

# Art in America

MAY-JUNE 1976



Cover Detail of André Derain's *The Turning Road, l'Estaque*, 1906, oil, 51 by 76 7/8 inches (reproduced in entirety above); collection Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. This and 22 other works by Derain are included in the Museum of Modern Art's major show, "Fauvism and its Affinities" (to June 1), which will also be seen at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (June 29-Aug. 15) and the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth (Sept. 11-Oct. 31). See article, p. 90.

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# The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: Women's Body Art

The 1970s have seen the proliferation of a new type of art in which the primary image and/or medium is the artist's own body. This wide-ranging essay examines the differences between women's and men's work in the genre, further illuminating the gulf between male and female experience in our culture.

BY LUCY R. LIPPARD

When women began to use their own faces and bodies in photo-works, performance, film and video, rather than appearing as props in pieces by men, it was inevitable that body art would acquire a different tone. Since 1970, when the women's movement hit the art world, it has; and the questions it raises concern not only form and content, but context and political climate. Although the Western world is habitually considered a cultural whole, varying points of view on women's body art have emerged on both sides of the Atlantic, on the two American coasts, and particularly from the two sexes.

I have no strict definition of body art to offer, since I am less interested in categorizing it than in the issues it raises and in its relationship to feminism. Early on, the term "body art" was used too loosely, like all art labels, and it has since been applied to all performance art and much autobiographical art rather than just to that art which focuses on the body or body parts. Usually the artist's own body is the medium, but at times, especially in men's work, other bodies are used, envisioned as extensions of the artist him/herself. The differences between men's and women's body art are differences of attitude, which will probably be neither seen nor sensed by those who resist or are simply unaware

of the possibility (and ramifications) of such an approach. I am not setting out to draw any conclusions, but to provoke thought and discussion about sexual and gender-oriented uses of the body in Conceptual art by women.

As Lea Vergine has pointed out in her book *Il Corpo Come Linguaggio* (Prearo, Milan, 1974), body art originated in Europe, though not with the expressionist happenings of the sado-masochistic Viennese school in 1962, as she states, but with Yves Klein's use of nude women as "living brushes".<sup>1</sup> In the U.S., something like body art was an aspect of many Happenings from the late '50s on, but body works as entities in themselves only emerged in the late '60s as an offshoot of Minimalism, Conceptualism, film, video and performance art. Virtually no women made body art in New York during the late 1960s, although it had been an important element in the oeuvres of Carolee Schneemann, Yayoi Kusama, Charlotte Moorman, Yvonne Rainer, Joan Jonas and others. In the early days of the new feminism, the first art by women to be taken seriously and accepted into the gallery and museum structure rarely differed from the prevailing, primarily abstract styles initiated by men. If it did reflect a different sensibility beneath an acceptable façade, this was hardly noticed by either men or women.

Body works by women, and art dealing with specifically female or feminist issues, materials, images and experience, whatever style they were couched in, became publicly visible with more

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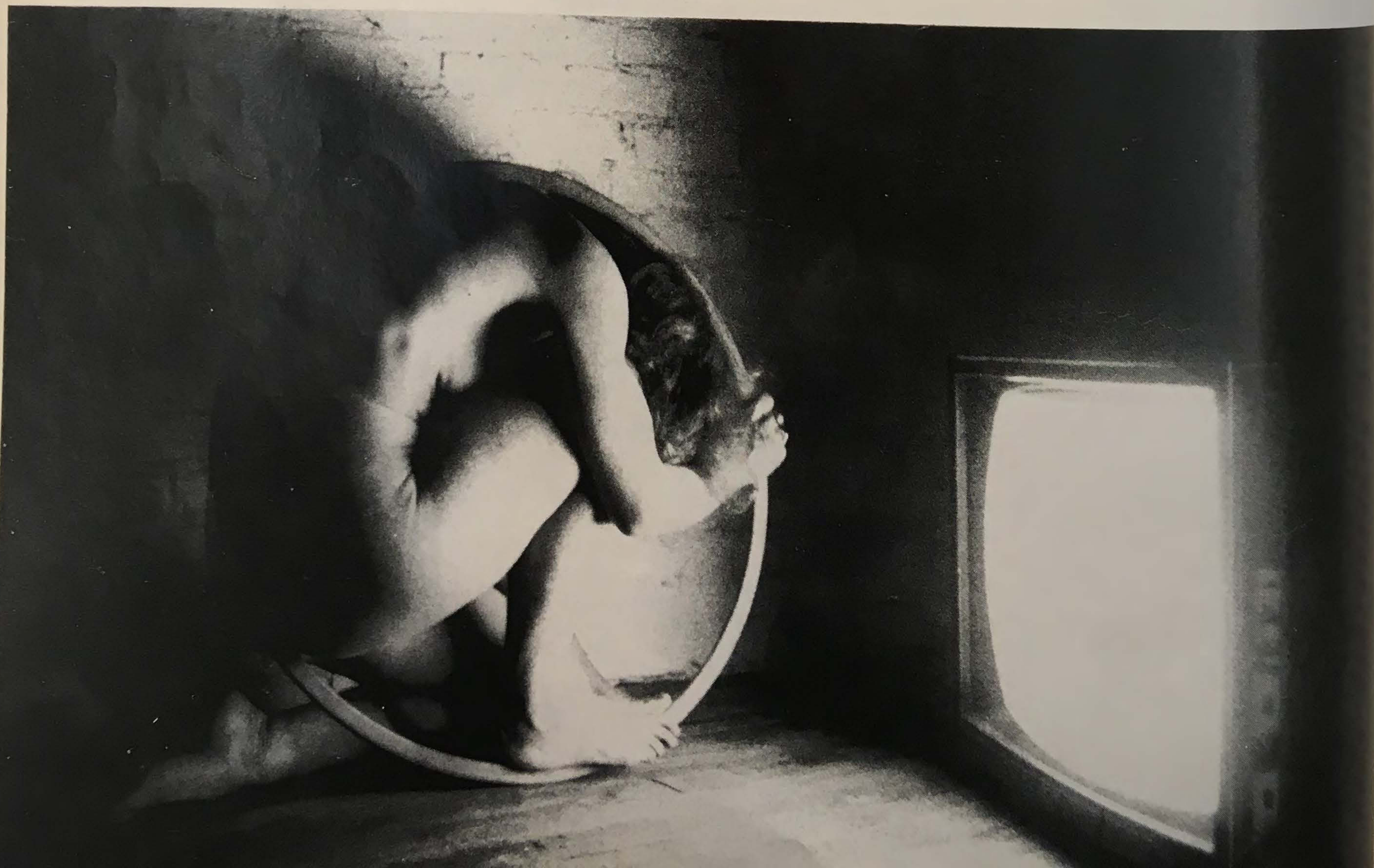
Rebecca Horn: *Paradise Widow*, 1975, costume piece; from *Widowhood*, a *Tender Instrument of Torture*, 1975, videotape and film, performed by the artist.





**Above** Ketty La Rocca: still from *You, You*, 1973, film.

**Below** Joan Jonas: detail, *Twilight*, 1975, performance by the artist.



difficulty than mainstream art and have therefore acquired a "radical" image in some circles. Although such "women's work" eventually suffered a brief vogue, it was initially considered clever or pretty but not important and was often relegated to the category of naive art or craft. This, despite the fact that the autobiographical and narrative modes now fashionable were in part inspired by women's activities, especially consciousness-raising. Indeed, since much women's work came out of isolation or feminist enclaves rather than from the general "scene," and since it attempted to establish a new iconography, it was justifiably perceived as coming from an "other" point of view, and it was frequently labeled retrograde for its lack of compliance with the "evolutionary" mainstream.

In a parallel development, the concept of "female imagery" arose on the West Coast through the ideas and programs of Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro. The initial notion (central-focus abstraction, boxes, spheres, ovals) emphasized body identification and biologically derived forms, primarily in painting and sculpture. This idea met strong resistance when it reached the East Coast, and in New York—the Minimal/Conceptual stronghold—it was diffused into more deadpan styles and "avant-garde" mediums. Nevertheless, all kinds of possibilities were opened up to women artists here who had recently espoused feminism, wanted change in their art as well as in their lives, and were mustering the courage to deal publicly with intimate and specifically female experience. If the results on the two coasts were somewhat different, the motivation was the same. Now, six years later, body art with a feminist consciousness is still considered to be more subversive than neutral art by women that ignores the sexual identity of its maker and/or its audience.

In Europe, on the other hand, an opposite situation seems to have developed. "Neutral" art made by women still has little chance of making it into the market mainstream, while the male establishment, unsympathetic to women's participation in the art world as equal competitors, has approved (if rather patronizingly and perhaps lasciviously) of women working with their own, preferably attractive, bodies and faces. Of the handful of women artists who currently appear at all in vanguard European magazines and exhibitions, the large majority deal with their own faces and figures. This was borne out by last fall's Biennale des Jeunes in Paris. I have been told that both the male editor of an Italian art tabloid and a male French neo-Duchampian artist have discouraged women from working in other ways by publicly and powerfully applauding women's art which limits itself to these areas. Perhaps as a result, female critics like Catherine Francblin have had negative reactions to women's body art. In an interesting article in *Art Press* (Paris, Sept.-Oct. 1975), she sees it as a return to infantilism and an inability to separate one's own identity from that of the mother, or subject from object. She blames these artists for "reactivation of primitive autoerotic pleasures. For what most women expose in the field of art . . . is just the opposite of a denial of the woman as object inasmuch as the object of desire is precisely the woman's own body."

