

# A body of work : self portraits

By John Coplans

Author

Coplans, John

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A  
BODY  
OF  
WORK

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JOHN COPLANS

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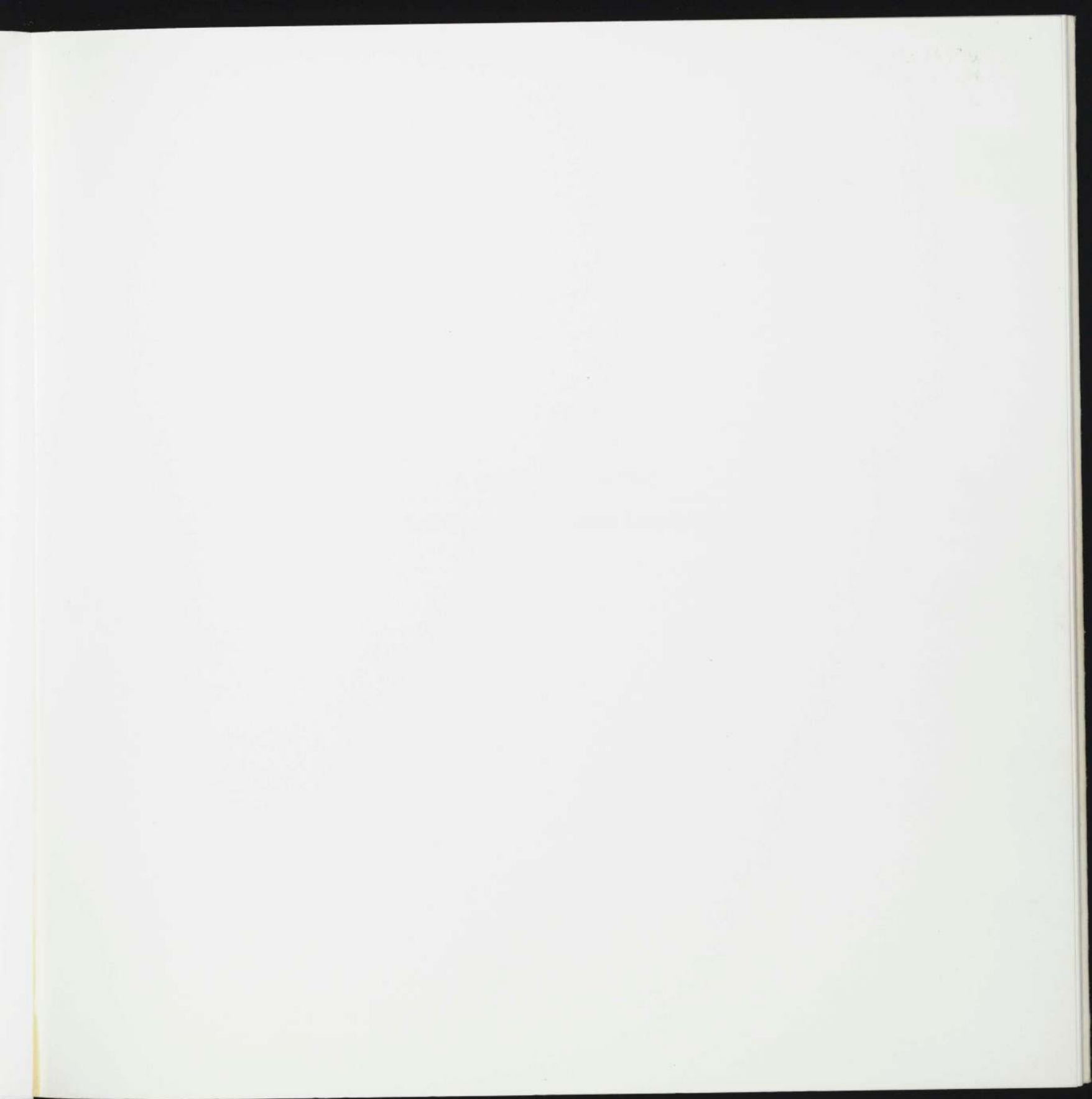
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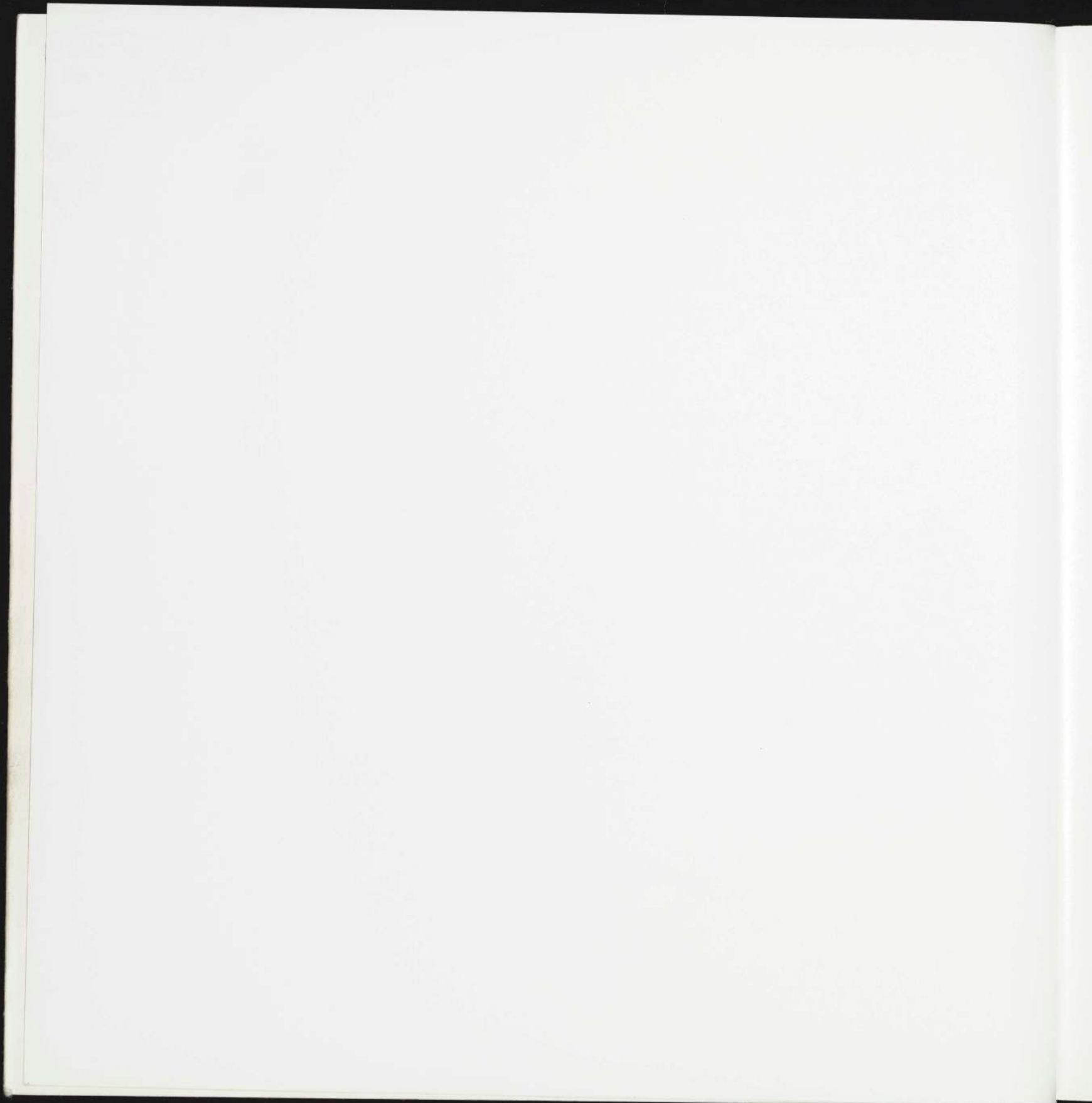
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A BODY OF WORK

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Self Portraits by John Coplans

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# A BODY OF WORK

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN COPLANS

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*He [Philip Guston] parodies himself and his subject matter, menacingly plays  
the clown at the same time that he ironically solicits our sense of pity.*  
—John Coplans, *The Private Eye of Philip Guston*, 1980

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK  
23 April – 10 July 1988

SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART  
19 February – 10 April 1988



# A BODY OF WORK

## PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN COPLANS

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—John Coplans, *The Private Eye of Philip Guston*, 1980

John Coplans's biography encompasses several careers. Perhaps he is best known as one of the highly articulate founders of *Artforum* magazine in 1962, when he was living in the Bay Area and teaching at the University of California, Berkeley. From this auspicious beginning in the United States, where he had moved from England in 1960, he became a curator at the Pasadena Art Museum (1967–70), and then the Director of the Akron Art Museum (1978–80). Throughout, he has remained a critic, author, editor, and staunch supporter of contemporary art and, more recently, of photography. While at Pasadena, Coplans organized exhibitions that indicated his responsiveness to the power of popular imagery in Pop Art as well as to the iconic toughness of abstract art of the sixties. But Coplans's passionate critical and editorial involvement with painting owed something to his original persona, that of an abstract painter.

Over the last decade, Coplans has redirected his life towards photography. The medium took hold of him in 1977 when he worked on an exhibition of the New York tabloid photographer, Weegee the Famous. Confronting Weegee's hard, street-wise work, Coplans bought the same camera as his predecessor's—a Speed-Graphic—and, like Weegee, found his subjects in the street. Early images of the Mardi Gras crowds in New Orleans and the Mummies' parade in Philadelphia were followed by portraits of friends made in his loft against the absolute background of the photographer's white walls. In 1979, while at Akron, he worked after hours on photographs of his own feet, hands, and face. Both of these preoccupations logically and naturally engendered the present work, portraits of his own nude body, which have occupied him for the last five years. Coplans makes these images in his studio, posing himself against the blank white wall, under lights, while observing the positions his body takes through a video monitor. When he finds what he wants, a studio assistant makes the exposure on Polaroid negative film. The process is further refined in the darkroom, where Coplans selects the image by cropping and then printing in large scale.

At the deepest root of these new photographs are Edward Weston's close-ups of legs and torsos. Both photographers set their subjects against a blank surface, an anonymous space against which they arrange knees, hands, thighs, and shoulders. In the work of both photographers (specifically Weston's images of the dancer Bertha Wardell taken in 1934) the head is excluded, the better to draw the abstract, rhythmic detail comprising the picture. But besides the obvious difference that Weston's photographs are images of women (with the earlier exception of his son, Neil), while Coplans's are resolutely male, the Weston images aspire to sculpture, to a purifying of the flesh out of its temporality into "art." Weston's dancer has a strong muscled body, and these photographs possess a certain sexual ambiguity. Coplans's work is specifically temporal, and explicitly male. He is close to seventy years old now, and his body has the sagging flesh, worn skin, and protruding belly of a man of those years. Like Rembrandt's portraits of the middle-aged Hendrickje Stoeffels, he glorifies the vivid charac-

strong, muscled body, and these photographs possess a certain sexual ambiguity. Coplans's work is specifically temporal, and explicitly male. He is close to seventy years old now, and his body has the sagging flesh, worn skin, and protruding belly of a man of those years. Like Rembrandt's portraits of the middle-aged Hendrickje Stoeffels, he glorifies the vivid characteristics of soft, stained, creased skin while resolutely avoiding the Dutch artist's tenderness. Where Weston refines the bodies he photographs into art—making them abstract and ageless—Coplans is open to the particularity of his subject.

These are self-portraits which do not reveal a consistent, simple author, but rather expose a multiple personality and a deep and rich cultural memory. Coplans likes to fancy different titles for his work: one (of two feet grasped at the ankles) he calls "The Ascension," and in another, where he leans over and kicks out a leg, we recognize an earth-bound "Victory of Samothrace." Still another, resembling Brancusi's torso of a youth, has the ancient, totemic grandeur of Cycladic sculpture. His body can also express a surprising range of mood. It can be strong, youthful, wistful, funny, grotesque. Shot from below, draped in austere shadows, he looks like a Gudea figure from Babylon. Pinching the flesh of his hand, he makes a strange mouth, and the close-up of his hairy chest doubles as a monstrous face. He cradles a thigh in both hands, hiding his genitals behind his knee, and his figure becomes coy, even feminine, reminding us that we are born with both male and female elements in our beings. In another, leaning forward, he condenses his body into the shape of a phallus. But the work tells us something of the history of the body. A large hand reveals the polished skin of old age, the stained fingernails of a smoker, the wear on a person who has worked with his hands for many years. Unlike Weston, Coplans exposes the rich, formal diversity and prolix personality he finds in his body. This examination of the various personalities his body can assume contrasts with Cindy Sherman's insistent role-playing, but his work is an exploration of self, rather than, as in hers, an examination of roles.

