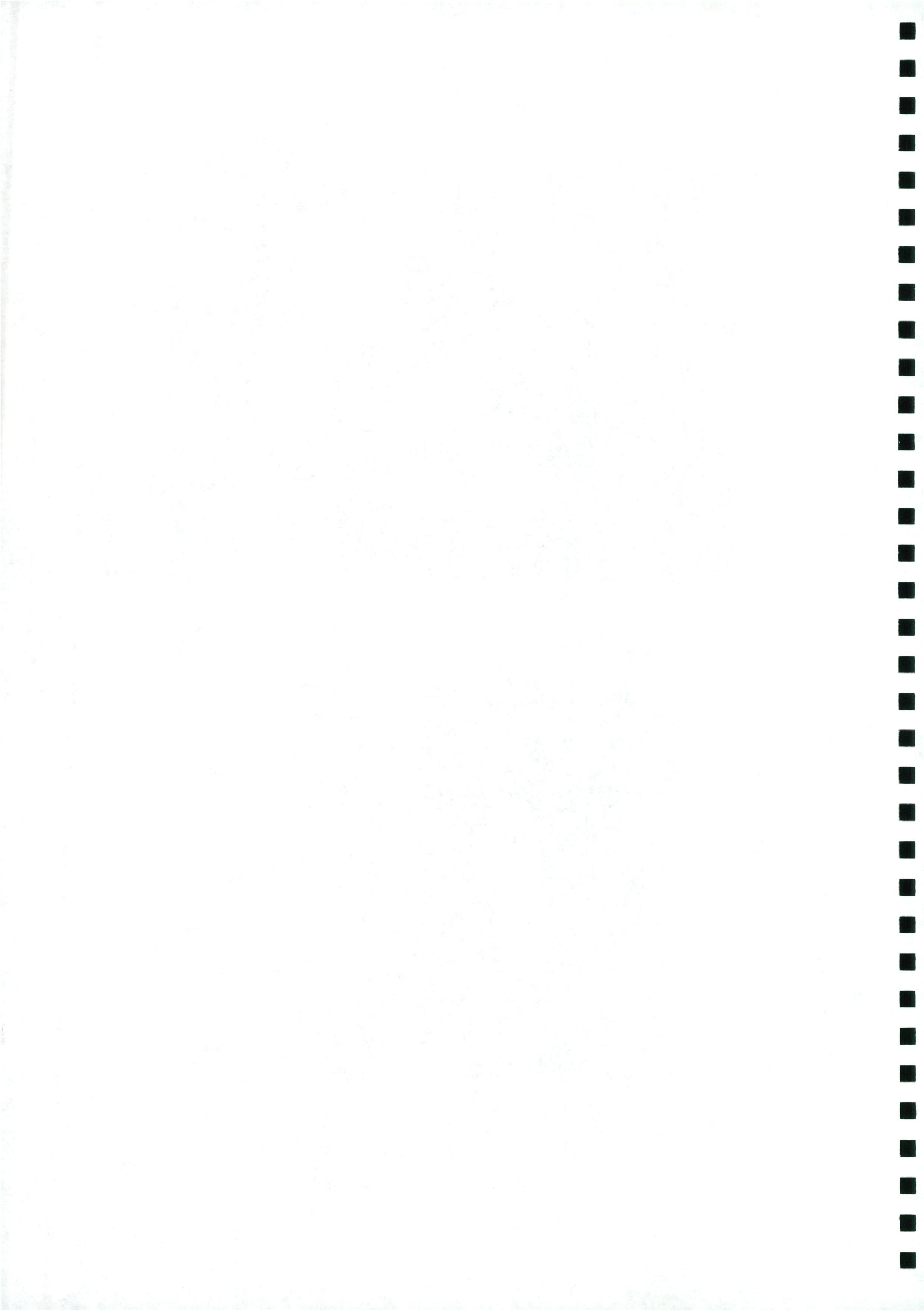
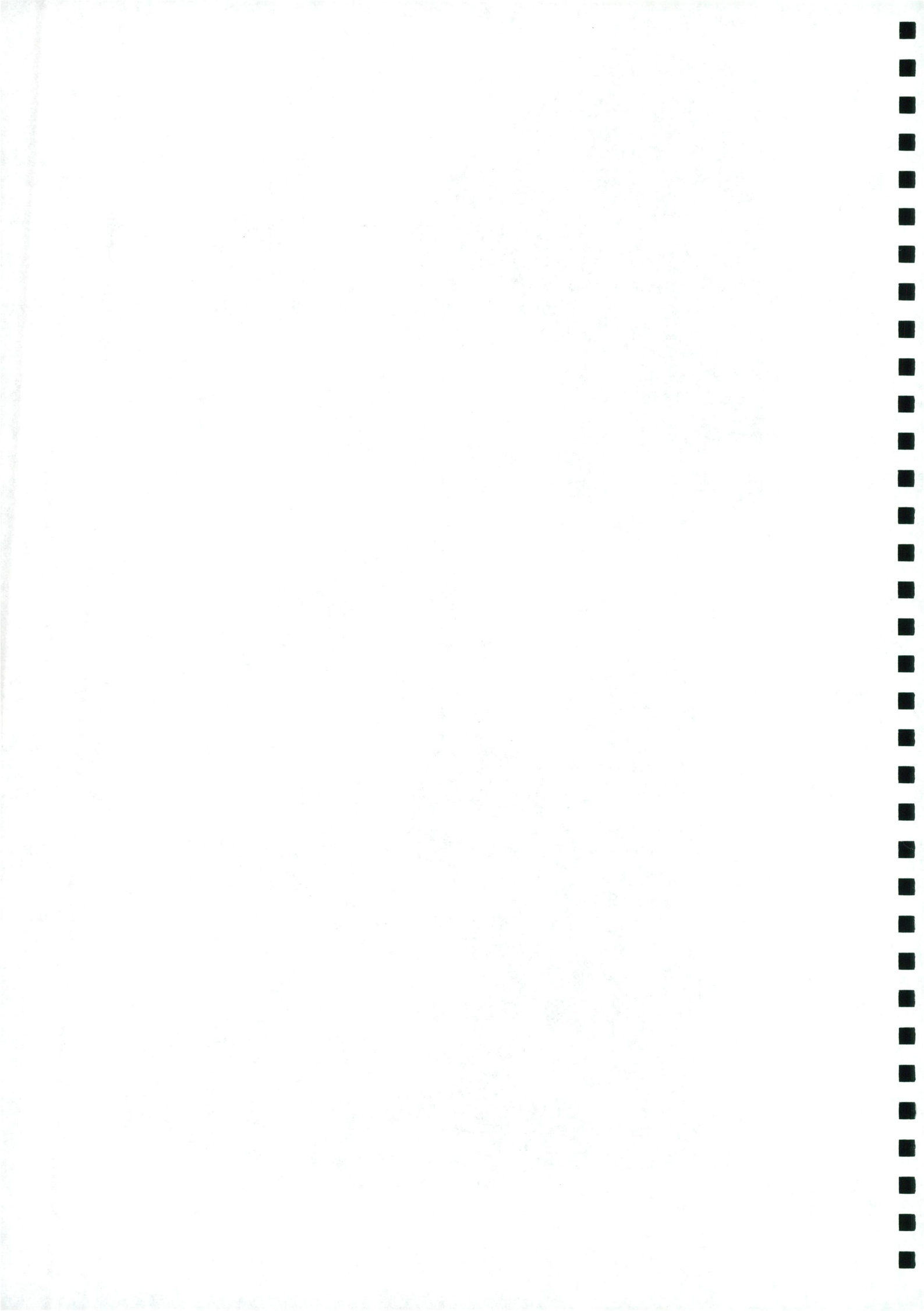




Plate 13, 14 "Rhythm 0."



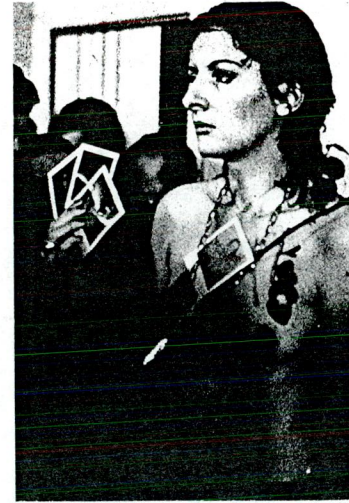
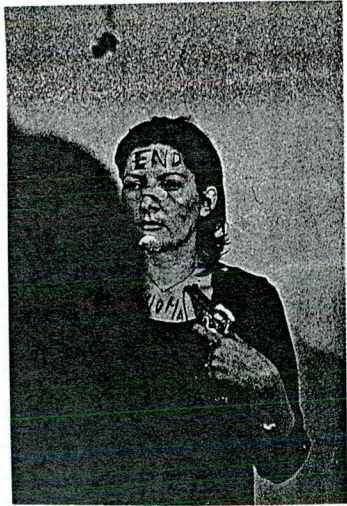
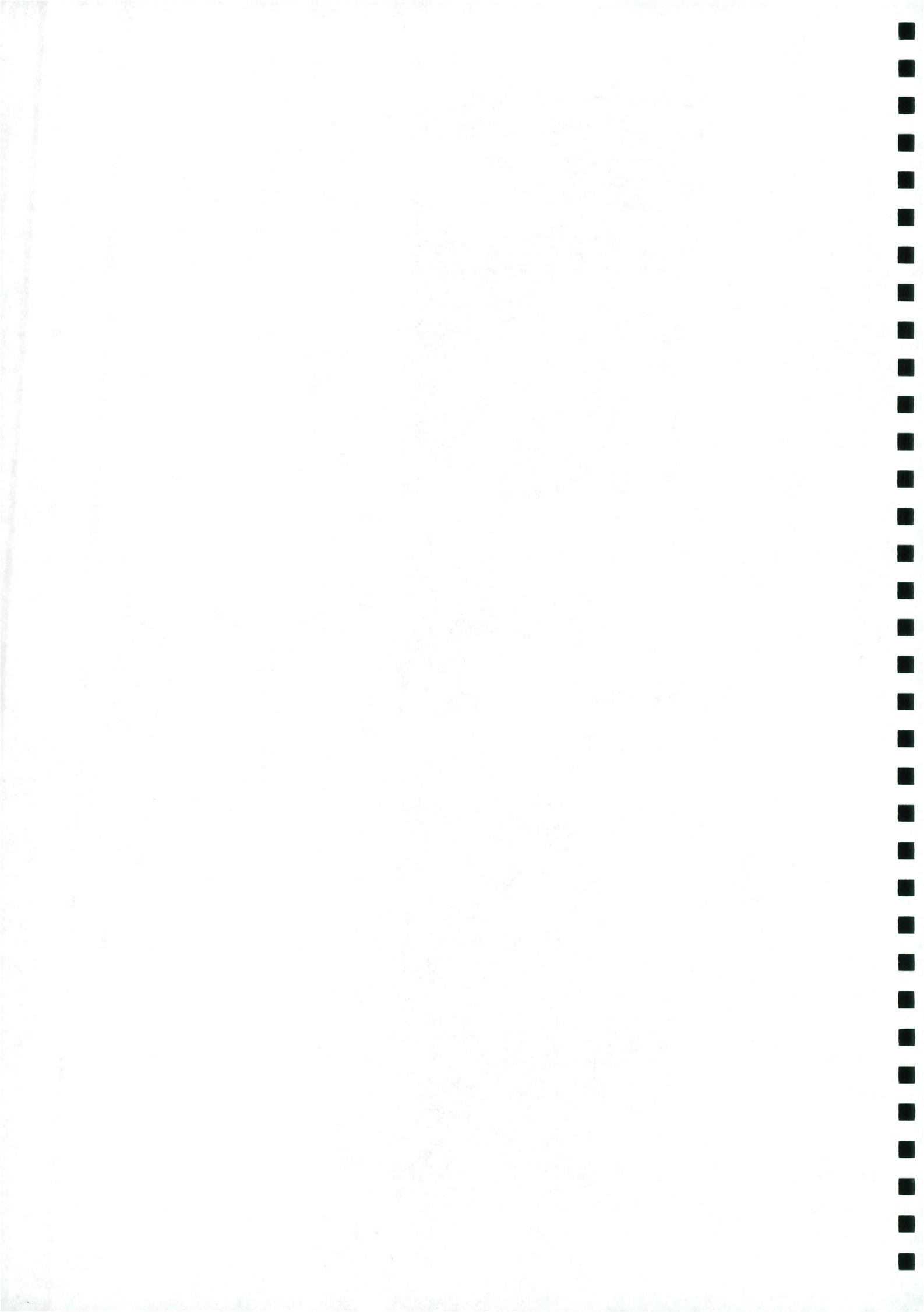


PLate 15, "Rhythm 0."



and the sacrificed, she offers herself to the world with a tough intensity that screens a tender -minded motivation underneath"(Mc Evilly,1995, p.46).

One viewer loaded the gun and put it in Abramovic's hand. The viewer then encouraged Abramovic to squeeze the trigger (Plate 15). Another viewer stepped in, removed the gun and threw it across the floor. At this point the performance came to an end. According to Bojana Pejic, Abramovic is questioning "her relationship with her own femininity and her sexuality" (Pejic,1993, p.19).

This performance intermingles a series of oppositions, such as male and female, activity and passivity, cruelty and kindness. As Abramovic wept, a woman from the audience wiped the tears from Abramovic's face (Plate 16). The nature of this performance raised and provoked ethical questions and criticism. Abramovic is driven by her desire to transform her own fears and emotions into frightening and alarming images thus connecting with the fears and perceptions of the spectators, a rich and unquantifiable resource. In an interview with Ilse Kuijen , Abramovic stated "It's important to create such strong images, so that the public cannot escape into the past or in the future". (Kuijen,1992,unp).

The Lovers

The Walk of the Great Wall of China was the culmination of Abramovic's and Ulay's collaborative works since 1975. The planning for *The Great Wall of China* piece officially began in Amsterdam 1983. A foundation was formed, expressly to raise funds and to manage the Chinese bureaucracy, that would eventually permit the artists to cross in safety seven provinces to remote and difficult geographic locations. *The Great Wall of China* is the only man made structure that is visible on earth from the moon, as a result the performance and the progress of the project was documented by French satellite.² The planning and organisation of the piece took five years. Abramovic and Ulay began their journey on the 30th of March 1988. They started from opposite ends of the Wall.

Abramovic started from the East, crossing the dramatic Tang Shan Mountain range, where the wall comes down to the Gulf of Bohai on the Yellow Sea, at the Shanhaiguan Gate, or "the first pass on earth", as this particular location is known in China (Ulay&Abramovic,1986,p.92). "In China, this is considered the male side of the dragon"(Ulay & Abramovic, 1986, p.92)(Plate 17). Ulay

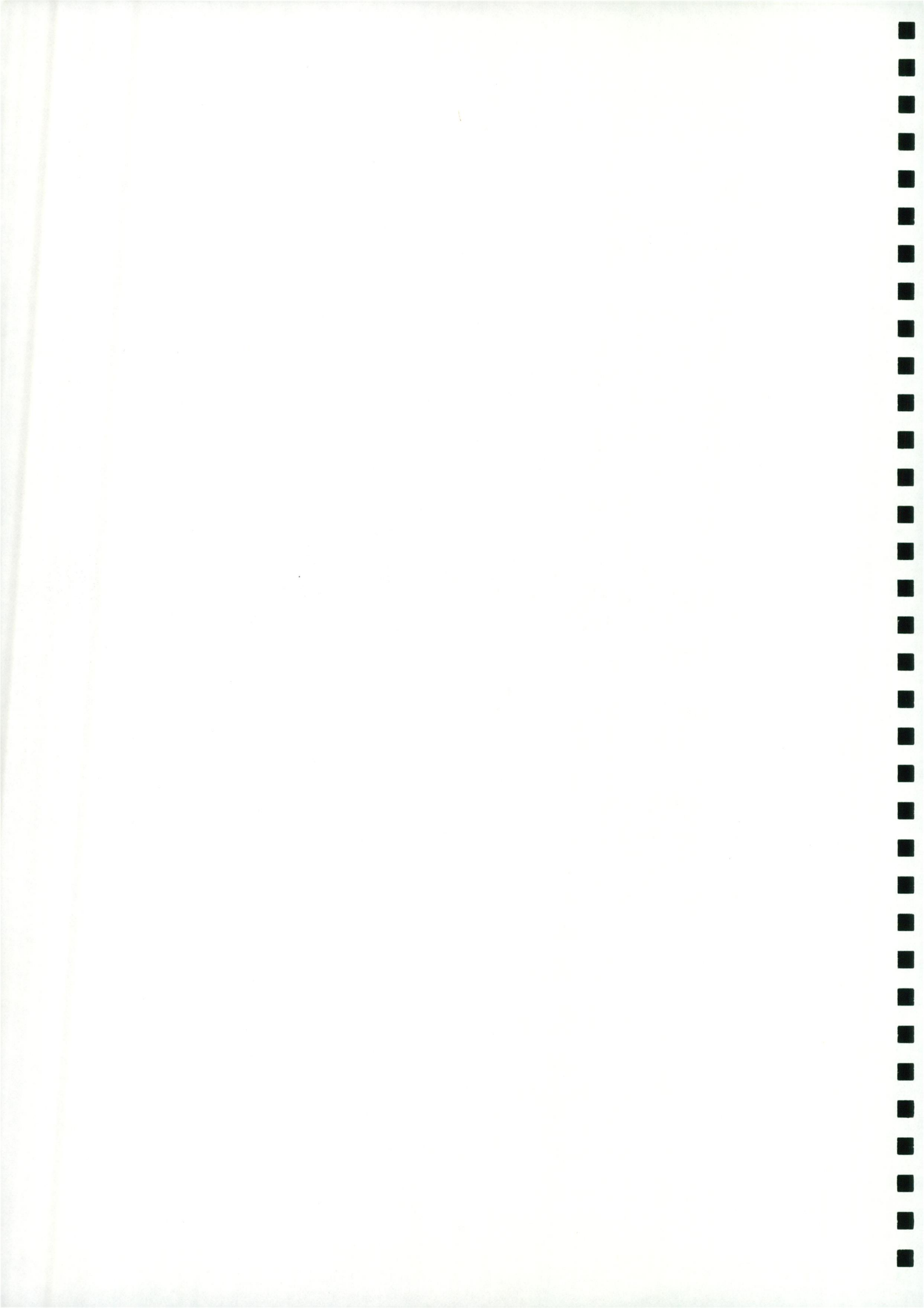
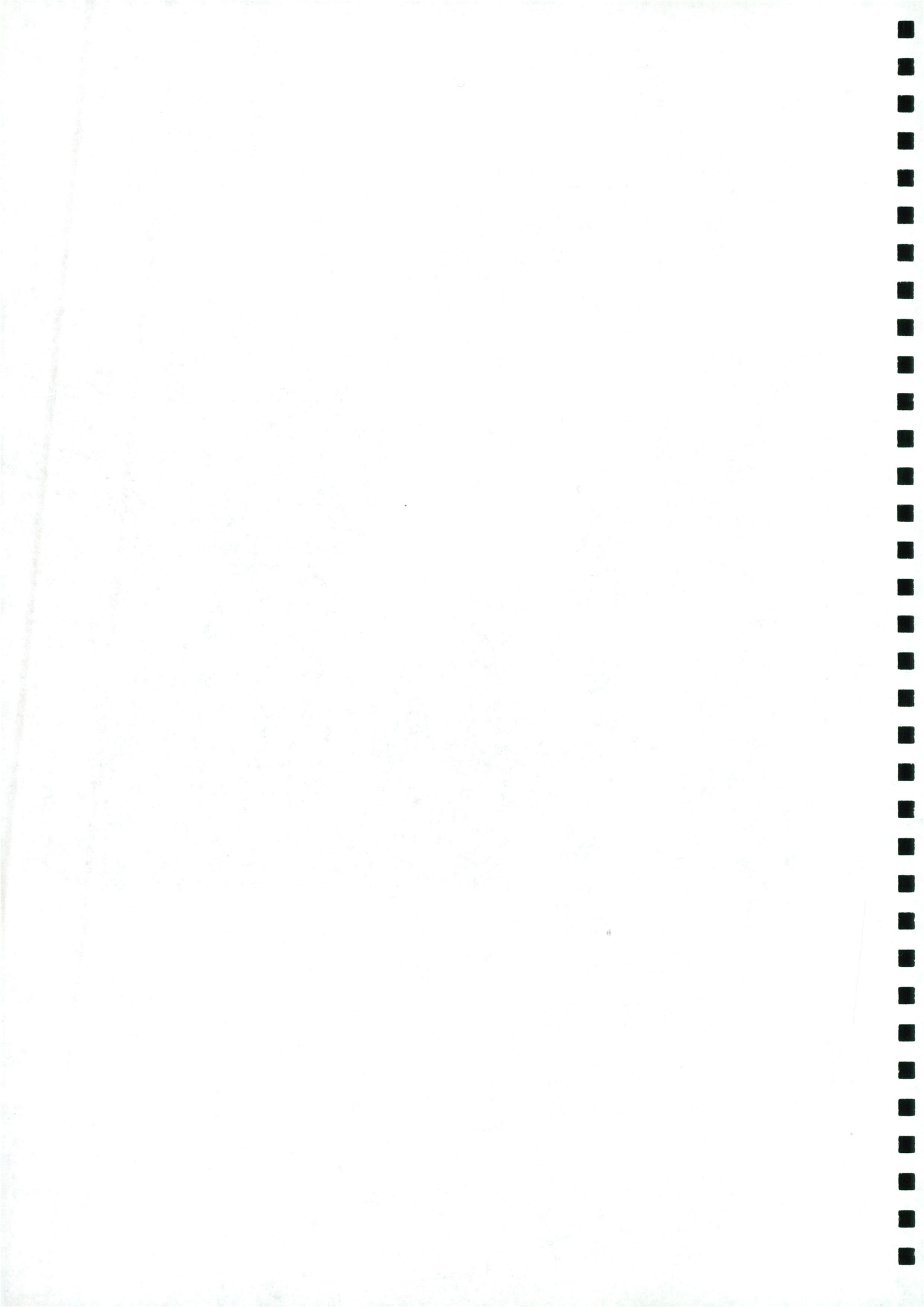




Plate 16, "Rhythm 0."



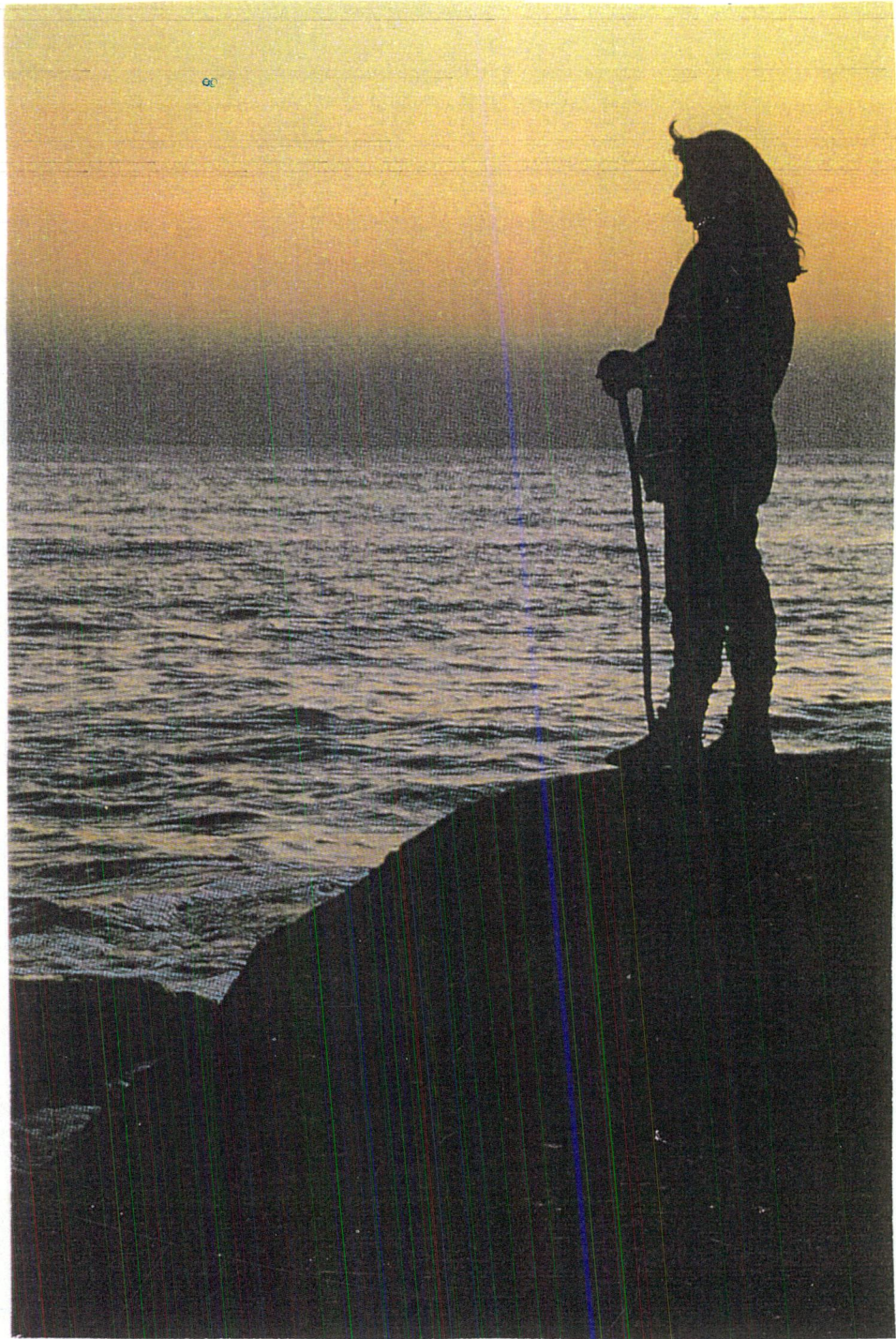
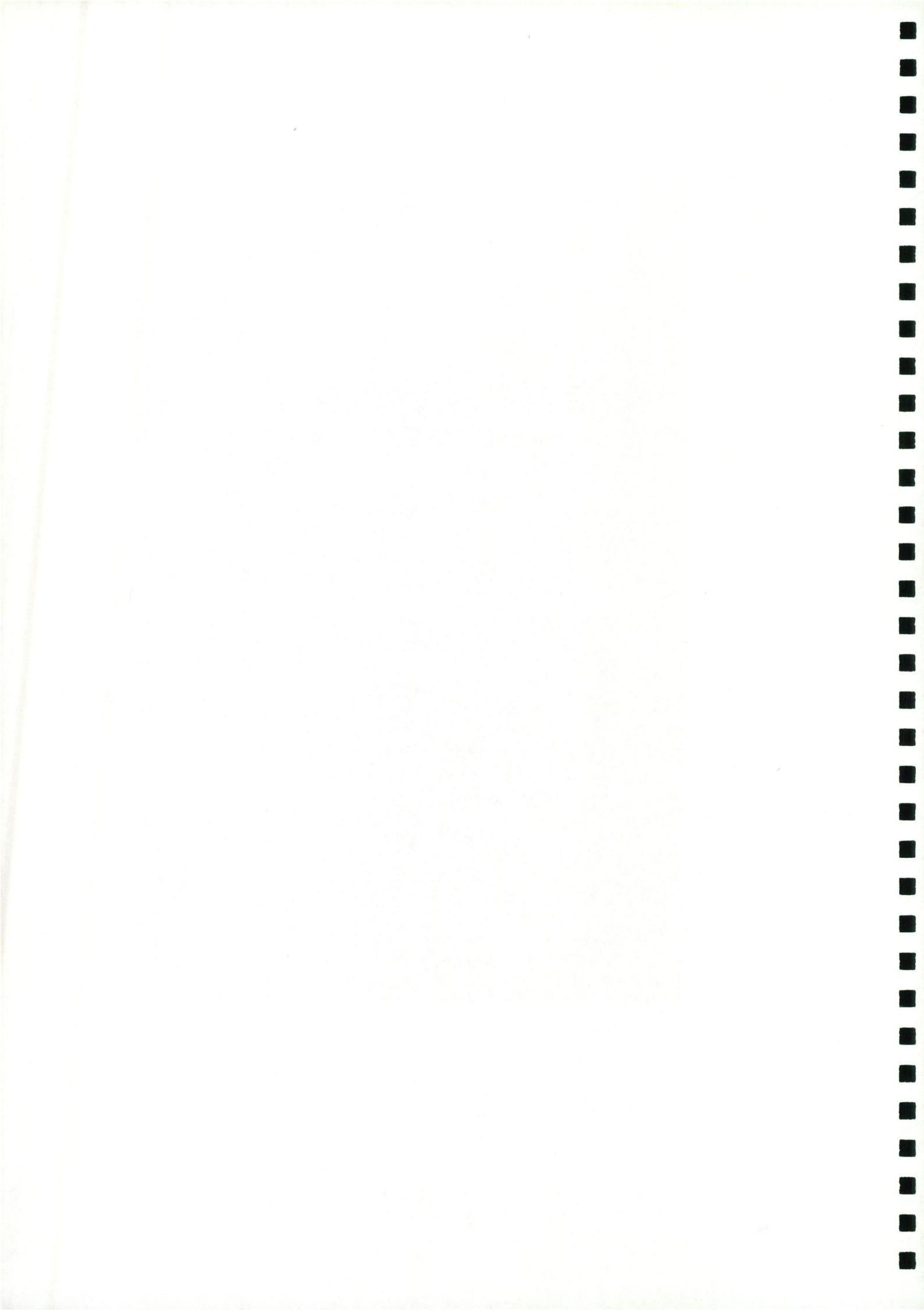


Plate 17, "*The Lovers*," where *The Wall* comes down to
The Gulf of Bohai on The Yellow Sea.