The way I see it—obviously controversially—is that, due to their legitimate and necessary desire to affirm both their female experience and themselves as artists, many European women have been forced into the position of voluntarily doing what the male establishment wants them to do—stay out of the "real world" of sales and seriousness. To extricate themselves, they have the tragic choice of rejecting the only outlets for their work (the magazines and museums) or of rejecting their feminist consciousness and its effect on their work—and, by implication, rejecting themselves. This does not affect the quality of the art being made, but it does crucially affect how it is perceived and interpreted by the general audience.

The alternative, of course, might be the foundation of art outlets based on solid political feminism, but this too is difficult in a culture where "Marxism" has successfully overrun or disdained feminist issues, to the point where the apolitical artist has no place to turn, and the political artist has only one place to turn.

One does not call oneself a feminist in polite art-society in Europe unless one wants to be ridiculed or ignored. This must be partially due to the lack of an organized feminist art movement in Europe and of any alternative galleries or magazines for women artists. Ironically, in the resultant void, middle-class, generally apolitical women have become the sole purveyors of what in another context, and with a higher level of political awareness, might be seen as radical feminist imagery. This happens in the U.S. as well, but here at least there is a broad-based support and interpretive faculty provided by the women's movement.

It is no wonder that women artists deal so often with sexual imagery, consciously or unconsciously, in abstract, representational and Conceptual styles. Even now, if less so than before, women are raised to be aware that our faces and figures will affect our fortunes and to mold these parts of ourselves, however insecure we may feel about them, into forms that will please the (male) audience. When women use their own bodies in their art work, they are using their *selves*: a significant psychological factor converts these bodies or faces from object to subject. However, there are ways and ways of using one's own body, and women have not always avoided self-exploitation. A woman artist's approach to herself is necessarily complicated by social stereotypes. I must admit to a personal lack of sympathy with women who have themselves photographed in black stockings, garter belts and boots, with bare breasts, bananas and coy, come-hither glances. Parody it may be (as in Dutch artist Marja Samsom's "humorous glamour pictures" featuring her alter ego "Miss Kerr," or in Polish artist Natalia LL's red-lipped, tongue-and-sucking "Consumption Art"), but the artist rarely seems to get the last laugh. A woman using her own face and body has a right to do what she will with them, but it is a subtle abyss that separates men's use of women for sexual titillation from women's use of women to expose that insult.

It was not just shyness, I suspect, that kept many women from making their own body art in 1967-71 when Bruce Nauman was "Thighing," Vito Acconci was masturbating, Dennis Oppenheim was sunbathing and burning himself and Barry Le Va was slamming into walls. It seemed like another very male pursuit, a manipulation of the audience's voyeurist impulses—not likely to appeal to vulnerable women artists just emerging from isolation. Articles and books on body art include frequent pictures of nude females, but few by women artists.<sup>2</sup> Men can use beautiful, sexy women as neutral objects or surfaces,<sup>3</sup> but when women use their own faces and bodies they are immediately accused of narcissism. There is an element of exhibitionism in all body art, perhaps a legitimate result of the choice between exploiting oneself or someone else. Yet the degree to which narcissism informs and affects the work varies immensely. Because women are considered sex objects, it is taken for granted that any woman who presents her nude body in public is doing so because she thinks she is beautiful. She is a narcissist, and Acconci, with his less romantic image and pimply back, is an artist.

Yet Vergine has noted that "generally speaking, it is the women, like Joan Jonas, who are the least afraid to know their own body, who don't censor it. They make attempts at discovery beyond acculturation" (*Data*, Summer 1974). I must say I admire the courage of the women with less than beautiful bodies who defy convention and become particularly vulnerable to cruel criticism, although those women who *do* happen to be physically well endowed probably come in for more punishment in the long run. Hans Peter Feldmann can use a series of ridiculous pornopinsups as his art (*Extra*, No. 5), but Hannah Wilke, a glamor girl in her own right who sees her art as "seduction," is considered a little too good to be true when she flaunts her body in parody of the role she actually plays in real life. She has been making erotic art with vaginal imagery for over a decade, and, since the women's movement, has begun to do performances in conjunction with her sculpture, but her own confusion of her roles as beautiful woman and artist, as flirt and feminist, has resulted at times in

politically ambiguous manifestations which have exposed her to criticism on a personal as well as on an artistic level.

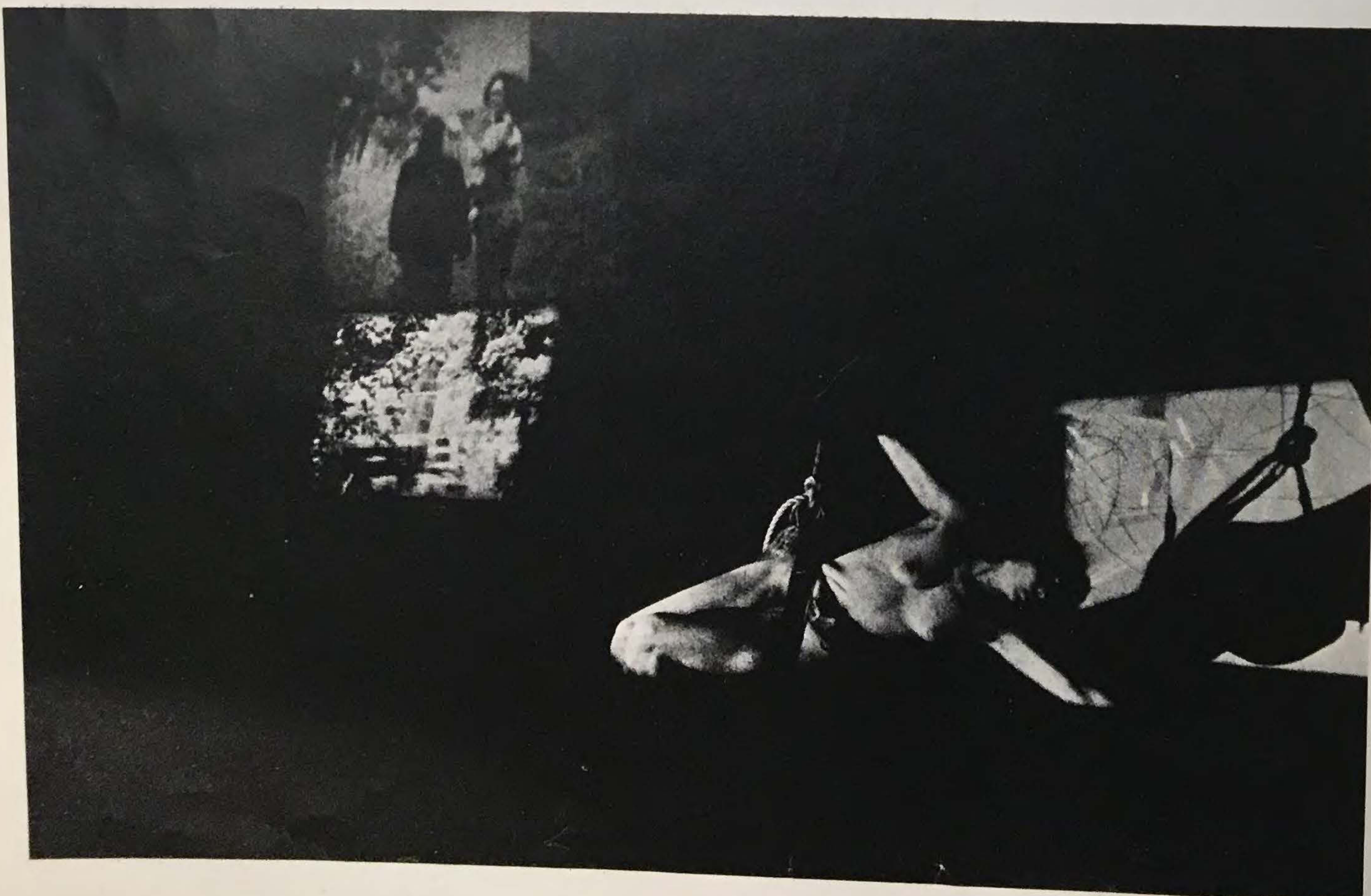
Another case in point is Carolee Schneemann, known in the early 1960s as a "body beautiful" because she appeared nude in Happenings—her own as well as those of Oldenburg and others, though for years she was labeled more comfortably "dancer" than "artist"—"an image, but not an Image-Maker, creating my own self-image" (1968). Schneemann's work has always been concerned with sexual (and personal) freedom, a theme still often considered unacceptable from a woman; she intends to prove that "the life of the body is more variously expressive than a sex-negative society can admit. I didn't stand naked in front of 300 people because I wanted to be fucked, but because my sex and work were harmoniously experienced, I could have the audacity, or courage, to show the body as a source of varying emotive power" (1968). "I use my nude body in *Up To and Including Her Limits* [a recent mixed-mediums performance in which Schneemann read from a long scroll removed from her vagina] as the stripped-down, undecorated human object" (1975). "In some sense I made a gift of my body to other women: giving our bodies back to ourselves. The haunting images of the Cretan bull dancer—joyful, free, bare-breasted, skilled women leaping precisely from danger to ascendancy, guided my imagination" (1968).<sup>4</sup>