By their size as well as the traditional subject of the nude, these photographs engage us as paintings would. The up-front closeness, their "objecthood," recall the kind of art Coplans spent much of his energy exhibiting, writing about, and encouraging. He feels closest to the work of Philip Guston, in whose late paintings he finds parallels to these photographs. Coplans's works are large in scale, ambition, and energy, paradoxically possessing both a classic linear beauty and a vigorous ugliness. This counterpoise of refined structure with ironic subject matter aligns him to Guston. The photographs comprise a vivid, ironic, death-defying pose against dissolution.

Sandra S. Phillips  
Curator, Department of Photography  
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art



## EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

All works are gelatin silver prints and are courtesy of Blum/Helman Gallery, Los Angeles, and Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York. A selection of these works will be shown at The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

1. *Self-Portrait* (back with arms above), 1984, 19 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 15 $\frac{1}{4}$ "
2. *Self-Portrait* (torso, front), 1984, 17 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 12 $\frac{7}{16}$ "
3. *Self-Portrait* (side view, knees with fist), 1984, 17 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 18 $\frac{1}{2}$ "
4. *Self-Portrait* (feet crossed I), 1985, 11 $\frac{1}{16}$  x 16"
5. *Self-Portrait* (hands holding feet), 1985, 20 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 24 $\frac{5}{16}$ "
6. *Self-Portrait* (front, dark shadow), 1985, 24 $\frac{9}{16}$  x 29 $\frac{15}{16}$ "
7. *Self-Portrait* (side view bent), 1985, 18 $\frac{7}{16}$  x 18 $\frac{1}{4}$ "
8. *Self-Portrait* (frontal, hands holding), 1985, 19 $\frac{7}{16}$  x 15 $\frac{5}{16}$ "
9. *Self-Portrait* (back view, upright), 1985, 13 $\frac{3}{16}$  x 17 $\frac{1}{2}$ "
10. *Self-Portrait* (back torso from below), 1985, 14 $\frac{3}{16}$  x 17 $\frac{5}{16}$ "
11. *Self-Portrait* (seated with knees up), 1985, 14 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 21 $\frac{3}{4}$ "
12. *Self-Portrait* (side torso bent with large upper arm II), 1985, 24 $\frac{9}{16}$  x 29 $\frac{15}{16}$ "; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Promised gift of Byron Meyer
13. *Self-Portrait* (legs and hands, thumbs together), 1985, 24 $\frac{9}{16}$  x 29 $\frac{15}{16}$ "
14. *Self-Portrait* (reclining back), 1985, 13 $\frac{3}{16}$  x 17 $\frac{3}{16}$ "
15. *Self-Portrait* (hands spread on knees), 1985, 24 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 31 $\frac{1}{16}$ "
16. *Self-Portrait* (back of hand I), 1986, 29 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 27"
17. *Self-Portrait* (two arms holding leg), 1986, 17 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 21 $\frac{13}{16}$ "
18. *Self-Portrait* (hand with buttocks), 1987, 17 $\frac{3}{16}$  x 21 $\frac{1}{8}$ "
19. *Self-Portrait* (spread fingers), 1987, 28 $\frac{1}{16}$  x 26 $\frac{5}{16}$ "
20. *Self-Portrait* (six times), 1987, 17 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 59" (overall) shown in SF; in NY: 25 $\frac{1}{16}$  x 82"
21. *Self-Portrait* (front and back), 1987, 25 $\frac{1}{16}$  x 31 $\frac{1}{16}$ "
22. *Self-Portrait* (front of hand II), 1987, 28 $\frac{1}{16}$  x 25 $\frac{1}{2}$ "  
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Purchased through a gift of Anne MacDonald Walker, 88. 31
23. *Self-Portrait* (hand, thumb out), 1987, 21 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 26"

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Butler, Susan. "Body Politics: The Revels and Rebellions of Age." *Ten-8/The Photographers' Gallery* (London), No. 25 (1987), pp. 16-19.

Chevrier, Jean-François. "John Coplans Autoportraits." *Photographies*, No. 8 (September 1985), pp. 92-95.

Lifson, Ben. "Personalities on Parade." *Village Voice*, February 11-17, 1981, p. 86.

Tucker, Marcia. "The Other Man: Alternative Representations of Masculinity." *On View at the New Museum*, May 8-July 12, 1987.

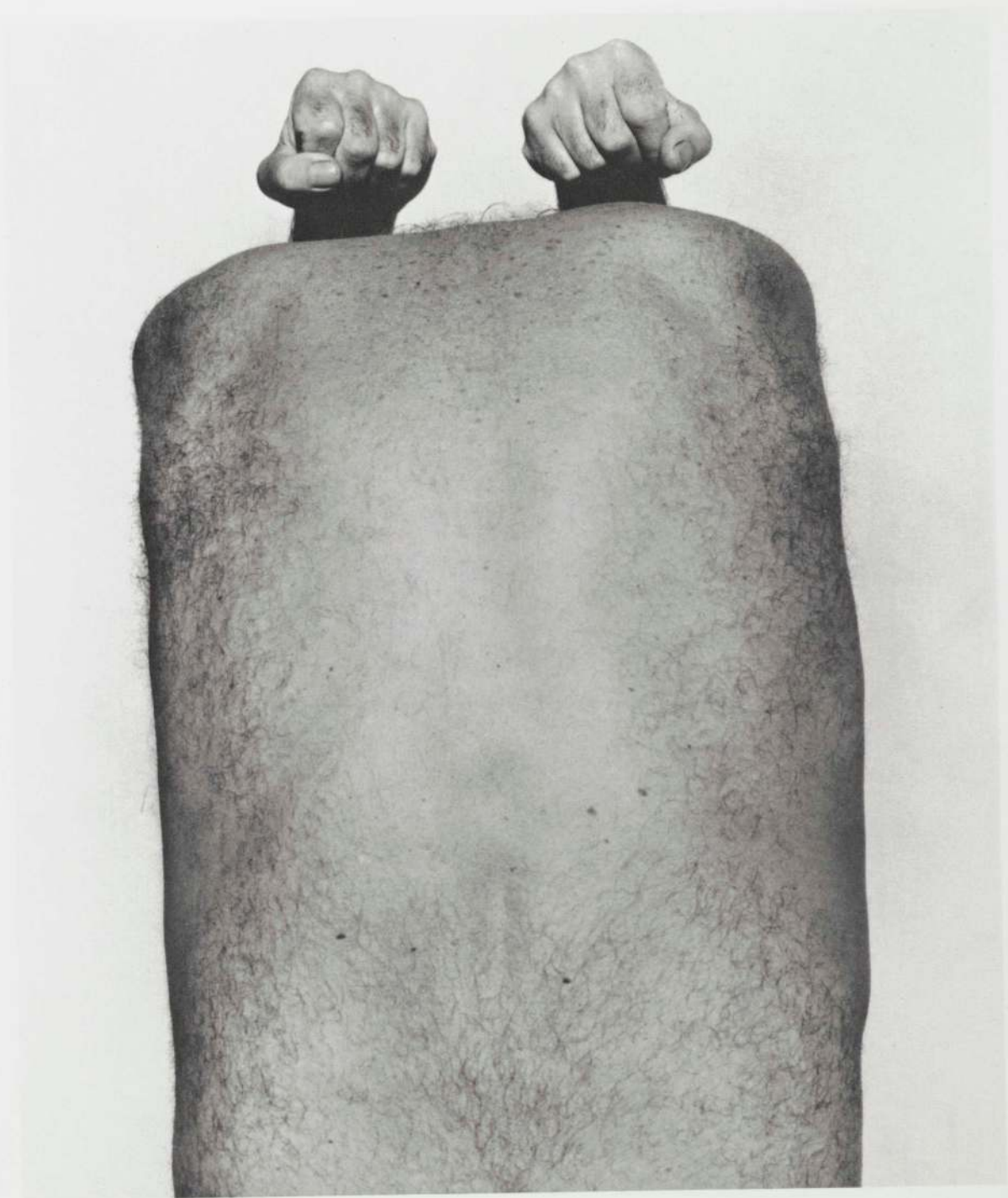
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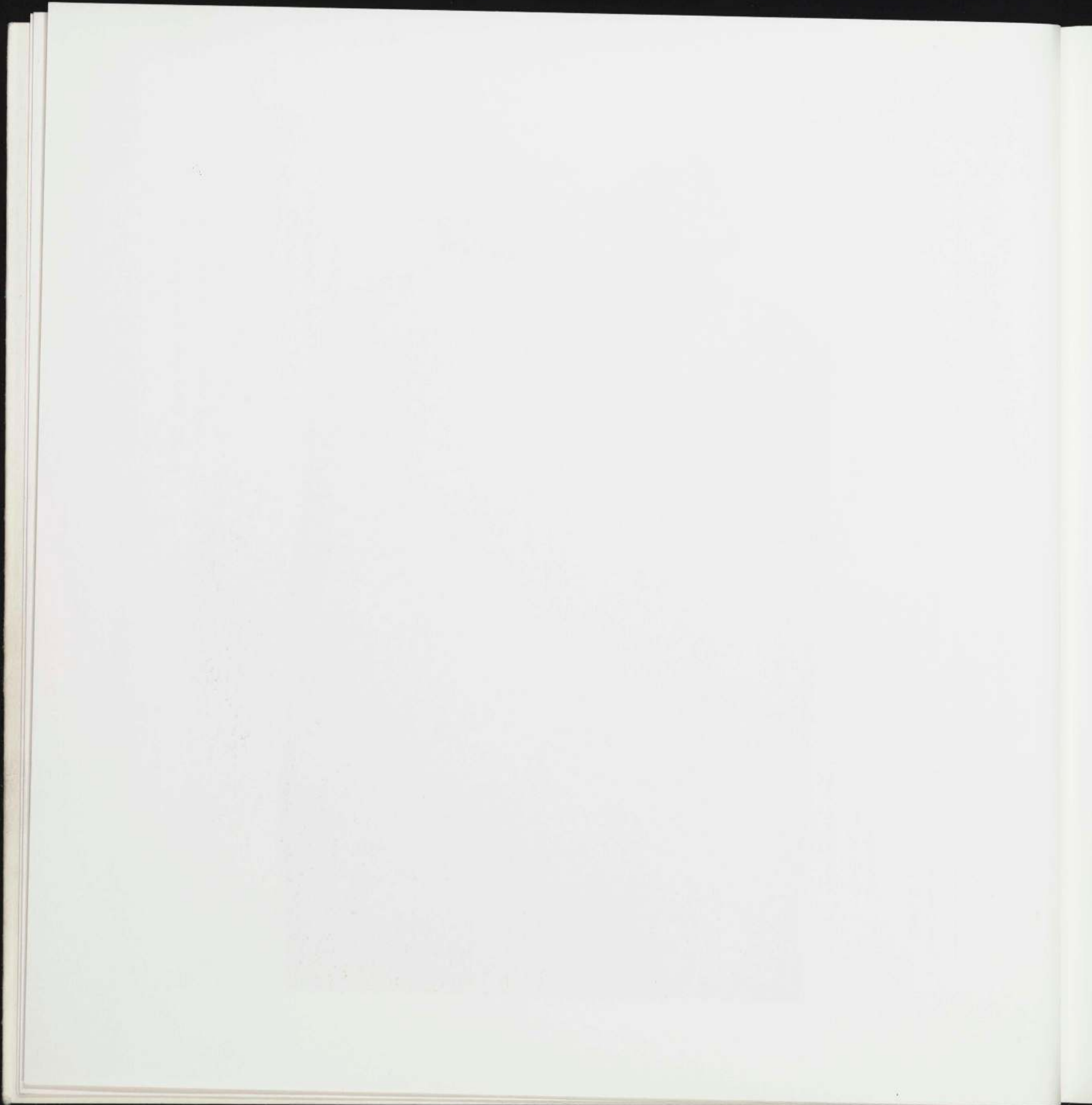
Cover: *Self-Portrait*, 1985