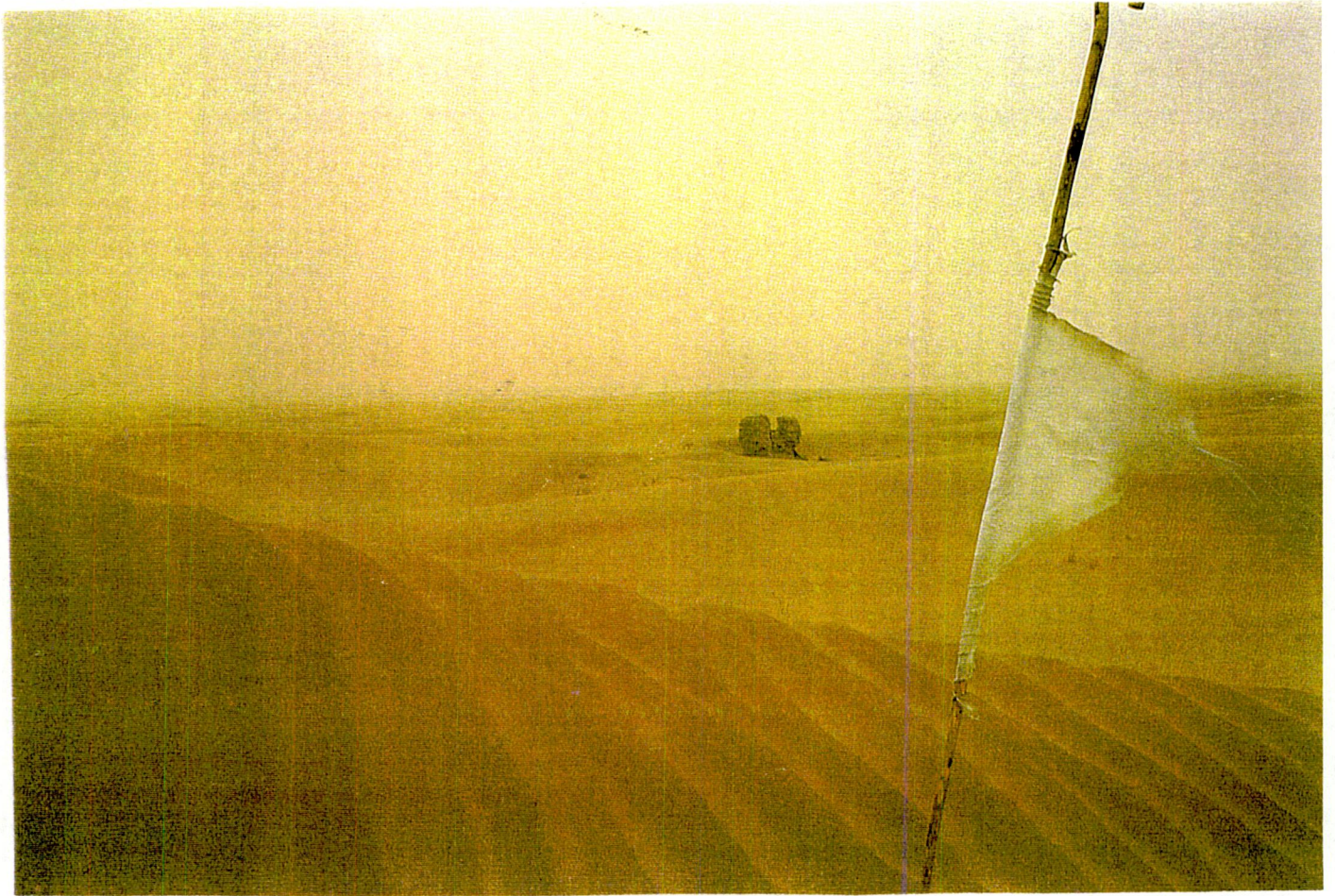
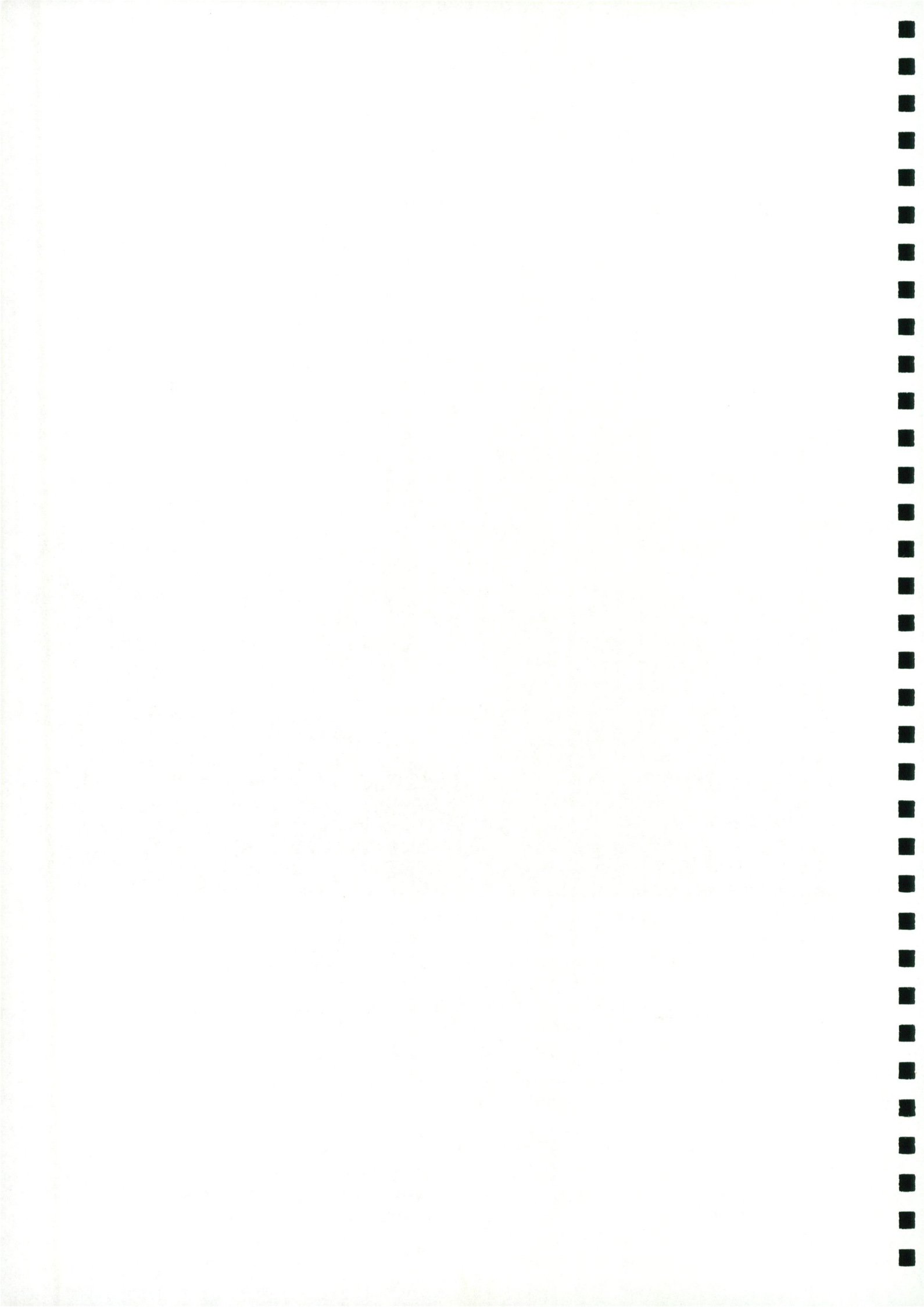


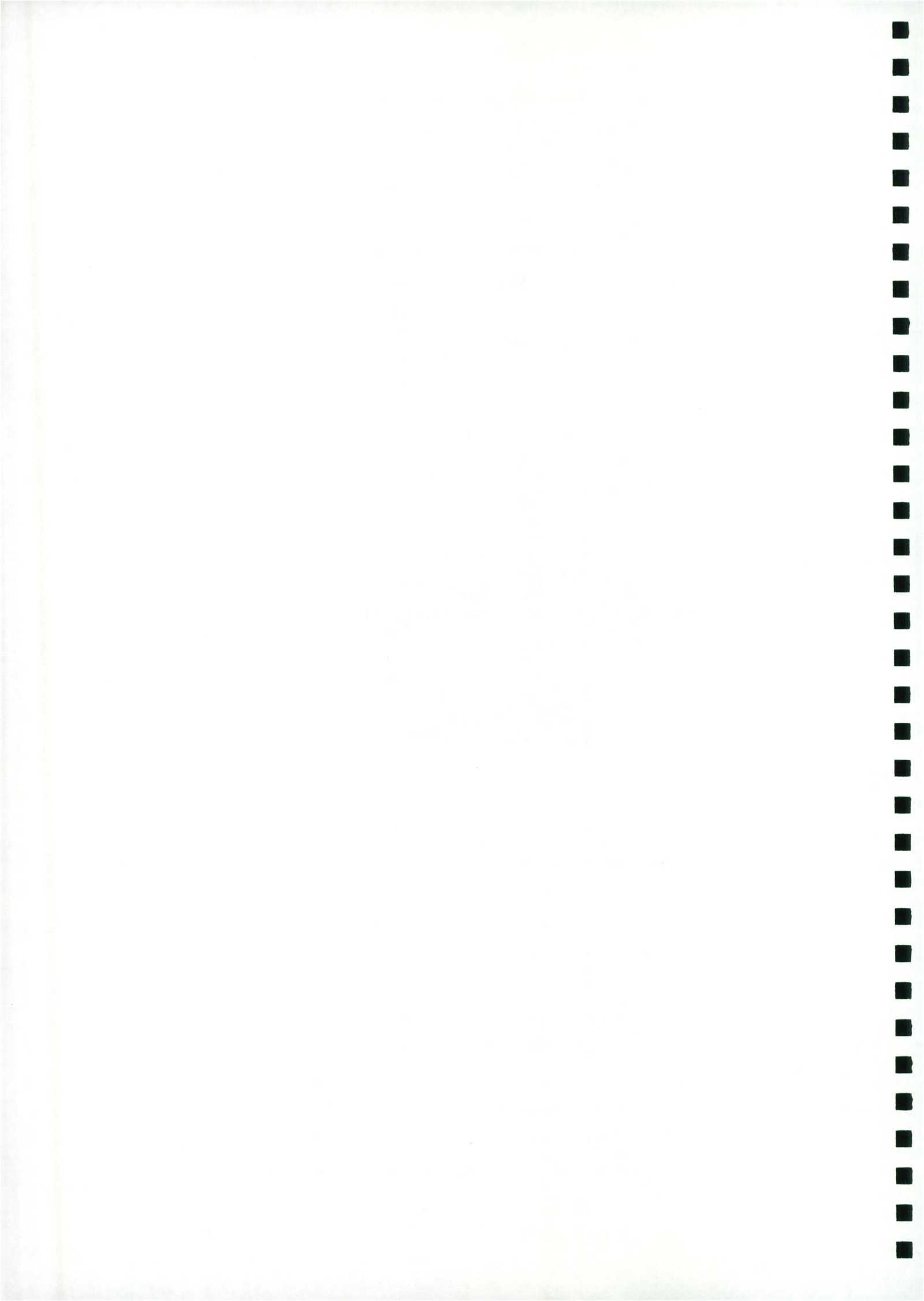
Plate 18, "*The Lovers*," Where *The Wall* crosses the Gobi Desert.



began in the West, where the wall crosses the Gobi Dessert, at the Jayuguan Gate, or "The heroic path of the sky " the dragons female side . (Ulay & Abramovic,1986, p.92) (Plate 18). One of the myths attached to the wall is that the wall is considered as if it were a dragon. With it's body meandering over a distance of between 3,000 and 4,000 miles, it's tail is said to move over toward the west and it's head lies at the eastern shore of China. The dragon head is supposed to relate to the dragontail in our galaxy. Sothe whole line is the mirror image of the milky way, The dragon signifies a marriage between the earth and the sky and there is a strong male and female principle to it.(Pijnapple, 1990,p.305).

The Walk of the Great Wall was expected to take a year long but, in fact, was concluded in three months. The piece was relentlessly physically demanding, far more so than the performers expected. They climbed up sheer mountain faces by day, climbing with enormous physical effort for up to fifteen hours, to reach the wall each morning and down precipices to reach shelter at night. They crossed vast seas of sand, where the wall had all but disappeared and the tips of the mountains could be seen with deep valleys between. At times the wind blew so hard they had to put stones as ballast in their pockets to weigh themselves down and prevent themselves from being blown off the wall. The initial plan had been that the project would be a test of will and a demonstration of strength. In fact the reality of it's hardship was underestimated until experienced.

The journey was to end with both artists being reunited in a wedding ceremony. The outcome was some what different to their original intention, as the work of *The Great Wall of China* marked the end of their relationship. Separation took the place of reuniting. For Abramovic, the Wall became a three month deliberation, one of contemplating separation and independence. On the 27th of June 1988, at the Shenmic in Shaanxi Province in the middle of a bridge over a mountain pass, they met. At this point they discontinued their relationship and their collaborative experience together. Their performances appear to have been rooted in an obsessive love affair (Mc Evilly,1989). Many of their performances were marked with aggression, risk and attempts to abandon gender and ego barriers, as in *The Relation Works*. It would appear that Abramovic and Ulay had worked so intensely together, challenging and ques-



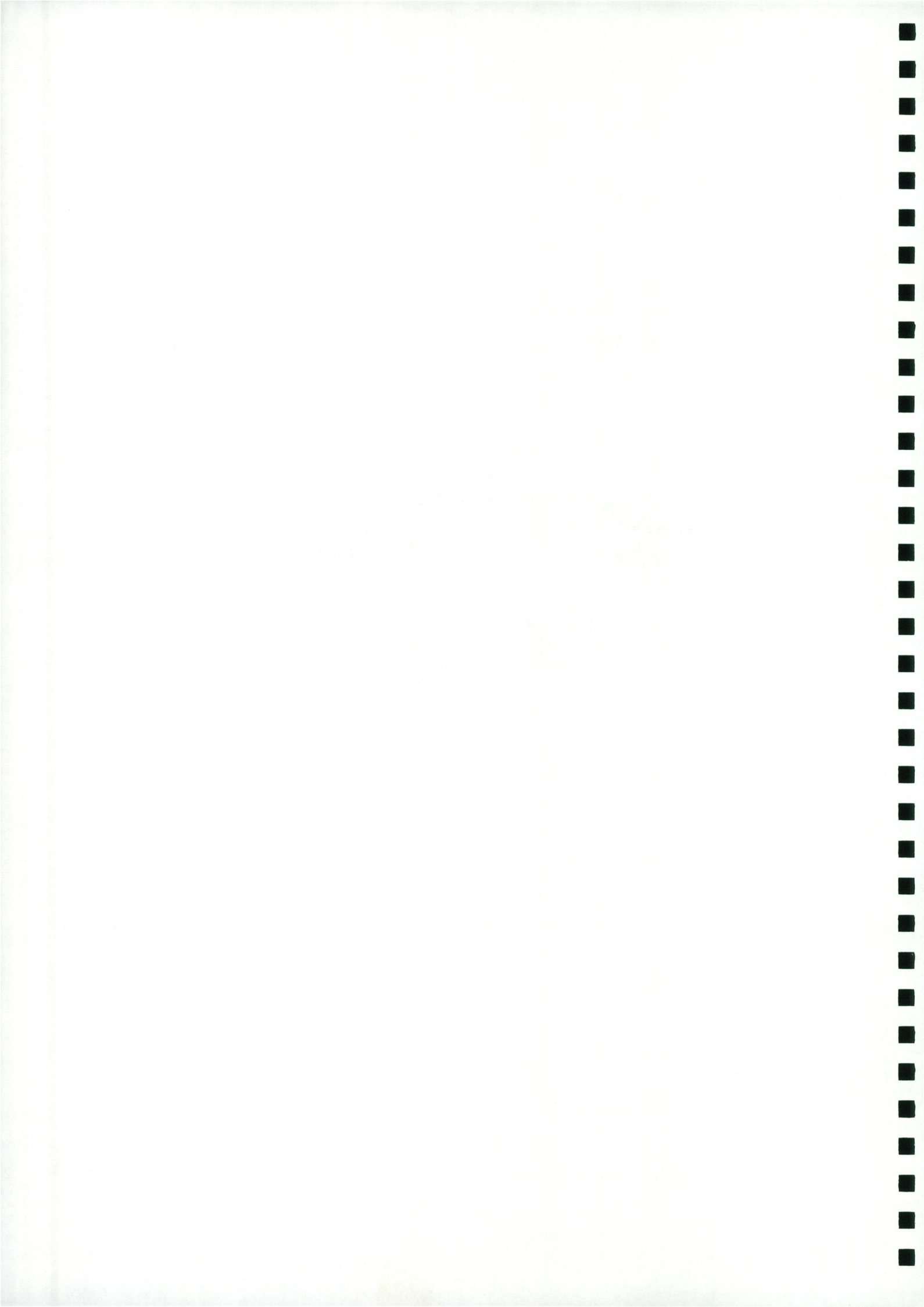
tioning all aspects of human relationships, that they no longer needed each other in the same way as before. The journey and conclusion of the walk of *The Great Wall of China*, lead them both to separate from each other and return to themselves, moving into the future as independent beings.

After *The Great Wall* project and after the last phase of Abramovic's collaborative period with Ulay, Abramovic's work began to evolve an emphasis on a material connection. This change became distinctively apparent in the work. Abramovic "endeavoured to transform the viewer of the work of art into a user of art" (Pejic, 1995,p. 36).

Abramovic's most recent work is dependent on public interaction. The act and participation of the recipient in touching and using the objects causes a visible wear and tear on the work, which is a significant aspect of the work. This becomes the "indexical signs of the presence of the body" (Abramovic,1993,p.36).

Cleaning the House/Cleaning the Body

Abramovic was shortlisted for the Glen Dimplex Award Exhibition, in The Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, Ireland, in 1995. Abramovic's work was represented here by sculpture and video, including the *Inner Sky*, *Cleaning the Body* and *Cleaning the House* sculptures. The following discussion will concern itself with one video entitled *Cleaning the Mirror from Cleaning the House* and one sculpture entitled *The Body Brush* from *Cleaning the Body*. Both pieces are a continuation of her theme of pushing the mental and physical limits of the body. Both of these pieces connects significantly with each other. *Cleaning the Mirror*, a video documentation of a performance by Abramovic in an installation built of a stack of five monitors, one on top of the other (Plate 20). The videos shown on the monitors show Abramovic scrubbing down a skeleton. The skeleton is sitting on her lap while she systematically and carefully cleans each and every piece with a wood and bristle brush. The brush used by Abramovic in the video is of the traditional scrubbing brush type, the same type as *The Body Brush* (Plate 19). The *Body Brush* piece is a large scale wood and crystal representation of a brush 7.5 by 15.7 by 9.9 inches. The bristles are made of long regular lengths of quartz crystal, which are severely pointed at the ends. The title



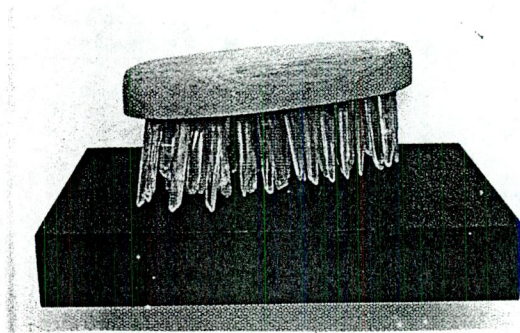
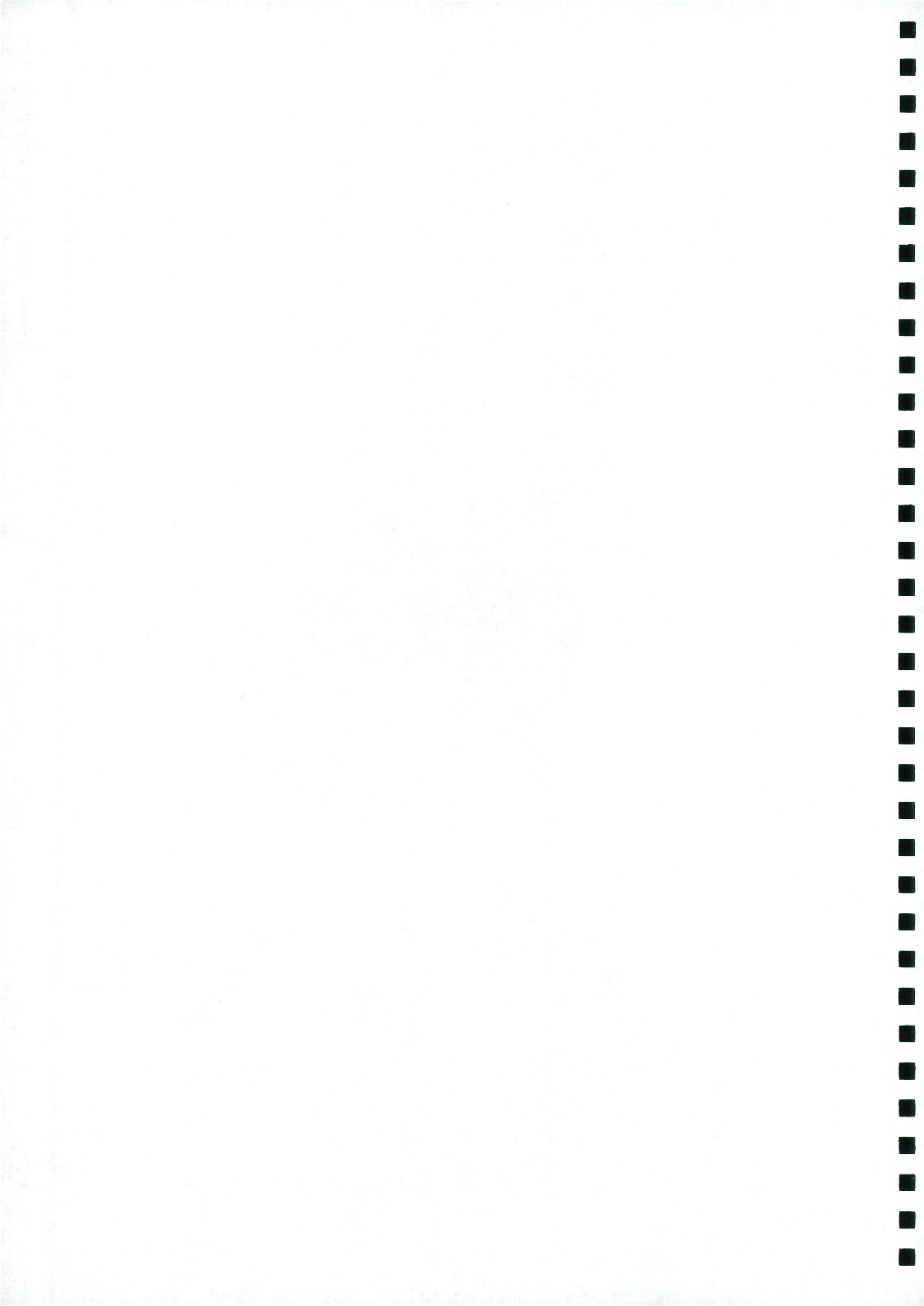


Plate 19, *The Body Brush*, from *Cleaning the Body Series*.



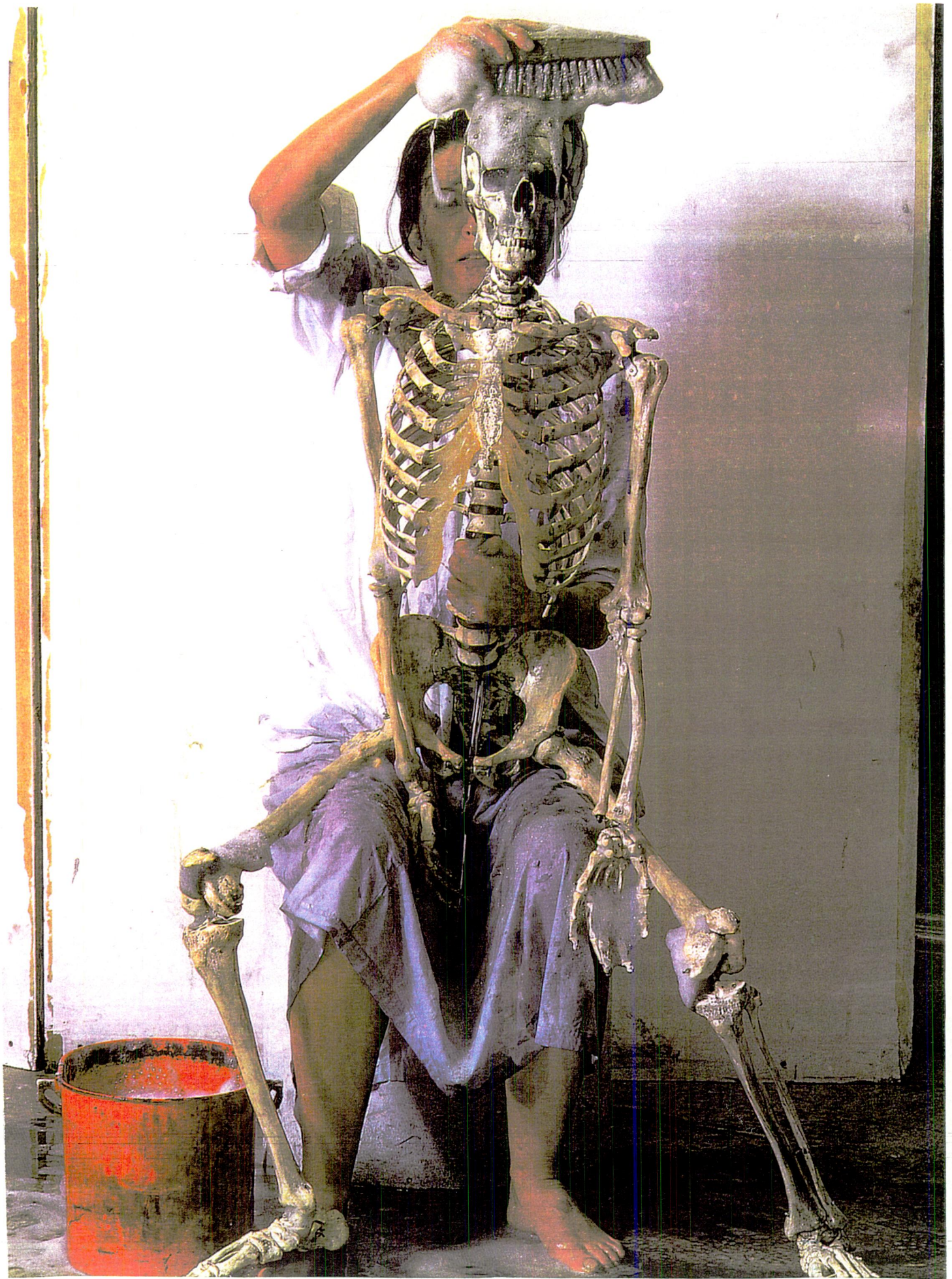
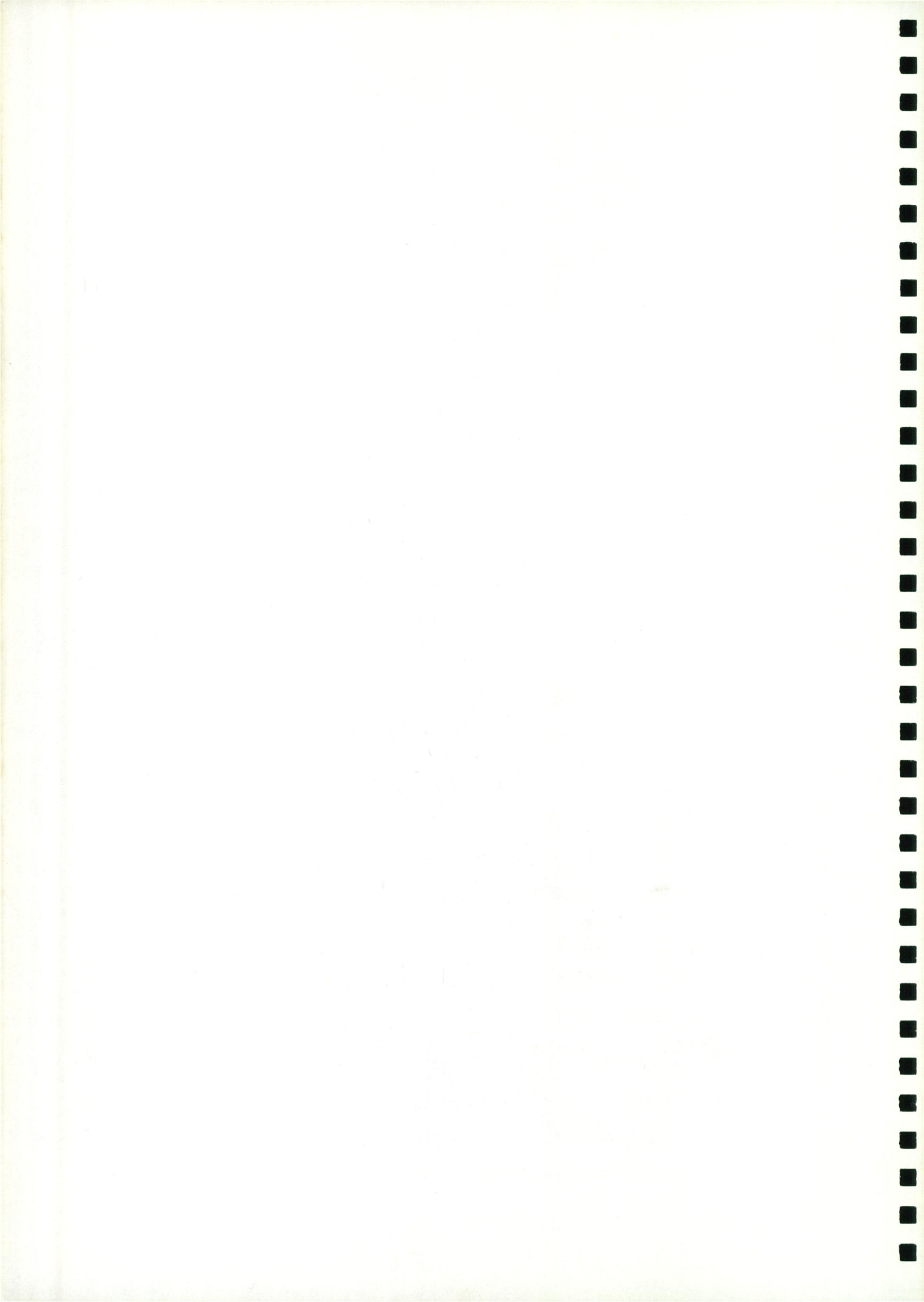


Plate 20, "Cleaning the Mirror," from *Cleaning the*



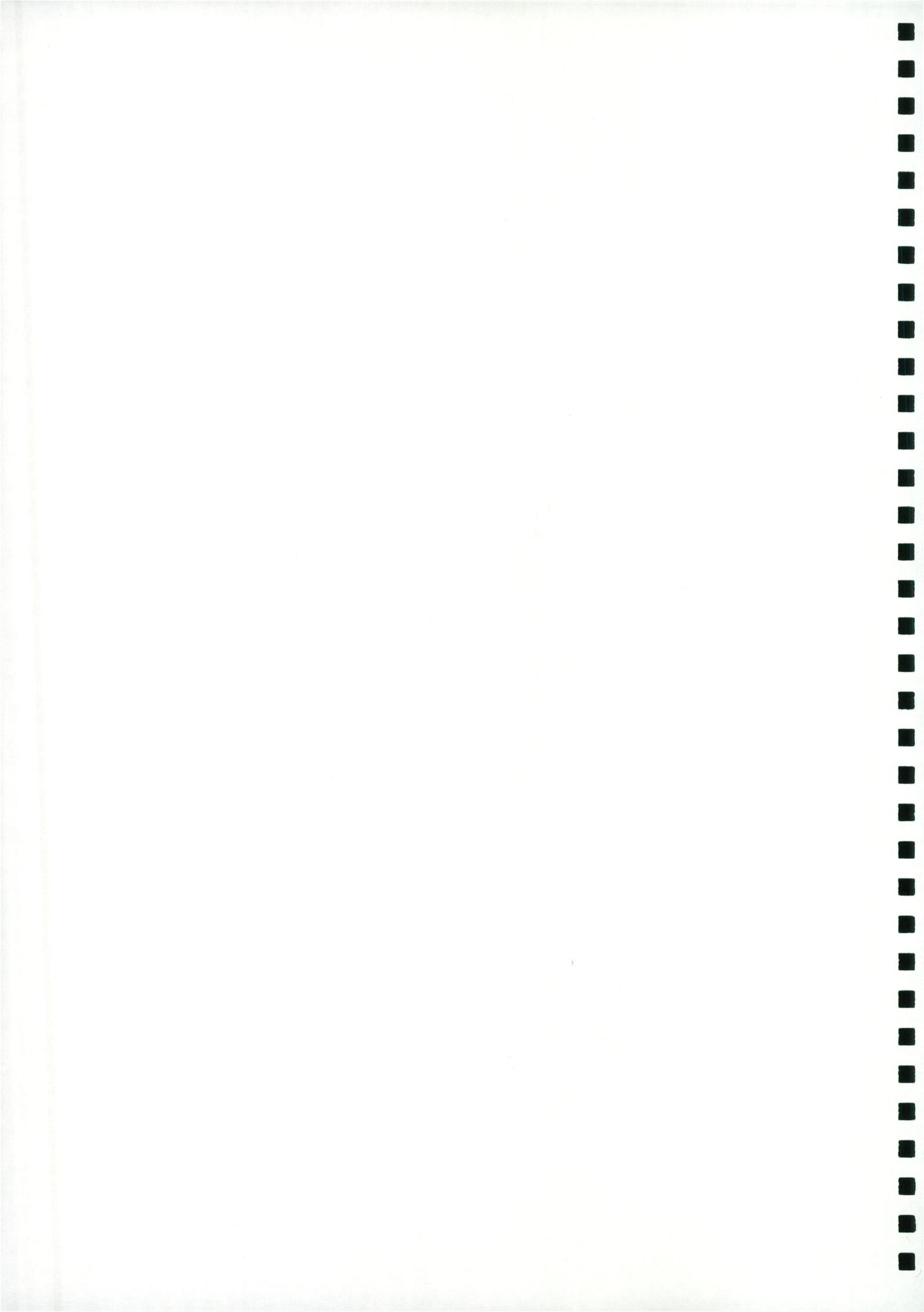
of the piece *Cleaning the Body* coupled with the sight of the sharply pointed crystals, conjures up a distressing image of connecting such a gruesome object with human flesh. This particular item clearly links cohesively with the video installation within the exhibition. "The videos have more than a touch of masochism about them and watching them triggers a mixture of fascination tinged with old fashioned sadism" (Mc Keone,1996, unp).

"These objects can be seen as extensions of Abramovic's longstanding concern with pain, endurance tests and primitivistic rituals".(Heartney ,1996,p.97).