A similarly defiant narcissism or "vulgarity" resulted when Lynda Benglis confronted the double standard head-on in some advertisements for herself which provided the liveliest controversy the art world has had for years. A respected sculptor (whose imagery is, incidentally, as abstract as it is sexual<sup>5</sup>) and video artist (here the imagery is autobiographical and autoerotic), Benglis has published a series of photographic ads for her exhibitions that included: herself in a Greek boy's skirt; herself leaning Butchly on a car; herself as a pinup in a famous Betty Grable pose, but with her jeans dropped around her ankles; and finally—the *coup de grâce*—herself as a greased nude in sunglasses, beligerently sporting a gigantic dildo. The uproar that this last image created proved conclusively that there are still things women may not do. The notion of sexual transformation has, after all, been around for some time. No such clamor arose in 1970 when Vito Acconci burned hair from his chest, "pulling at it, making it supple, flexible—an attempt to develop a female breast," then

tucked his penis between his legs to "extend the sex change" and "acquired a female form" by having a woman kneel behind him with his penis "disappearing" in her mouth (*Avalanche*, Fall 1972).<sup>6</sup> Nor was there any hullabaloo when Scott Burton promenaded Fourteenth Street in drag for a 1969 Street Work or when he flaunted a giant black phallus in a static performance in 1973, when William Wegman made his amusing *trompe-l'oeil* "breast" piece (on video with his elbows), or when Lucas Samaras played with himself in front of his Polaroid camera.

It has often been remarked that body art reflects the "role crisis" in contemporary life. The urge to androgyny, in fact, has been frequently expressed by artists of both sexes, though more often by men than by women (oddly, given the advantage of being male in this society). Urs Lüthi, a Viennese artist who makes campy transvestite photodramas starring himself, says that ambivalence is the most significant aspect of his work and that he sees himself as a stranger. Katharina Sieverding, in Düsseldorf, has made photoworks on "Aspects of Transvestism," which she sees not as a pathological phenomenon but as "communications-material," exposing roles, repression, ambiguity, possibility and self-extension: "The conquest of another gender takes place in oneself" (*Heute Kunst*, April/May 1974). Such a positive approach has more in common with the traditional (Platonic, Gnostic, etc.) myth of the androgyne as two in one, "the outside as the inside and the male with the female neither male nor female"<sup>7</sup> than with contemporary art's emphasis on separation instead of union of the two sexes. A woman working with androgyny these days would not be "accused" of being a Lesbian, because gay women no longer want to be men, but see themselves as the last word in woman-identified women.

In 1972, Martha Wilson, in Halifax, made a "drag" piece in which she transformed herself first into a man and then into a man dressed as a woman. Suzy Lake, in Montreal, transforms herself into her friends, both male and female, in two ways—with cosmetics and through photo-retouching. In *Suzy Lake as Gary Smith*, the documentation is organized "with reference to a binary logic: The first row = female, augmentation, transformation done on the actual subject; the second row = male, diminution, transformation done at a distance on the photo image" (Paul Heyer in *Camerart*, Galerie Optica, Montreal, 1974). In Annette



**Left** Carolee Schneemann: detail from *Up To and Including Her Limits*, 1975, mixed-mediums performance by the artist, including film, video, environmental installation and such activities by Schneemann as swinging in a harness and marking up the wall behind her. Photo Gwenn Thomas.

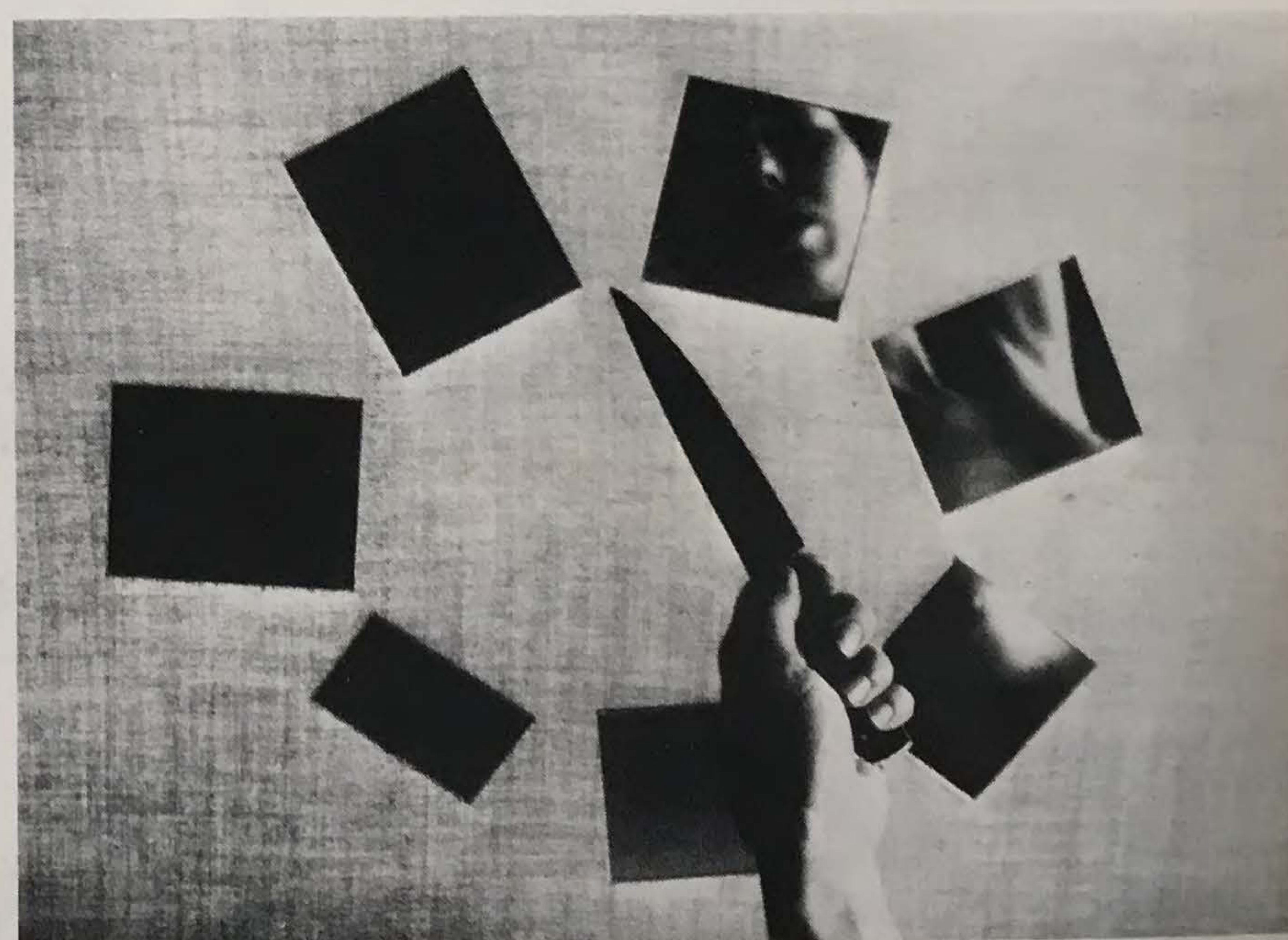
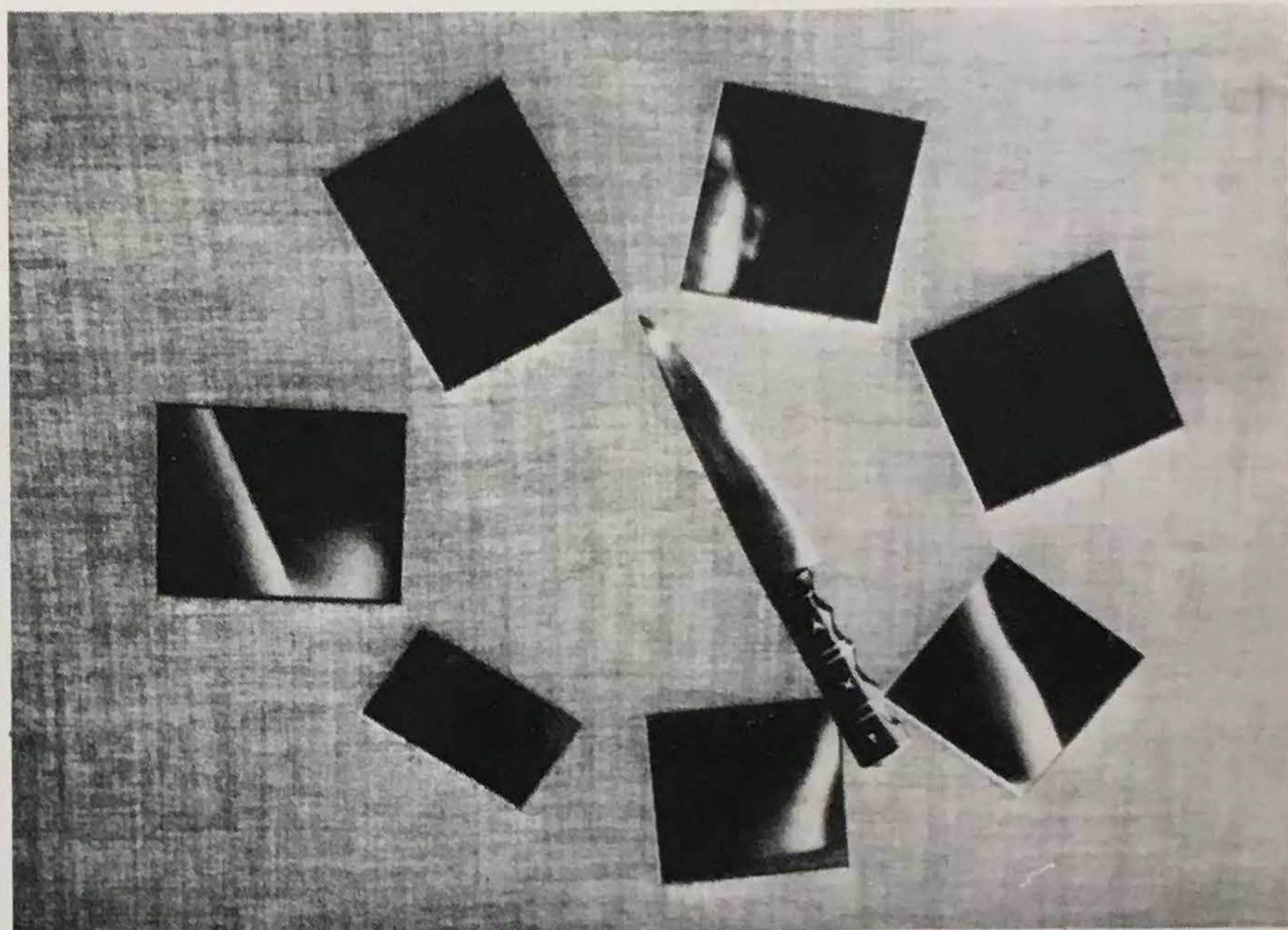
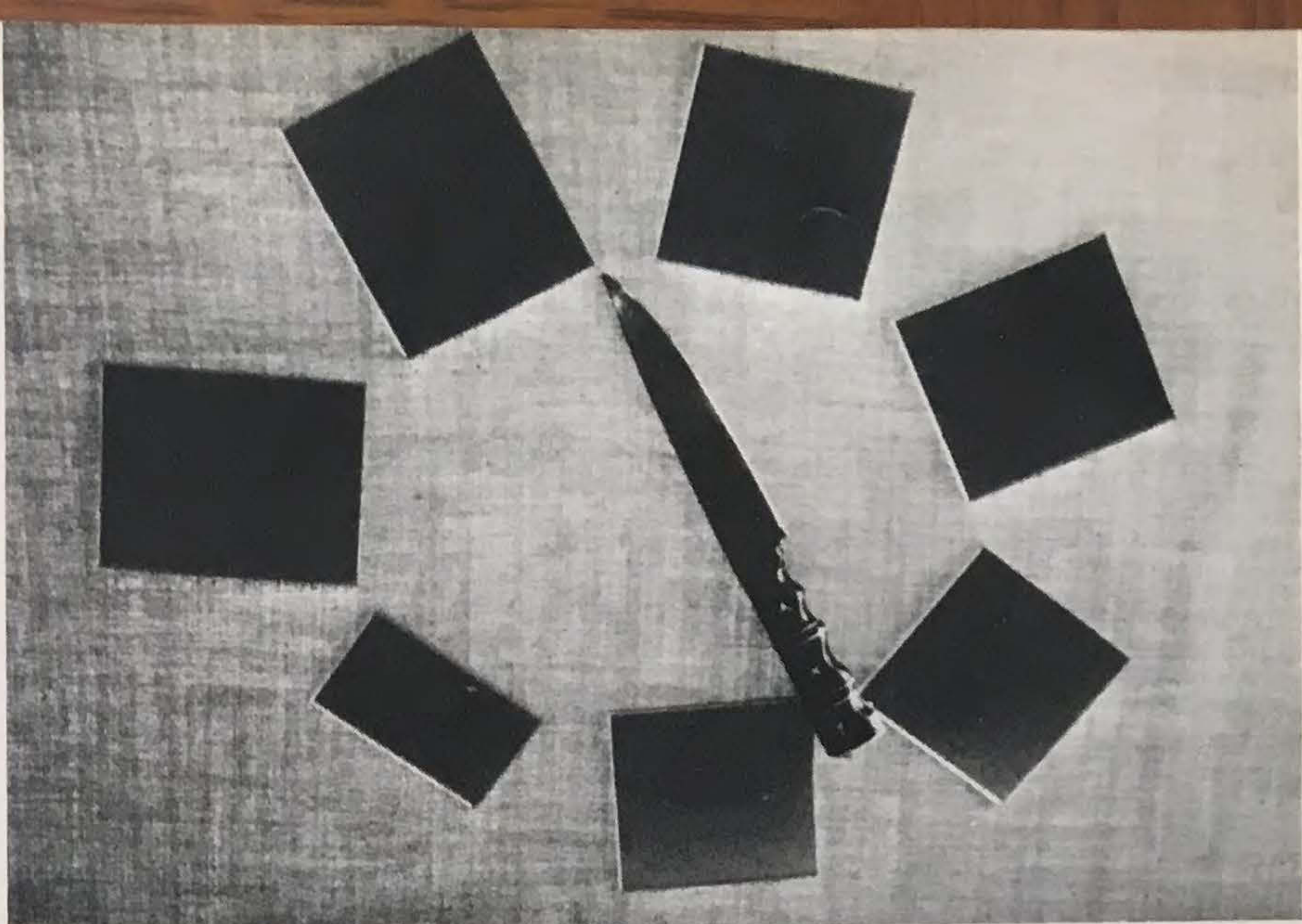
**Opposite** Iole de Freitas: four stills from *Glass Pieces, Life Slices*, 1974. A sequential confrontation with the "archetypally" fearful symbol of the knife (and perhaps in the last frame a specific reference to Buñuel and Dalí's *Le Chien Andalou*).