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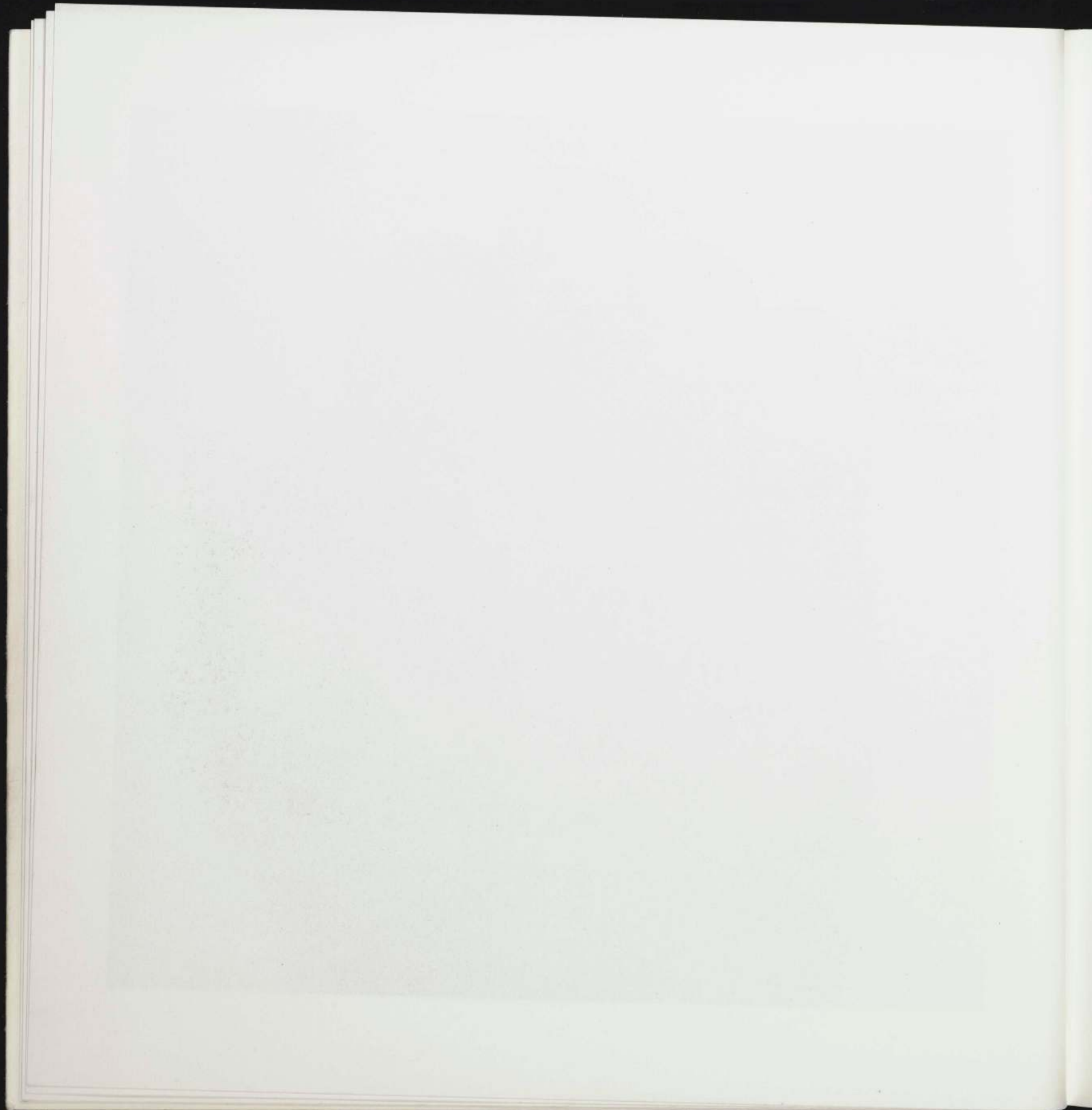
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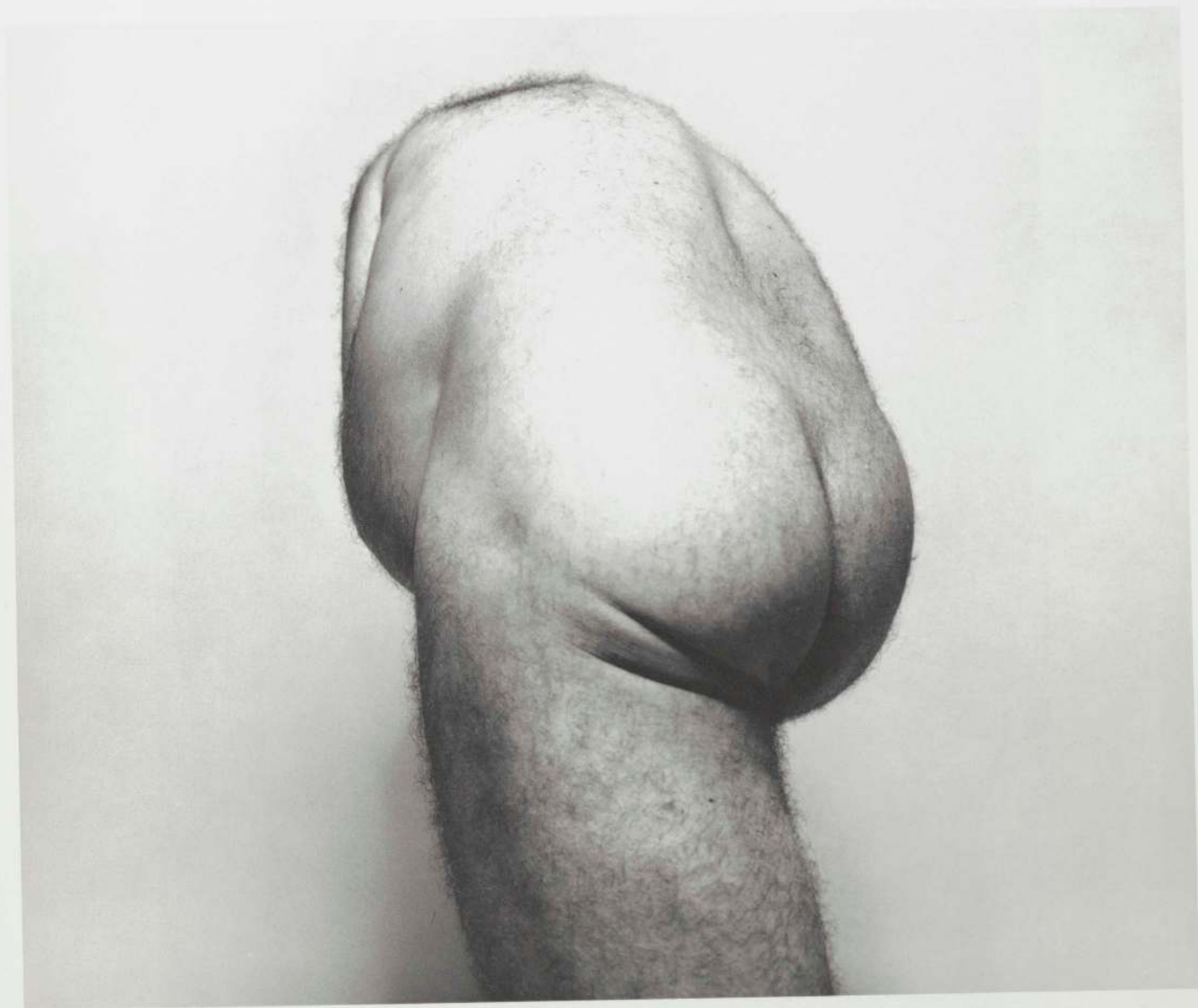