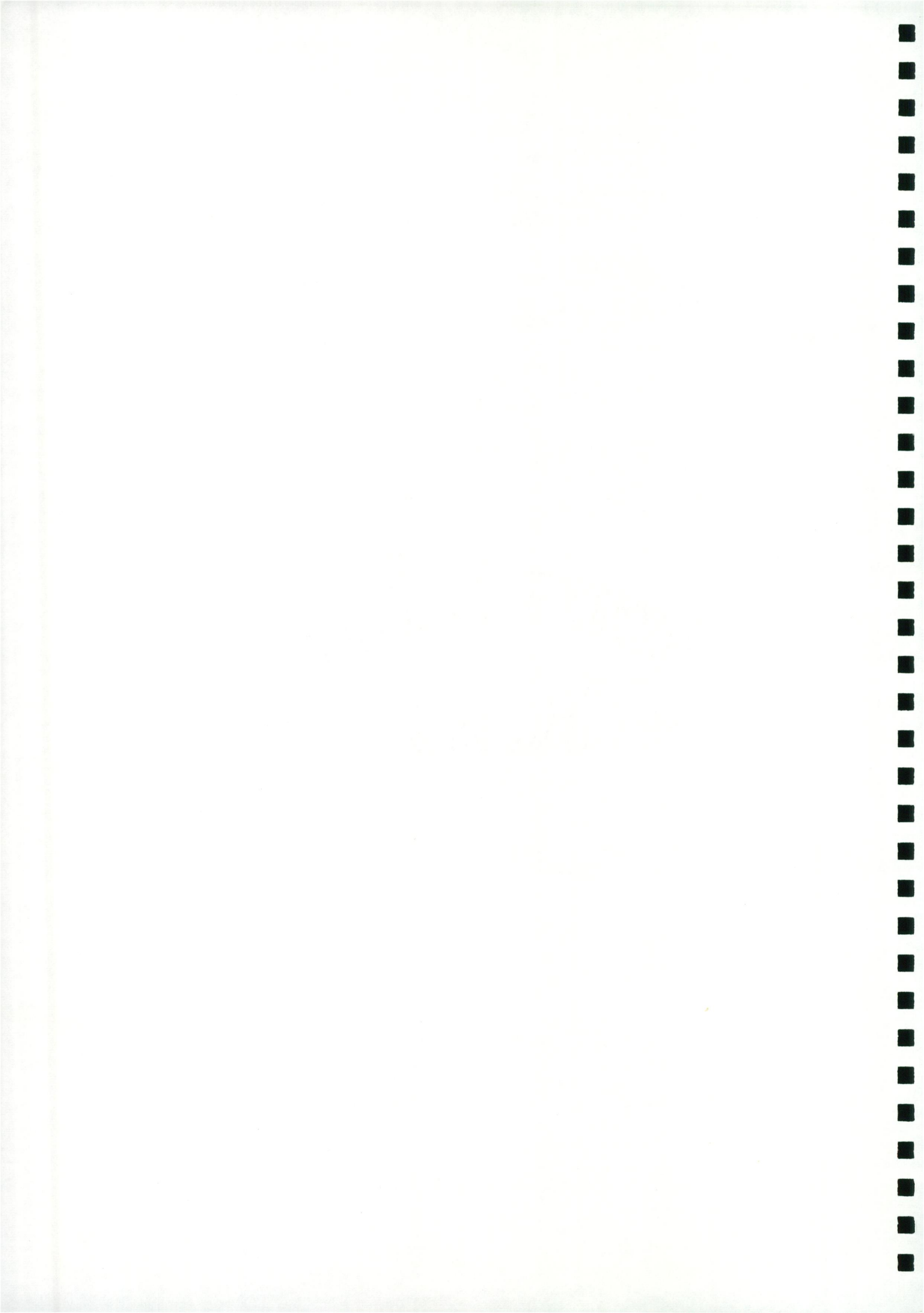
The Body Brush object could be perceived as a powerful metaphor for the past, relating to cleansing, the scrubbing away of infection, a notion and memory which strongly reconnects to the reasons for her isolation as a child. This type of brush would have been used in war times, in households and in places such as hospitals to cleanse areas and floors of infection. These brushes would have also been used for general reasons of hygiene. The brush appears to announce the need for severe cleansing, in order to become clean or truly purified. The use of quartz crystal and wood represent, "this identification of body and earth".

The nature of the skeleton video seems to reinforce the depth of Abramovic's work and *Cleaning the House* is another metaphor for self, encased in body. The image of the skeleton reasserts the notion of the body being merely matter. Abramovic appears to confront the viewer with a life and death representation in one image. Abramovic claims that Western society has great difficulty dealing with 'pain' and the prospect of death and the fear of death (IMMA Lecture,1996). The idea of process and time is reinforced through the mirror image of the skeleton forefronting Abramovic. The skeleton echoes the same seated position. The slow process of cleaning down the skeleton is another indicator of time. The realisation that this skeleton was once a living being, is perhaps one of the points Abramovic was trying to make. Every living being eventually makes the transition from life to death. Here the viewer is faced with the bleak realisation of mortality.

This chapter described some of the work of Abramovic, as well as providing a



background to her work both in art historical and biographical terms. Three specific examples were described and discussed. It would appear from this short description of Abramovic's work that there are certain elements which link her various projects together. These themes are 'pain', 'extremity of the use of the body', 'endurance' and 'levels of consciousness or ways of being'.



Chapter Two

Recurring themes in the work.

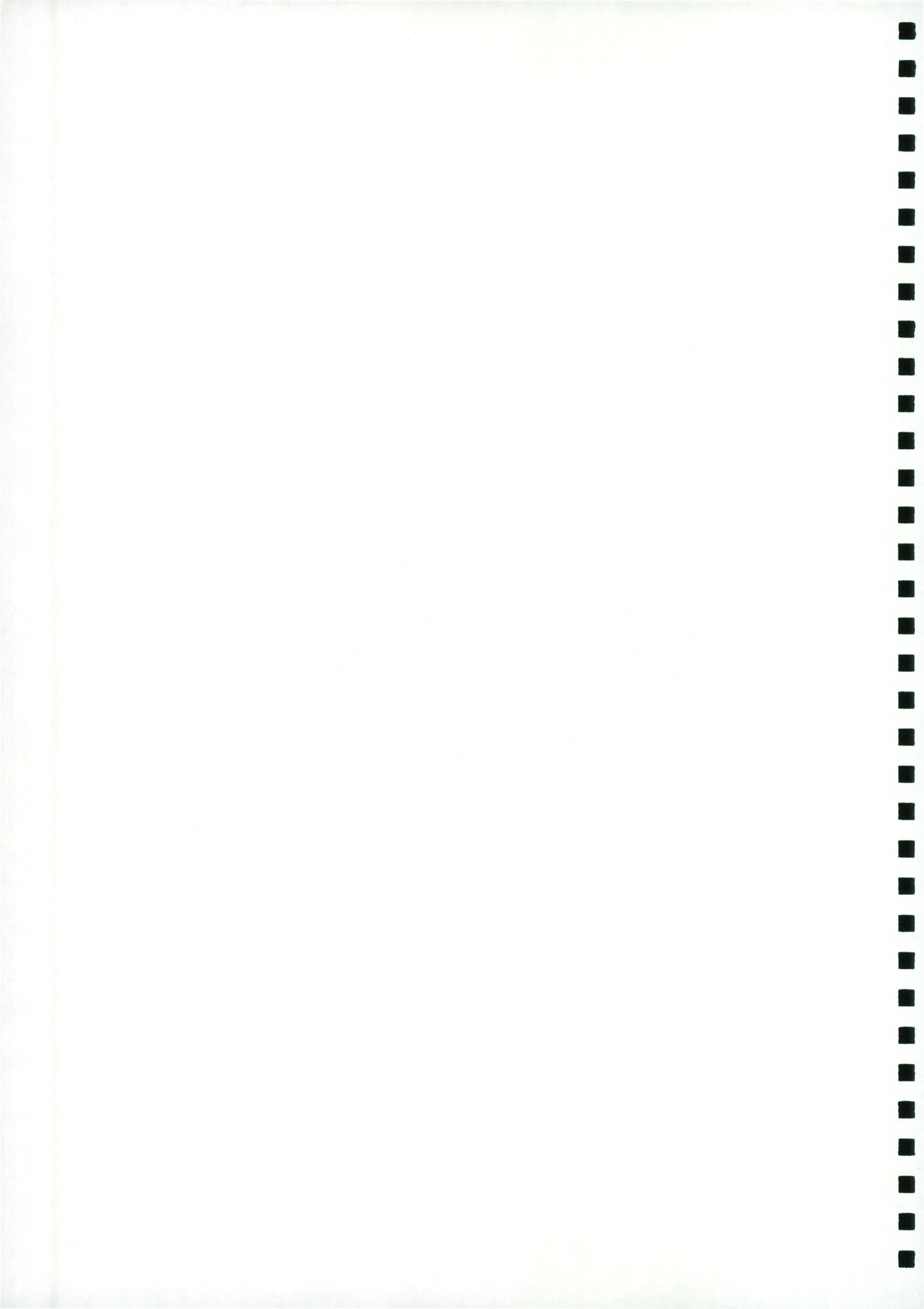
The previous chapter discussed Marina Abramovic's background, her work in general and provided a description of three specific examples. From this discussion of Abramovic's work, it has been suggested that the elements that link each project together are recurring themes of pain, in some cases through extreme uses of the body, endurance and different levels of consciousness or ways of being. This chapter will discuss these themes separately and in relation to the three specific works previously outlined and identified in chapter one.

PAIN

Abramovic stated in her lecture in IMMA (1996) That "Pain is a very important fact". She spoke of pain of fear, and her response to that feeling was: "every time I felt this fear, I had to push through it." This gives a strong indication of the significance of 'pain' in Abramovic's work and her attitude to 'pain' and challenge. 'Pain' is a vital and fundamental element in the work, and is an intrinsic component in her work process. Abramovic stated in her lecture in (IMMA1996), that her focus in her work has always been the body, it's energy and what we can do with it. She comments on the difference between Western societies and those of the Far East, (Tibet, India, etc.) Abramovic believes these cultures to be far more capable of controlling the body and pushing the mental and physical limits of the human animal so much further than Western society. She claims Eastern cultures are unafraid of dealing with pain unlike the people of the West, where pain is avoided at all costs. Pain is not always induced through physical activity as long periods of forced immobility can also be excruciatingly painful. This aspect is clearly seen in Abramovic's *Relation Works*, where she remained still for periods of up to sixteen days. Pain is clearly evident in *Rhythm O*, the experience of which was in both the mental and physical sense.

ENDURANCE

The concept of endurance is heavily subscribed to throughout Abramovics work as she believes that by pushing the body to its limits, it is possible to learn how the mind moves to a 'different state'. A state in which risk and aggres-



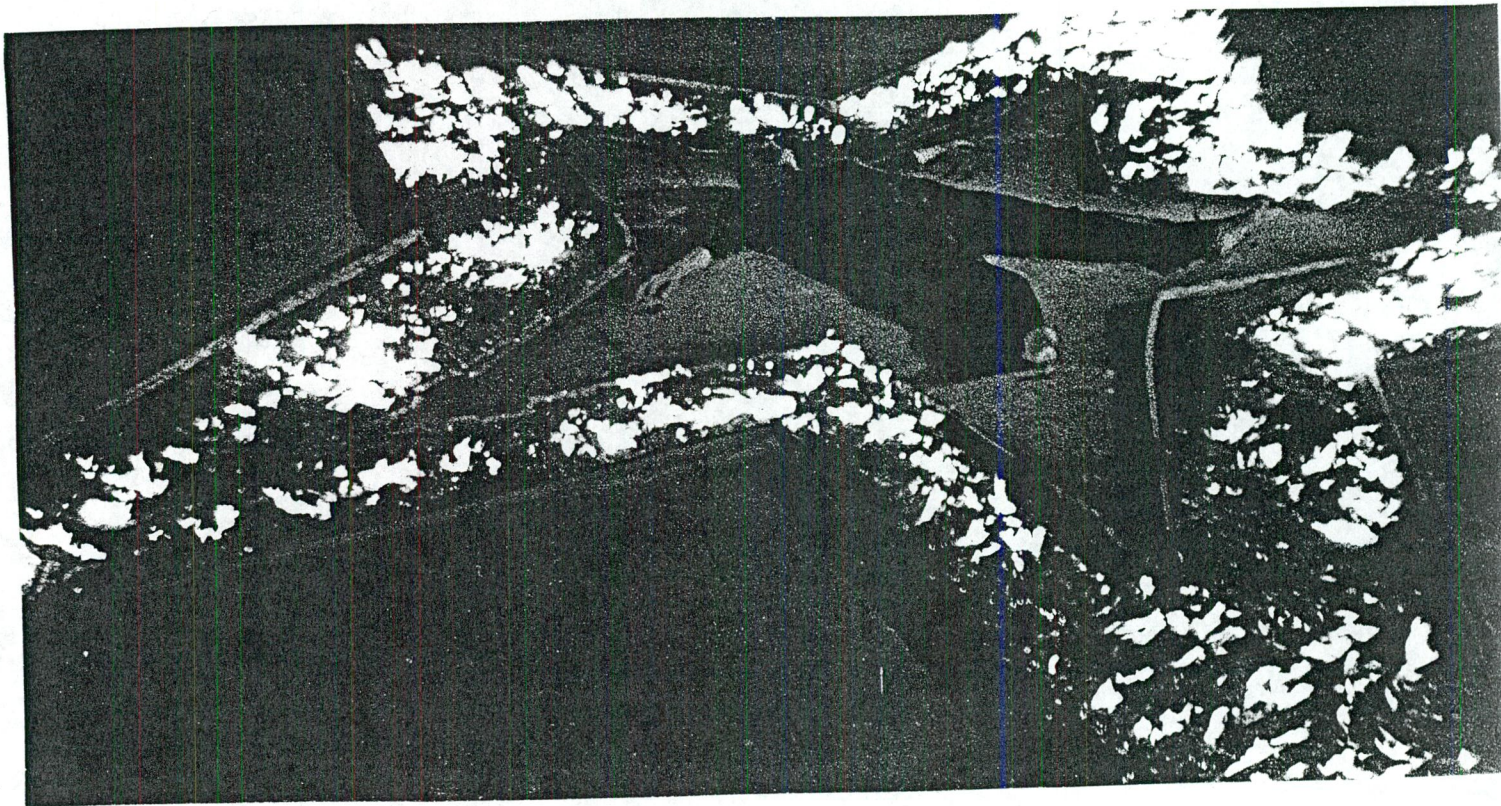
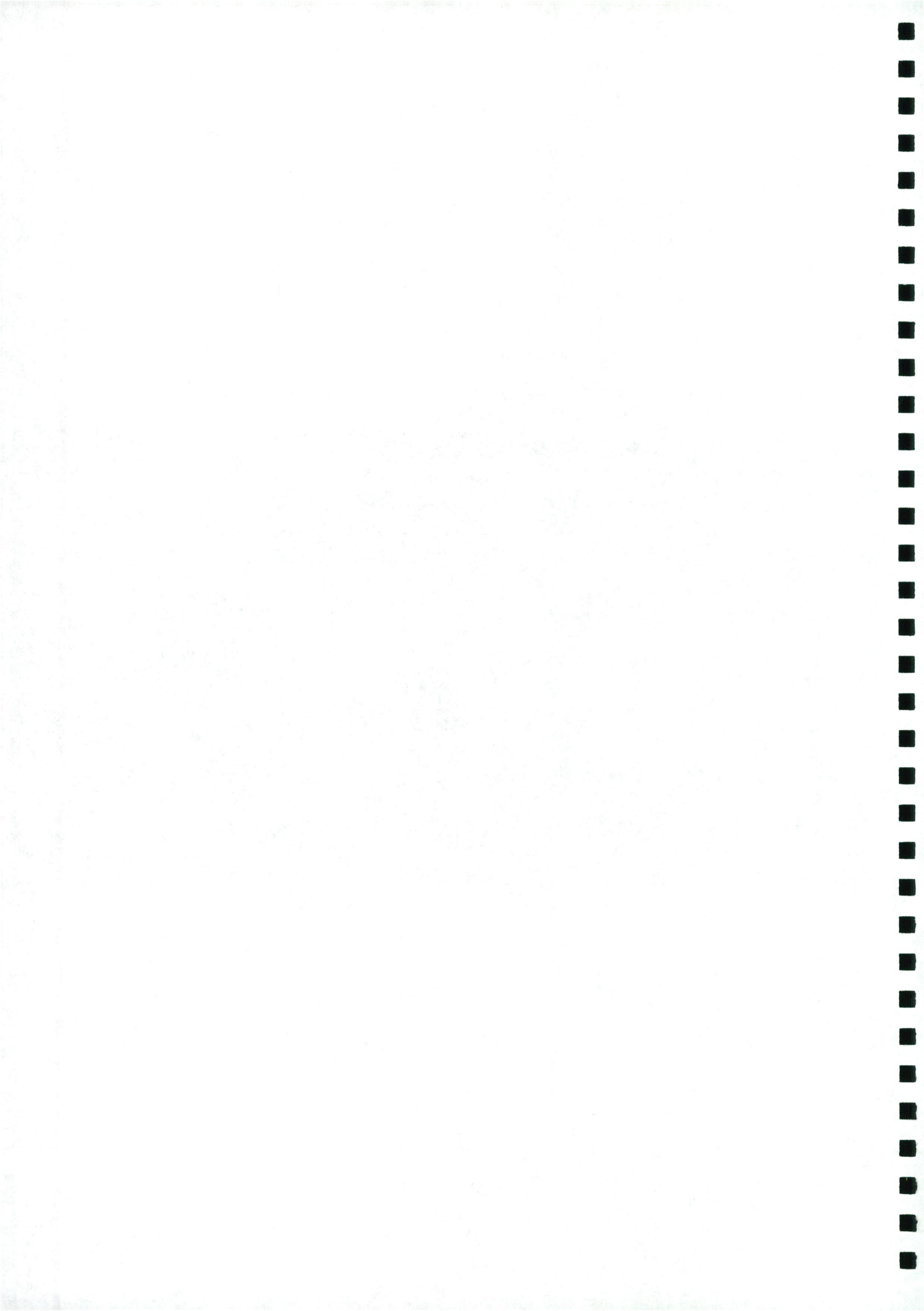


Plate 21, "*Rhythm 5.*"



sion are used to push through into another level of consciousness(Iles, 1995, p.22). Throughout the performances Abramovic endures a high level of pain endured. In many of Abramovic's performances, 'limits' may appear to be touched on but the pushing beyond 'limits' have been prevented by audience and institution intervention, as in the case of *Rhythm O*, *Rhythm 10* and *LlIs of Thomas*.

EXTREME USES OF THE BODY

The 'extremity of the use of the body' in Abramovic's work is obsessively pursued. It would appear that Abramovic performances are pushing through aspects of human pain. Abramovic claims this aspect of 'pushing through' is constantly confronting walls of fear (IMMA Lecture, 1996). In some cases this dedication to "pushing through" has led to unconsciousness and near death.

ALTERED CONSCIOUSNESS

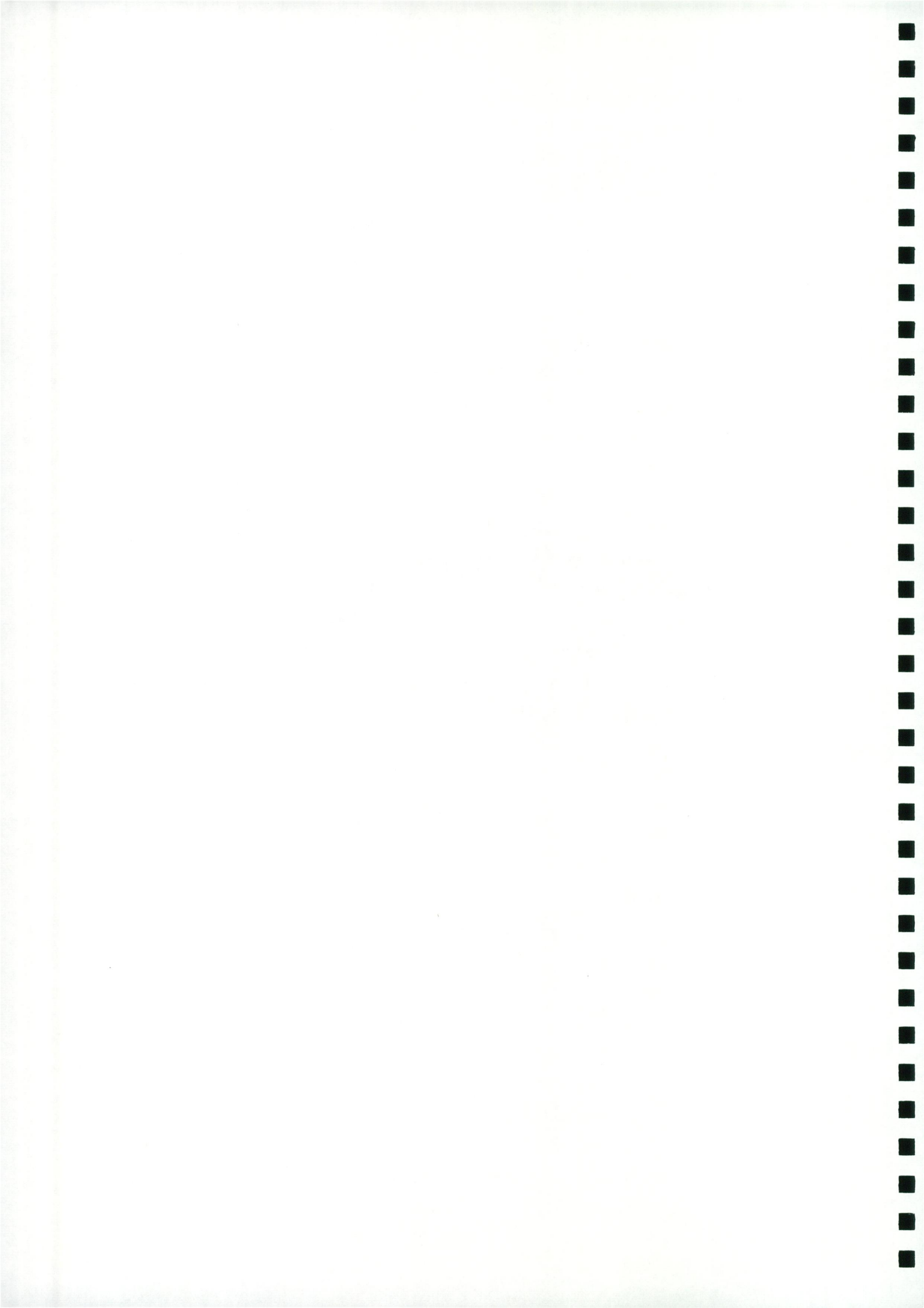
In many of Abramovic's performances she claims to have reached 'different levels of being'. In *Rhythm 5* Abramovic lay within a star shape, constructed of wood and shavings soaked in petrol which was set alight (Plate 21).

Abramovic became unconscious and she was unable to respond to the danger. In *Rhythm 3*, Abramovic deliberately took psychoactive medication to experience another level of consciousness (Plate 2). The aim of the work was to connect the mind to another consciousness or to another reality. Abramovic and Ulay privilege the Eastern world as being superior and more capable of achieving such a goal. Both artists strove to achieve similar states of being in their work. (IMMA Lecture, 1996)

These four themes pain, endurance, and extremes uses of the body and altered consciousness which have been identified as recurring elements connecting Abramovic's projects, will now be discussed in relation to the specific works already described in Chapter One.

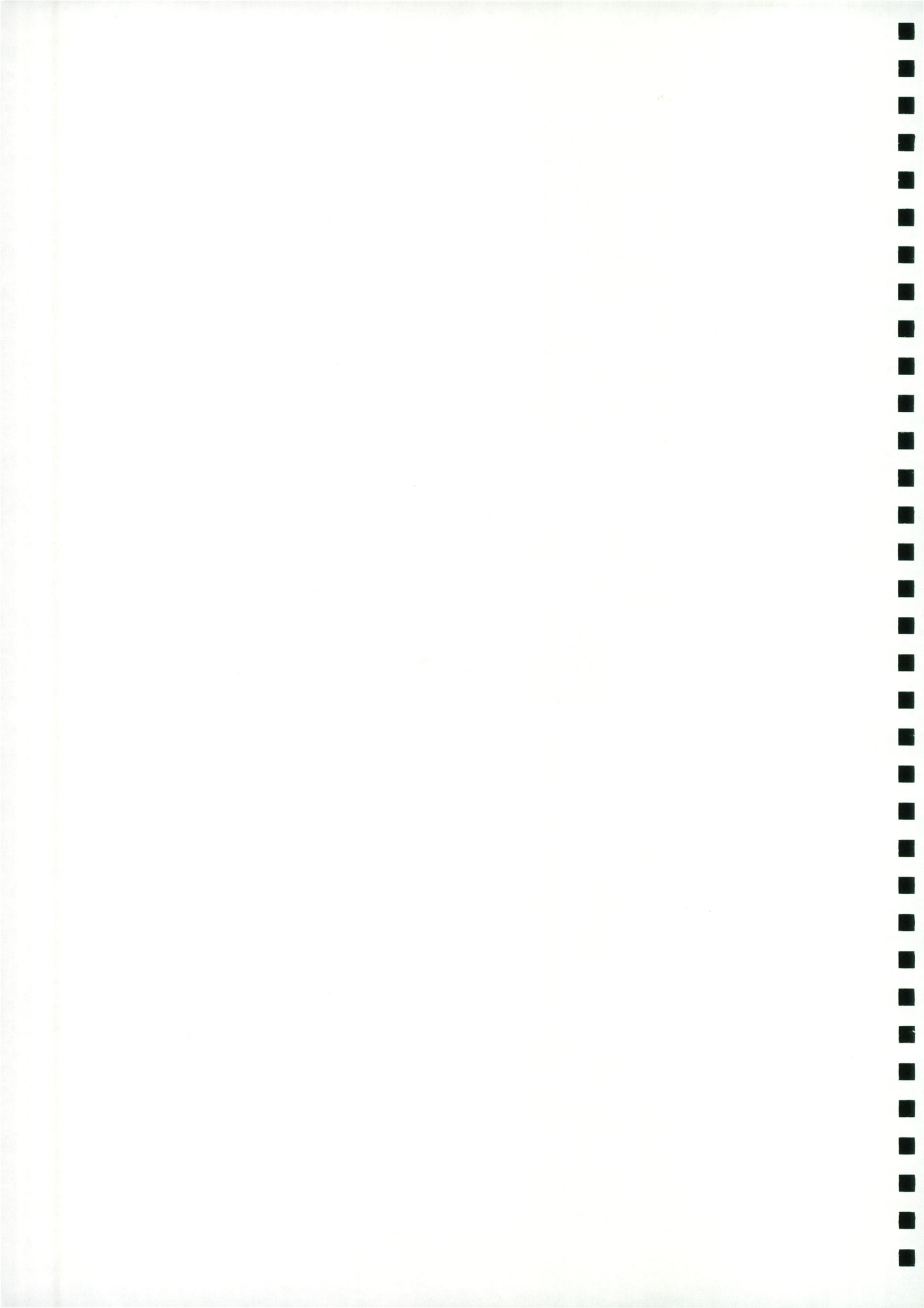
Rhythm O

In *Rhythm O*, there were aspects of 'physical and mental pain' involved. The audience inflicted cruel acts on Abramovic, both mentally and physically. Abramovic's clothes were removed by the use of razor blades and in doing so Abramovic's flesh was cut. At one point during the performance Abramovic



wept. She gave the participants full permission to do whatever they liked with her. Such an allowance lead to dangerous consequences at the time of the performance. To be the creator of such a performance is, in itself, extreme, as there was no way of knowing what could have happened or what personalities could be within the audience group. Abramovic was unable to take control of the situation when it became potentially dangerous, as her state of consciousness would not have allowed her to put an end to the performance.

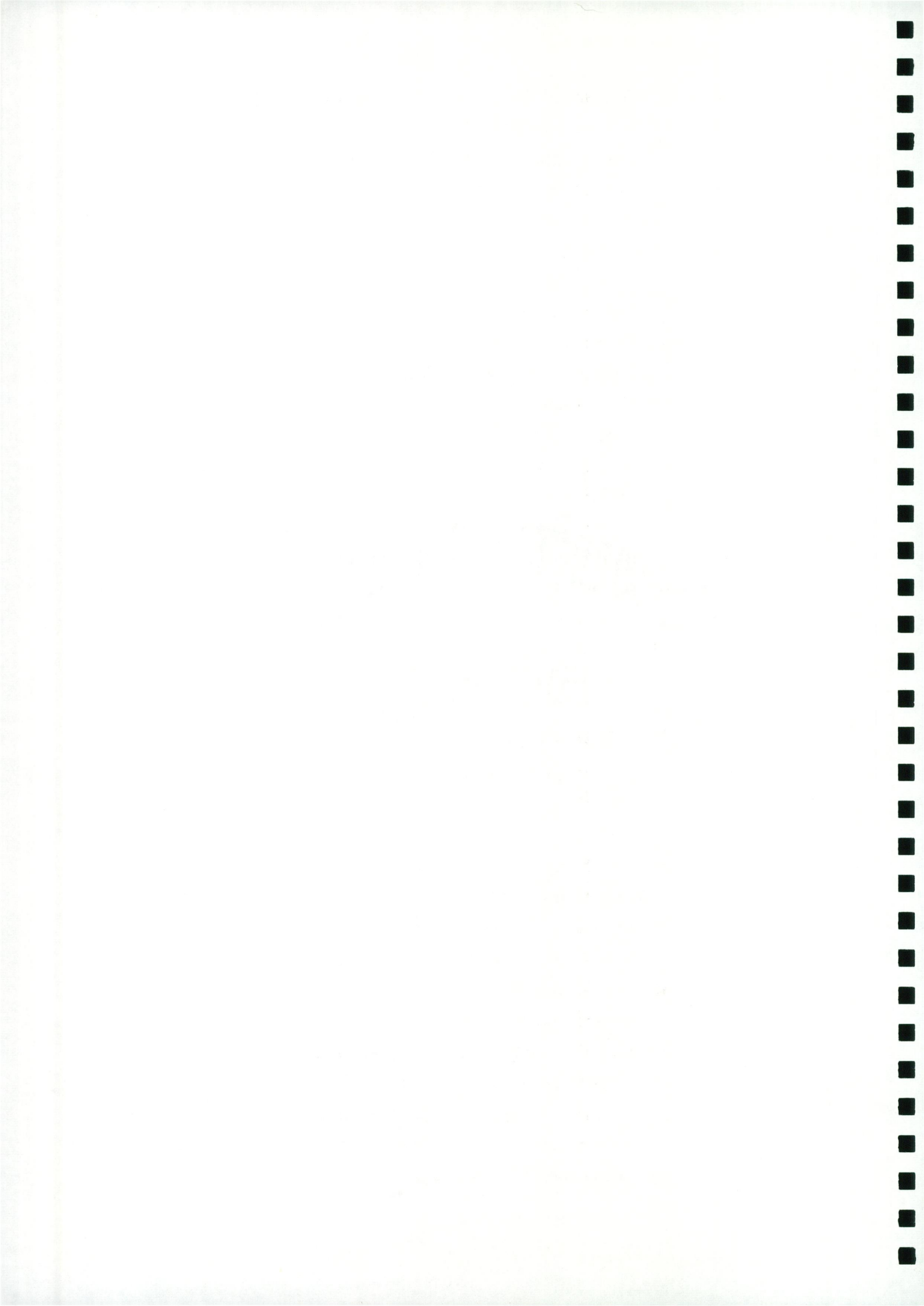
“Endurance and denying the body were very important to me. I went quite a way towards destroying my own body in that period, through my denial of it”.
(Iles, 1978, p.15)



Abramovic had endured three hours of active public participation, some aspects of which were abusive and dangerous. At a point when one of the audience was encouraging Abramovic to squeeze the trigger of the loaded gun slowly, Abramovic found she was unable to resist. Another participant from the audience removed the pistol from Abramovic's hand and threw it across the room. As a result of this happening Abramovic became aware, that the audience had a potential, an unquantifiable danger (Goldberg, 1995, p.12). The day after this performance there was an influx of calls from the participating public, with concerned enquiries as to what had happened. The audience expressed disbelief at the nature of the aggressive deeds which had been inflicted on Abramovic. They claimed they were unaware of their own motivations and behaviours in acting out these aggressions. Here it would appear there was a situation, where both performer and audience reached levels of altered consciousness. Abramovic had surrendered herself totally to her audience, which brought about a situation where in she forfeited a certain amount of control and introduced the unpredictable dimension of direct audience response. (Iles, 1978, p.14). As a result of this discovery Abramovic realised that she had brought the audience as far as she could go. This work is perhaps the most dangerous work she has ever done. There is certainly a high risk element attached to Abramovic's work but she performs these acts within the confines of the institution or gallery space; there is always somebody to make a decision and prevent a situation becoming out of hand. Abramovic has never been allowed to do serious or permanent damage to herself.