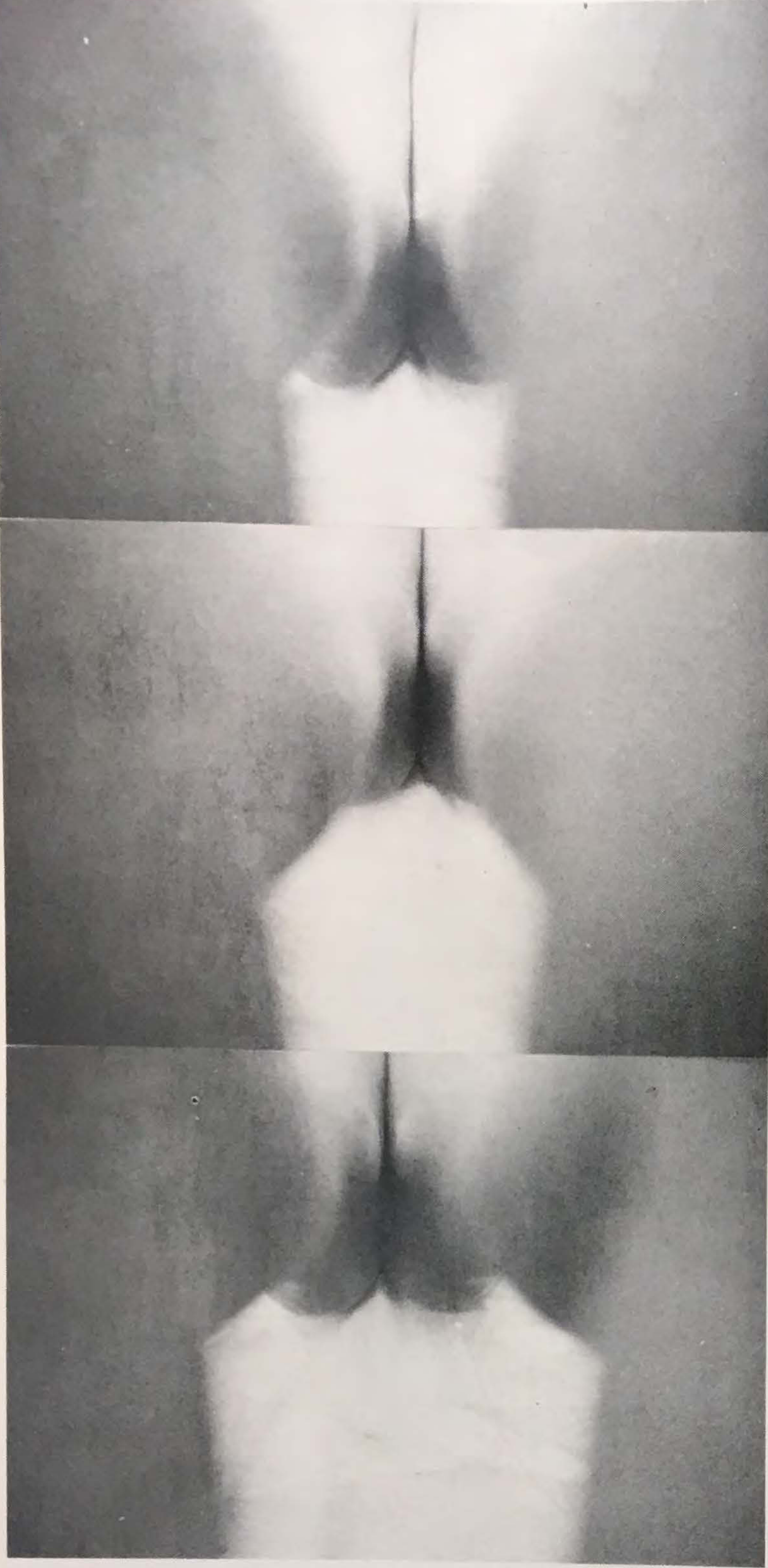
Messenger's albums of found photographic images of women's lives, she has created *femmes-hommes* and *hommes-femmes* whose disguises are lightly laid over their dominant characteristics; men are still men though with long lashes and red lips, and women are still women though with beards and mustaches. Jacki Apple's "Identity Exchanges," "Transfers," and "Redefinitions" also involve impersonation of both sexes and "the relationship between the many views of a single person and the varying positions of the viewers to the object" (catalogue of c. 7500, 1973). Eleanor Antin's several art personae include one man—a 17th-century king in whose beard, boots, cape and sword she visits her subjects on the streets of Solana Beach, Calif. Adrian Piper too has a male ego—the "Mythic Being," with Afro, shades and mustache, who also walks the streets in a continuation of Piper's several years of exploration of the boundaries of her personality. "The fact that I'm a woman I'm sure has a great deal to do with it. . . . at times I was 'violating my body'; I was making it public. I was exposing it; I was turning me into an object. . . ." (*The Drama Review*, March 1972). Dressed as the Mythic Being, she re-enacts events from her own life but re-experiences them as a man. One of the many things the Mythic Being is to his creator is "a therapeutic device for freeing me of the burden of my past, which haunts me, determines all my actions . . ." ("Notes on the Mythic Being, I", March 1974).