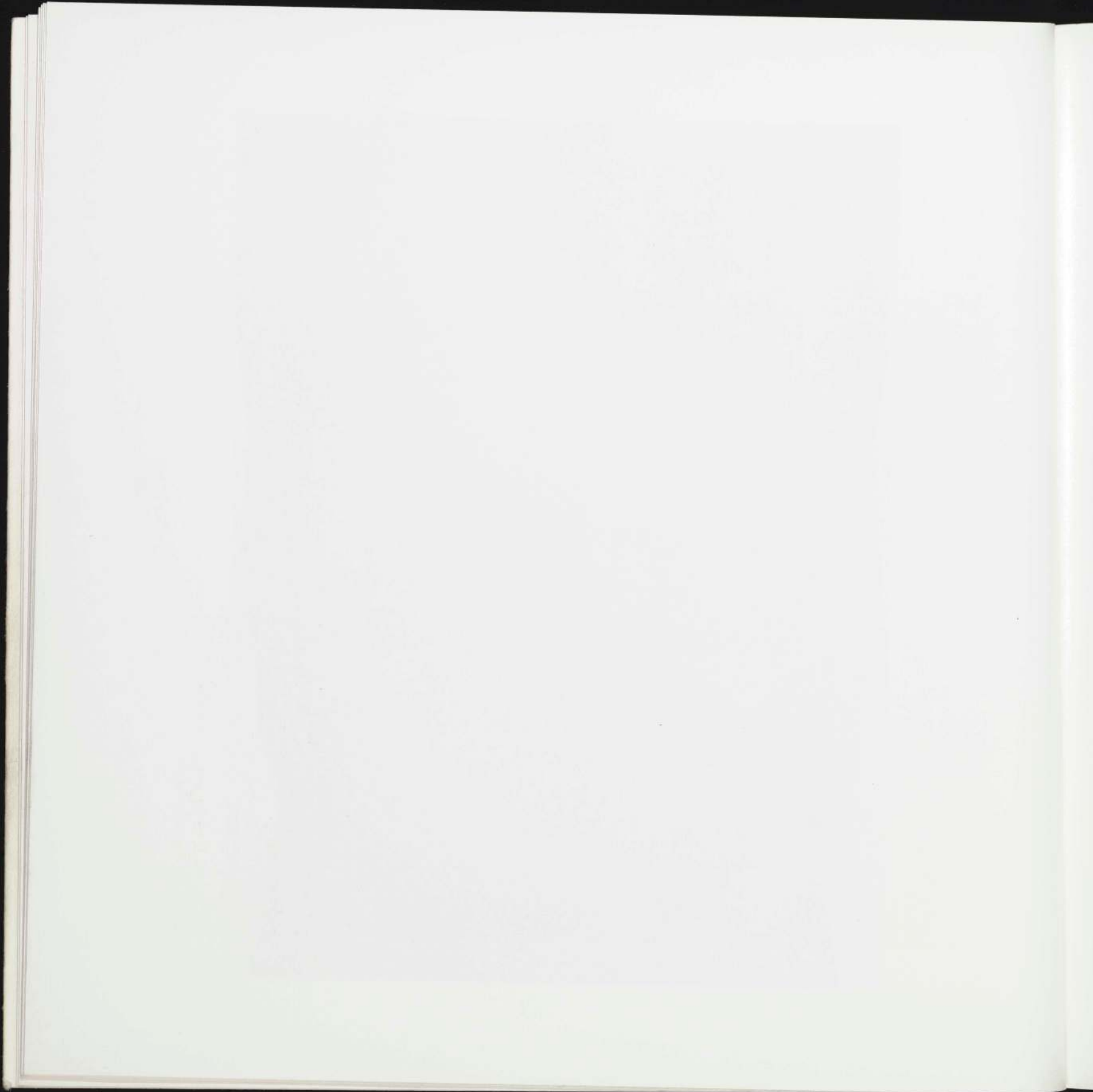




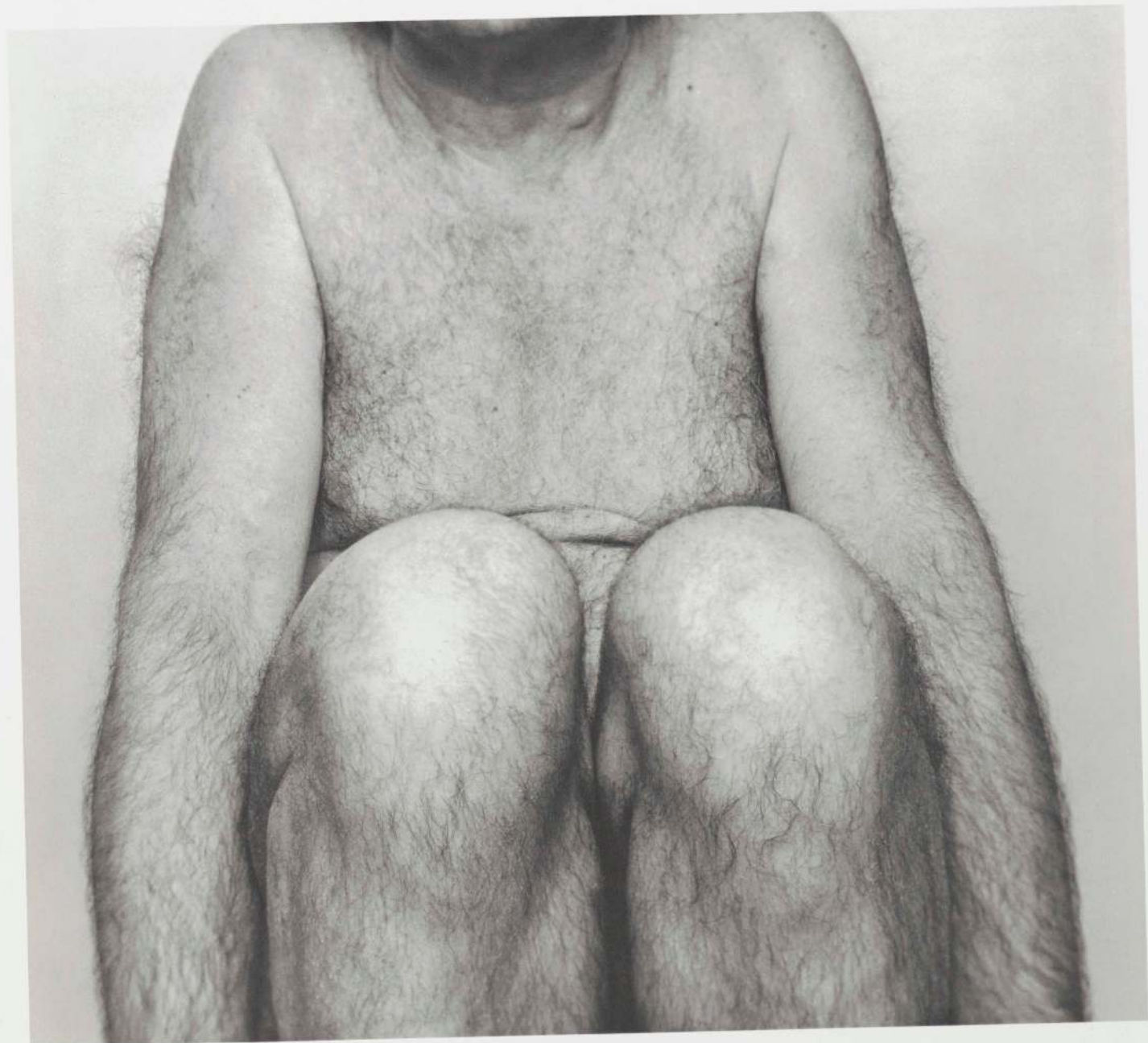


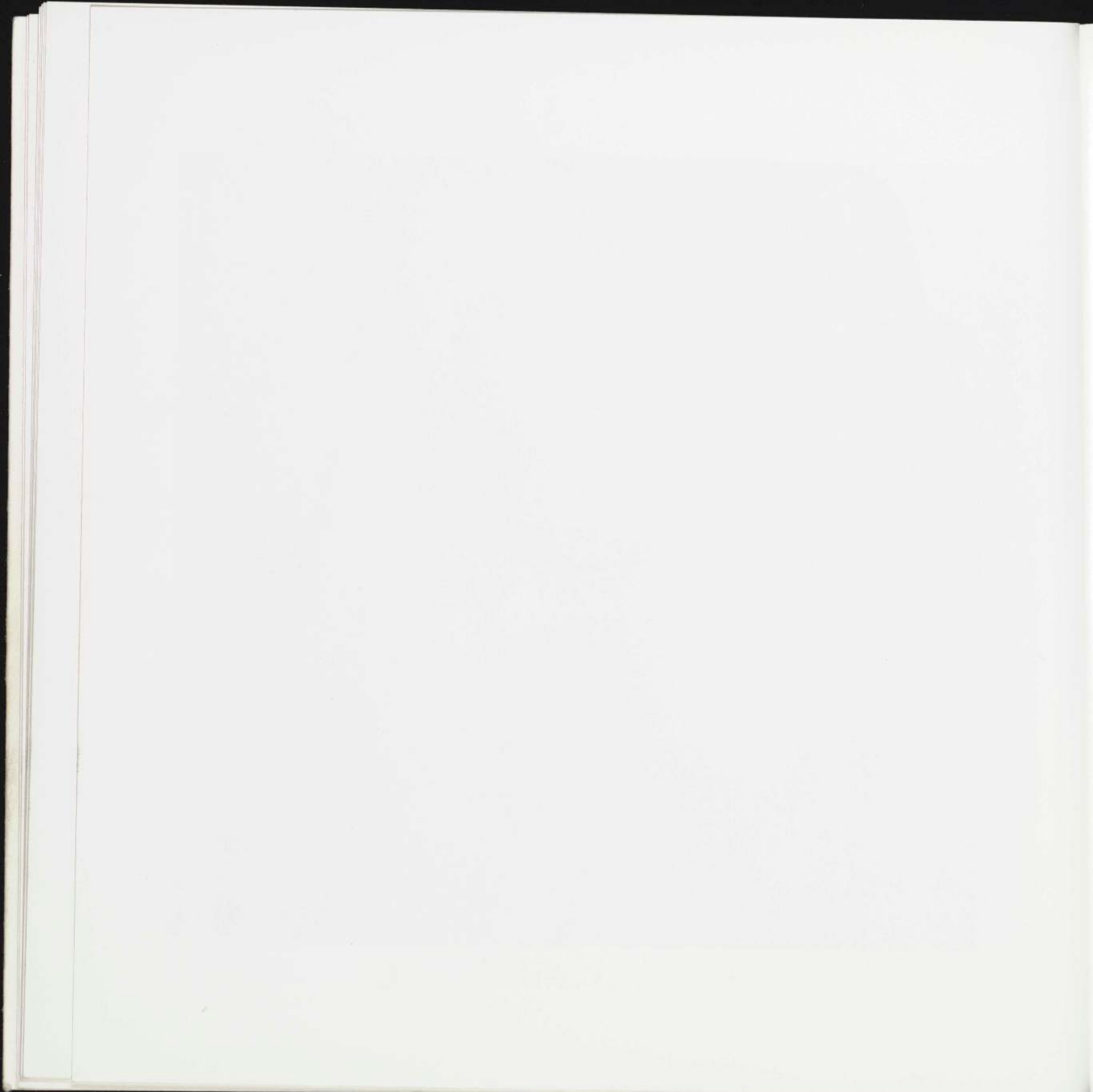


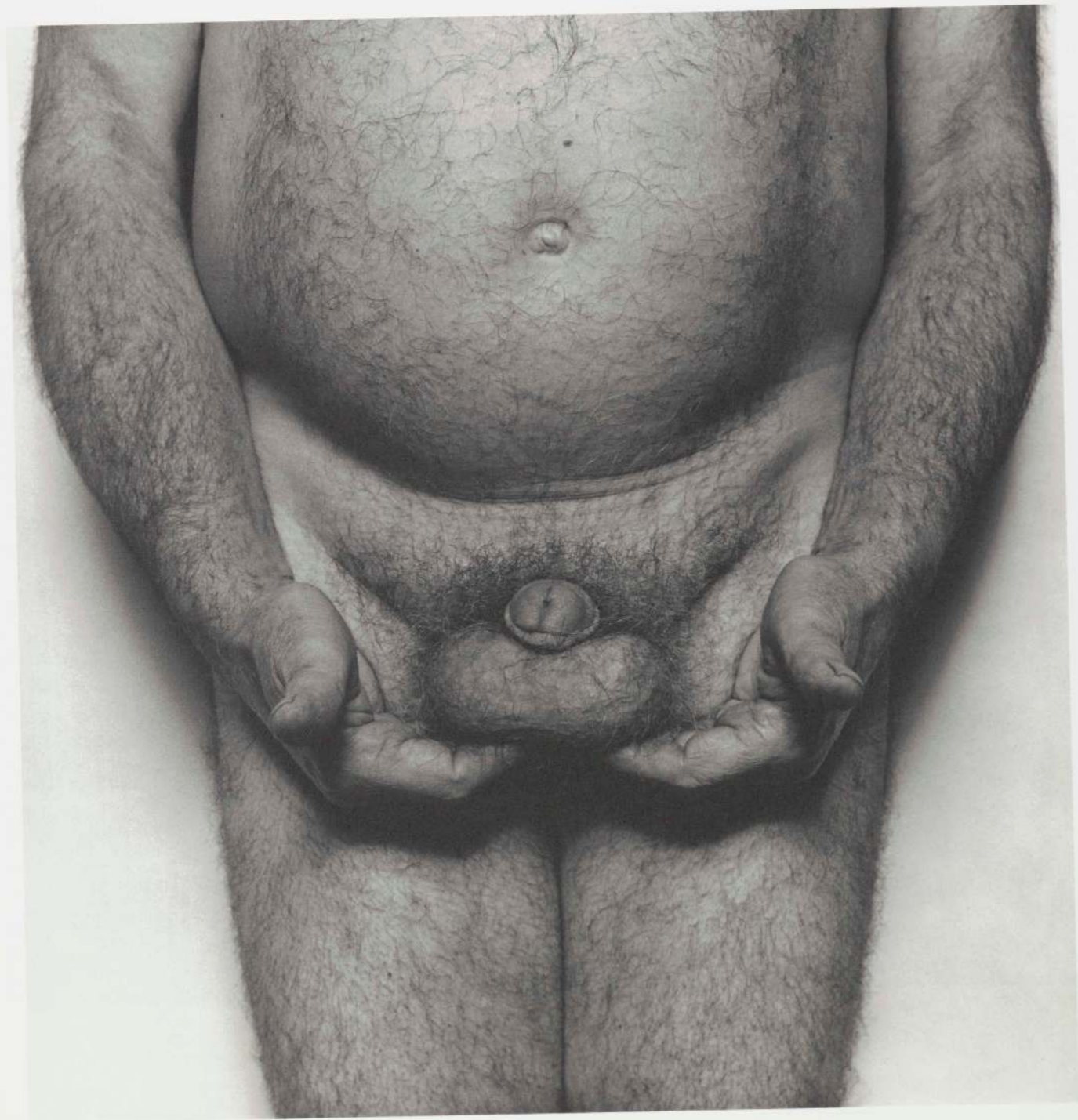










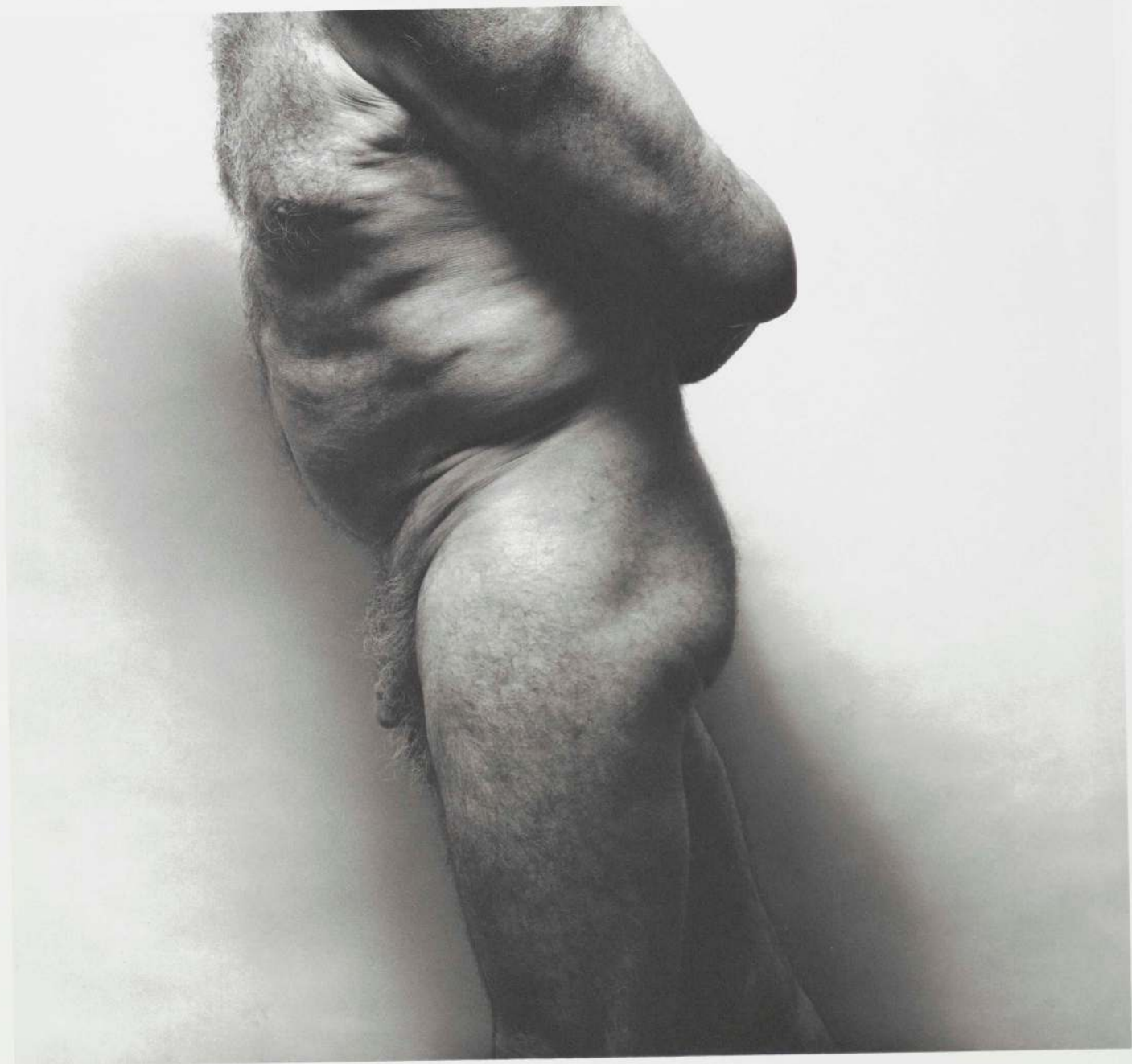