The Lovers

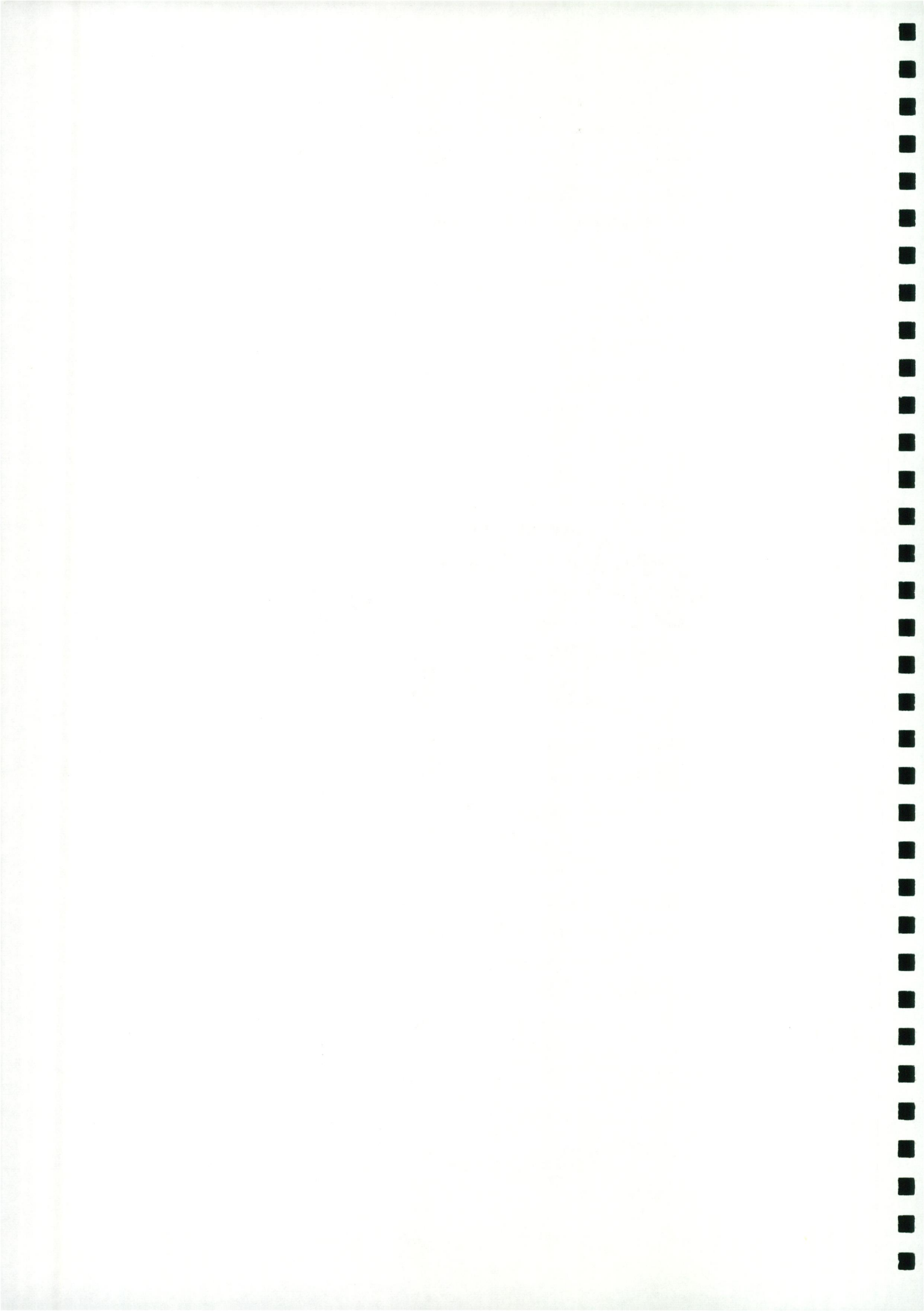
This period referred to, is the performance work done in the 1970s. Before Abramovic met Ulay and started to collaborate with him in performance. Abramovic and Ulay worked and performed together for twelve years. In this time they used their relationship to explore formal, spiritual and cultural relationships and their development. The walk of *The Great Wall of China*, may be read as the culmination and paradoxically the conclusion of their relationship. Ulay claims that pain is all part of life and an important part of his life's process, and it must be dealt with as it is, without altering or subduing it with drugs or becoming distracted by any exterior source (Rothanien, 1983 ,p. 19). It is then possible to move beyond the pain to attain a different level of consciousness. The pain eventually goes, this phenomena then becomes sculpture. In the earli-



er work which was very aggressive, Ulay claims he did not feel the pain, as he was in a very special state and pain became an object (Rothanien,1983,p.17). Abramovic reached a stage of exhaustion after many hard hours of walking *The Great Wall* In her description of this experience, she recalls a moment when her body was seriously "protesting and she was about to faint, it was at this moment she stopped thinking about her body and the pain stopped she no longer felt her body"(Von Drathen,1995,p .230). Here is an example of all four themes. In an interview with Chrissie Iles, Ulay states that the effect of not talking for the three month period while walking the wall had a profound effect. In the performance *Night Sea Crossing*, a different endurance was experienced, that of control through being motionless (Iles, 1978, p.15). To sit for hours on end without moving is painful. Both artists denied themselves food and water for long periods of time in this series of work.³ It was essential to be in total control of their minds and bodies, otherwise they were in trouble. The techniques to achieve this continuous control go unseen and both Abramovic and Ulay deal with with pain differently, in that both Abramovic's and Ulay's metabolic rate are of different strengths and abilities (Iles,1978, p.16). All of Abramovic's performances have a high drama content. This focus follows through into her sculpture and video work.

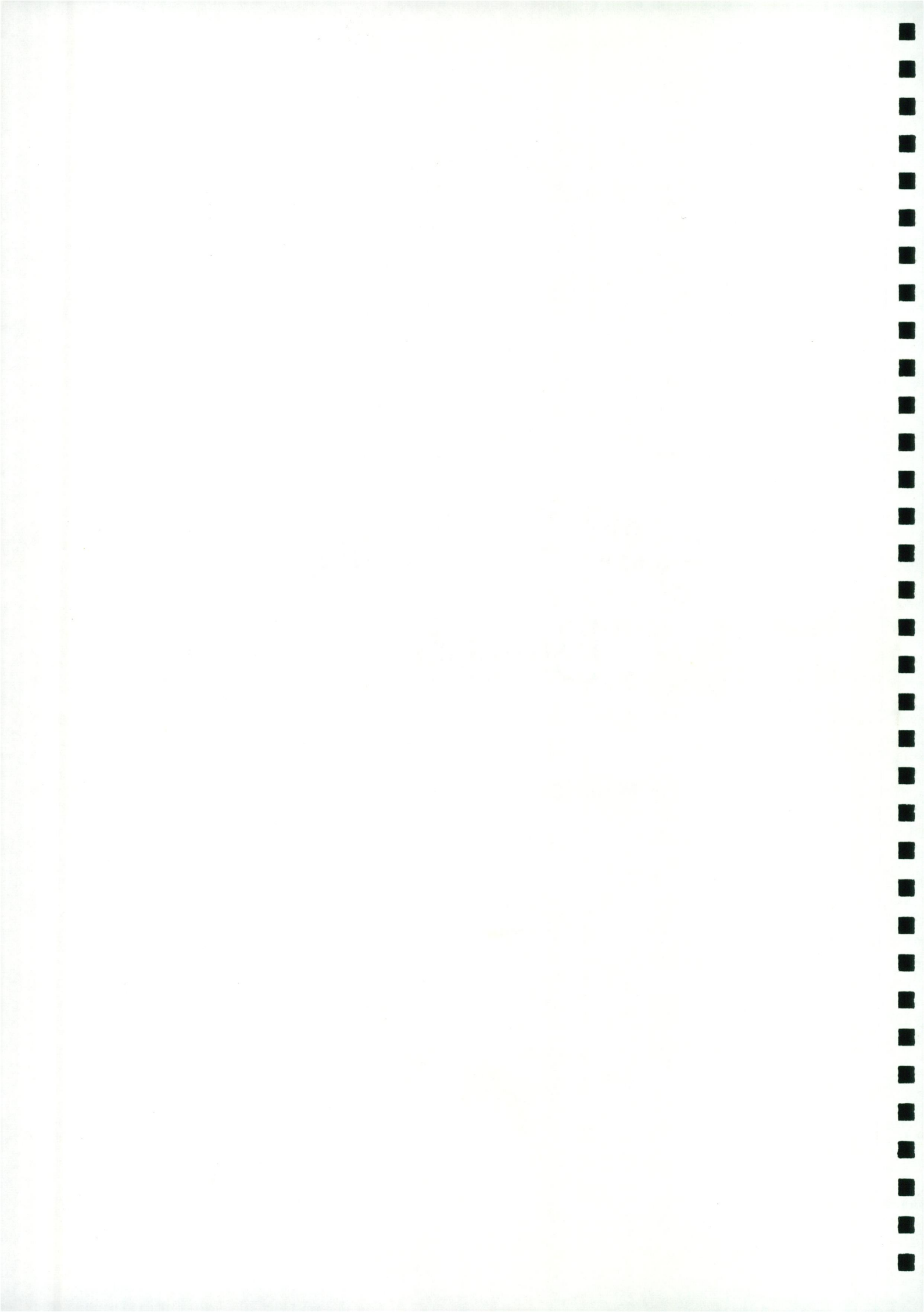
Other elements

There is a performative element in Abramovic's gallery work. *The Body Brush* from the exhibition *Cleaning the Body*, IMMA 1995. The brush is of the traditional scrubbing brush type, which would have been used for scrubbing floors. It's difference, is in size, as Abramovic's body brush is larger than normal. In the exhibition there are many references to cleaning the house and body. *The Body Brush* seems to imply a painful experience. One is led from one object to the next with an underlying theme of the "pain" that would be "endured", with the notion of flesh connecting with such an object. The notion of *The Body Brush* being used in this way is inferred by the skeleton video piece. There is a question of mortality and immortality , the unknown, unconscious level, between living and dying. "For Abramovic, matter is endowed with spirituality and with something alive,it has a memory, although this memory is not dated, it has a history, a future. It is a subject, an acting subject, and as such a presence. (Davvetas, 1991, unpaginated).



Ideally Abramovic would like people to use her pieces in their homes, like her amethyst shoes *Shoes for Departure*, "before they drink their coffee in the morning". These pieces would be very expensive items, such a suggestion would seem highly impractical, the implication of which would deplete the earth further of its materials, which is a contradiction to Abramovic's plan of making the world more aware of the importance and necessity for the earth to stay in tact and to prevent any further destruction (Von Drathen,, 1993, p.229) Abramovic calls these objects "transitory" and she feels that in their use all the boundaries and classifications would completely merge. Abramovic speculates that the art of the 21st century, will be devoid of objects, and a telepathic art form will emerge, where artists will transmit ideas to a cultivated audience, who are sufficiently creative to take the concepts on board. Abramovic believes her objects are paving the way for this time. (Iles, 1978, p.15). Many would consider this to be an elitest view.

The elements that link Abramovic's work together are these recurring themes of 'pain', 'extreme uses of the body', "endurance' and 'different levels of consciousness or other ways of being'. These themes warrent closer consideration as they intersect with contemporary critical concerns such as the ethics of the body, authenticity and the cross cultural exchanges.

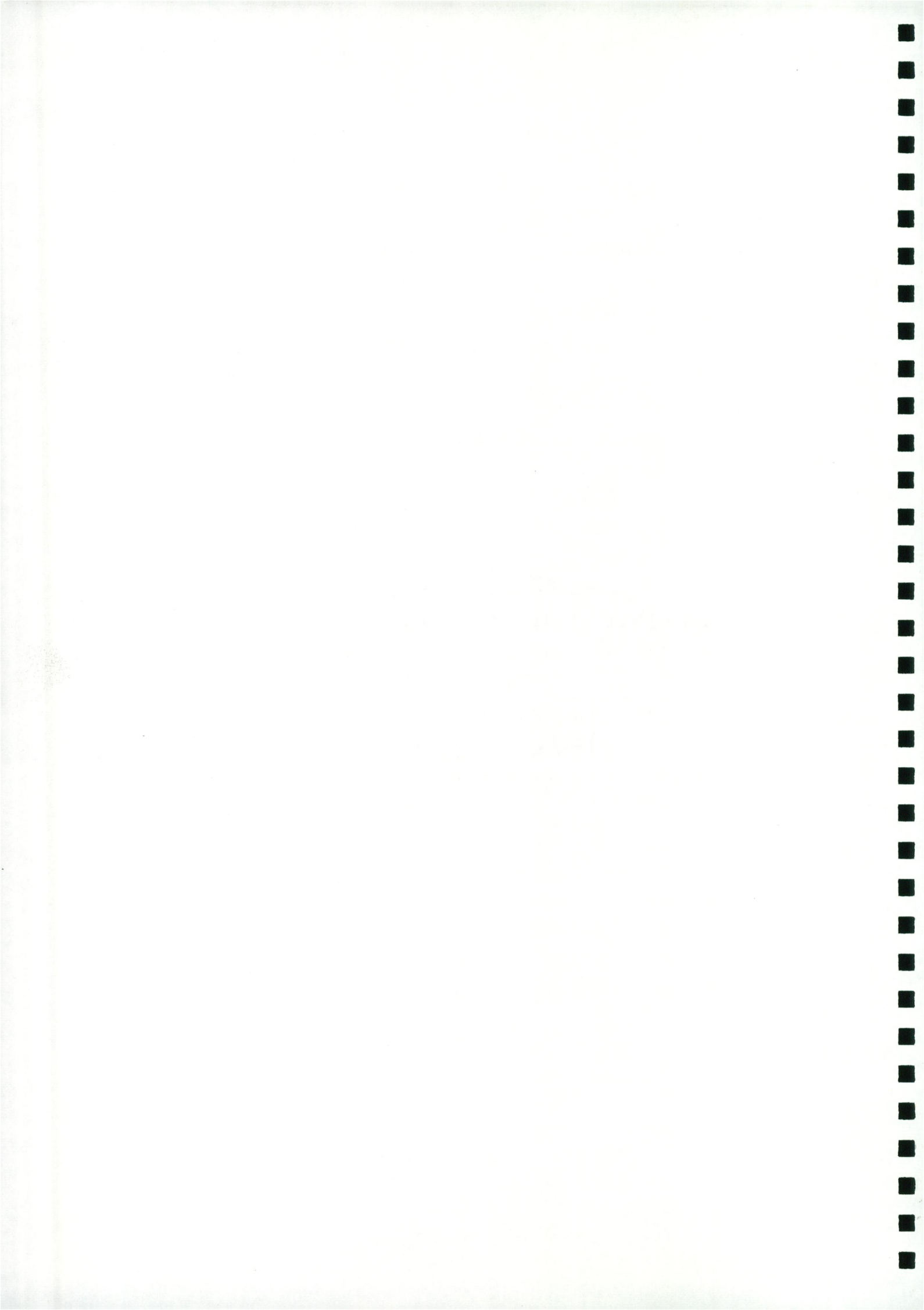


CHAPTER 3

Critical issues in relation to the recurring themes of the work.

The following paragraphs discuss the notion of the body as construct and as socio-cultural artifact, in relation to Abramovic's art practice. There is a binarism of male and female which appears to be the central focus in Abramovic's collaborative work. These will be addressed as well as the question of essentialism within feminist art practice and how this could relate to Abramovic's work. The way in which Abramovic incorporates references to oriental cultures in her work, needs to be looked at. This particular area of her work seems to contain elements of what has been described as 'primitivism'. These elements will be considered as part of a larger examination of Abramovic's preoccupation with the body.

Abramovic's intense interest in the body and the limitations of the body is apparent from the works considered so far. Abramovic first began to use her body as material in her work in 1972. With the *Rhythm Series* (1975), Abramovic utilised her body in a characteristic way. This work involved exploring the notion of fear through extreme bodily discomfort. Abramovic's use of the body is concurrent with the views of Lisa Tickner. Tickner reviewed the way in which existing images of sexuality in art were being constantly challenged in the 1970s by the work of women artists. Tickner argued that the female body was a fundamental site for feminist intervention in art practice (Betterton, 1996,p.9). The body represented all of what was recognised as being degrading in the erotic tradition of art in the West but at the same time gave women a way of expressing a specifically female experience. Abramovic's use of her body relates to these ideas. This is clear from her *Rhythm Series, Freeing the Voice, Freeing the Body, and Freeing the Memory*, all connect with Tickner's view of women using the body as a site for expressing a specifically female experience. John Berger has famously argued "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" (Berger, 1972)



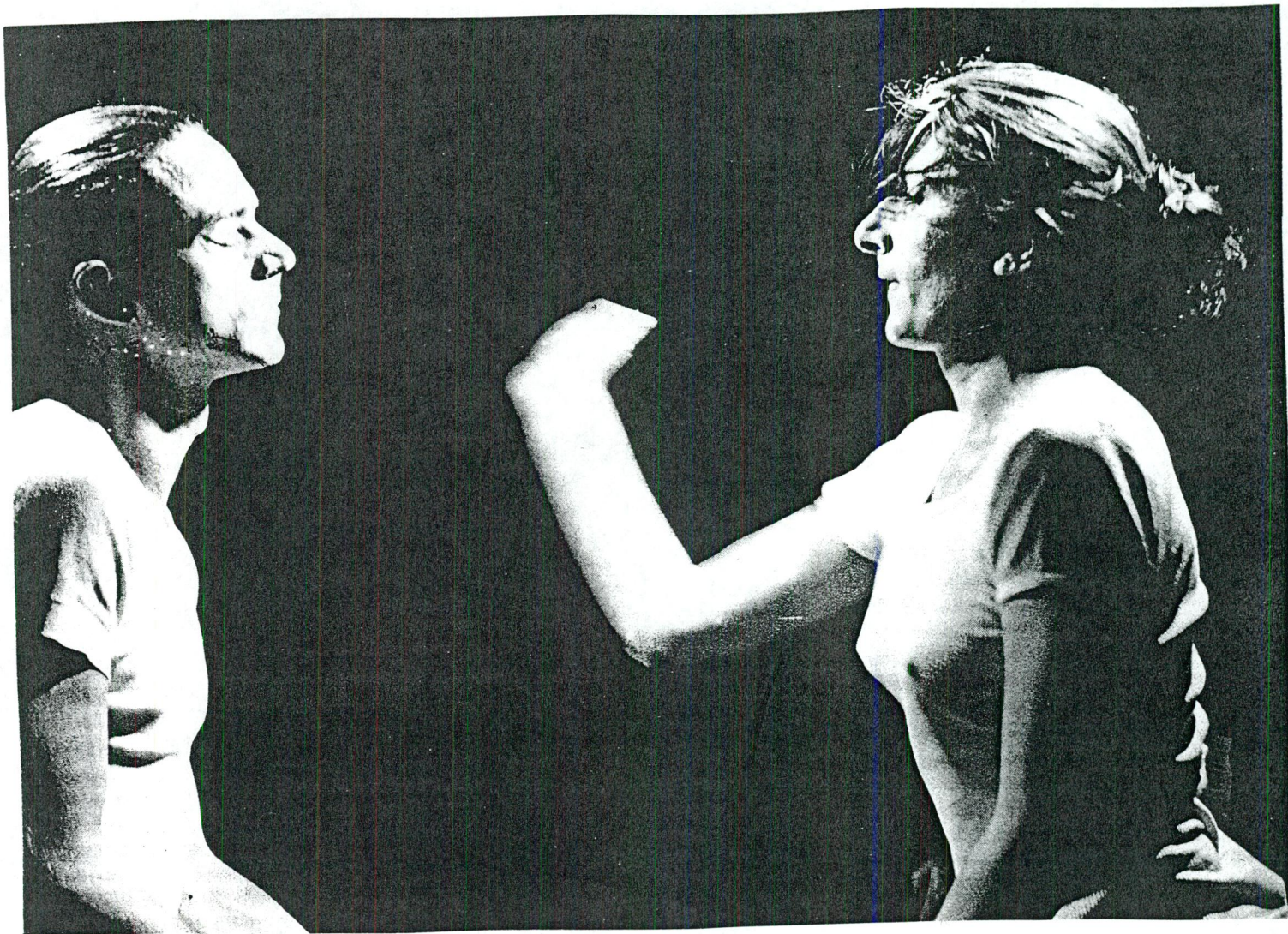


Plate 22, "Light/Dark."

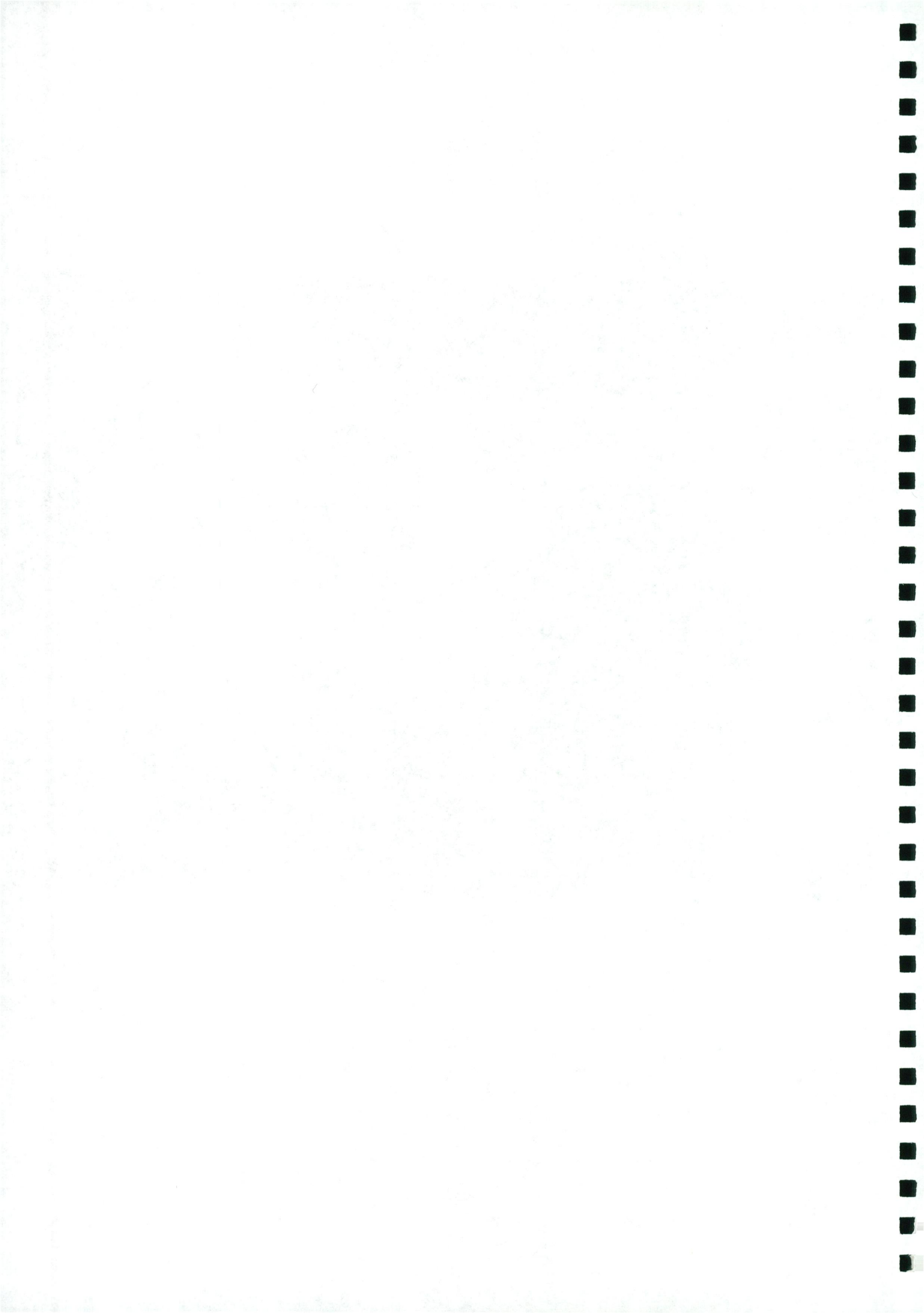
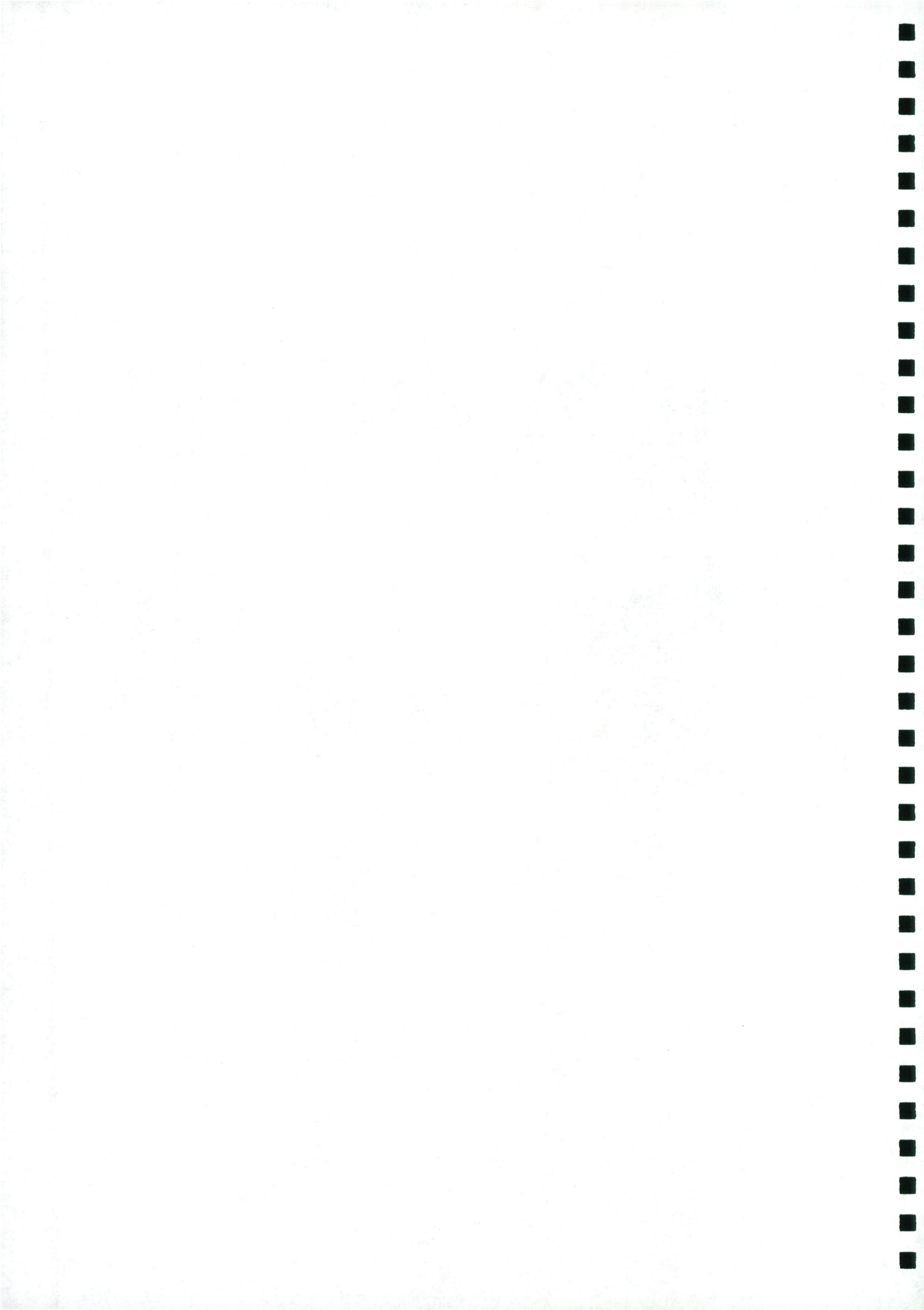




Plate 23, "*Breathing In/Breathing Out.*"



Feminists such as Laura Mulvey have argued that women in the past have been viewed as objects within culture, but rarely have they been recognised as subjects of cultural production in their own right. (Mulvey & Wollen, 1995, p. 203). Images of women in the West are not representative of female subjectivity, knowledge and experience. This fact is in constant opposition with the way in which women today try to reconstruct the body and its representation. Abramovic's *Rhythm 0* piece could be read as a reconstruction of the body as object. In *Rhythm 0*, Abramovic performed 'objectness' here she acted out the role of passive female, thus assuming a stereotypical gender role. In *Rhythm 0* Abramovic negates and subverts the passive/active opposition since her very passivity instigated the performance. This was a powerful act in the power that she wielded over a group of people to bring about a situation which aroused them to behave in the way they did. The audience reduced Abramovic to an object. They stripped her of her clothes and reasserted the constructed Western view of relating object with nakedness, abuse and humiliation.

Another feminist writer, Elizabeth Grosz, investigates how to reconceive the body as a socio-cultural artifact. Grosz looks at the traditional manner in which the body has been perceived and defined in terms of "mind and body, inside and outside, experience and social context, subject and object, self and other" underlying those terms, the opposition between male and female (Grosz, 1995, p. 103). She examines the make-up of the inside and outside of the body, in terms of how they relate to each other and how the body is constructed, in an effort to see the difference between biology and culture. In doing so, the exploration is guided towards an understanding of the way culture forms the biological order in its own image. She states that the body defines the limits of experience and subjectivity through the intervention of the other. With this in mind, it may be possible to argue that Abramovic is making serious effort to reconstruct the body image through opposing those traditional notions outlined by Grosz.

These traditional notions appear to be confronted through Abramovic's collaborative work with Ulay. After the work of the *Rhythm Series*, Abramovic joined forces with Ulay for a period of twelve years, during which they collaborated intensively. The works that ensued were rigorous and demanding for both artists. *The Relation Work Series* incorporated thirty different pieces of work.

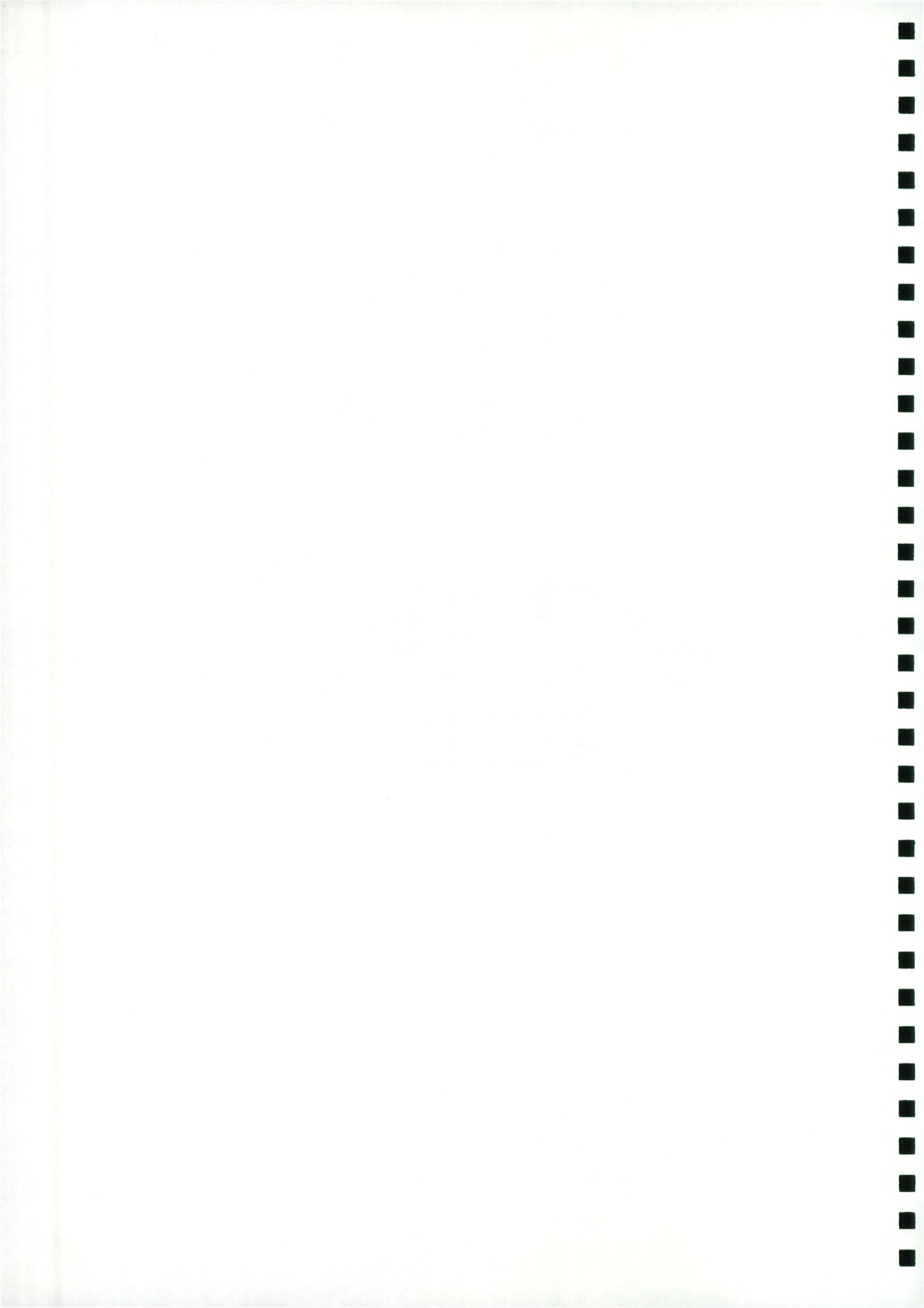




Plate 24, "Rest/Energy.."