For the most part, however, women are more concerned with female than with male roles and role models.<sup>8</sup> Ulrike Nolden Rosenbach, in Germany, has made a series of videotapes of herself dressed in the high hat or *haube* worn in the 14th century by married women and made a symbol of self-confidence and equality in the Renaissance; she uses it "to transcend the conventional erotic context of contemporary women." In a 1974 performance called *Isolation is Transparent*, dressed in a black net leotard, she combined erotic "coquetry with the female body" and "man's work with hammer and nails," weaving a rope skirt around herself from the corners of the space until she became "the center of the earth" (*Avalanche Newspaper*, May 1974). Also in performance, Yugoslavian artist Marina Abramovic recorded her reactions after swallowing pills intended to cure schizophrenia. Two cameras, one pointed at the artist and the other at the audience, emphasized the subject/object relationship and the perfectly natural desire to see yourself as others see you. Camera and video monitor have multiplied the mirrors into which for centuries women have peered anxiously before going out to confront the world. Cosmetics pieces were common in the early 1970s, when consciousness-raising began to bring those mirrors out before public scrutiny. One of the early instances was *Léa's Room* in the Cal Arts Feminist Art Program's *Womanhouse*, 1971, in which a lovely young woman made herself up, wiped off the cosmetics, made herself up again and took them off again, dissatisfied, and so on.

To "make yourself up" is literally to create or recreate yourself. In two color photographs of herself, *Perfection and Deformation*, 1974, Martha Wilson explored her dual self-image and did so again in a fat-and-thin variation in a 1975 videotape. Mary Beth Edelson has transformed her own photograph into those of two admired role models, Georgia O'Keeffe and Louise Nevelson. Nancy Kitchel has also made "disguise" pieces and has studied the physiological results of psychological stress on her own face in several "exorcism" pieces involving her family and love affairs. Athena Tacha has dealt with her family and heredity, and in an ongoing piece called *The Process of Aging* is cataloguing in detail the effects of time on her body. Annette Messenger has drawn the ravaging lines of jealousy on a photograph of a woman's face, while other women, among them Marisol, Yoko Ono, Joan Jonas and Faith Ringgold, have used masks in the place of cosmetics.

Psychological emphasis and the need for a profound level of transformation of the self and of others are subtly reflected in the work of two Italian women. Diana Rabito deals with "Retinal Cannibalism," "talking with the eyes," comparing in one piece

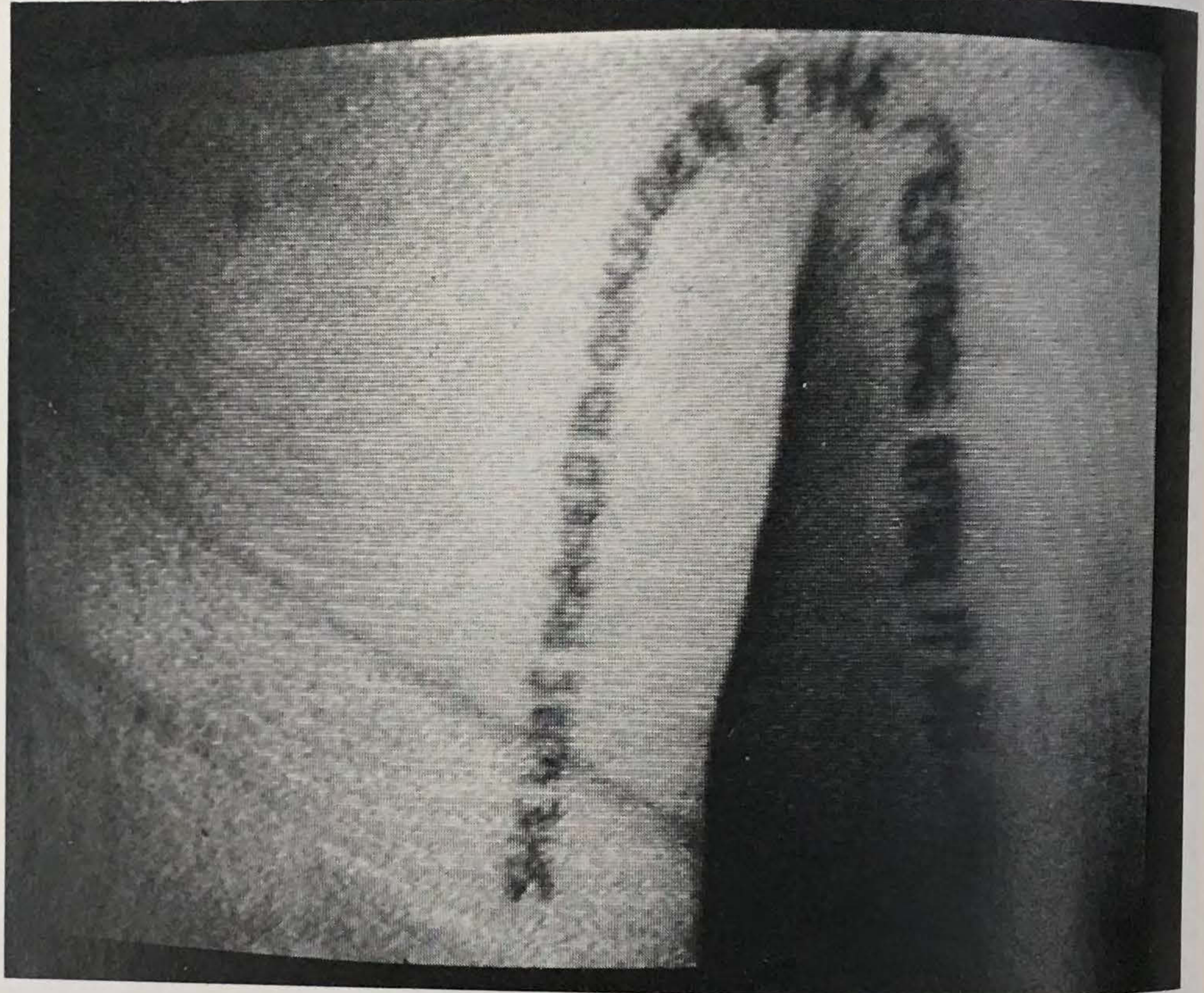




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the signs of hypertension produced in a woman's face to the *craquelure* of antique Chinese porcelains. Ketty La Rocca, unable to break into the male art world with her art or her writings, made a highly expressive book in 1971 using photographs of her hands to illustrate proverbs. Until her recent death, she worked in a complex matrix of word and abstracted autobiography; her *You, You* series shows her hands juxtaposed against X-ray images, presenting for instance a skull as a mask, a face as "pantomime made by language," a skull as a fetal image with the hand—the language symbol—about to burst out of it, the whole image outlined by the handwritten word "you" repeated around its edge.

Transformation is also the motive for cooler variations in which body is subordinated to art, exemplified by Martha Wilson's anti-prurient *Breast Forms Permutated*, 1972, in which nine pairs of breasts stare out of a grid, wondrous and humorous in their variety; by Rita Myers' laconic *Body Halves* of 1971, where her nude photo is split vertically down the middle and reversed, revealing the minute discrepancies between the two halves; by Antin's *Carving*, a series of clinically naked self-portrait photos documenting her weight loss. German artist Friederike Pezold's videotapes use her body abstractly, but the most "ordinary" (i.e., not erogenous) zones, such as elbows, feet, knees and

shoulders, evoke extraordinary images of sensuality—more erotic in their disguise than the parts simulated would be in reality. Lauren Ewing, in a videotape, also uses ambiguously defined body parts in a suggestive manner; fingers slowly erase the words "She was forced to consider the Message after it was over" from an apparently erotic zone.