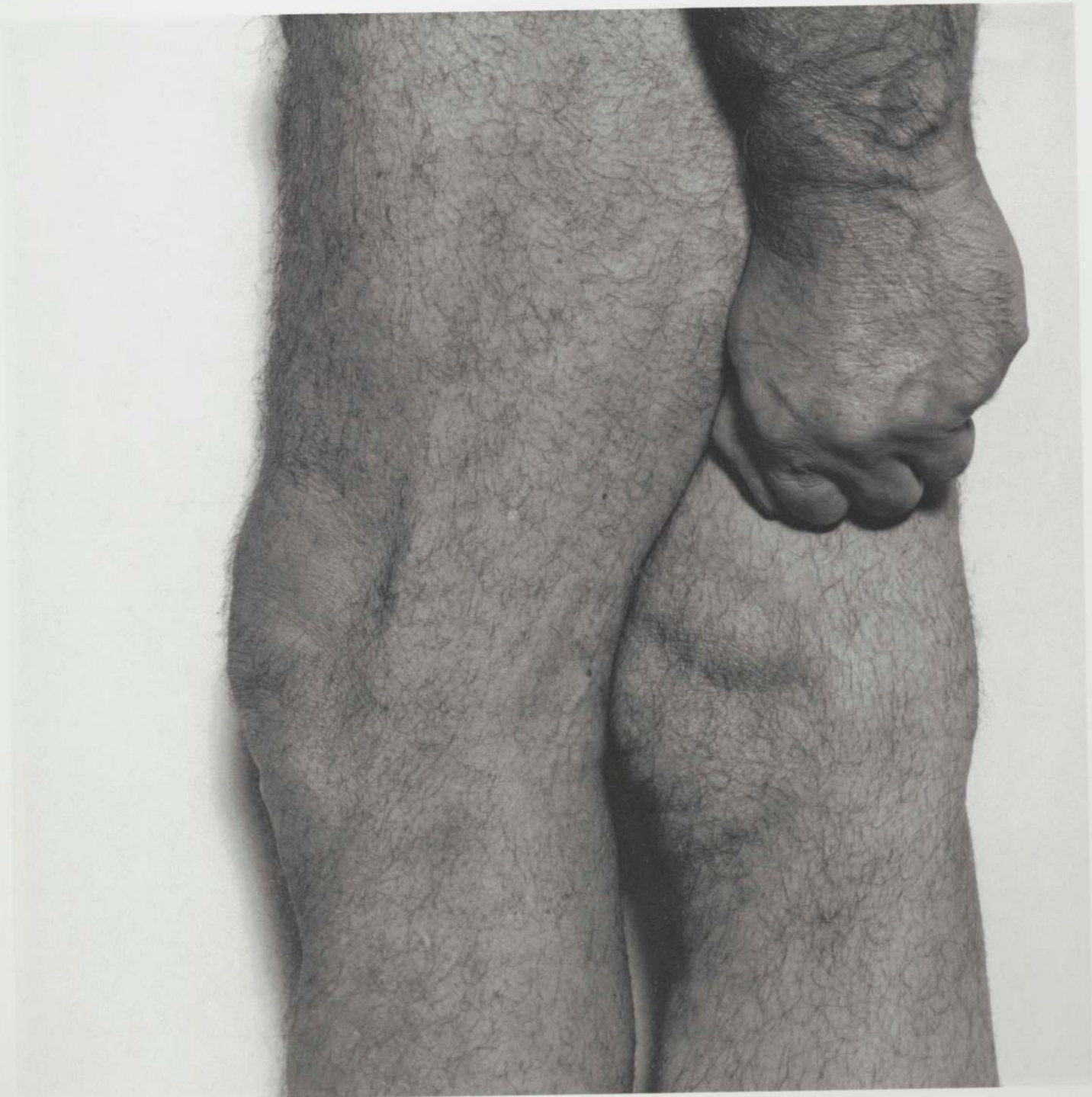










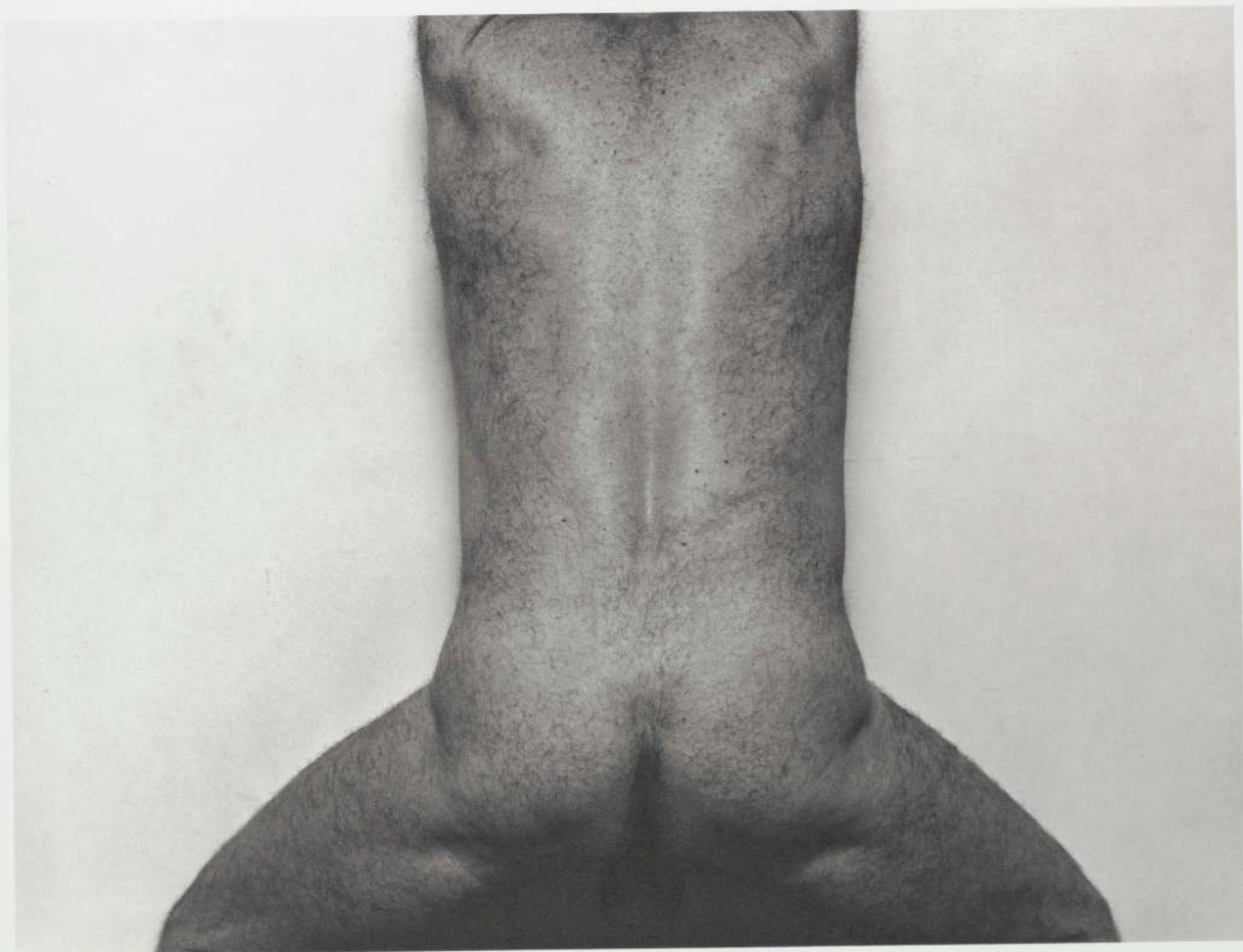


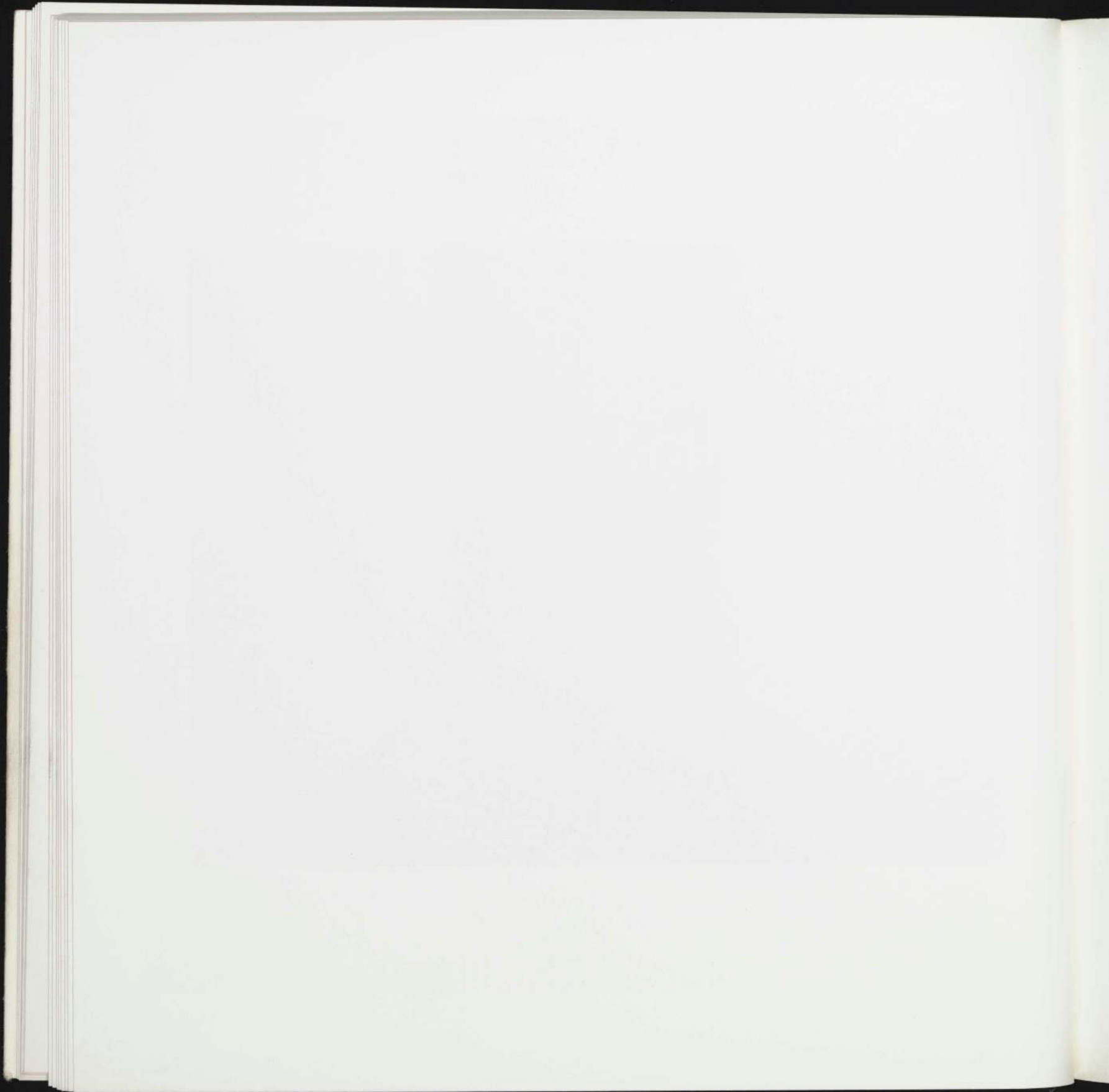








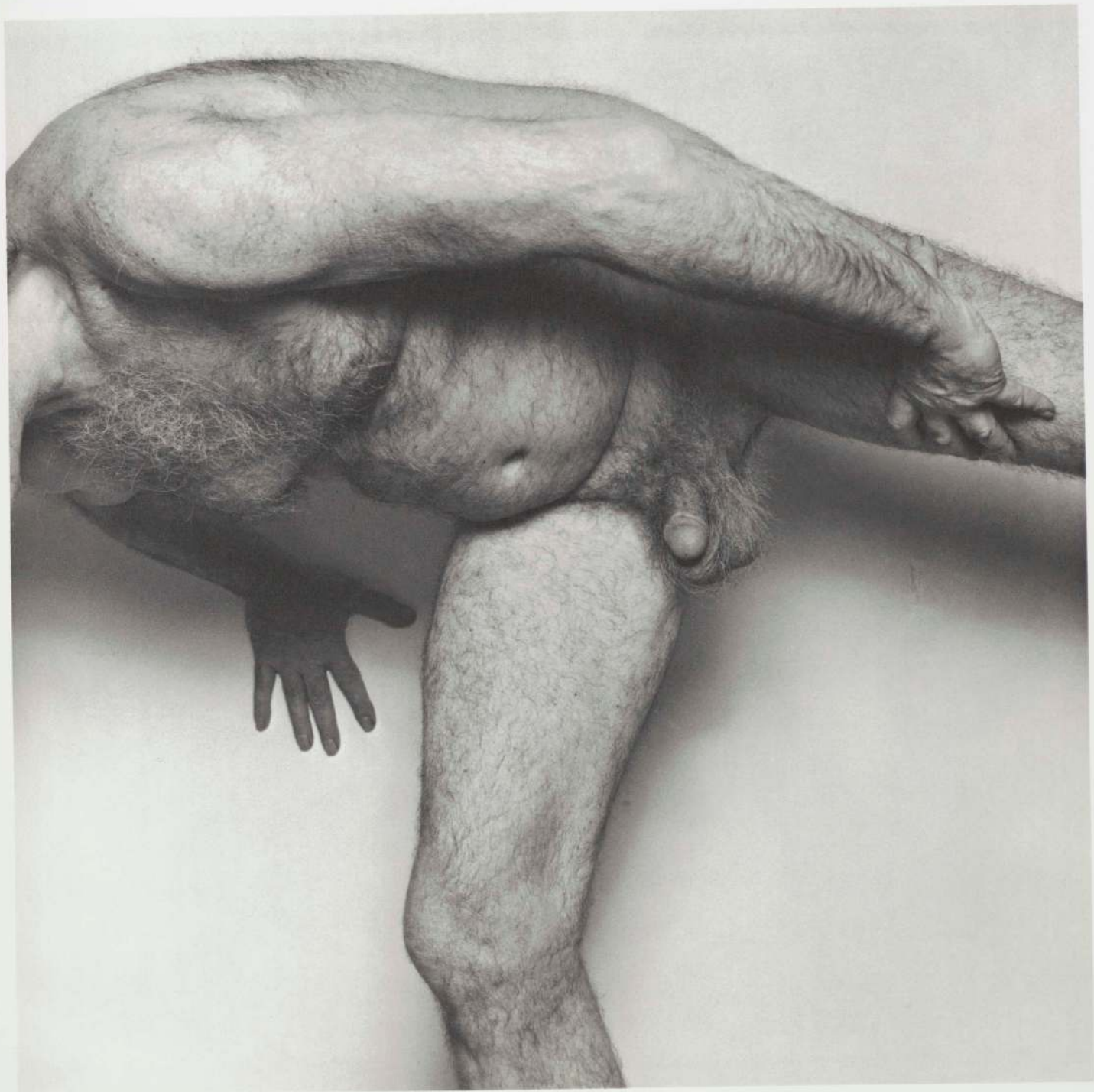










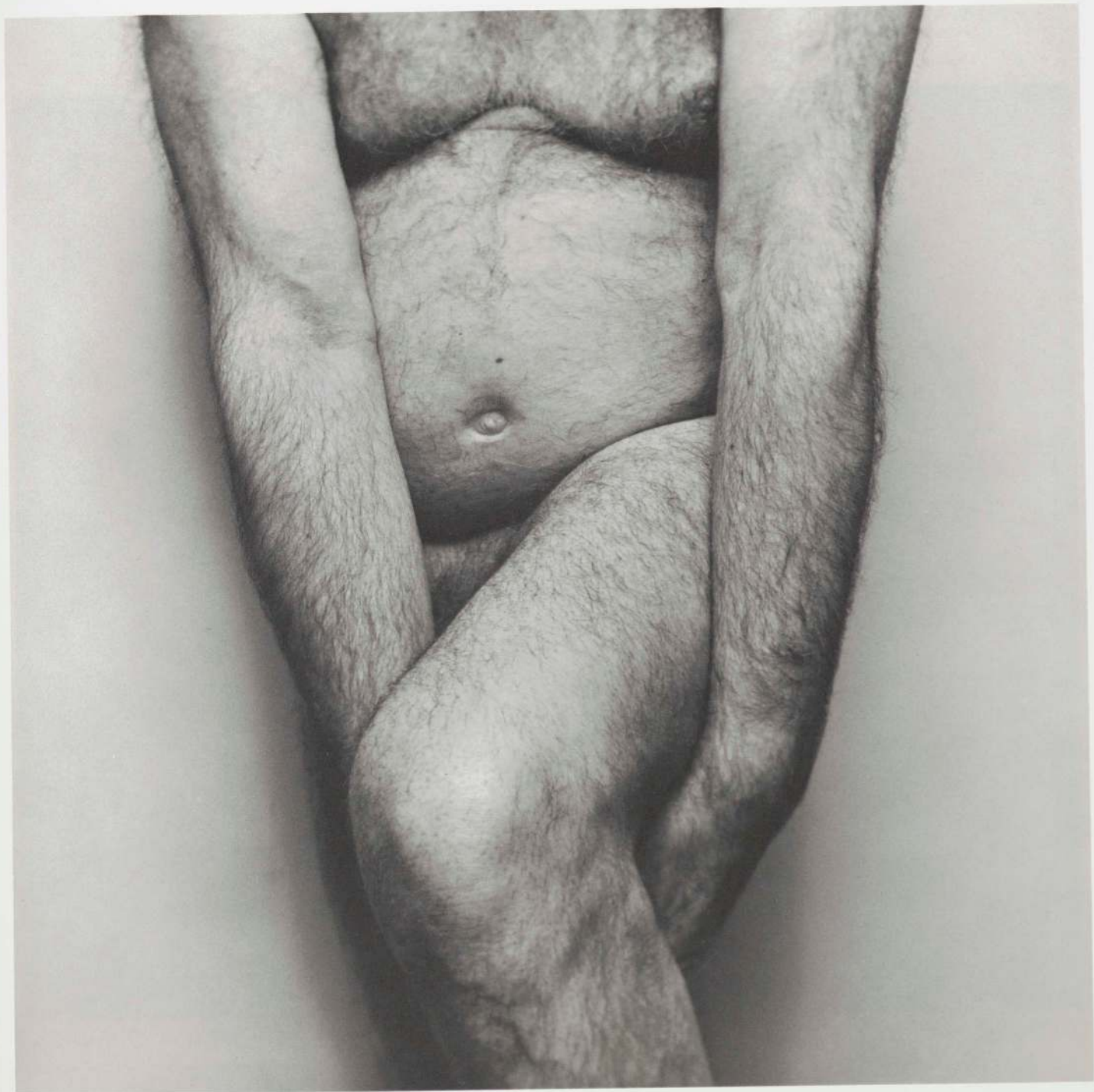