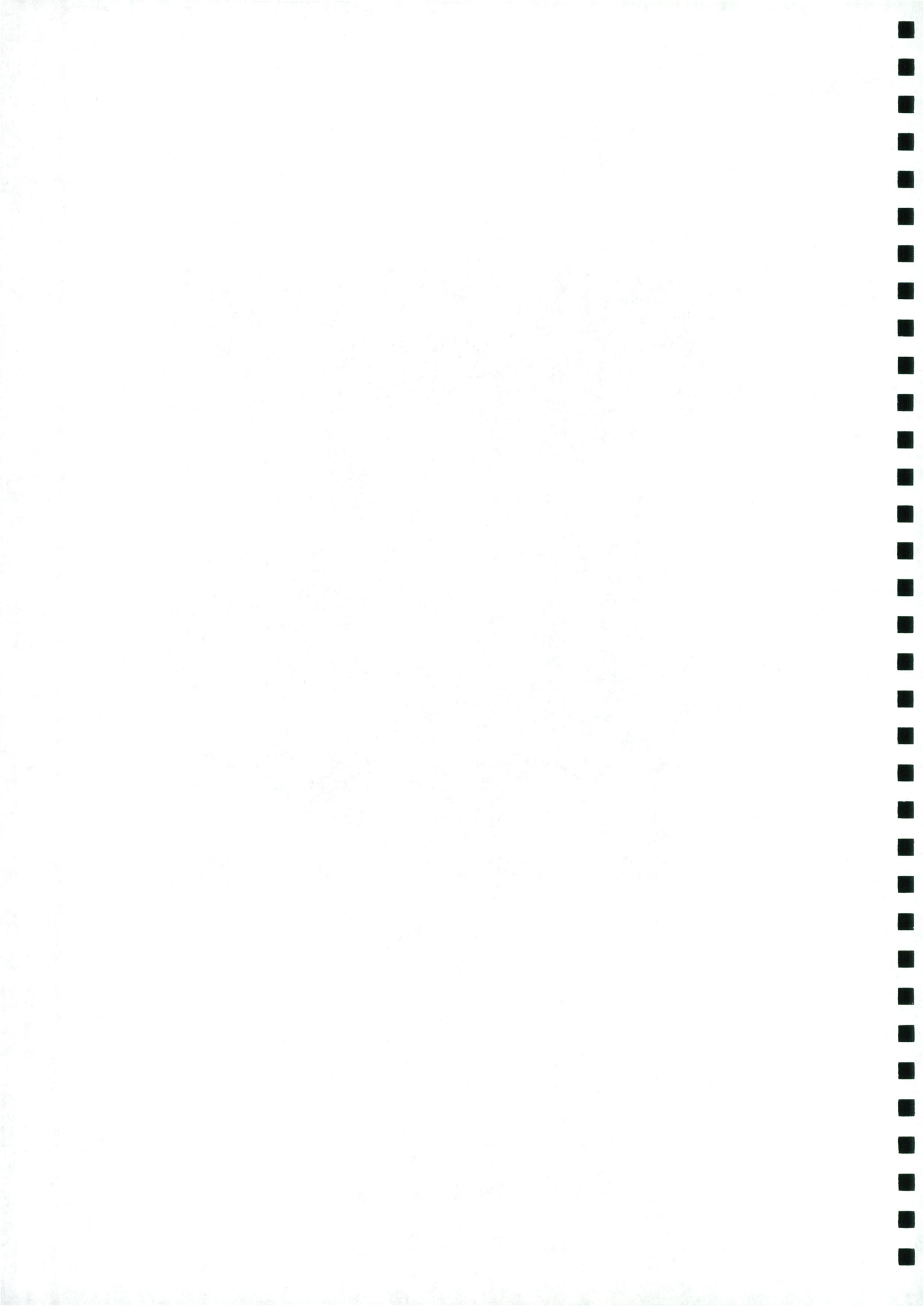
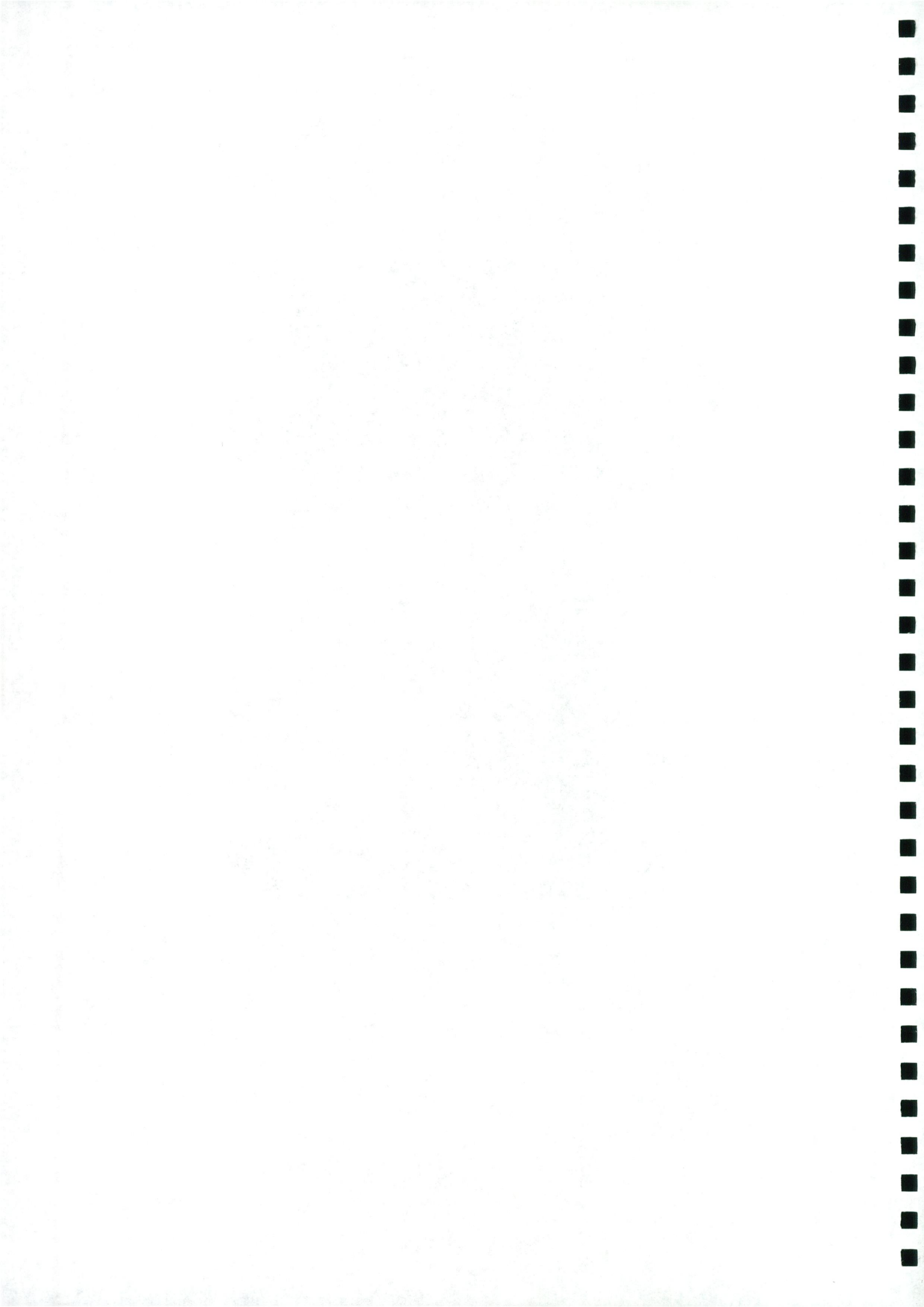




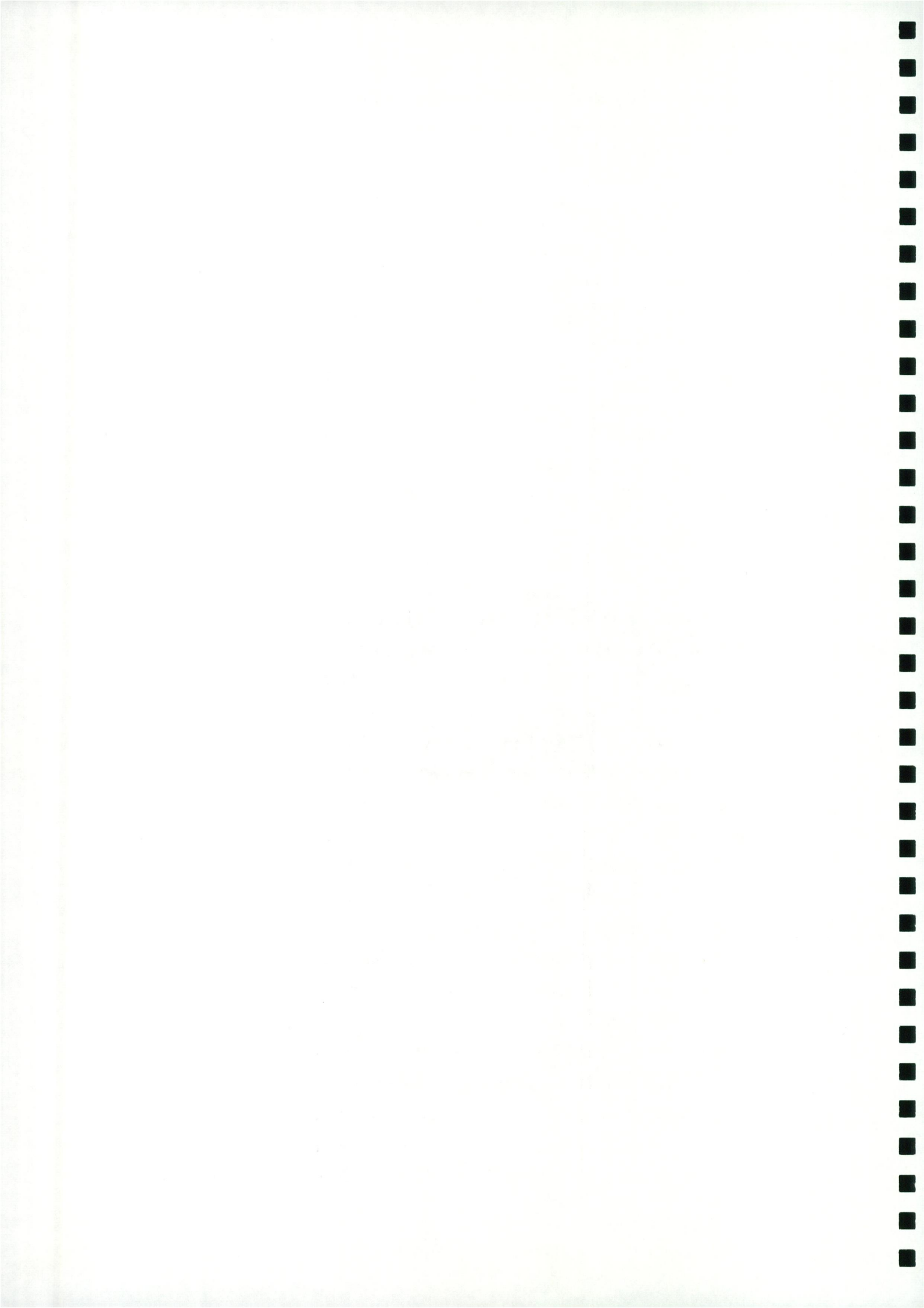
Plate 25, "Role Exchange."



The following paragraphs will address four pieces from this particular series. These pieces are *Light/Dark*, *Breathing In/Breathing Out*, *Rest/Energy* and *Kaiserschnitt*.

In *Light/Dark* (1977), a video piece, Abramovic and Ulay are presented alternately slapping each other's faces, for a period of twenty minutes (Plate 22). When finally Ulay slaps Abramovics face and she no longer reciprocates, the piece ends. In this piece, both artists are kneeling in front of each other. They in turn hit each other with an attitude of determined concentration. Theirs is a competitive atmosphere but the scenario is presented in a restrained controlled manner. It is evident that there are two different issues at work. The question of what is happening externally and how this corresponds to what is happening internally for both artists. There is also the male/female binary at play here. In this work that opposition is strongly represented, in the action and in the image.

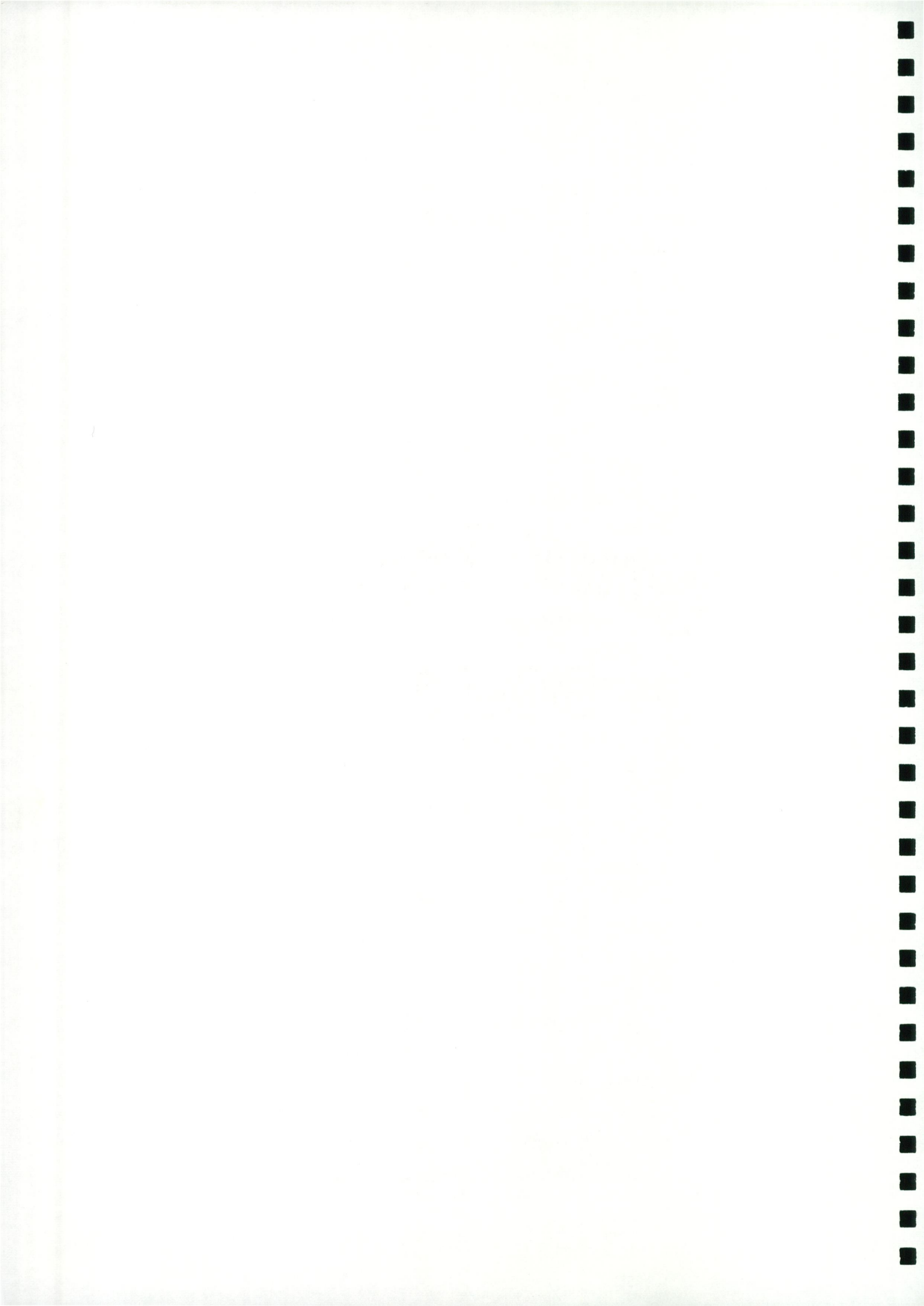
In the performance *Breathing In / Breathing Out*, Ulay is breathing oxygen in and breathing out into Abramovics mouth through his mouth (Plate 23). Both Ulay and Abramovic have their noses blocked, Abramovic's only source of air is through Ulay. Therefore, she is breathing carbon dioxide. This act is fundamentally dangerous and places Abramovic in a weak and vulnerable position as her survival is utterly dependant on Ulay. The idea of these works appears to have been to articulate the notion of relationships and what they entail but the scales of equality appear unequal. These works pit strength and endurance against each other, between male and female. The patriarchal concept of aligning men with power is clearly on display here. Perhaps this is the very point Abramovic wishes to make and in this way she confronts these issues. The question of power and the relative positions of male and female are emphasised in *Breathing In / Breathing Out*, *Light / Dark*, *Rest / Energy*, and their performance *Kaiserschnitt* in the International Performance Symposium, Vienna. It was generally at the point where one of the two performers reached their individual limit that the works ended. In the performance *Light / Dark*, Ulay strikes the last blow. Steven Durland suggests *Light/Dark* "acknowledged the pain that is inflicted inside a relationship in terms of the pain willingly suffered for it's sake"(Durland, 1986,p.51). Durland draws a comparison between the way Abramovic and Ulay indicate the strength of their relationship in *Light/Dark*



and in *Kaiserschnitt*, where they tested their strength against external forces (Durland, 1996, p.51). Durland suggests that we may be impressed by the strength of the relationship, he considers the act of dealing with the pressures within a relationship is a profoundly personal and private the experience of which is different for everyone. There is nothing to say about it to the public, Durland assumes this view would be the general consensus of opinion through personal experience. In the performance *Rest / Energy*, Ulay holds the end of the arrow and Abramovic holds the bow (Plate 24). This piece indicates that Ulay is the one in the place of power and the socially constructed view and understanding of masculinity being of an active aggressive and spontaneous nature compared to the position of the weak, passive feminine is in evidence here.

In *Kaiserschnitt* , a horse is held in the centre of the space by a rope passing through rings fixed onto opposite walls. The rope extends from the rings to the crooks of Ulay's and Abramovic's arms. Each movement of the horse becomes a separating force for the artists. They scream alternately, "I have nothing to say, ask anyone" (Abramovic,1980,p.114). It is Abramovic who is unable to hold onto the connecting rope and she lets it go. In *Rest / Energy*, Ulay holds the end of the arrow and Abramovic holds the bow.

From the 1960s many issues of feminist politics have foregrounded the body in campaigns for women to control their bodies against sexual abuse, violence and around issues of health and reproduction. The use of the body has always been a problem in feminism because of the way the body has been represented in the past. It would seem that Abramovic uses and reuses old codes of difference and reasserts them in her own way. In a dual performance piece, entitled *Role Exchange* (1975) at De Appel Gallery in the Red Light District of Amsterdam, Abramovic exchanges roles with a prostitute. Abramovic sits in a window on view to the public (Plate 25). Abramovic addresses the question of sexual identity. Perhaps, this is her way of indicating the need to create new erotic codes by way of reusing the old. This could be seen as Abramovic's way of addressing the question of difference through the use and discourse of the body. The focus is on the traditional socially constructed sexual subject, not on the individual. This work could question the notion of how to theorise the body, in respect of the biological and the social, the natural and the cultural.



All of these issues are still very much at the centre of feminist debate. This role exchange may be representative of the changes within feminist politics.

There have been shifts in technology in the latter part of this century which impact upon the body (Betterton, 1996 , p.5). Such as the developments within technologies of reproduction, genetic engineering, and gender reassignment procedures. The advent of new treatments for infertility are clearly representative of an area where the boundary between the female body and technology is blurring. The fixed notions of sexual difference which were previously the infrastructure of early feminist art in the 1960s are being challenged and redefined by these technological advancements and transformations.

"Role Exchange" centralises these issues by Abramovic exchanging her role as artist with a prostitute shows how the female body is culturally inscribed as she emphasises the concept of voyeurism and fetishism which further divides male and female; women as passive objects of the male gaze, and men as active participator and makers of their own desire.

"Essentialism is most commonly understood as a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the "whatness of a given entity" (Fuss, 1989, p. xi).

One type of women's art can be seen as a celebration of an essentially female power. Griselda Pollock suggests this power to be an innate feminine experience which articulates women's position within the relationship with society.⁴ (pollock, 1986) This essence is suggested to be exclusively female and this principle is the basis of essentialism.⁵ This type of art can be found in association with ritual. Idealism, materialism and mythology are some of the themes that are current in discourse relating to essentialism. The idea of a specifically female mythology is also associated with this notion. It is within the realms of possibility to see this type of art taking a heroic standpoint in terms of the body and reversing the traditional Western stance, of mind over matter. There are aspects of essentialism which could certainly be seen in Abramovic's work. *Rhythm Series* (1975) delivers a strong image of Abramovic possessing a power

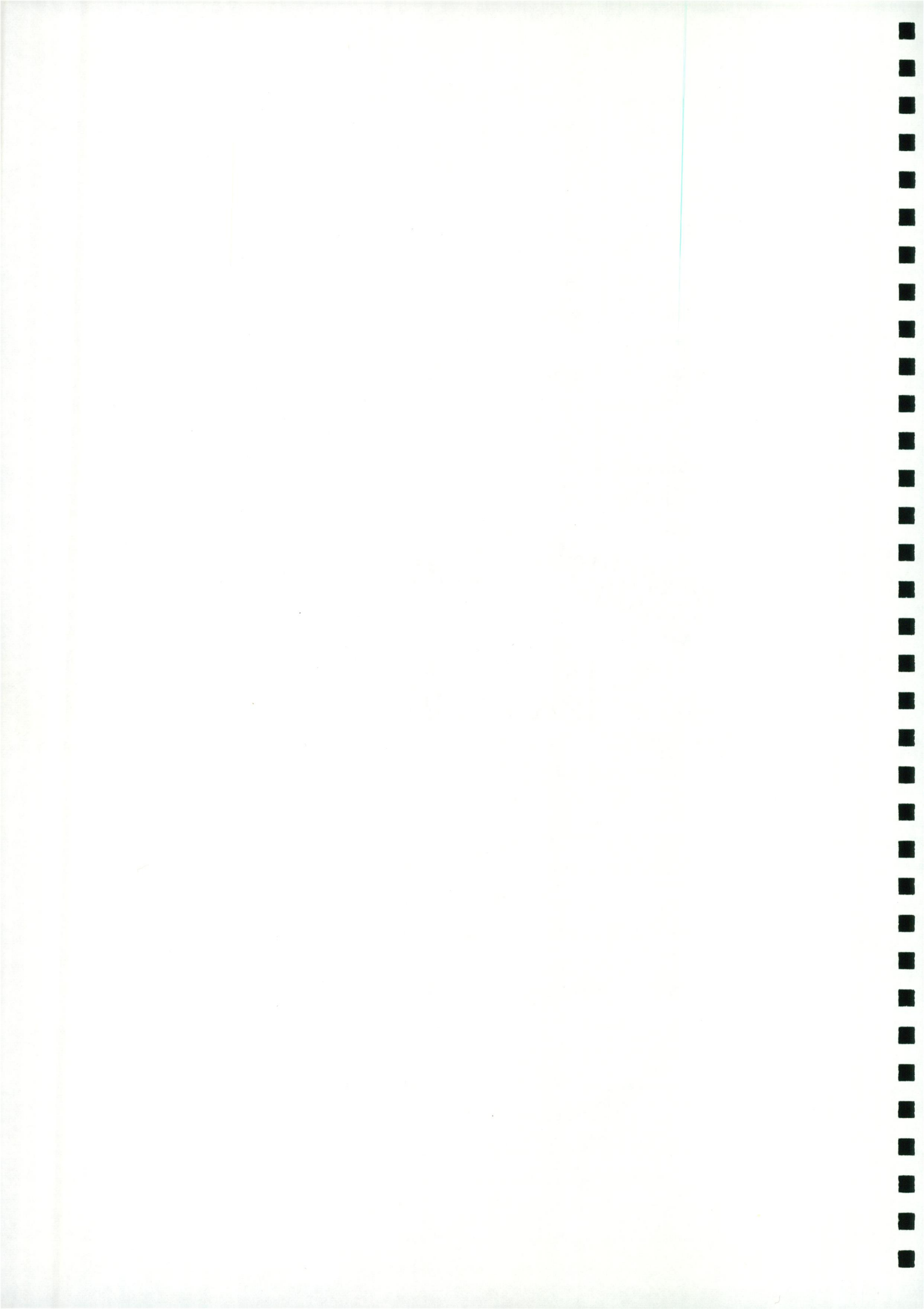




Plate 26 "*lips of Thomas*"

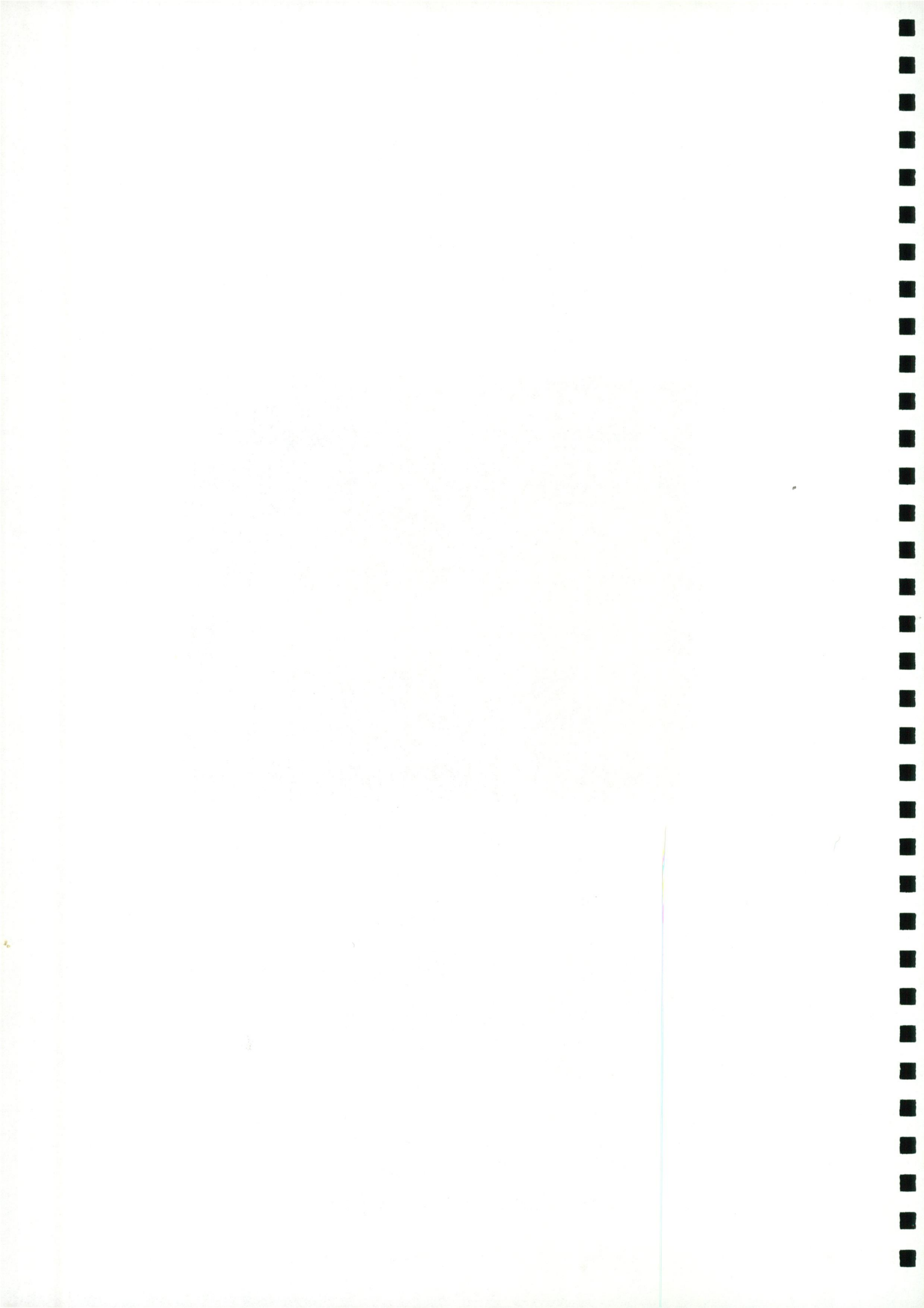




PLate 27, *Positive zero* from *The Modus Vivendi Series*.

