

The Museum of Modern Art

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A BODY OF WORK: PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN COPLANS

April 23 - July 10, 1988

In A BODY OF WORK: PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN COPLANS, the critic, curator, and former teacher is represented by the most recent, and perhaps most provocative, phase of his career. Opening at The Museum of Modern Art on April 23, 1988, the exhibition consists of approximately fifteen black-and-white photographs of nude self-portraits and isolated parts of the artist's body. The works were selected by Susan Kismaric, curator in the Department of Photography, from an exhibition organized by Sandra S. Phillips, curator of photography, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The exhibition continues through July 10.

In 1984 John Coplans (b. 1920) began the compelling series of nude self-portraits presented in this exhibition. Coplans posed himself naked against a blank white wall while observing the positions of his body in a video monitor. When he found the composition he wanted, a studio assistant made the exposure on Polaroid negative film. The process continued in the darkroom, where Coplans created the picture by cropping the negative and making a large-scale print. The resulting photographs are an intimate yet impersonal way to deal with the issue of aging and the objective fact of his own body.

"I photograph my body," Coplans has written. "I generalise it by beheading myself to make my body more like any other man's. Nakedness removes the body from the specificity of time. Unclothed, it belongs to the past, present, and future. It is classless, without country, unencumbered by language and free to wander across cultures at will."

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Coplans sees himself as an actor, lampooning the clichéd association of decrepitude with an aging body, while at the same time glorifying the image--sagging flesh, protruding belly. By mimicking postures that are both typically feminine and explicitly masculine, he objectively examines the various personalities his body can assume. Rather than revealing their subject, these self-portraits expose a multiple personality and a rich cultural memory.

While Coplans's work invites references to, or draws comparisons with, the self-portraits of Cindy Sherman, Lucas Samaras, and Anne Noggle, it is distinguished by the artist's interest in form and design. His 1984 portrait of his back, for example, with its wide, rectangular shape topped with roughly rounded, clenched fists, bears a stronger resemblance to abstract sculpture than to traditional portraiture.

Born in London in 1920, Coplans studied art in London and Paris. In 1960 he moved to the United States and began teaching painting at the University of California, Berkeley. He was a founding editor, in 1962, of Artforum magazine. From 1965 to 1967 he was director of the Art Gallery at the University of California at Irvine, and from 1967 to 1970 he was senior curator of the Pasadena Art Museum, where he organized retrospectives of the work of Roy Lichtenstein (1967), Wayne Thiebaud (1968), Andy Warhol (1970), and Donald Judd (1971).

In 1971 Coplans left California for New York to rejoin the editorial staff of Artforum, an affiliation he continued until 1987. He has published numerous articles on art, and his books include Cézanne Watercolors (1967), Andy Warhol (1970), and Weegee: Täter and Opfer (1978). In 1978 he became director of the

Akron Art Museum, a position he held until 1980, when he returned to New York and decided to become a photographer.

"Coplans's self-portraits refer to other ideas in art--classical sculpture, traditional self-portraiture, and 'body-art' of the 1960's, among many others--yet they are absolutely original," says Susan Kismaric. "No one in the history of photography, prior to Coplans, had conceived of the purely corporal self as a continuing subject."

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