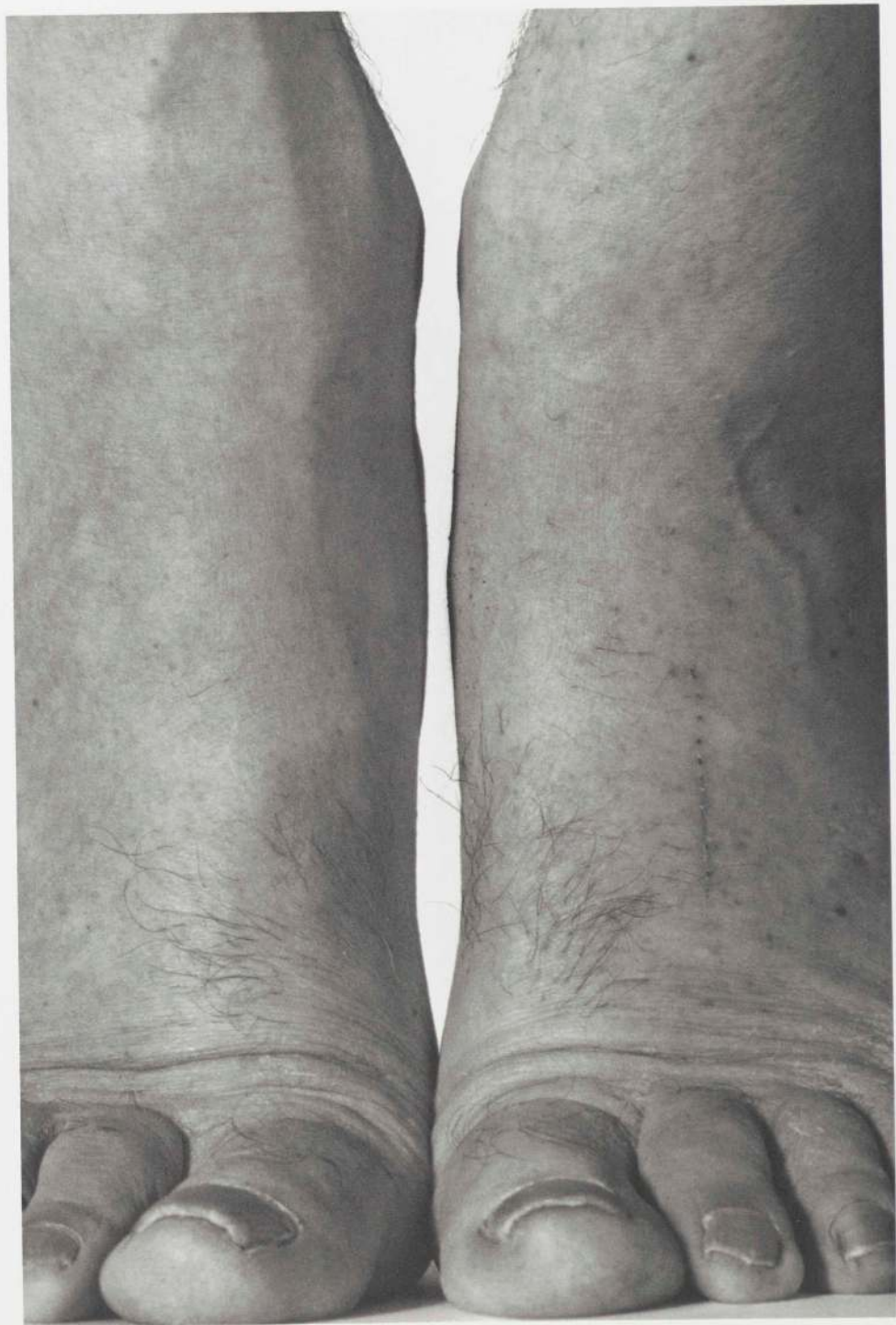


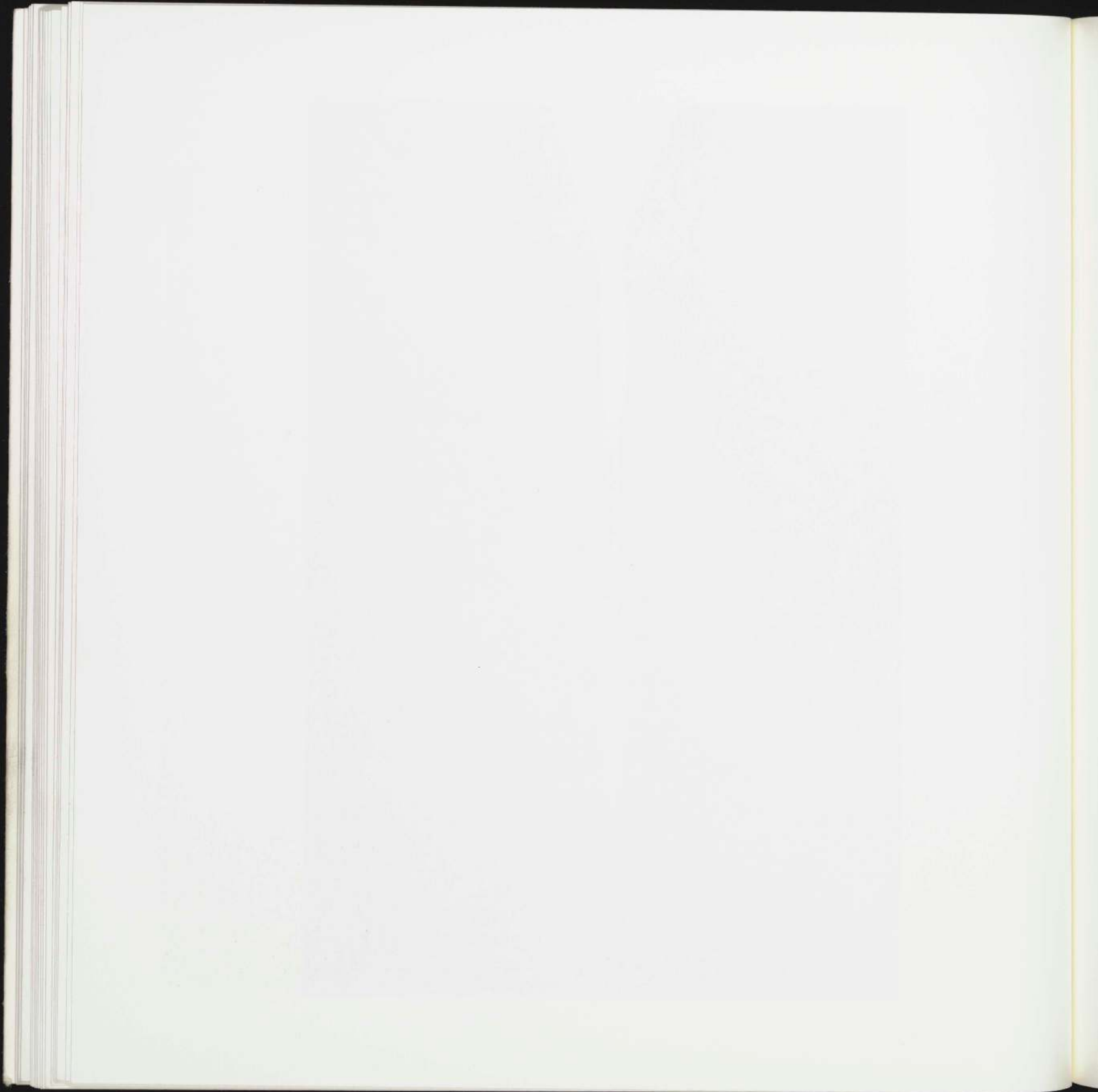








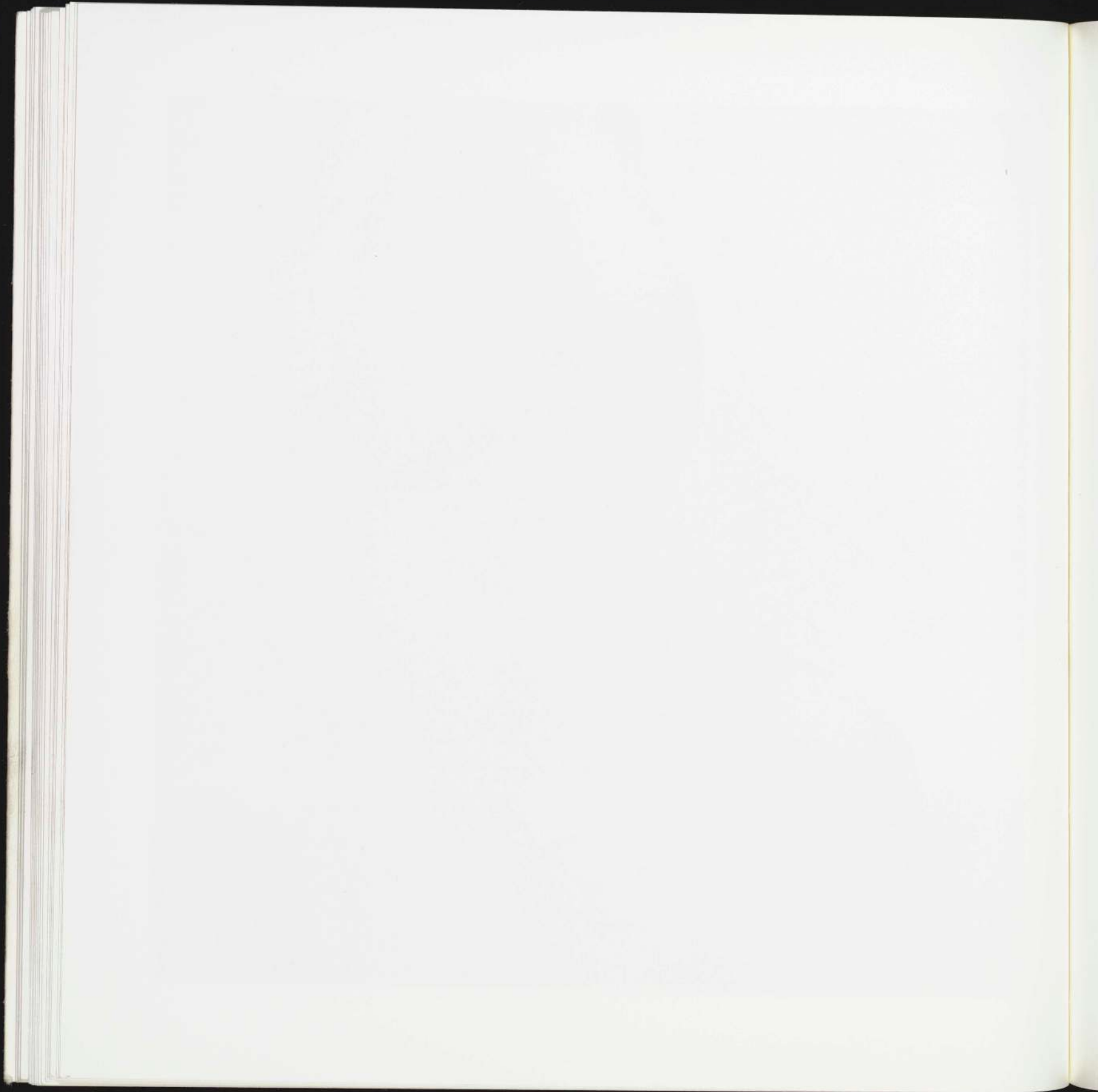




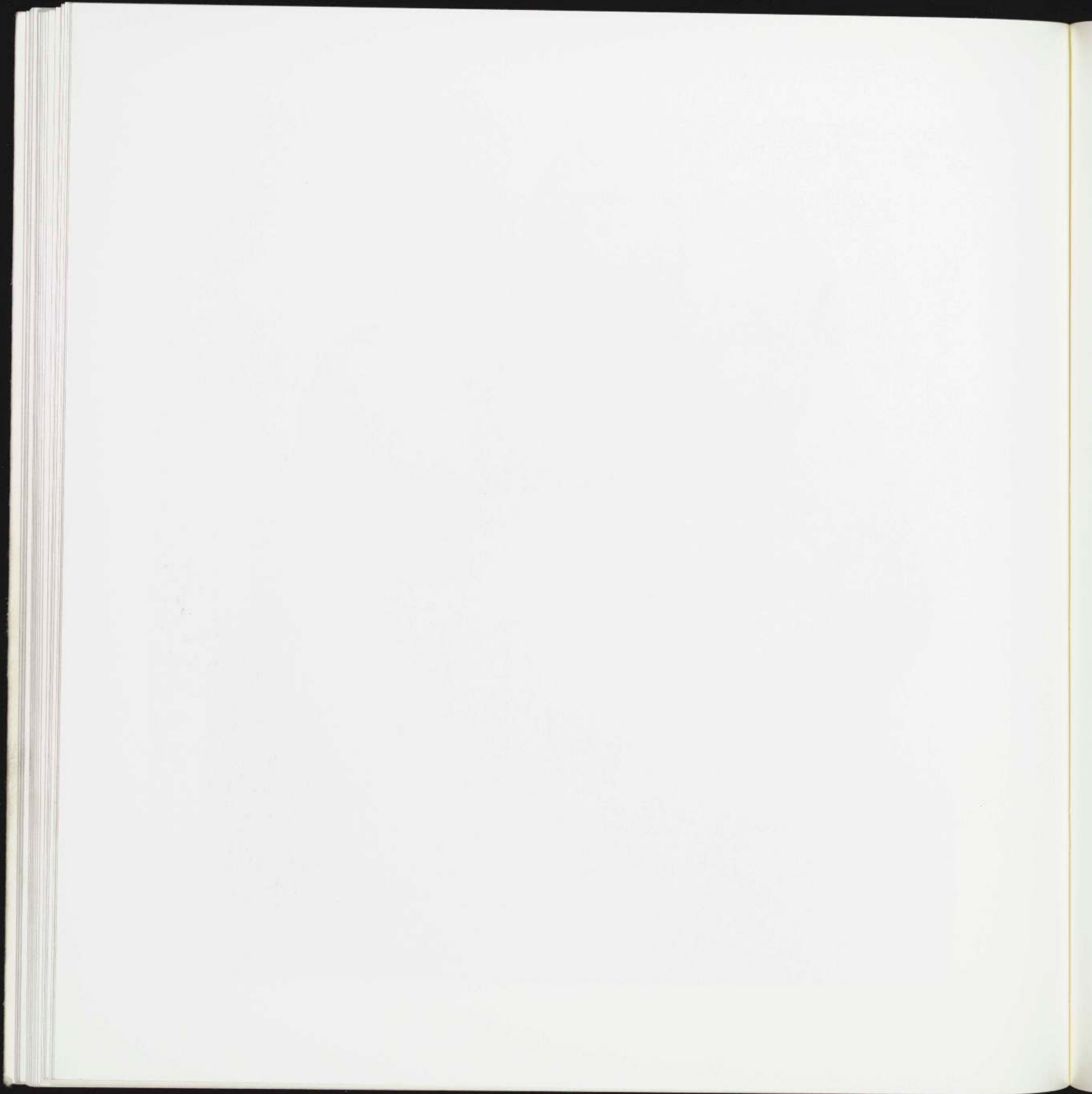




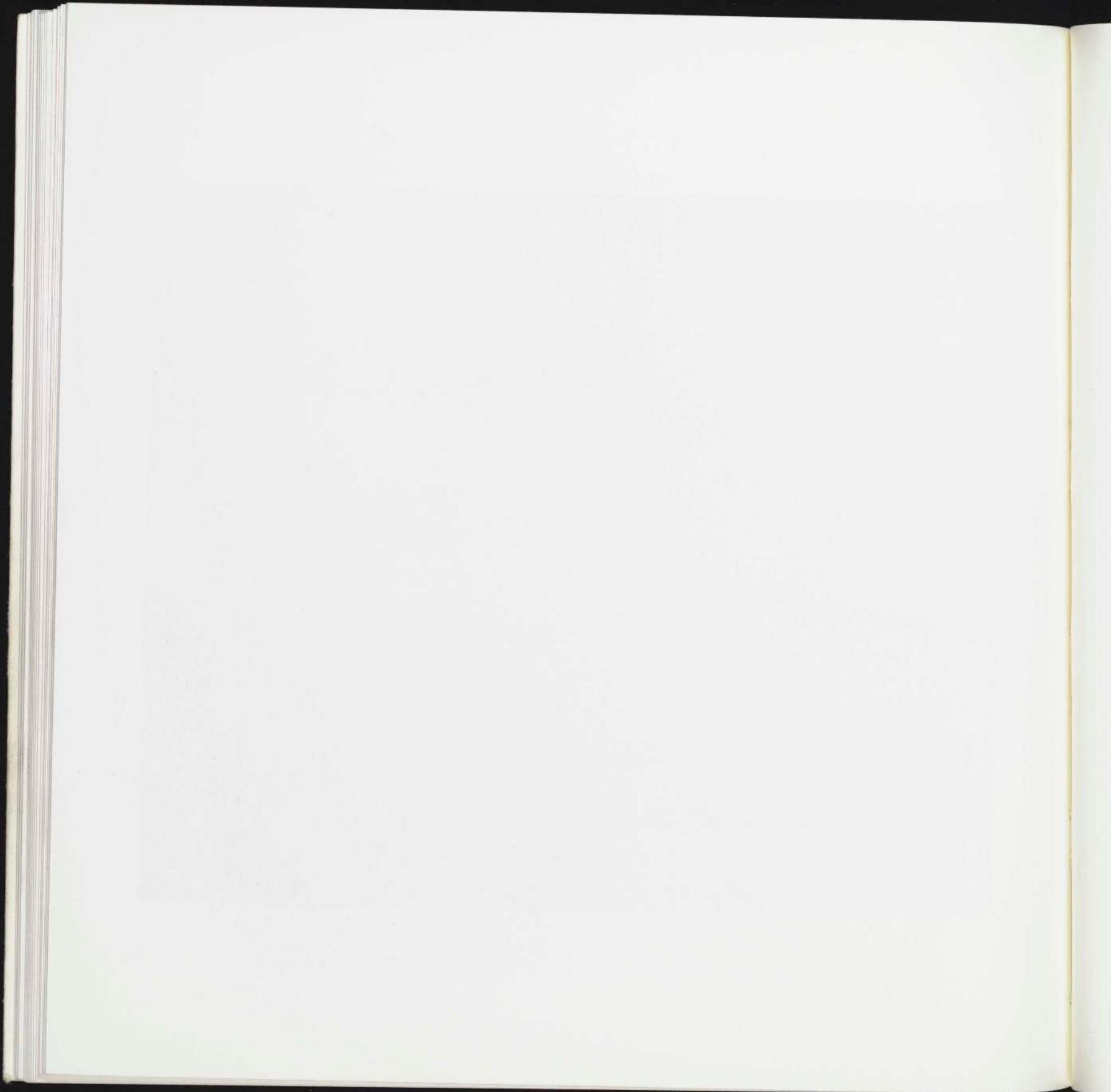