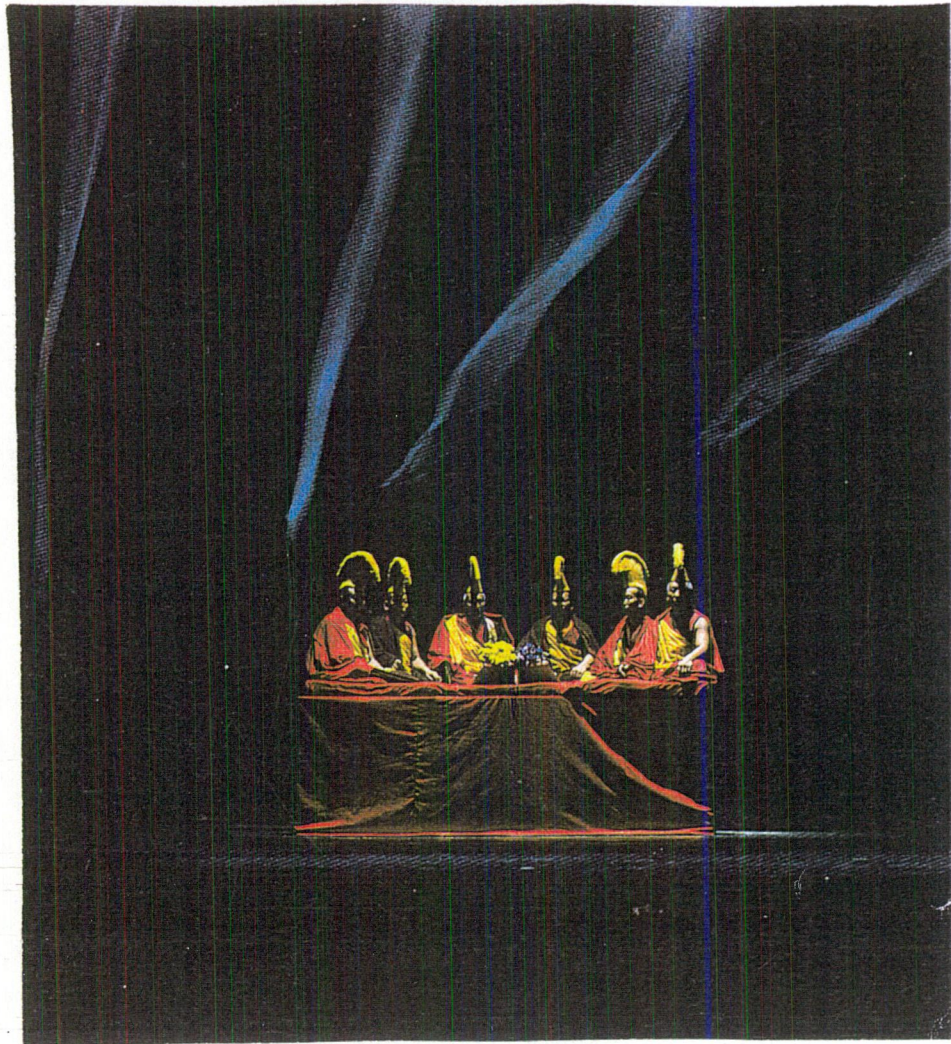
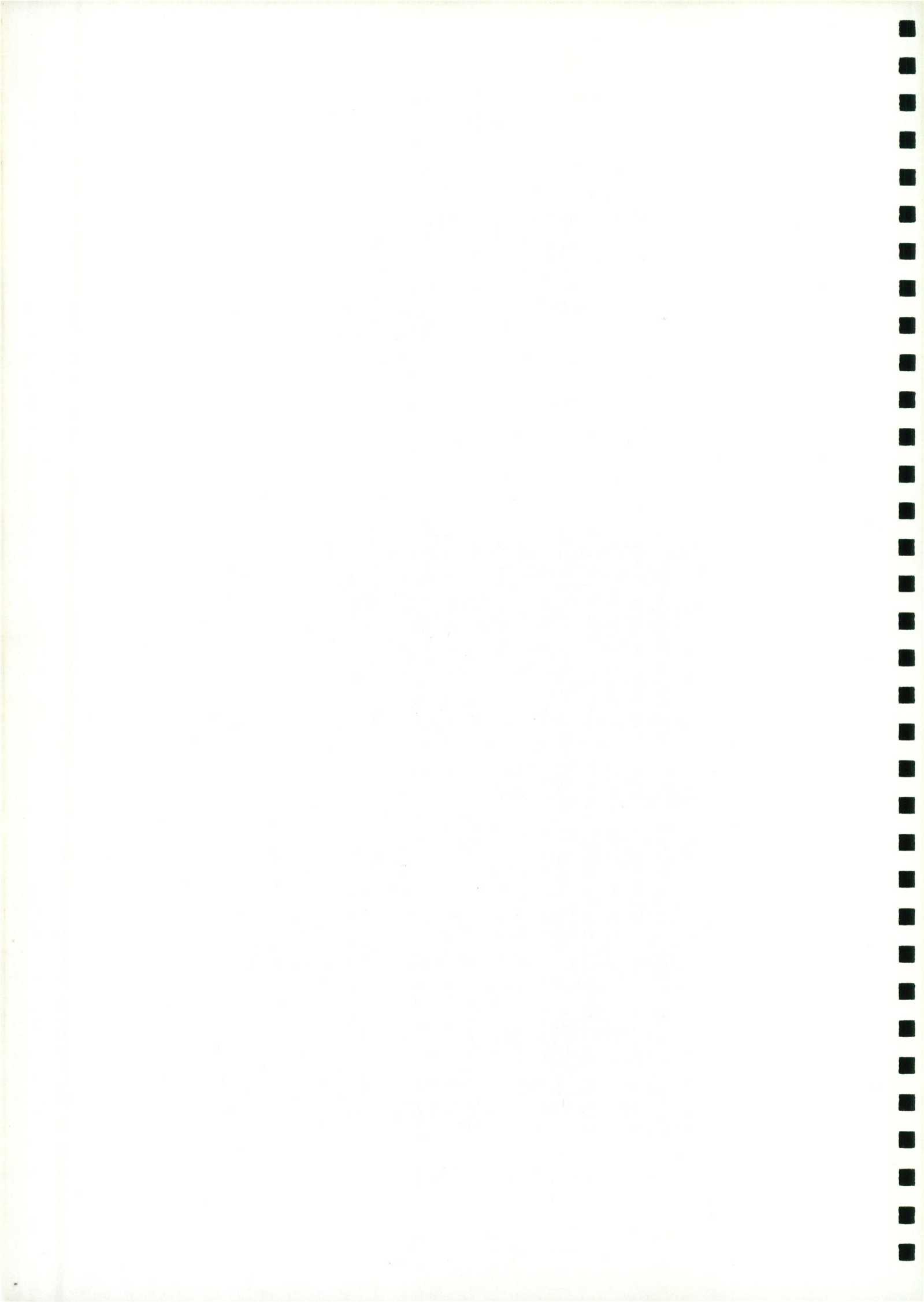


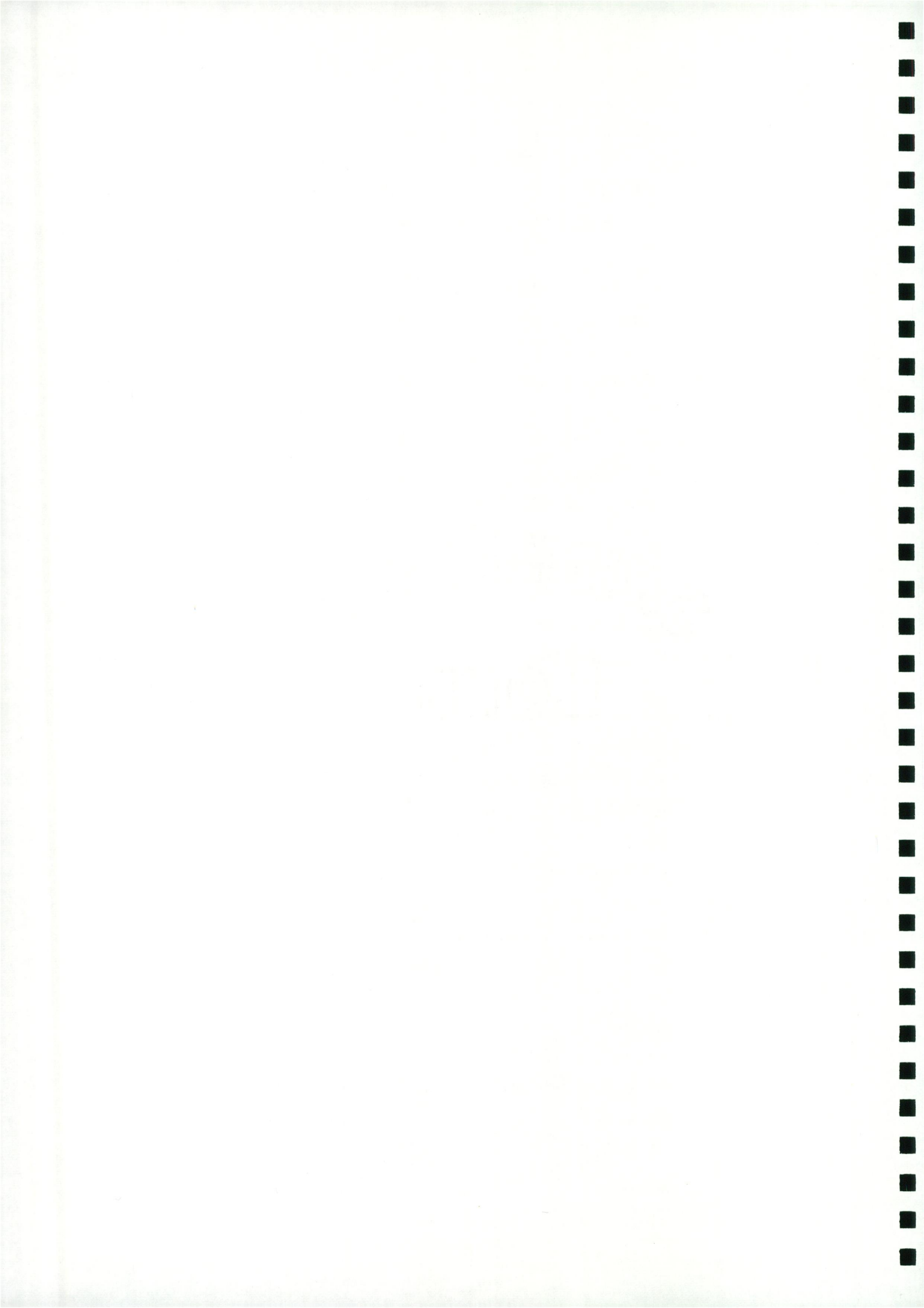
Plate 28, *Positive Zero* From *The Modus Vivendi Series*.



within herself to free her voice in *Freeing the Voice*, to free her memory in *Freeing the Memory*, to free her body in *Freeing the Body*. Abramovic performs as spectacle and her physical body presence is central in her work. Abramovic states in an interview with Ilse Kuijken, "All my work is about essence and totality, not specific problems" (Kuijken, 1993, p290).

Lips of Thomas (1975) performed in The Galerie Krinzinger, Innsbruck, clearly illustrated a strong sense of ritual. Abramovic cut a five pointed star on her stomach with a blade (Plate 26). This act was performed slowly and precisely, while blood is seen to stream down from the wound. According to Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman, to elevate pain to a position of an oppositional artistic force could reassert a traditional cliché about women (Barry, Flitterman, 1987, p314). Abramovic had used this emblem before in *Rhythm 5* (1974) but with it the star carried a traditional connotation as a symbol, and was politically representative of Communism and a national emblem of Yugoslavia. "After the performance I ask myself how to use my body in and out of consciousness without interrupting the performance" (Abramovic, 1993, p.55). This statement would appear to be contradictory in terms of human physical ability and in the way Abramovic has been unable to respond to potentially dangerous situations in other performances. In *Lips of Thomas*, the star has a different meaning as the point of the star faces downwards, which associates its image with something that could suggest an ulterior meaning in an evil or magical way. The use of symbolism is an integral part of Abramovic's art practice which is further emphasised by her use of ritual

The use of symbolism is clearly seen in Abramovic's use and understanding of the dragon myth, a myth which played an important part in *The Lovers*. The myth suggests that one side of the wall is considered to be male in gender and the other half is said to be female. Abramovic accepts the idea of this myth and uses the Yin and Yang construct, as part of the structure and plan for the walk. Both artists walk the side of the wall which is said to be associated with the gender opposite to each of their own. These examples provide sufficient similarities with what is understood to be essentialist. Abramovic's work does contain references to a specific female power. Abramovic uses symbolism, ritual and mythology in her work process and in some cases these form the basis of her work



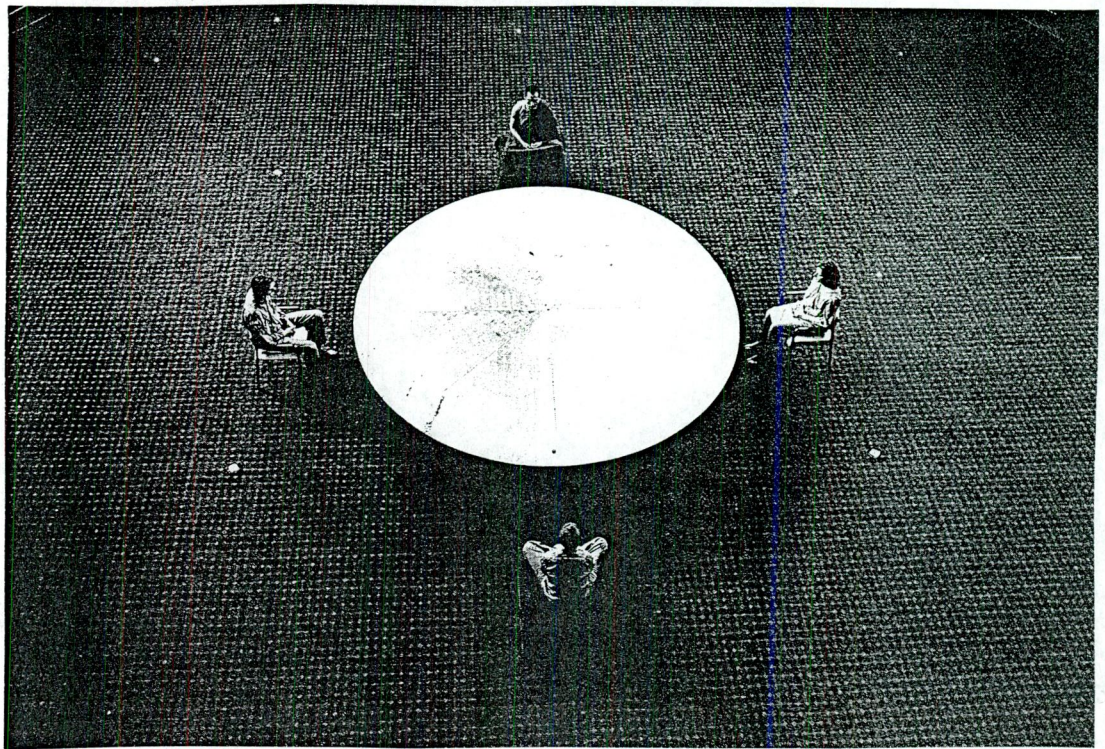


Plate 29, *conjunction* from *The Night Sea Crossing series*.

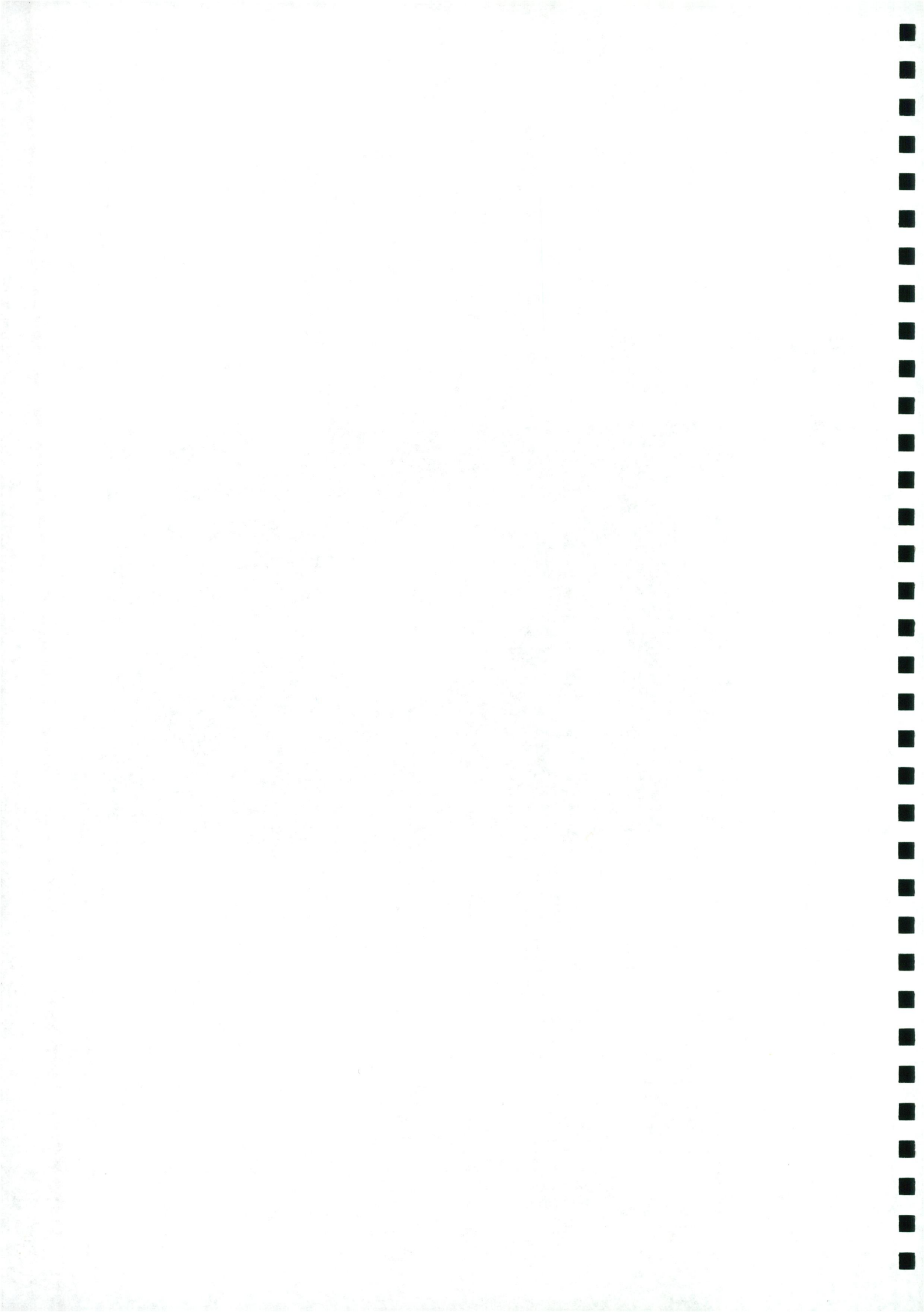
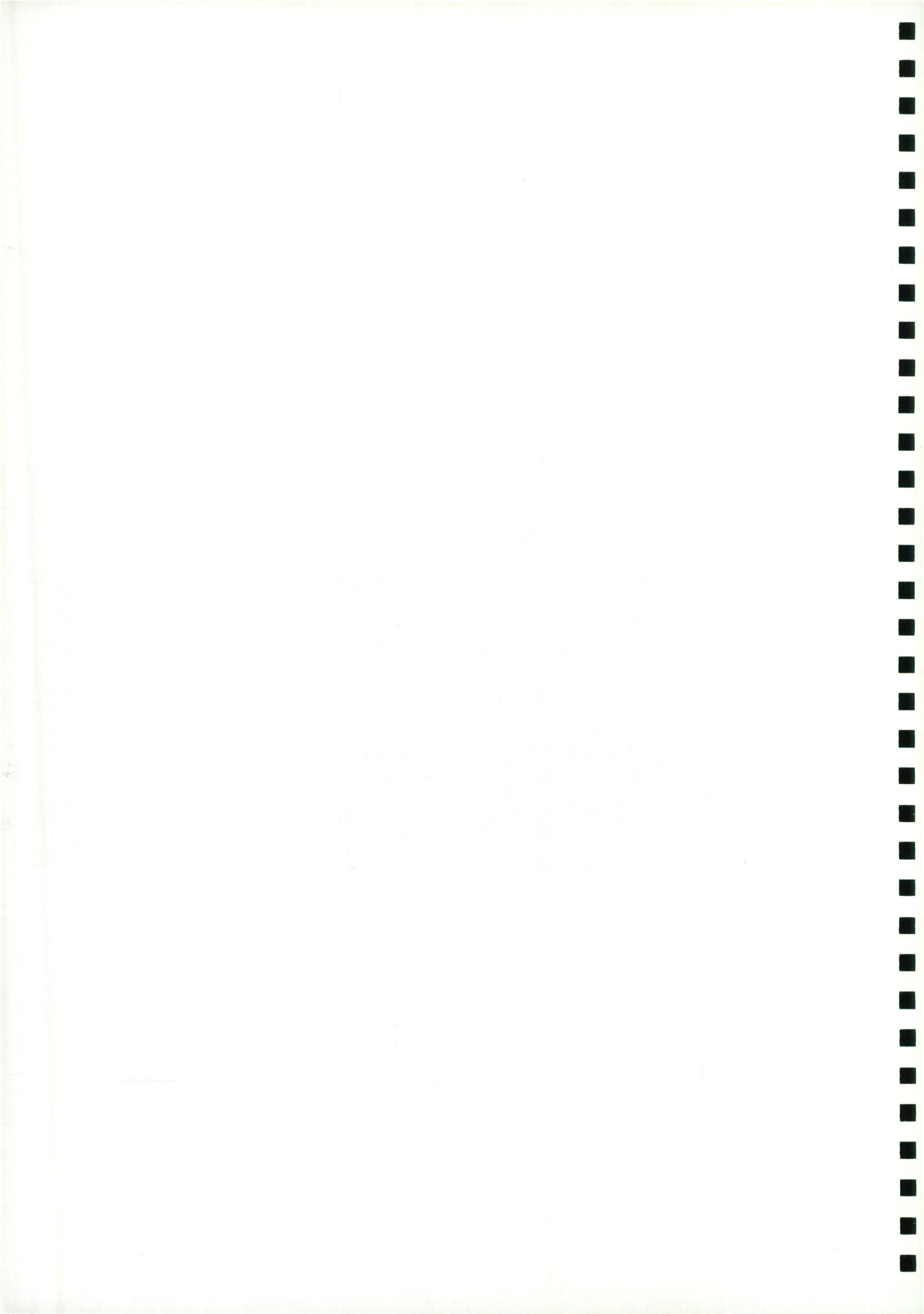


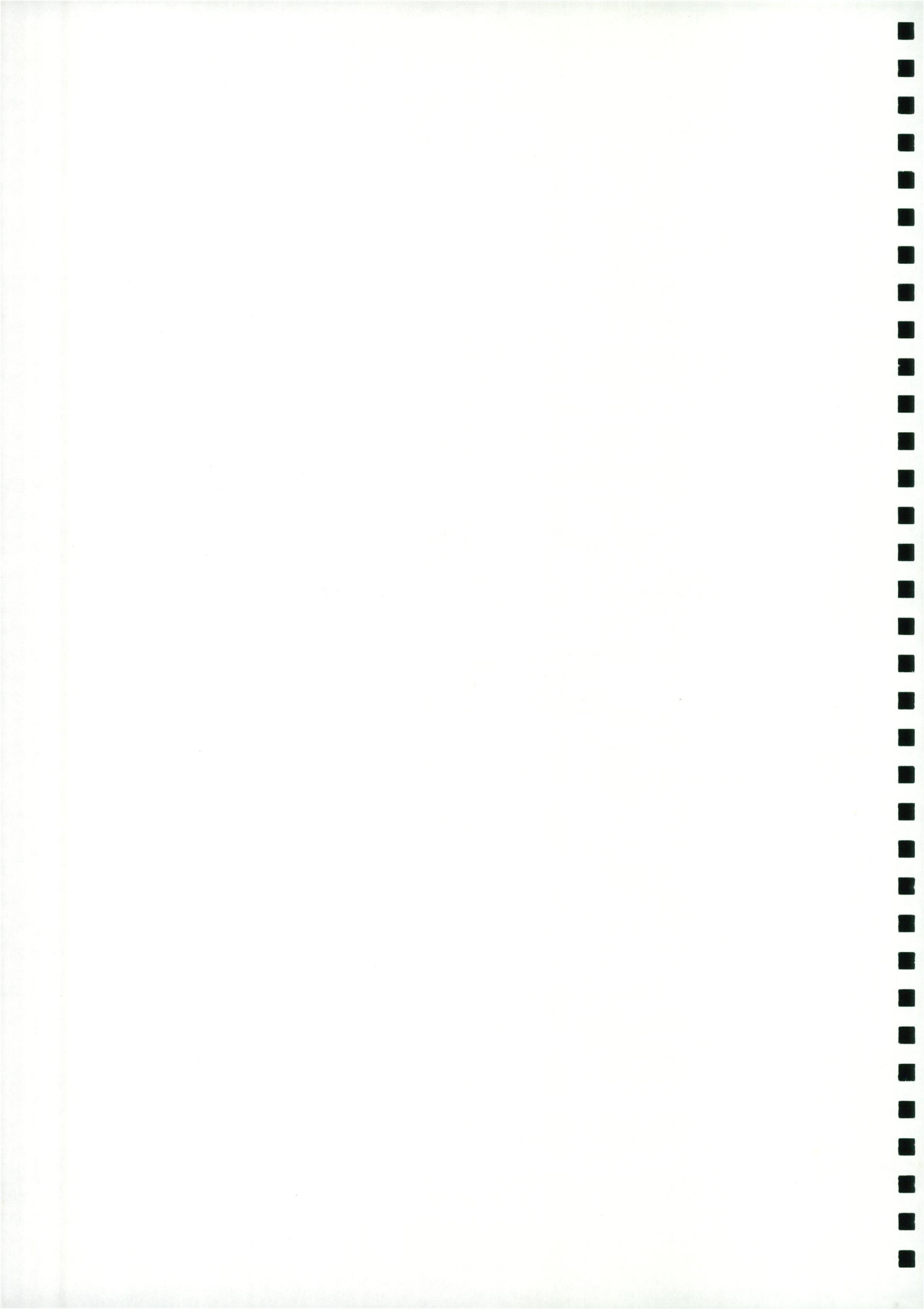


PLate 30, *The Great Wall* in the landscape



As well as the question of gender the body brings with it other political questions. Often in Abramovic's work the body is related to the "authentic" and in turn to the "primitive". Abramovic's work indicates an obsessive interest with third world cultures. Abramovic chooses elements of a foreign culture and highlights them with a Western style and taste. The resulting work expresses appreciation of the reality of "unfamiliar life forms" (Mc'Evilly,1989, p.113). Abramovic gives the impression of privileging Eastern and primitive traditions as being more in touch with nature. In this way certain oppositions seem to be identifiable between the first world metropolitan arena of the art world where-in Abramovic is promoted and her work distributed and the non-Western cultural reference points which are central to the thematics of the body in the work. The themes of 'pain', 'endurance', 'extremity' and 'different levels of consciousness', are consistently related to tribal, traditional or 'oriental' cultures. *The Lovers*, involved the Chinese. *Positive Zero*, from *The Relation Works Series* incorporated a performance including Tibetan monks Indians and Aborigines (Plate 27, 28). In order to evaluate the larger significance of Abramovic's thematics, it is important to consider those elements of the work which may bread in relation to "Primitivism" and "Orientalism" 6

The Orient was the object of a powerful fantasy. (Hall, 1992, p. 302). Sexuality was a powerful aspect in the fantasy which the West had constructed of the Orient. The Orient was imagined as a place of paradise, which was inhabited by people whose lifestyle was simple and innocent. The Oriental was considered to be lacking in any social organisation or civil society. The Orient became a source to the West, in terms of theoretical study in anthropological, racial, historical, biological and linguistic interests 7. The notion of the East was re-imagined and represented through a Western perspective and consciousness. The Orient became a possession of the West and was colonised for reasons of the West's repressions, desires and projections. Orientalism is also to be seen informing avant-garde art practice in the early decades of the twentieth century. The evidence of this interest is seen in the work of avant garde artists who used both the image of the orient and a related image of the primitive. In line with Ingres over half a century earlier, Matisse constructed Oriental fantasies ,Picasso and Gauguin were advocators of particular types of "Primitivism". Gauguin in his appeal to a fantasy of Tahitian culture as in *Manao Tapapou*, (Spirit of the Dead Watching) and Picasso in his use of West African sculptural stylisation, as in *Les Demoisselles D'Avignon*.. Those within Western society who



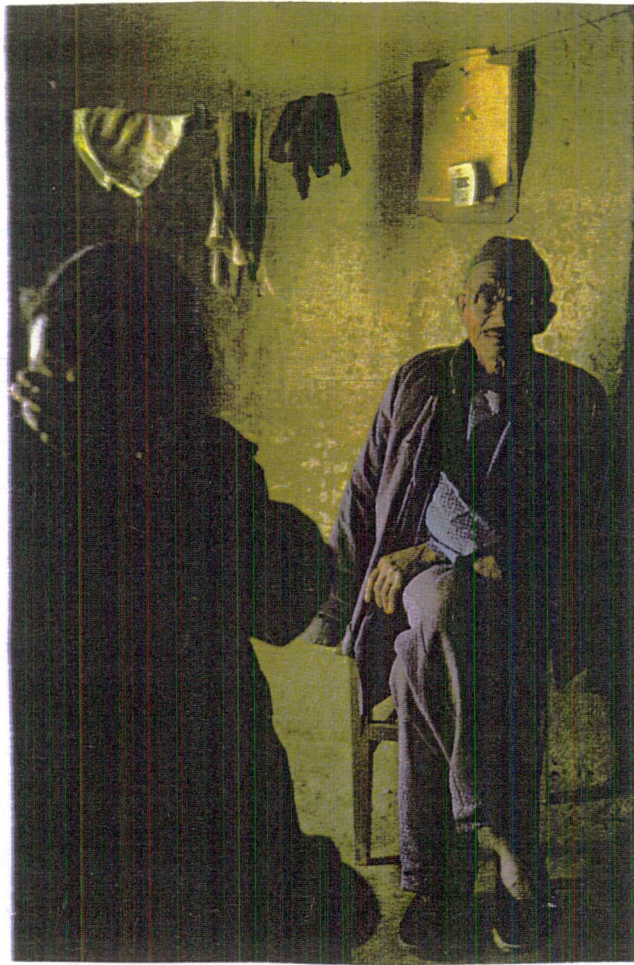


PLate 31. "The Lovers", Chinese people at home.

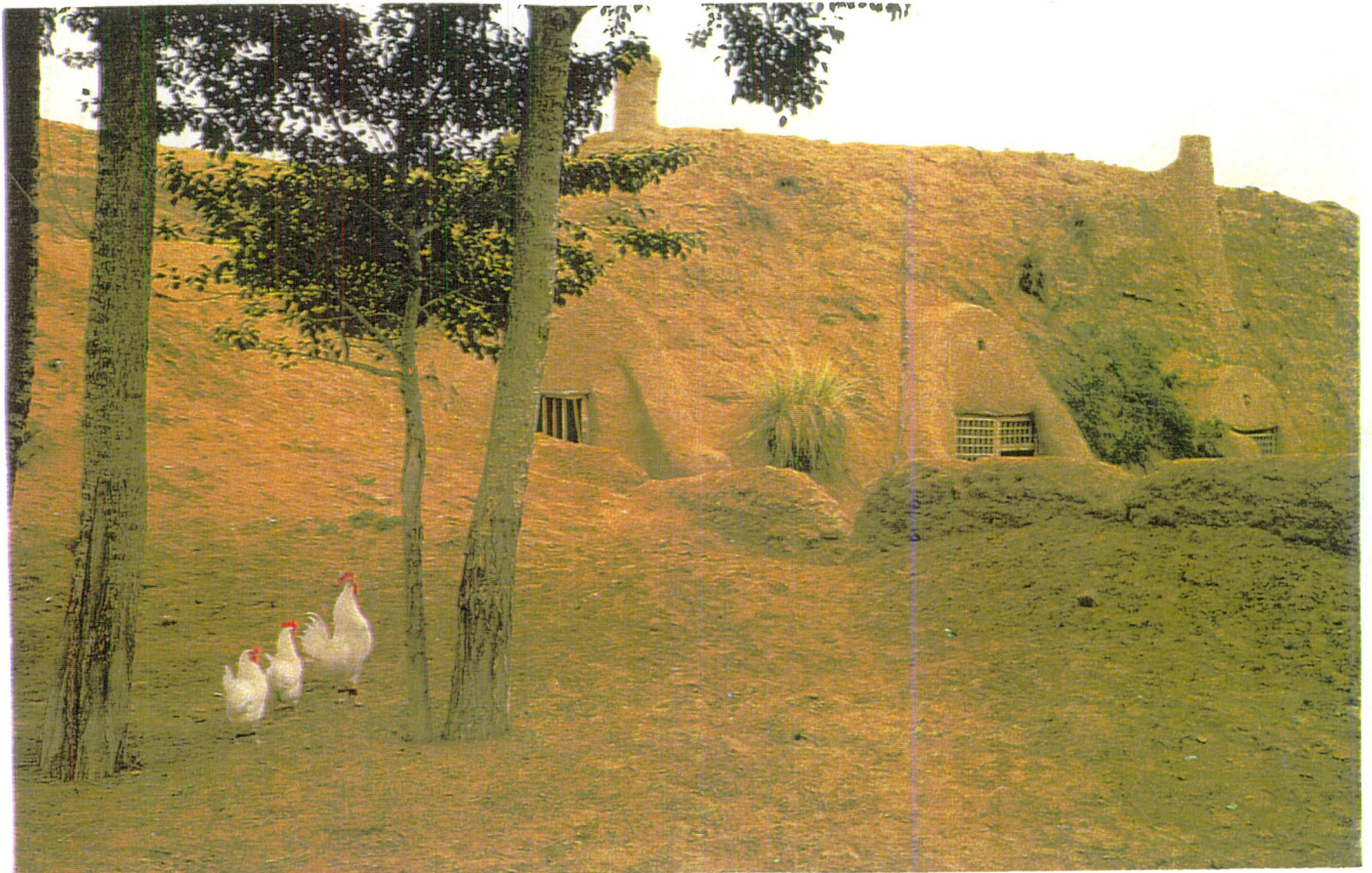


PLate 32, "The Lovers," Rural Chinese homes.

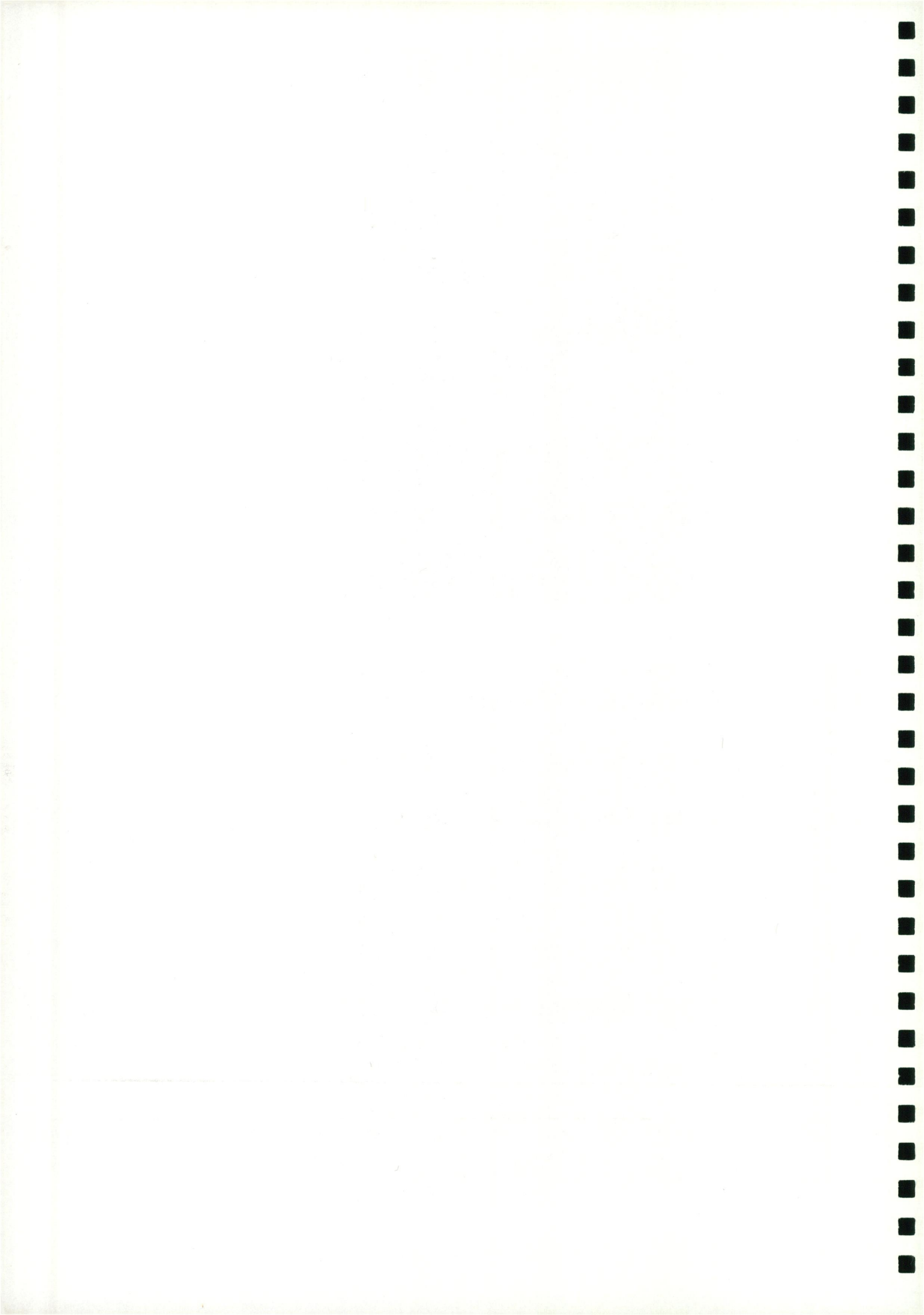




PLate 33, *The Lovers*, Abramovic stands on the wall, only her feet in view.