From 1971 to '74, French artist Tania Mouraud used the object-self/sex-object relationship in objective philosophical statements illustrated by subjective autobiographical images, and nude body parts as in *Mine Not I*, or *People Call Me Tania Mouraud*. *Which of These Bodies Are They Referring To?* Her photographic mandalas reached out from the center which is herself to concentric rings of family, friends and increasingly distanced relationships or environments. Mouraud is an ardent feminist; however, in the last year or so, in response to the circumstances surrounding women's art in Europe, she has abandoned all female subject matter in favor of the same perception-word-concept form based on a wholly neutral vehicle—the wall.

Women do not often use men's bodies in their work, although Renate Weh (Germany) did a photo piece in which a man is dressed and undressed like a paper doll. Verita Monselles (Italy), who is trying in her photo series to "objectify woman's exist-

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tial crisis, her rebellions against a codified behavior," has reached what she calls "the negative moment in her analysis" where man is represented as "a dummy, or as a son [also a doll] petrified in his privileges as a petty speculator exploiting mother love." Her work is particularly interesting because of its overt anti-Catholicism, a burning issue for Italian feminists. Hannah Wilke has also used one of the great symbols of male domination in her *Jesus Christ Supert-art* performance, although the feminist crucifixion aspect was intended to overwhelm the religious satire. Wilke has also made a "Samson and Delilah" videotape in which she cuts the hair of a former lover.

Men, however, when not using themselves, are using women. Vergine has written about the "acute gynephobia" demonstrated in much male body art, and sees many of its manifestations as an "envy of the uterus as capacity for creation." Herman Nitsch, in a destructive male imitation of the constructive female ability to give birth, smears blood and animal guts on himself and other men, calling this a "birth . . . like a crucifixion and resurrection together." <sup>9</sup> Stanislaw Pacus seems to speak for many of his colleagues when he declares that "Woman annuls creativeness. She is the dualistic model of love-hate in which the artist loses himself and from which, with intellectual effort, he escapes. To reconquer his professional conscience the artist derides the loved-hated woman's nakedness" (Vergine). Vettor Pisani chains women in his performances and archaically equates the female with "darkness." Such statements are parried by Tania Mouraud, who has written that "Women, who create, know what creation is. I started to paint after bringing my daughter into the world; the male argument which sees the maternal sensibility as an obstacle to creation seems inverse. On the contrary, the male's fixation on his sex, the fundamental fear which animates him of one day finding himself impotent, has completely falsified the very notion of art. Women do not act out of fear, but out of love and knowledge" (*Actuel*, No. 3, 1974).

European men, less conscious of feminism than Americans and less intimidated by women's consciousness of themselves, are particularly guilty of exploitation of women's bodies in their art, but the U.S. is not far behind. Acconci has tied up and otherwise manipulated women psychologically and physically; James Collins, as his own voyeur hero, "watches" women as erotic objects on film; Roger Cutworth makes pallid films which use naked women as though we still lived in the Renaissance; Chris Burden has thrown burning matches on his wife's nude body in performance. In fact, it is difficult to find any positive image whatsoever of women in male body art.

Much of the work discussed above clearly rises from a neurotic dissatisfaction with the self. There are exceptions on both sides, but, whereas female unease is usually dealt with hopefully, in terms of gentle self-exploration, self-criticism or transformation, anxiety about the masculine role tends to take a violent, even self-destructive form. Acconci and Oppenheim burned, scarred, irritated their own bodies around 1970; Burden has taken the lead since then by having himself shot in the arm, locking himself in a baggage locker for five days, nearly electrocuting himself, nearly immolating himself, nearly being run over, and so forth. Though lacking the horror-show theatricality of the Viennese S & M school, the deadpan masochism of American male body artists has a decidedly chilling effect.

Almost the only woman who engages in such practices is Gina Pane, in Paris, who has cut herself with razor blades, eaten until she got sick, and subjected herself to other tortures. Her self-mutilation is no less repellent than the men's, but it does exist within a framework which is curiously feminine. Take, for instance, her *Sentimental Action*, a performance she describes as the "projection of an 'intra' space" activated by the sentiments of "the magic mother/child relationship, symbolized by death . . . a symbiotic relationship by which one discovers dif-



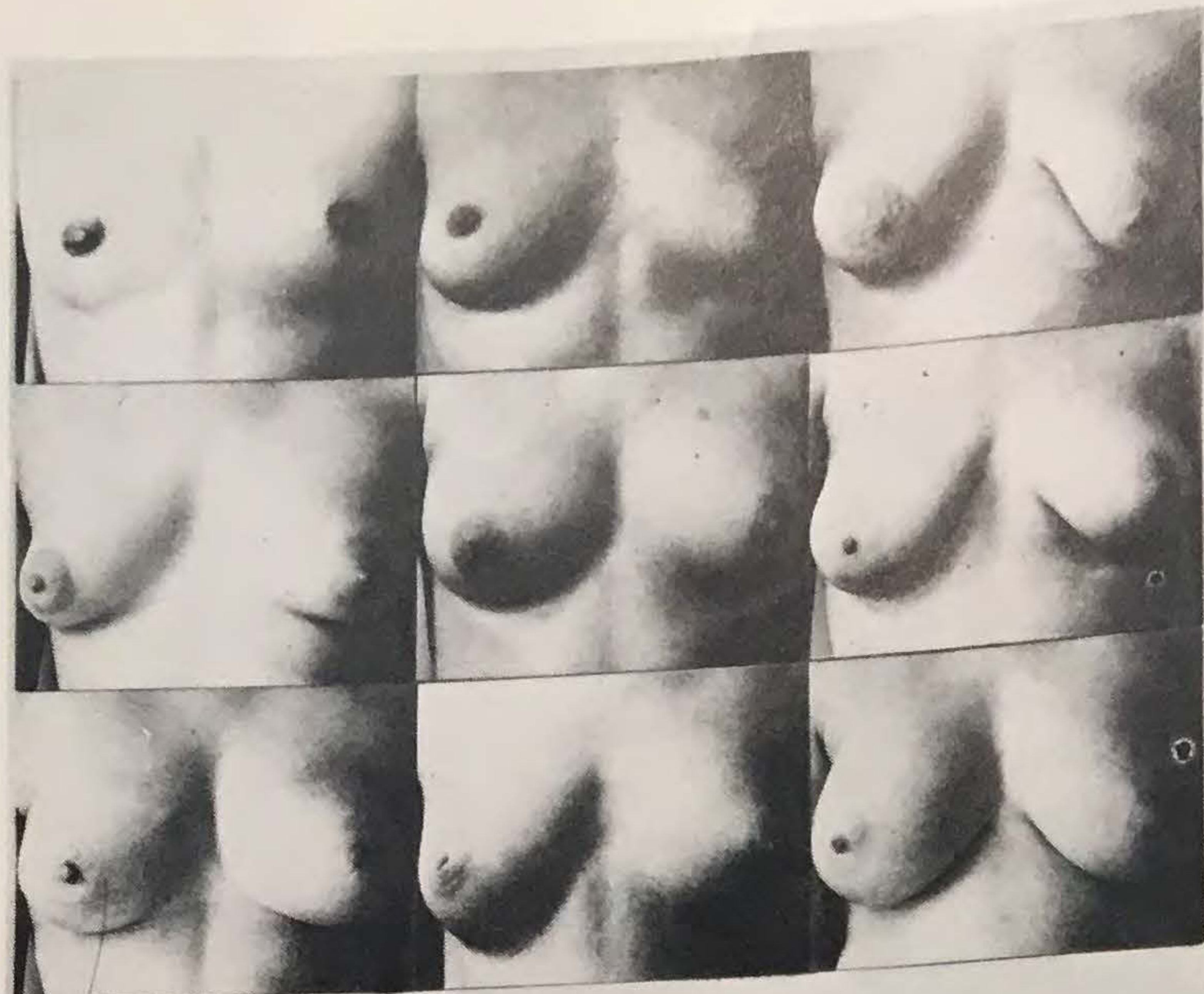
Body-part body art:  
**Opposite far left**  
Friederike Pezold: detail,  
*Between*, 1974-75, photo  
series. In her visual puns  
the artist uses her own  
body (here, legs and feet).

**Opposite near left, above**  
Tania Mouraud: *Is Name  
Given to a Single Object?*,  
1972, mounted photographs.  
Photo Didier Béquilar.