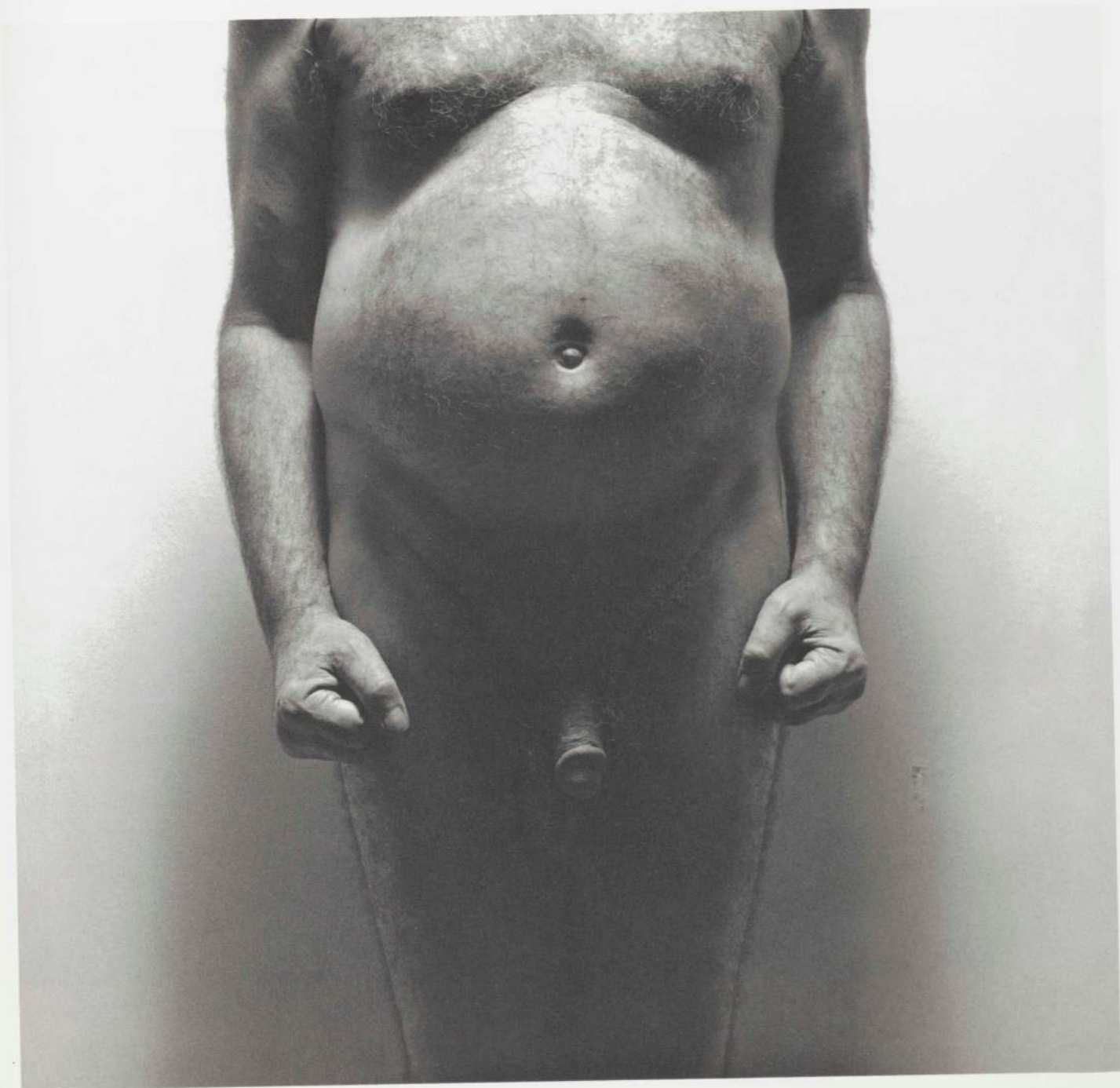


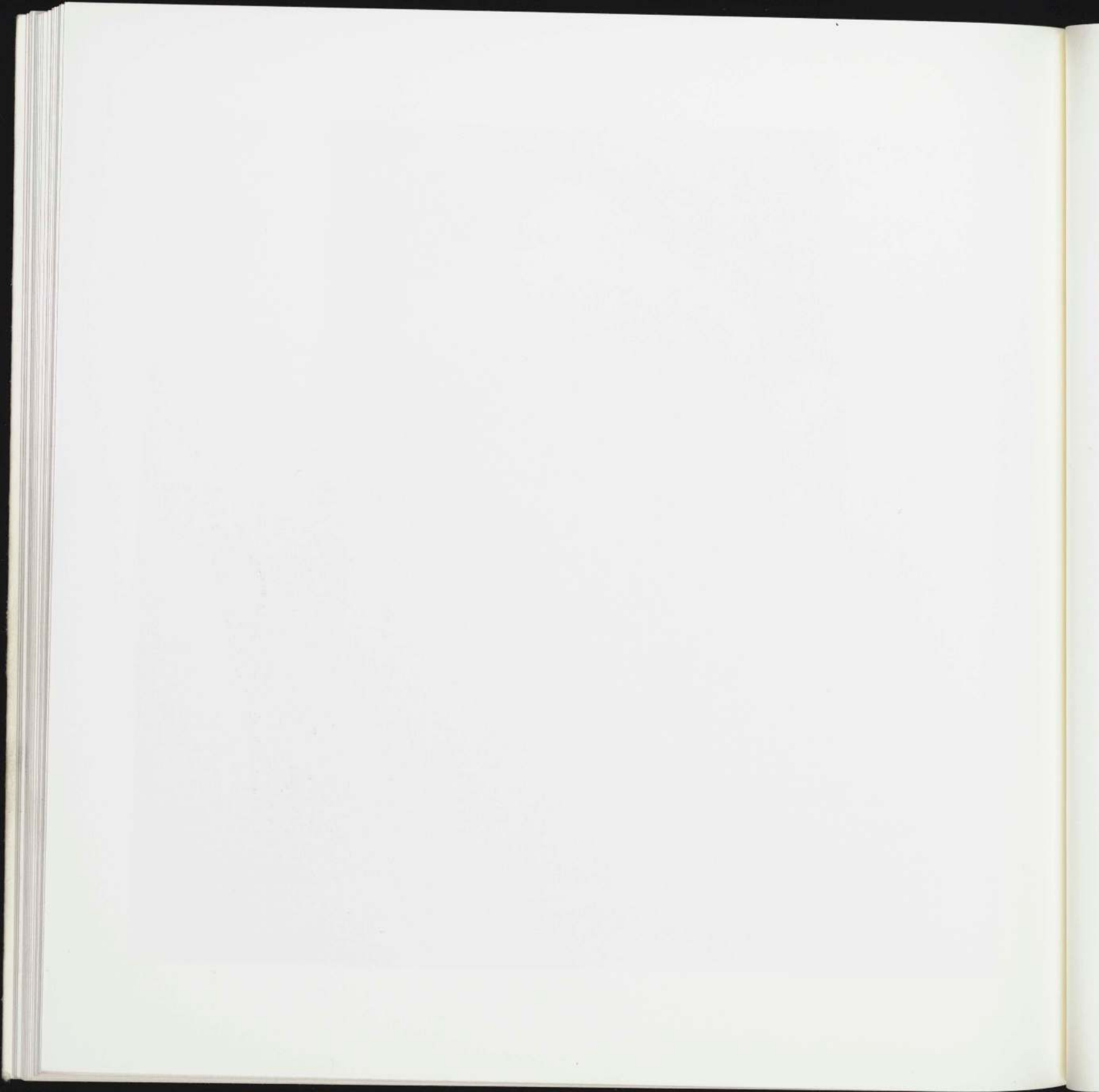
















JOHN COPLANS WAS BORN IN  
LONDON, ENGLAND AND LIVES  
IN NEW YORK CITY. THESE  
SELF PORTRAITS WERE TAKEN  