Today I saw the rain bathe the dead.
Which is stronger, the fragrance or the rustle of the hay.
(Huang Xiang, 199 ,p.170-171).

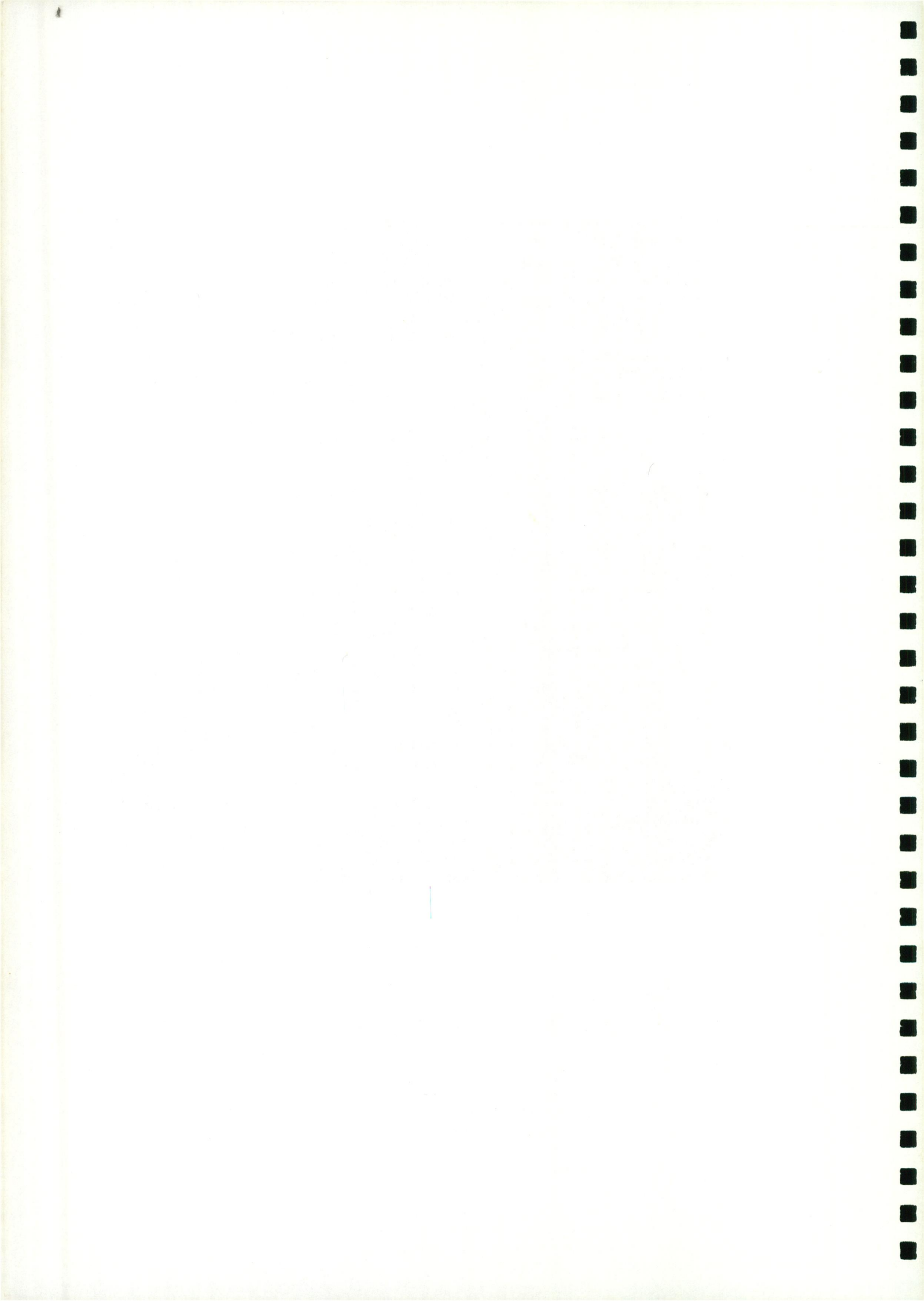
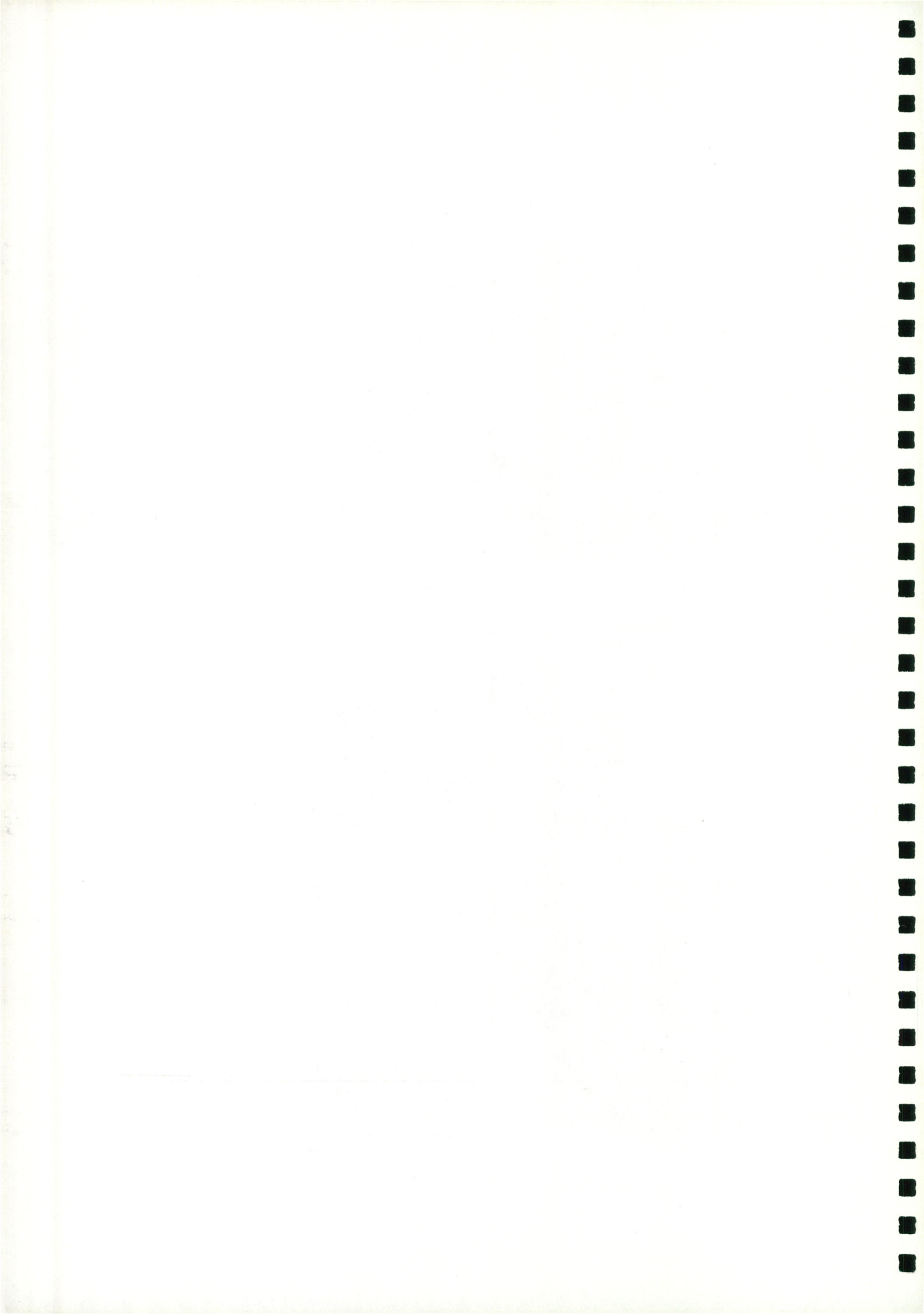




Plate 34, "*he Lovers*", Abramovic balancing a stick.



Plate 35, "*The Lovers*" Abraamovic waves a flag.

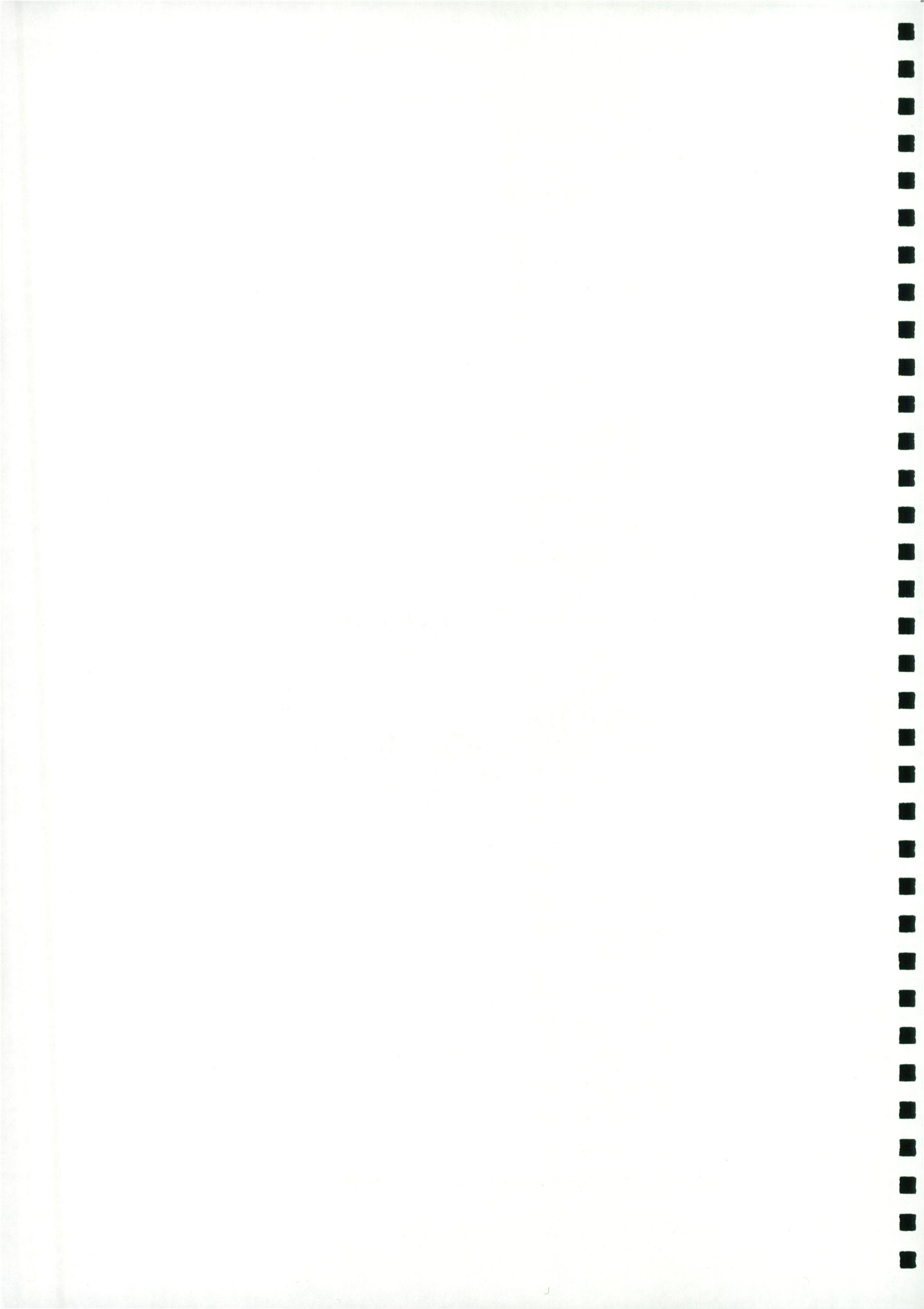


analyse, teach, paint or reproduce a view of the 'primitive' are, by this activity dominating, restructuring and having authority over that which they define as 'primitive'. This would suggest that Abramovic's work might be construed as a contemporary instance of the familiar discourses of 'Primitivism' and 'Orientalism'.

Abramovic's art practice has included the presence and participation of people from rural provinces and outreach civilisations. Both Abramovic and Ulay have lived with Aborigines in Australia in 1979, and were residents in a Buddhist cloister in India. From these activities developed two performances, one entitled "*Conjunction*" from *The Night Sea Crossing Series* Performed in the round Lutheran Church in Amsterdam in 1983, for a duration of four hours, over four consecutive days. Both Abramovic and Ulay sat around a gold leaf covered round table together with an Australian Aborigine and a Tibetan monk. In their performance *Positive Zero*, they performed with six Tibetan Lamas from India and two Australian Aborigines. The integration of Aboriginal and Tibetan references into one piece suggests the reduction of cultural differences to merely a singular cultural difference where the West is the central point of reference. In an interview Johan Pijnappel asked Abramovic:

Q: What do you see as highlights in your own career?

Abramovic: One of them was from a series called '*Night Sea Crossing*', a work with my fellow artist Ulay. We brought a Tibetan Lama and an Australian Aborigine from their own culture and made a piece together with them here in Amsterdam. We built a very big table, eight meters in diameter and covered it with twenty four carret gold. We sat around it for seven hours a day motionless in the Sonesta Church. The Church too was completely round. It was like circling a circle, looking like the sun with four planets. This was the first time that a Tibetan and Aborigine cultures really met each other. It was for many reasons a very important event. There was a lot of anger about it, because the project was bought like a painting or sculpture by the city of Amsterdam. Many artists and art administrators were very much opposed to that. They said: 'What did you buy? You bought a dream. It was so expensive to get a passport for the Tibetan Lama and to fly a small plane to the desert to get the Aborigine. And then what do you have. You have a dream' Tijmen van Grootheest, who bought the project, defended it. He said: " We bought a dream. This dream costs about the same as a middle-class car, but for that price

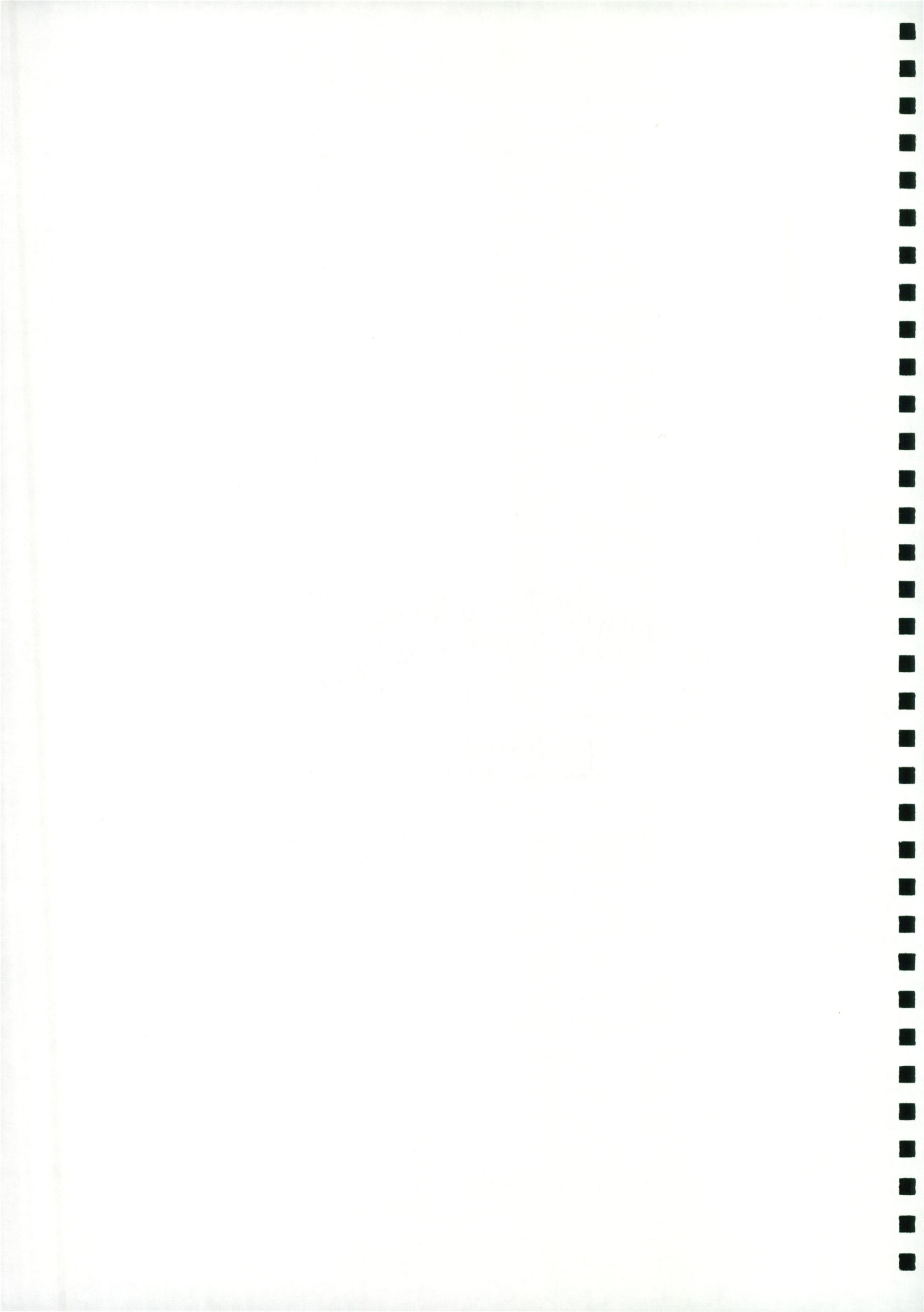


we got a Rolls Royce". It is interesting how we need dreams at this time. And these dreams cost money (Pijnapple,1990, p.303) (Plate 29).

From this discussion it is clear that Abramovic's concerns are not connected to the real concerns of the issue in question. The people of Amsterdam obviously were aware of the significance of bringing two diverse cultures together in this way. Abramovic's performance highlights the absurdity of placing these people together, to be on public view amongst plush and unfamiliar surroundings. In today's terms it is nothing less than a humiliating act. Abramovic appears to have used the situation to create a theatrical spectacle. Tijmen van Grooyheests use of metaphors is offensive and could only be classed as a superior white Western attitude which complies to the elements built into the structure of 'orientalism'.

In the book and catalogue *The Lovers*, Thomas Mc Evilly documents the walk of *The Great Wall project*. It is interesting to note that the majority of the photographs which document Ulay's walk, show the native people in their homes, outside of their homes, and at work (Plate 31,32). Ulay dedicated a piece of writing in this book to "To the good people".(Abramovic, 1989, p.58) He remarks on "the clear stream water, the lovely mountains, small wooden houses, tall green trees. There is plenty of food and fruit, children, playing in the grass. Happy people everywhere. Their lives are most simple, calm, slow. They may eat meat once in two months. They are strong, healthy, but most of all, contented" (Abramovic, 1989, p. 58-59) Ulay expresses a desire to live with in this situation and states that he is "greedy for authenticity". (McEvilly, 1989, p. 36). The company of the peasant people of China represented a sense of belonging for Ulay.

Abramovic is photographed mostly at a distance indicating the distance and immensity of the walls and the landover which the wall stretches over. There is a heroic aspect evident or suggestive of the way in which Abramovic posits herself within the vast landscapes. Abramovic is also seen struggling with *The Wall's* ruggedness and its gradients. Walking the wall represented freedom for Abramovic. Her relationship with Ulay was coming to an end and she was determined to walk the wall without 'sentimentality'. "I walk every fucking centimeter of the wall" (Mc evilly,1989, p.103) Abramovic's feet are photographed, standing on a part on *The Wall*. (Plate 33) There is evidence of



human remains along with ancient architectural fragments to be seen beneath her feet. Once again Abramovic confronts the viewer with symbols of 'pain' and 'death'. In an interview with Johan Pijnappel (Pijnapple, 1990,p.298), Abramovic was asked,

Q: How do you yourself think you could function in the world as an artist?
Perhaps as messenger?

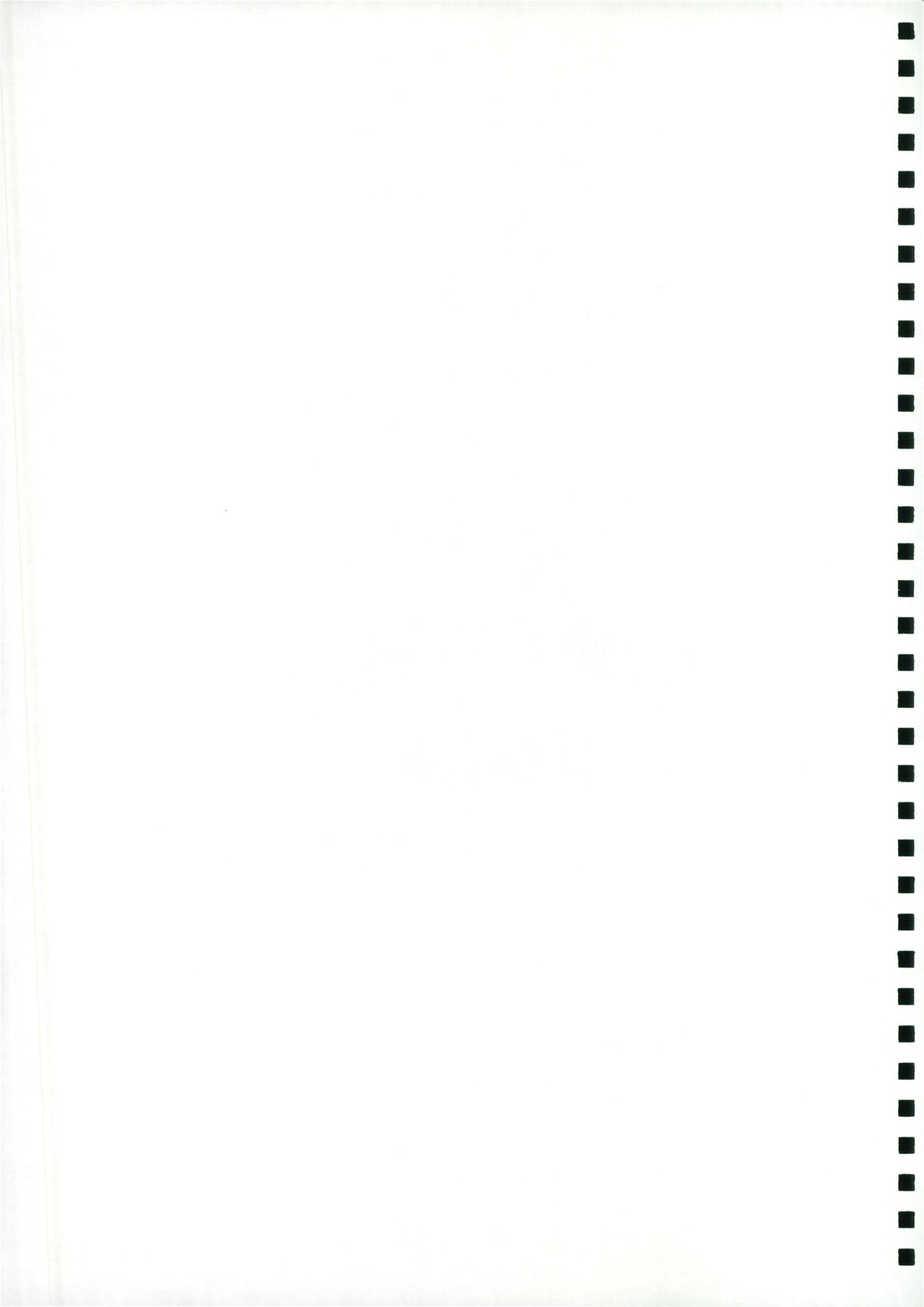
Abramovic: Untill now my function as an artist has been very particular. I always go to the East and to nature, to extreme situations like living in the dessert, or I spend time with Tibetans or Aborigines, or decide to be just myself on a little island somewhere in the Pacific and there I get the energy and ideas for art. Then I come to Western society and serve as a bridge. There I recieve and here I give. That goes on in cycles all the time. I think that our society is a very disturbed society. We need art as a way of showing to humanity how it can develop, as scientists or spiritual people. My function as an artist is the bridging of West and East.

Abramovic perceives the Eastern cultures to posess qualities that the Western culture has lost with time. Abramovic uses her work to try and indicate to the West an understanding of what has been lost.

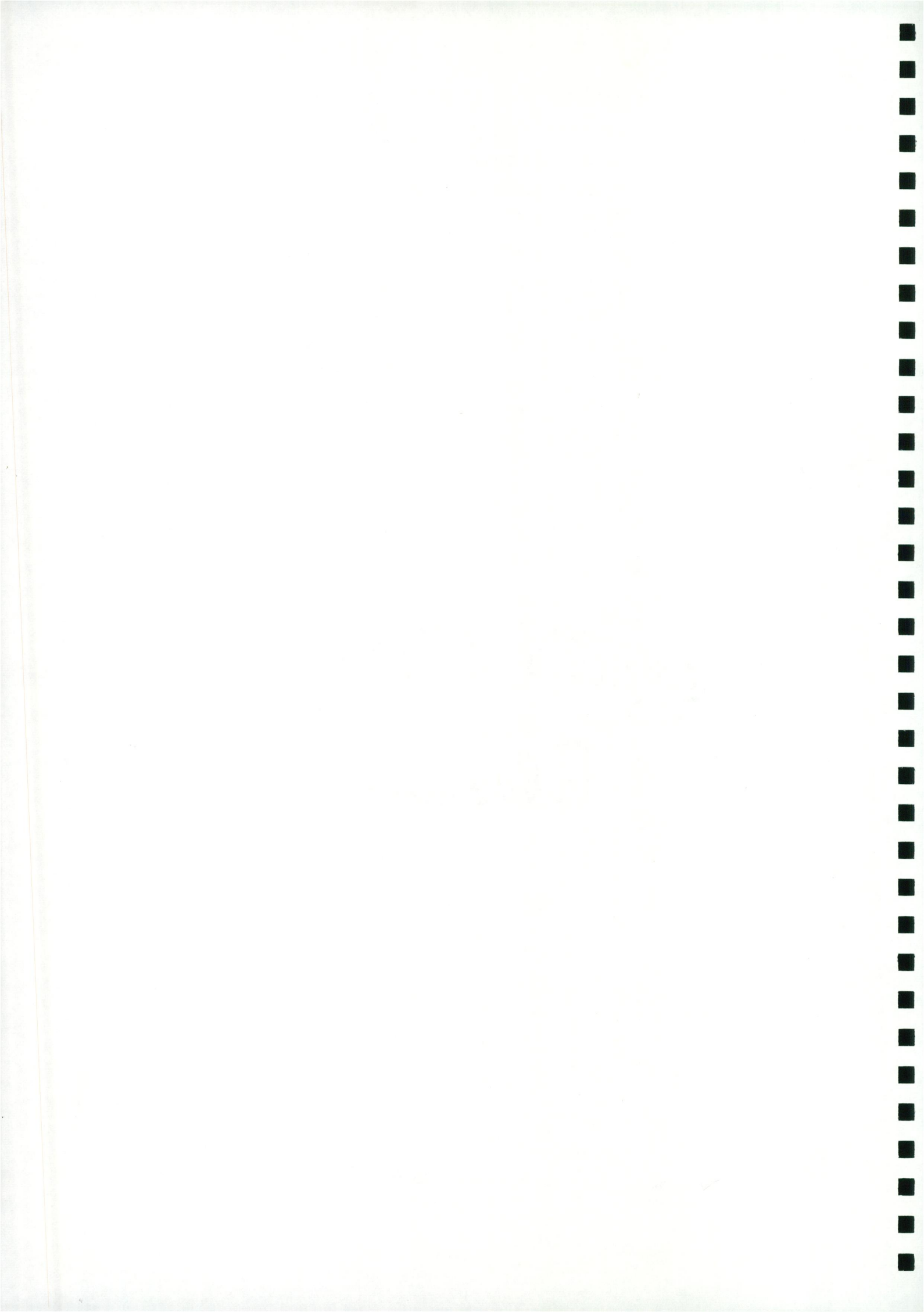
Abramovic's romantici notions are further reflected in a conversation with Mc Evilly during his visit to the artists while walking The Great Wall. She cried as she spoke of the "ugliness, the ugliness" of it all (McEvelley, 1989, p.106). She spoke of a desire to have beauty around her and the need for this. The initial fantasy, of the walk, the wedding, had now gone , now diminished through time to a reality that was far less romantic than when *The Great Wall* .project was first conceived.

Abramovic is photographed waving a flag a symbolic gesture marking the end of *The Lovers* and *The walk of The Great Wall of China..* (Plate 35).

"We each take 2000 km march to say goodbye" (Abramovic,1989, p.173)



This Chapter highlighted the way women use their body as a central focus as a feminist intervention in art practice. Abramovic fully exploits this concept to express herself through the medium of performance to reconstruct the body and it's representation. Abramovic confronts and pushes the ideas of traditional notions and limitations. The concept of essentialism is present in Abramovic's work and is evident in her expression, a powerful display of her own female experience and it's totality. There appears to be elements within the concepts 'primitivism' and 'orientalism' which conflict with Abramovic's work practice. Abramovic incorporates the involvement of native people from non western cultures, she sees the union of East and West as being an important move forward towards a reevaluation of Western ideas and priorities, to become more aware of the capabilities of our minds and bodies.