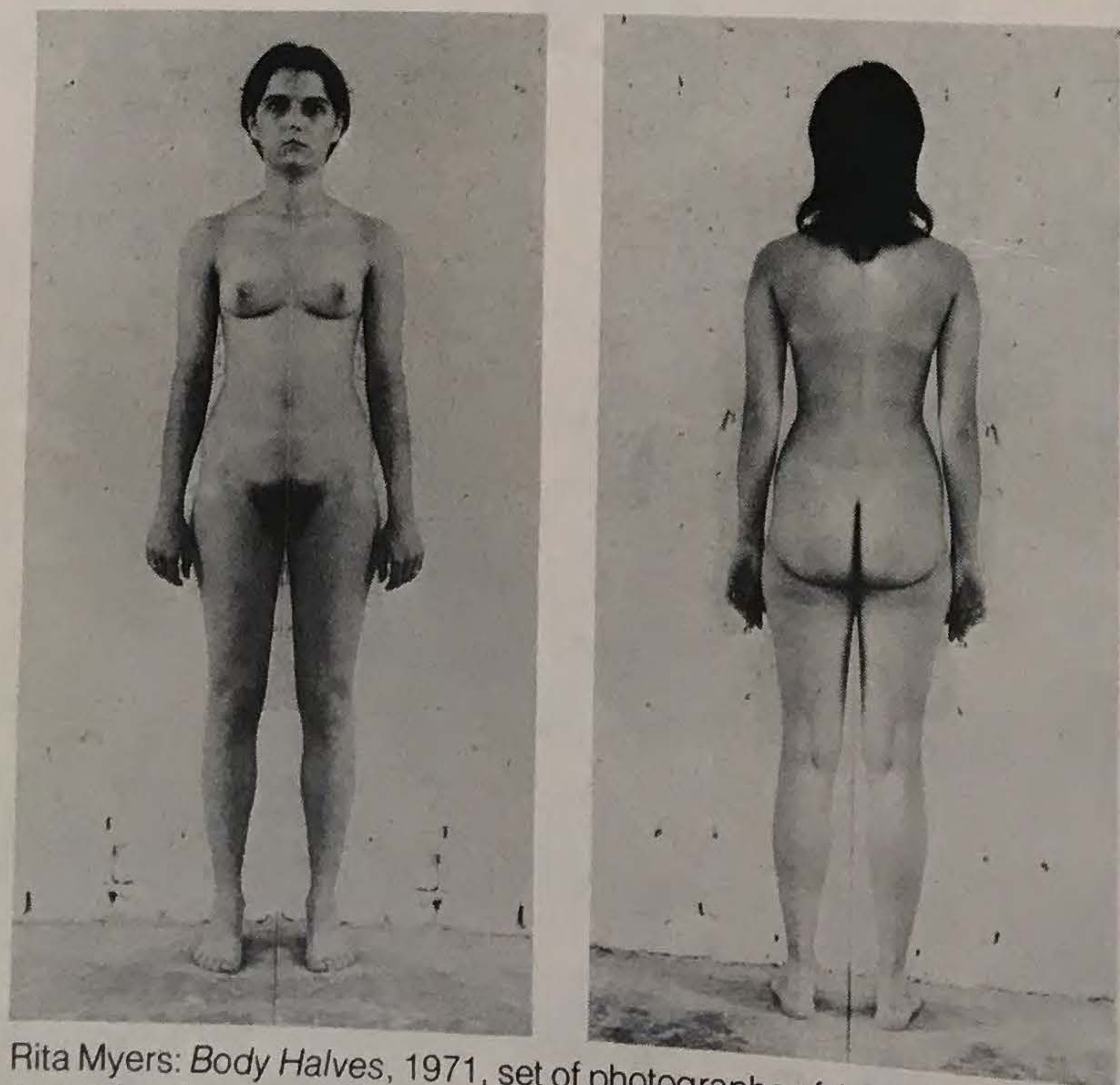
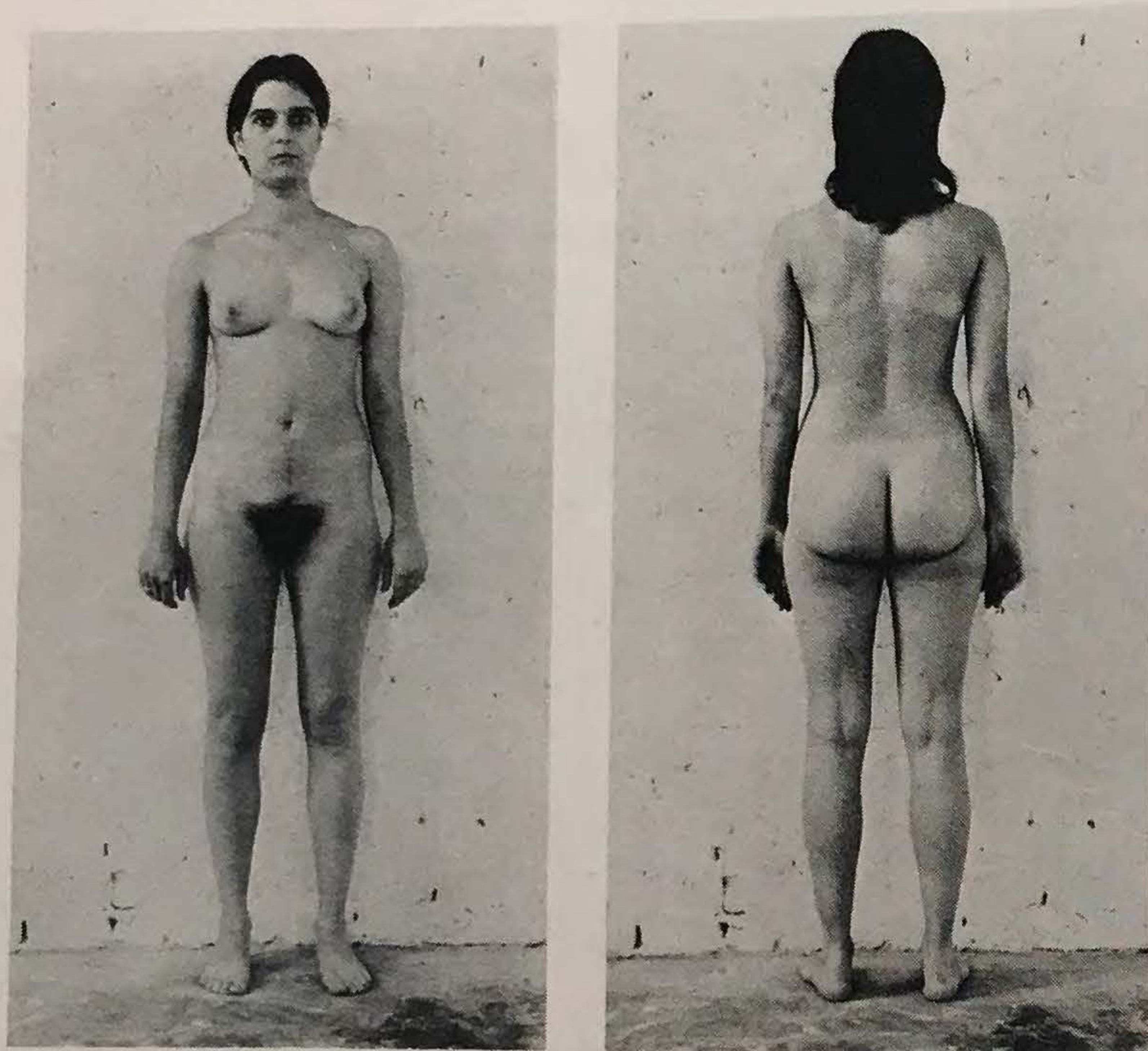
**Opposite near left, below**  
Lauren Ewing: still from  
*Message*, 1976, videotape.  
The words say: "She was  
forced to consider the  
*Message* after it was over."

**Right** Hannah Wilke: detail,  
*S.O.S. ("Starification  
Object Series")*, 1974-75,  
set of 35 photos of artist  
"scarred" by chewing gum.





Martha Wilson: *Breast Forms Permutated*, 1972, photographs and text. The system of permutation is from "flat-chested" at upper left to "pendulous-full" at lower right, with the "perfect set" at center.



Rita Myers: *Body Halves*, 1971, set of photographs of the artist. A "cool" example of women artists' self-transformations—Myers recreates herself symmetrically by halving the negative and printing in reverse.

ferent emotional solutions." Using her body as a "conductor she takes apart "the prime image—the red rose, mystic flower, erotic flower, transformed into a vagina by reconstitution into its most present state: the painful one" (Vergine). Photodocumentation shows the artist dressed in white with her face hidden in a bunch of roses and her bleeding arm, pierced by a line of tacks stretched out before her.

If few women artists inflict pain on their own bodies, the fear of pain, cruelty and violence surfaces frequently in their work. Hannah Wilke's *S.O.S.* ("Starification Object Series"), includes a performance in which, shirtless, she flirts with the audience while they chew bubblegum, which she then forms into tiny loops resembling vaginas and sticks in patterns on her nude torso. She calls these "stars," in a play on the celebrity game, but they are also scars, relating on the positive side to African rituals through which women gain beauty and status and on the negative side to the anguish of the artist's real "internal scarification." In German artist Rebecca Horn's strange, mechanically erotic films, her body is always protected by bizarre contraptions resembling medieval torture apparatuses; she makes contact with objects or people but only at a remove; in her elongated, stiff-fingered gloves, tickling feathered headdresses, cages and harnesses, she achieves a curiously moving combination of potential sadism and tenderness.

Iole de Freitas, a Brazilian living in Italy, combats the archetypal female fear of the knife by wielding one herself in cryptically beautiful photo pieces, sometimes combined with fragments of her body seen in a framelike mirror on the floor, as though in the process of examining and reconstructing her own image. One recalls Maya Deren's image of the knife between the sheets here, as well as in the film *Sentimental Journey* by Italian artist Valentina Berardinone, which concerns "the anthropomorphism of the rose . . . transformation . . . intense persecutory anguish . . . and tunnels; its dominant theme is murder." In Iowa City, Ana Mendieta has made brutal rape pieces where the unwarned audience enters her room (or a wooded area) to discover her bloody, half-naked body. She has also used herself as a symbol of regeneration in a series of slide pieces. In one she is nude in an ancient stone grave in Mexico, covered by tiny white flowers which seem to be growing from her body; in another she lies nude over a real skeleton, to "give it life," and in another she makes herself into the "white cock," a Cuban voodoo fetish, covered with blood and feathers. She has traced her skeleton on her nude body to become "Visible Woman" and has ritually outlined her silhouette in flowers, flames, earth and candles.