BETWEEN 1984 AND 1987 WITH  
THE ASSISTANCE OF EDITHA  
MESINA, MARILYN TOTH AND  
JOSEPH COPLANS ON POLAROID  
POSITIVE/NEGATIVE 4x5 LAND  
FILM.

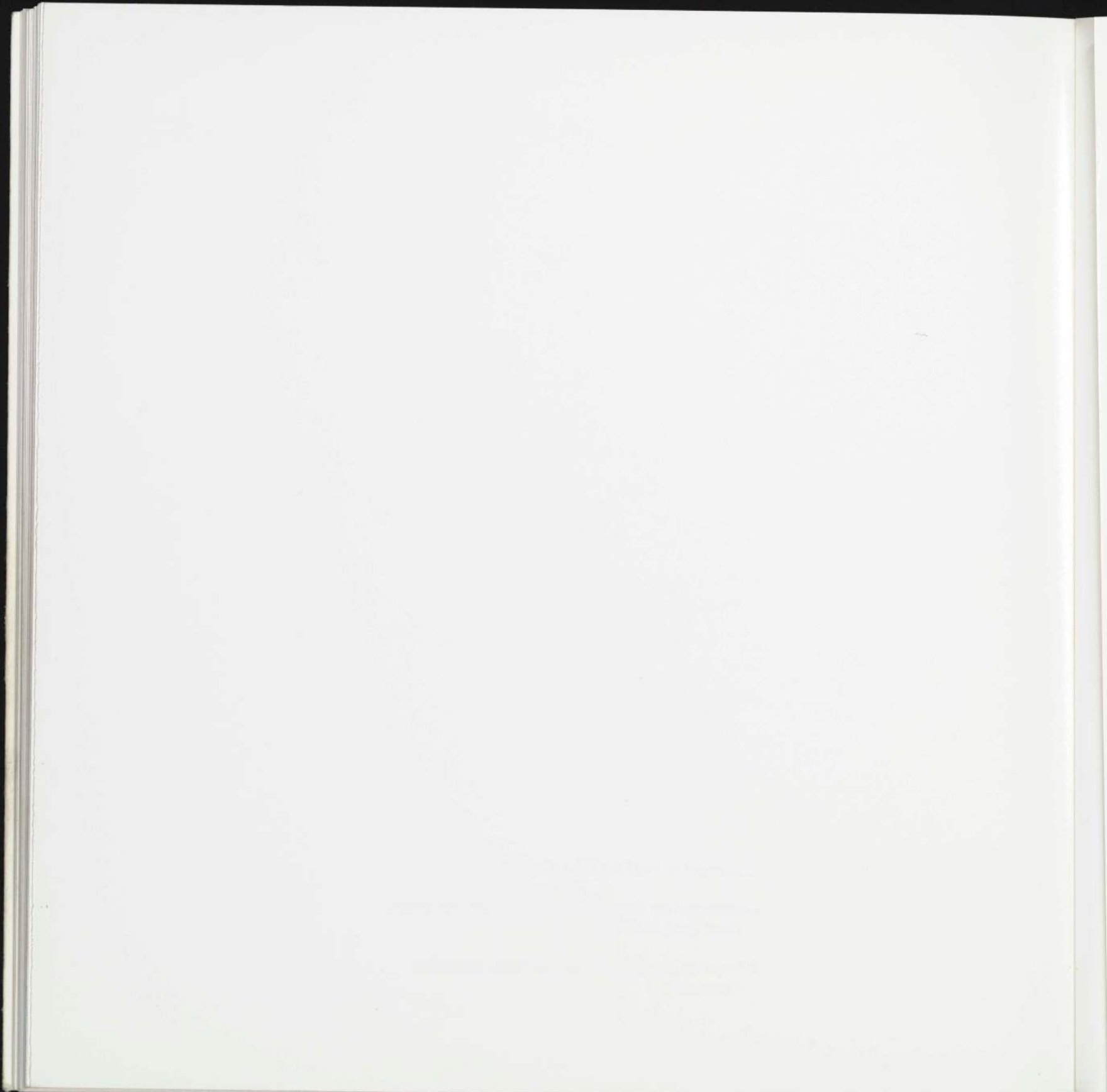


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