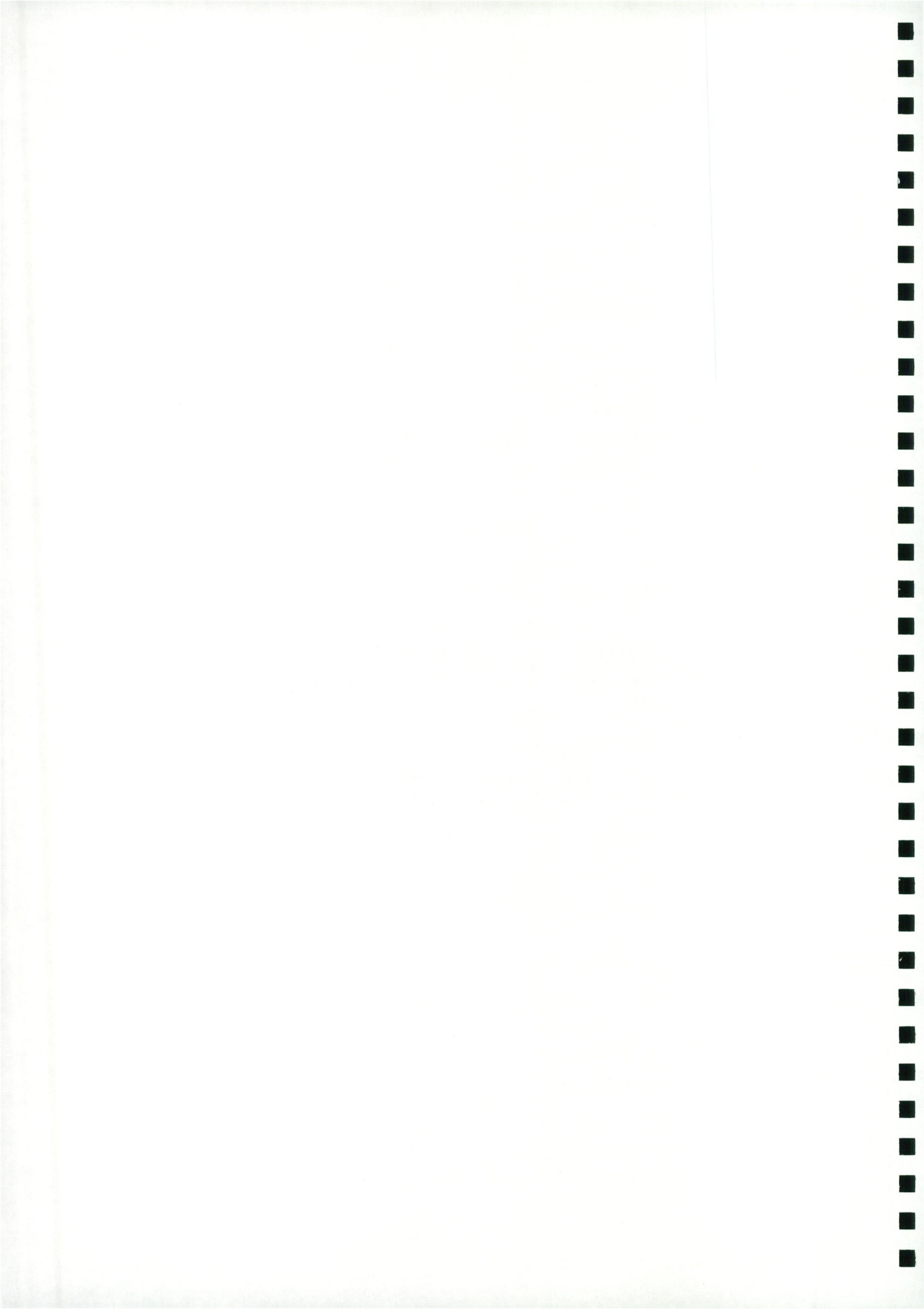
CONCLUSION:

This thesis was an investigation of recurring themes in the work of Marina Abramovic to achieve a greater understanding of her work practice . This involved looking at Abramovic's background and her work in a general way followed by a closer scrutiny of three specific works, to analyse the recurring themes. At first sight, the work would appear to be greatly diverse, particularly as her use of media is adventurous and varied and her work is sited in different locations throughout the world. She has been a prolific producer of art work since the beginning of her career, and is renowned for her risk taking and for placing herself in precarious and often dangerous situations, as the previous work indicates. It is the recurrent presence of these themes that this thesis sought to clarify. However it has become evident that all of the work had the same essential ingredients .These elements are important in the work, in that they create an excitement that is tinged with an element of danger, Abramovic achieves this in her work through the recurring presence of pain , endurance, extremity in the use of the body and altered use of consciousness or subconscious.

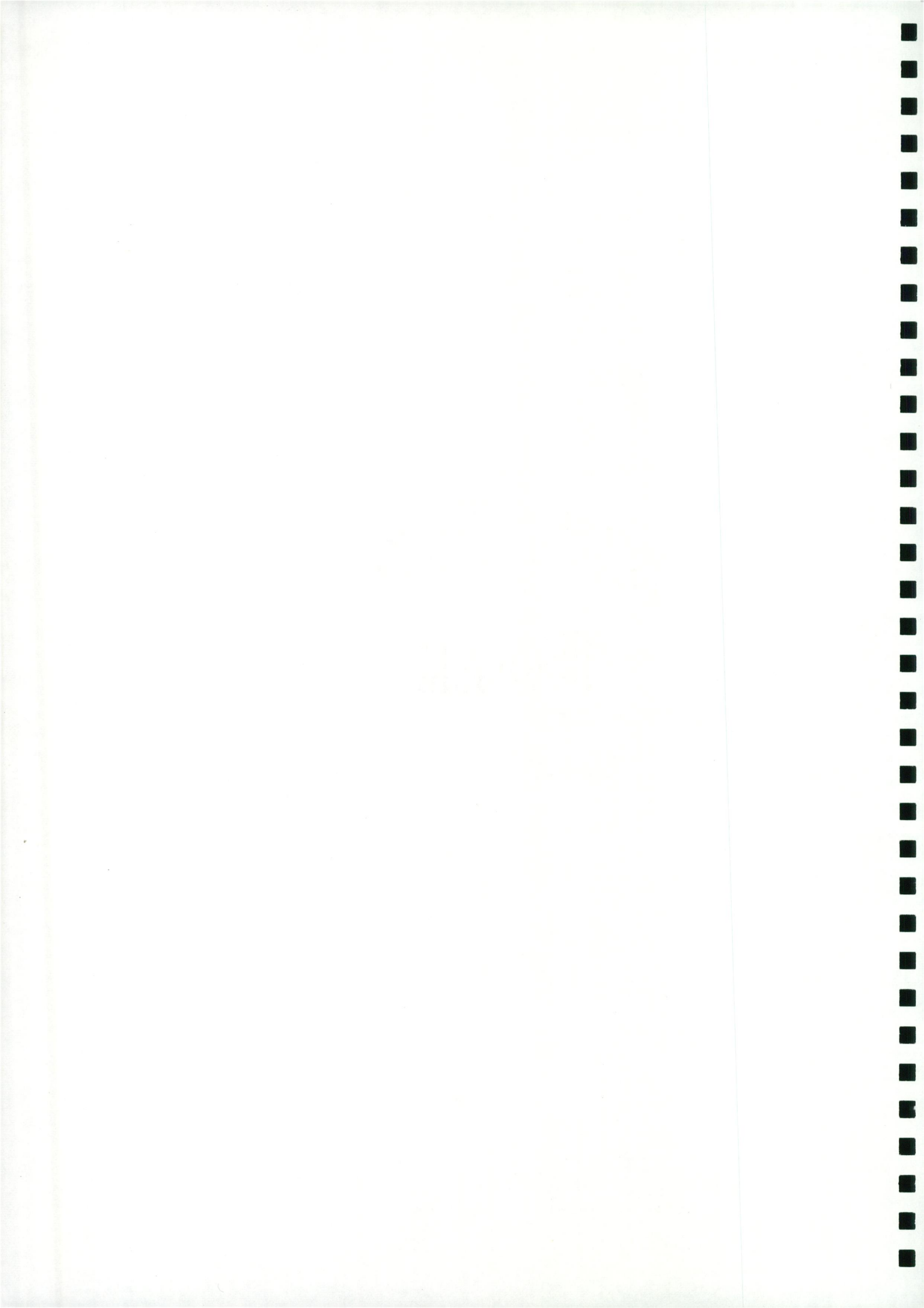
It has been argued that these recurring themes may be problematic when related to critical debates within feminism vis-a-vis essentialism and the critique of 'primitivism' and 'orientalism'. The work may be problematic by relating it to 'essentialism', 'primitivism' and 'orientalism', however, it is clear from the discussions in Chapter One and Two that the work also produces material and audience experience which goes beyond these discursive conventions.

In assessing Abramovic's work there is a strong sense of romanticism and desire to disconnect from Western world through the more idealized ways of the East. This is Abramovic's way of trying to create and offer the West a journey in space and a way of returning to the energetic spirituality of matter.

Whatever contradictions seem to appear , throughout Abramovic's performances , she has produced a body of work which stimulates discourse. She is one of few artist that move within a limitless territory in a space that is not delimited by category. Abramovic has never declared her adherence to any collective dogma. Abramovic believes that good art should have a kind of energy



that is not descriptive or visual , it is just the presence that makes the difference in the space. Abramovic's dynamic personality is powerful and multifaceted, these qualities are transmitted through her body's energy in an effort to open up new possibilities and new experience. In Abramovic's works the visual is related to what appears but also to what is hidden .



ENDNOTES:

I. page 2

A refusal to walk at the age of two (Abramovic 1992) :

Dr. Gordon Love in this book *The Growth of Personality*, suggests that when the personal relationships of a child breakdown, the result could be shown in the child being unable to achieve what is normally achievable at that age and may become defiant. In some severe cases child's behaviour may regress to infancy where the breakdown is made worse by sudden separation from the child's Mother. The child is angered by the struggle for autonomy and this stage is a continual battle between child and environment.

2. page 20

(Pultz, 1988), *Photography and the Body*. Foucault suggests photography controls us and reflects the notion of photography as objective medium. Photography is implicated in a series of power relationships especially in areas of gender, race, class.

3. page 35

(Susan Bordo 1993)

Bordo claims that mythological, polemical, artistic and scientific discourses suggest that female hunger can be read as a potent symbolic cultural metaphor for an unleashing of female power and desire. This area of abstinence is another aspect of Abramovic's work in which she empowers herself.

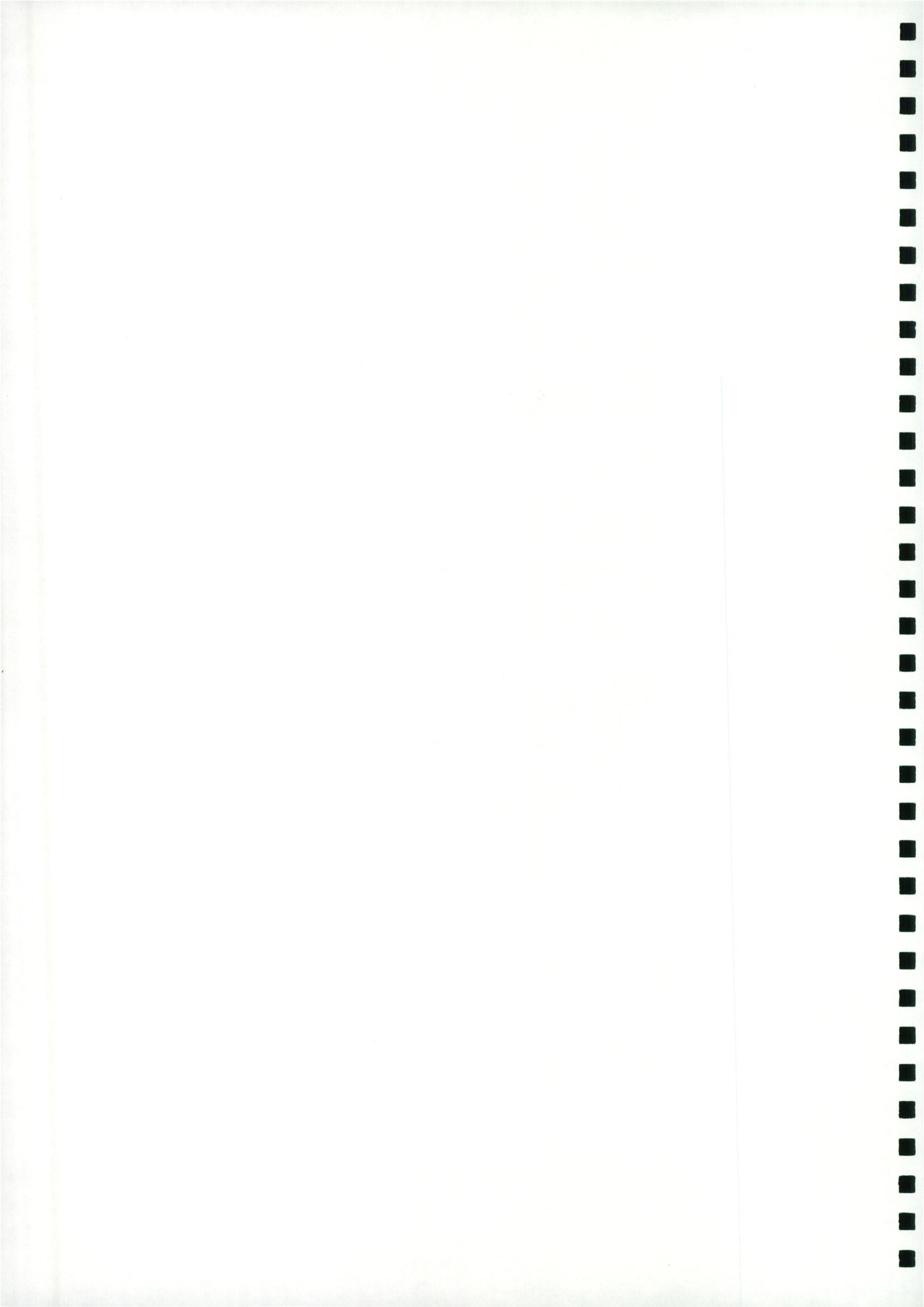
4. page 45

(Pollock, 1987)

Our feelings are not private so therefore are political. There is no innocence, much feminist theory has helped to warn us that the material of feelings and our most intimate experience of identity and of sexuality are socially permeated, if not constructed and constrained by determinations outside our control and consciousness.

5. page 45

(Assiter, 1993). In particular areas of contemporary philosophy and feminist



theory, the interest for 'constructivism' has now moved on to 'essentialism'. Among feminists 'essentialism' has opened up an area which needs to be examined. 'Essentialism' is no longer frowned upon and in some cases it has become an acceptable concept. Diana Fuss, attributes essentialist elements to people like Lacan, who have been considered to be anti-essentialist. Fuss adds that essentialist position has been used politically within a group situation who have been seen as 'others' in relation to a strong group..

6. page 51

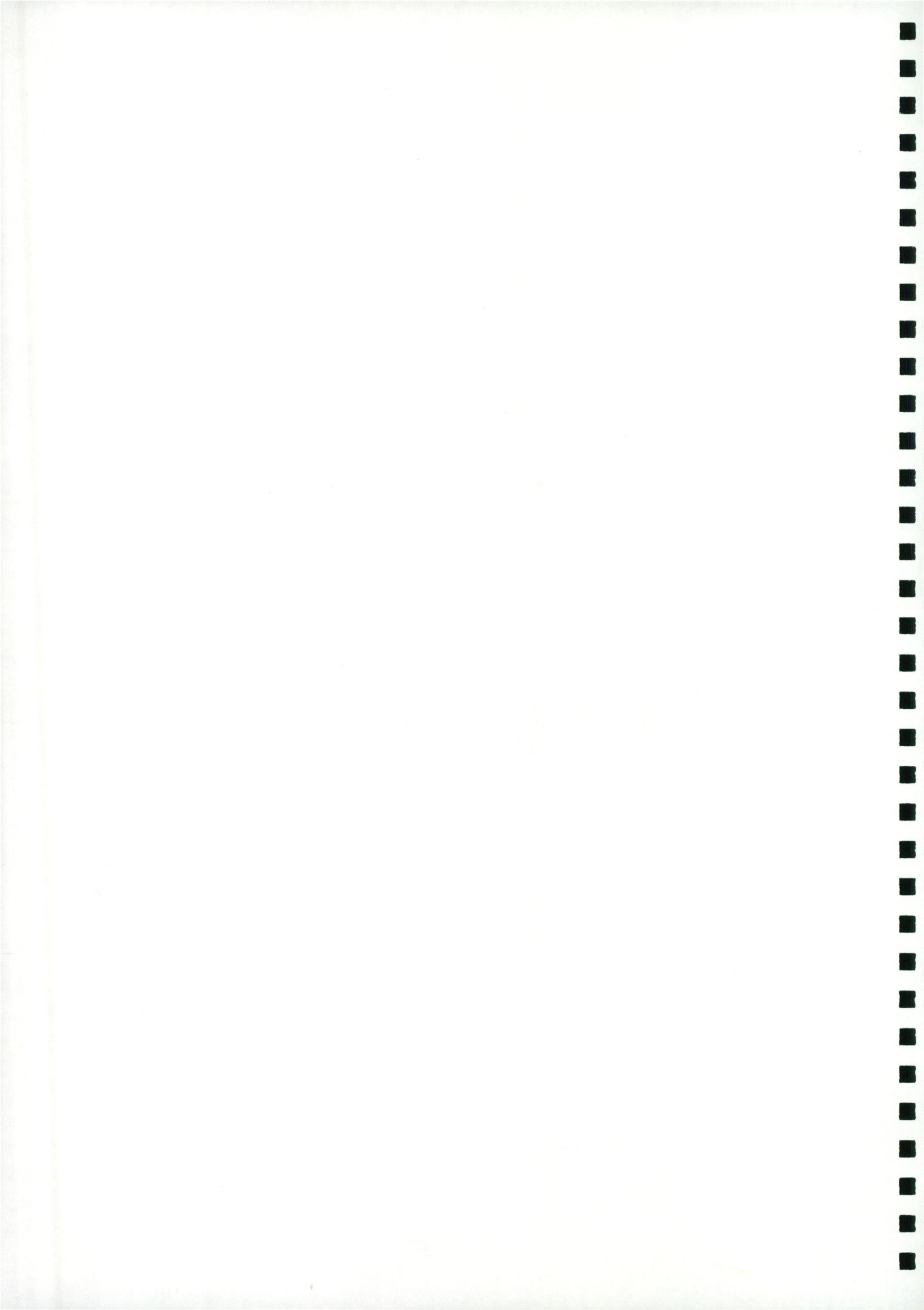
(Hall 1992) Orientalism constructed a powerful European fantasy in which there was a collection of dreams, images and ideas. A system which projected fantasies. desire, degradation and failed to recognise and respect difference.

7. page 51

For an introduction to Primitivism see..., the classic account of Orientalism (Said 1992).

8. page 56

Scott Bukatman in "Uncontrollable Bodies", Sappington & Stallings
Superhero bodies, are armoured bodies, rigid against chaos of surrounding disorder yet with a look of power. Abramovic presents herself in a heroine position claiming, she is a servant to the public and a saviour and messenger to the West. Abramovic endeavours to demonstrate her power and will. The body of the superhero is, in fact, a ritualized body "a symbolic system" based on the image of the body, whose primary concern is the ordering of a special hierarchy.



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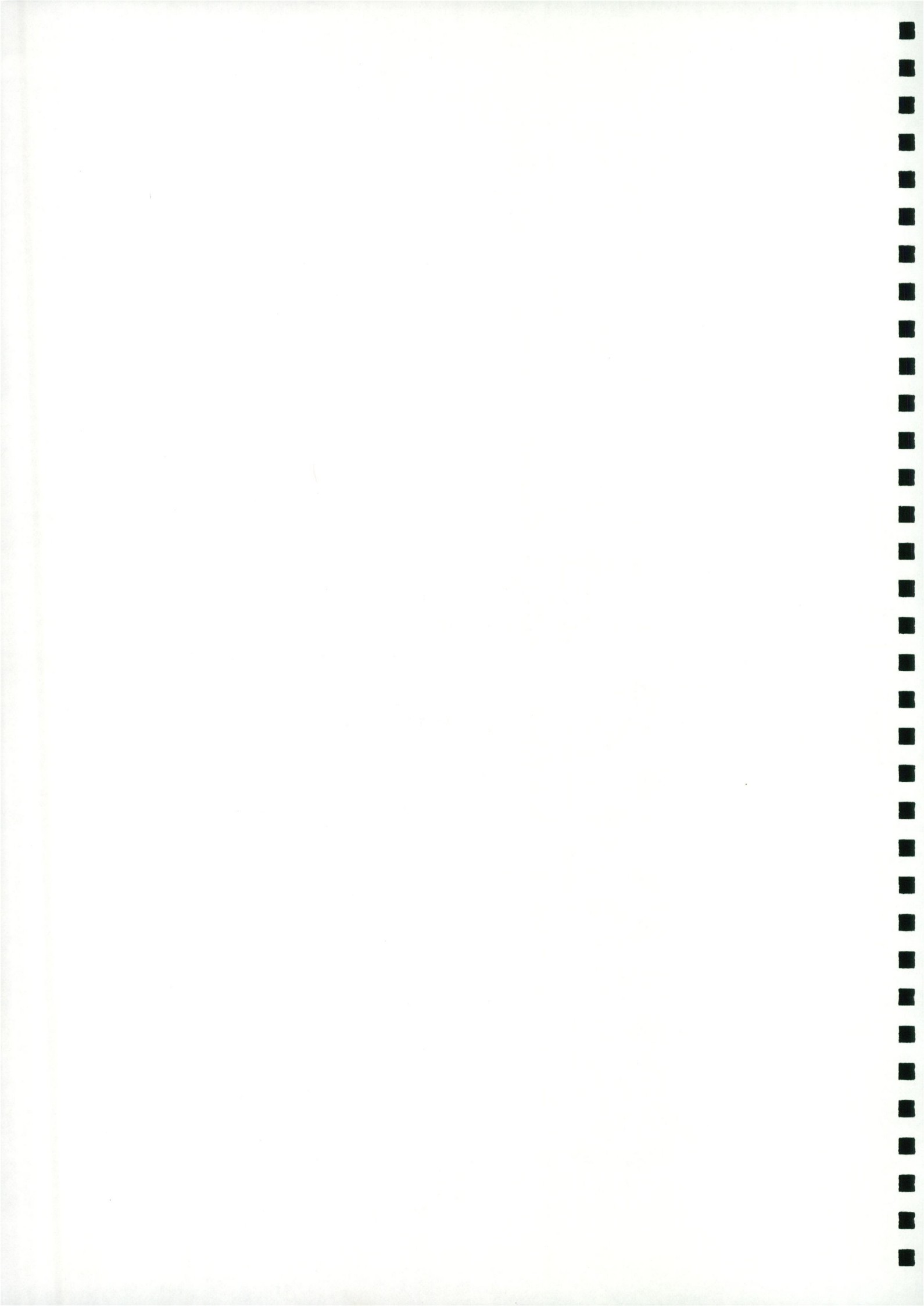
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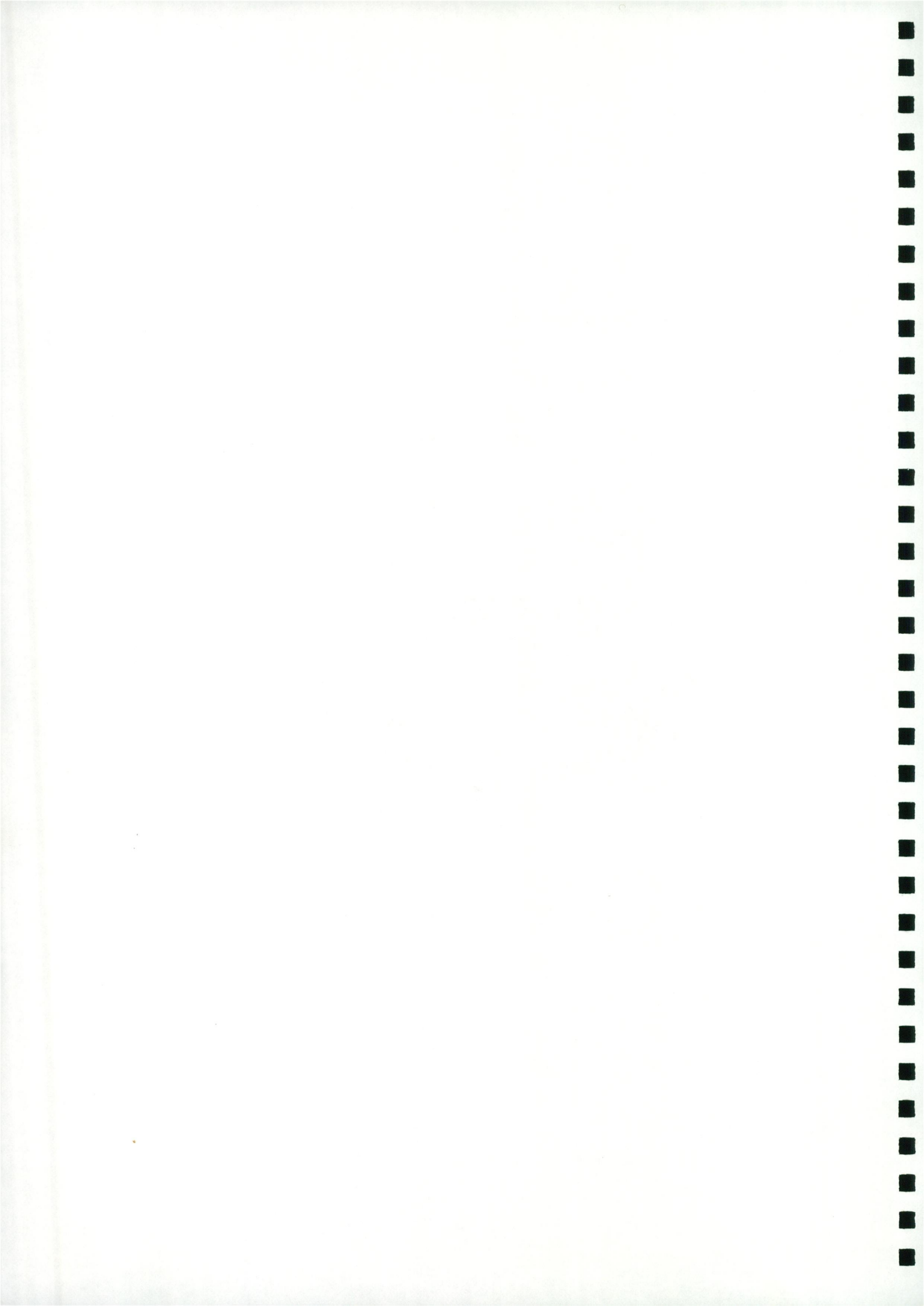
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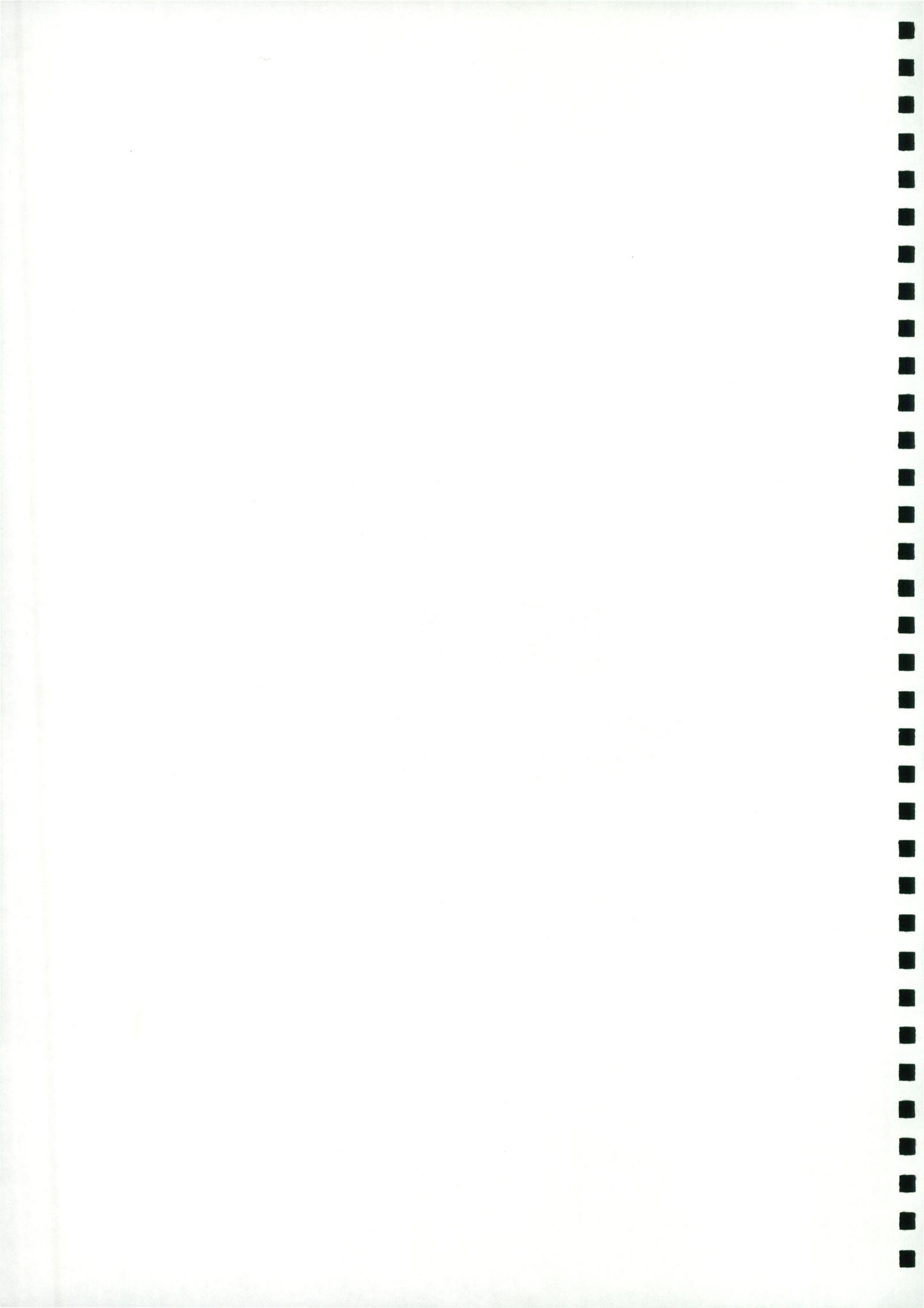
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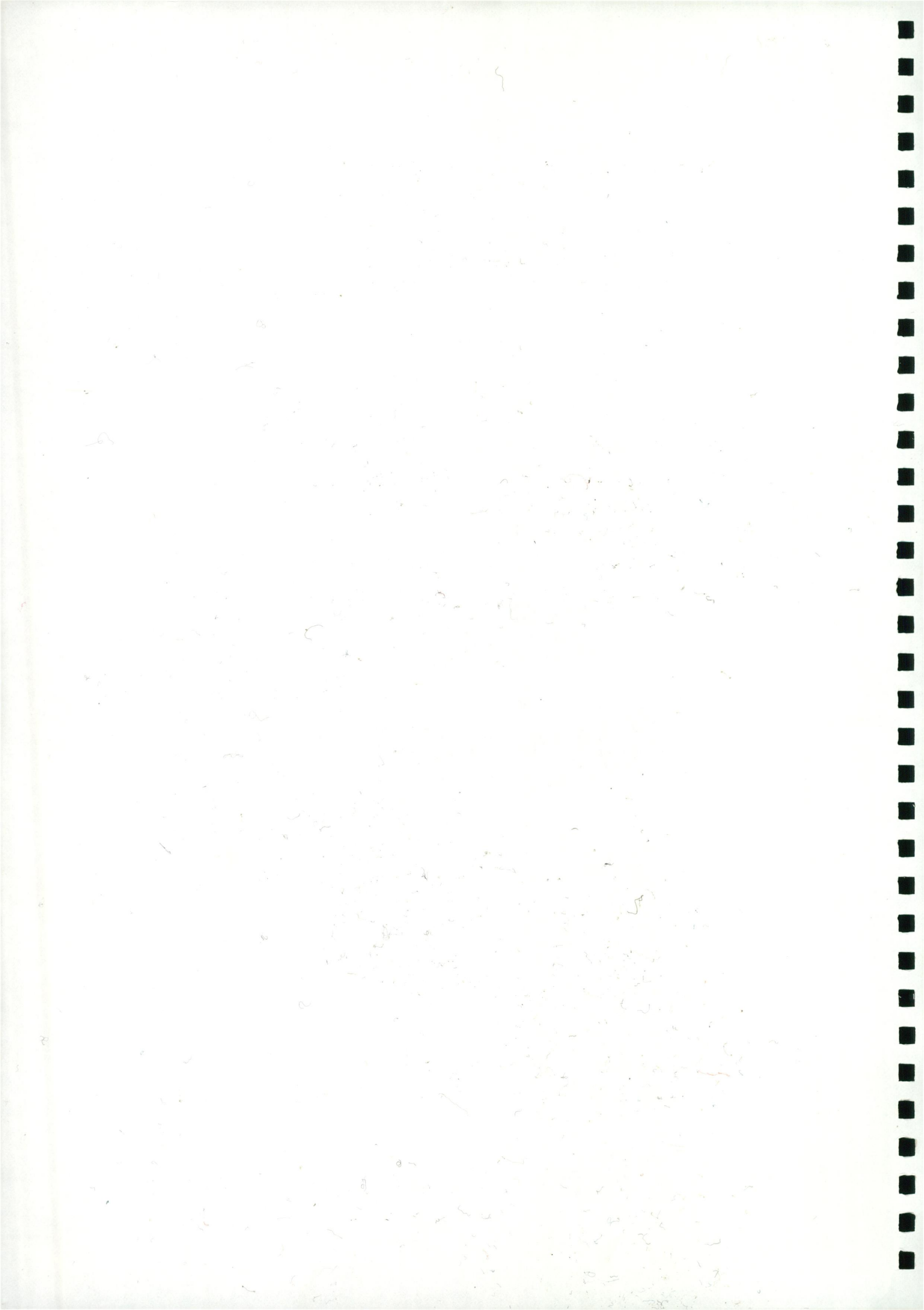
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