A good deal of this current work by women, from the psychological make-up pieces to the more violent images, is not so much masochistic as it is concerned with exorcism, with dispelling taboos, with exposing and thereby defusing the painful aspects of woman's history. The prototypes may have been several works by Judy Chicago—her *Menstruation Bathroom* at Womanhouse,<sup>10</sup> her notorious photo-lithograph, *Red Flag*, 1971, a self-portrait from the waist down showing the removal of a bloody Tampax (often read by male viewers as a damaged penis) and her "rejection drawings," which demand: "How Does it Feel to Be Rejected? It's Like Having Your Flower Split Open." In a recent two-woman exhibition at the College of St. Catherine in Saint Paul, Betsy Damon and Carole Fisher showed, respectively, drawings, collages and reliefs titled *Mutilation Images: A Garden* and *Self Images: Terrible Mother of the Blood River*. Many of these took, however, the hopeful shape of the butterfly—female transformation symbol par excellence—also introduced into feminist iconography by Judy Chicago. The visual resemblance of a butterfly to the Great Goddess' double-edged axe is not coincidental, for Chicago has made a series of painted-china plaques which deal with the "butterfly vagina" and its history as passage portal, Venus of Willendorf and so forth. Edelson, in photographs of herself as a symbol of "Woman Rising" [see photo p. 69] from the earth, from the sea, her body painted with ancient ritual signs, adopts these images to a new feminist mythology. She

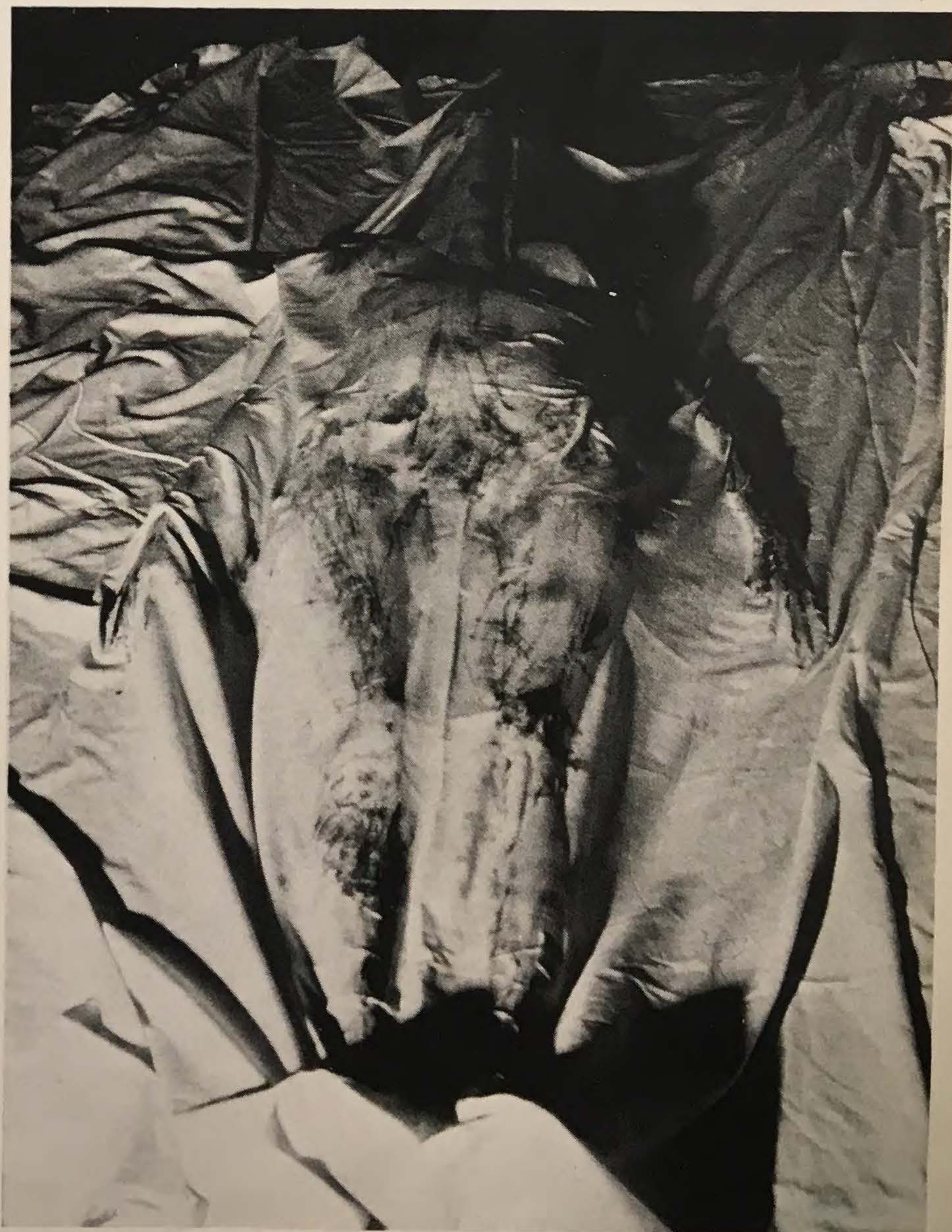
also incorporates into her work stories written by the audience of her shows: mother stories, heroine stories, menstruation and birth stories, all of them part of her search for ancient woman's natural, shameless relationship to her body.

One curious aspect of all this woman's work, pointed out by Joan Simon, is the fact that no women dealing with their own bodies or biographies have introduced pregnancy or childbirth as a major image. Sex itself is a focal point; Edelson has done ritual pieces with her son and daughter (as has Dennis Oppenheim); a *Womanhouse* performance included a splendidly choreographed group birth scene and a number of women photographers have dealt fairly often with pregnant nudes, but for individual Conceptual artists, this mental and physical condition unique to women exists in a curious void. Is it because many of these artists are young and have yet to have children? Or because women artists have traditionally either refused to have children or have hidden them away in order to be taken seriously in a world that accuses wives and mothers of being part-time artists? Or because the biological aspect of female creation is anathema to women who want to be recognized for their art? Or is it related to narcissism and the fact that the swollen belly is considered unattractive in the male world? But if this were so, why wouldn't the more adamant feminists have taken up the theme of pregnancy and birth along with monthly cycles and aging? None of these explanations seems valid. The destruction of derogatory myths surrounding female experience and physiology appears to be one of the major motives for the recent surge in body art by feminist artists. Perhaps procreativity is the next taboo to be tackled, one that might make clearer the elusive factors that divide body art by women from that by men. □

1. The Gutai Group in Japan also made similar events in the late 1950s, and Carolee Schneemann's *Eye-Body (Nude in Environment)* dates from 1963.
2. This continues. Max Kozloff's "Pygmalion Reversed" in *Artforum*, November 1975, is the latest example. A few women body artists are mentioned and no women are reproduced in 12 illustrations. He also seems unaware of the existence of a large selection of such art by women and complains that there are "very few artists . . . to exploit dress, ornament and headgear. . . ."
3. In the course of my research in European art magazines I found: a woman with her blouse open, a woman's body signed as art, a woman with a gallery announcement written on her two large bare breasts, a provocative 1940s pinup captioned "Subscribe to me—I'm Extra" to advertise an "artists' magazine" of that name.
4. The 1968 quotations are taken from Schneemann's book *Cézanne She Was a Great Painter* (1975); the 1975 quotation was from another self-published book, *Up To and Including Her Limits* (1975).
5. Benglis' wax totems are acknowledged labial imagery; her sparkle-covered knot pieces are named after strippers and all the knot pieces have sexual connotations.
6. Susan Mogul, in Los Angeles, has made a delightful feminist parody of Acconci's masturbatory activities in her vibrator video piece.
7. This is a quotation from Gnostic mysticism in "The Myth of the Androgyne" by Robert Knott (*Artforum*, November 1975). The subject is also treated in the same issue by Whitney Chadwick, who notes that throughout the 19th century "the myth of 'the man/woman' . . . emblemized the perfect man of the future" (my italics), thus absorbing the female altogether, which seems to be the point of most male androgynous art.
8. I have written on costume, autobiographical and role-playing art by women in "Transformation Art," *Ms.*, October 1975.
9. Nitsch, quoted in Max Kozloff (*op. cit.*). The Knott article (*op. cit.*) relates the relationship of androgyny and "countless fertility myths" which employ violent dismemberment. Chadwick (*op. cit.*) sees debasement of women and androgyny as ways male artists have used to "desexualize the female . . . as a defense against a severe castration anxiety," responsible for "violent attacks on the female's natural procreative functions"—from sadism to the making of art as competition with the mother and her ability to create the artist herself.
10. Leslie Labowitz and Friederike Pezold in Germany have also made menstruation pieces, as have Judith Stein, Jacki Apple in a terrifying autobiographical text, and Carolee Schneemann in her important orgiastic happening, *Meat Joy* (1964).



Verita Monselles: *Amore, Amore II*, 1974, photo of the artist, an Italian who parodies the iconography of Madonna and Child.



Ana Mendieta: Rape piece, 1975. Mendieta lies immobile, covered by a bloody sheet.