

The Primitive Subject of Female Bodybuilding: Transgression and Other Postmodern Myths

Metamorphosis has a few drawbacks.
(John Acorn, entomologist)

Introduction: All Pumped Up and Nowhere to Go

Since its first official competition in 1977, which featured contestants sporting high heels, female bodybuilding has been a hotbed of gender-related controversy.¹ Some, but by no means all, or even most, female bodybuilders have seen themselves as challenging feminine norms through achieving and displaying the conspicuous strength and muscularity conventionally equated with masculinity. Some sympathetic feminists, historians, and critics, sports sociologists and psychologists, share this view of bodybuilding as contestatory gender performance and use it to bolster their own critiques of normative gender constructs.² The title of Alan Klein's insightful book on male muscle culture as a form of petty fascism, *Little Big Men*, epitomizes what many see as wrong with the men who bodybuild, while the title of Maria R. Lowe's book, *Women of Steel*, sums up what's right with the women who do so.⁵ That the men Klein describes comprise a coherent subculture he could study as a sociologist, while the women Lowe describes comprise, rather, a collection of marginalized individuals, is itself symptomatic of the double standard that the bodybuilding establishment has always applied. Despite

the persistence of this double standard, some feminist critics and theorists think, with Laurie Fierstein, that “females’ big muscles have revolutionary implications, metaphorically and corporeally, for both gender and women’s empowerment” (137),⁴ as if “women of steel” not only represented, but actually achieved, the kinds of gender deconstruction academics perform discursively.

I should say “*we* women of steel”; I have been a bodybuilder since 1983.⁵ In the summer of 1985, shortly before taking my Ph.D. orals, I entered two bodybuilding competitions. In the first, I won the women’s overall championship, for which I was awarded a medal, a huge trophy, the amusing title “Miss Neptune,” and the chance to be photographed supine wearing a mermaid’s tail made of aluminum foil. Mr. Neptune stood beside me, holding a trident. The second contest I lost because, I was told, the judges thought that, given my muscle size and definition, I must be on steroids. (They declined to test me.) I am familiar with the physical, intellectual, and psychological benefits and challenges bodybuilding offers women. I am all for gender transgression. Years spent practicing and writing about female bodybuilding, however, have convinced me that, whatever it may mean for any given individual, at the level of cultural discourse or social imaginary, gender transgression is not what bodybuilding is about.⁶ (“Bodybuilding” here means not only the activities of an individual in training but more broadly the integrated and highly controlled institution of competitive bodybuilding, including the contests themselves and the combined health and fitness industries, together with the magazines, advertisements, other media, and the audiences and consumers upon which these all depend.)

What bodybuilding does is to yoke the individual’s own psychological idealism—her desire to embody or at least resemble (even if takes desperate measures) her own “body image” (a psychological structure that arguably underpins gender in that one has to have a body to gender)—to that of the culture, with its normative gender ideals. Bodybuilding plays a trick: while seeming to encourage men and women to exceed the norm and achieve heroic, outrageous physiques of increasingly “monstrous” proportions, it actually uses these subjects to maintain, even more rigidly than does mainstream culture at large, reactionary norms, themselves “ideals,” of masculinity and femininity. Credulous supporters of female bodybuilding who claim it as revolutionary gender transgression idealize their own fictions of transcendence, reinvesting the very fantasies of essence, presence, and autonomy that deconstruction set out to discredit. Exploring the

contradictory idealisms at work in female bodybuilding is the purpose of this essay. In each of the following three sections, the dialectical opposition of transcendence versus immanence—the fantasy that something “trans” might offer an escape from the lure of essentialism—becomes the target of a critique meant to reveal transgression as but a pseudomaterialist name for that old metaphysical bugaboo, “transcendence.”⁷

*The Contradictory Business
of Female Bodybuilding*

Modern feminist Simone de Beauvoir saw women as stuck, due to their biological and cultural situation, in an imposed, essentialized immanence, while men were free to go around transcending. It seemed to her that, just like male subjects, women needed, wanted, and deserved equal opportunity transcendence (xxxiii–xxxiv). Despite the acid rain that postmodern critique has, in recent decades, caused to fall upon transcendence as just so much discarded theological machinery, “one of the most deplorable aspects of the postmodern era and its so-called ‘thought’ is the return of the religious dimension in all its different guises” (Žižek, *Fragile 1*), including feminist ones. Women’s particular need for transcendence, some feel, originates in trauma—the trauma of being obliged to *be* a woman—and this in turn may confer upon her certain rights and duties. Bodybuilder and academic feminist Leslie Heywood, for example, claims that for women individually and collectively, bodybuilding can heal trauma and offer transcendence:

A form of violence against the self, bodybuilding functions as a repetition of trauma that, through the transformation of weak, vulnerable flesh into flesh that seems like steel, is also trauma’s cure. [. . .] It is also one way of dealing with experiences of rape, harassment, and sexual abuse that second-wave feminism raised as important social issues. It is also one way of overcoming victim status, as conservative third-wave feminism has been urging us to do. (160–61)

Bodybuilding is thus for Heywood both a path to religious self-love (“ardent and devoted in my belief that the muscular female body—mine and others like it—is a kind of sanctuary” [8]) and a form of third-wave feminist activism (17) capable of morphing us from victims into “queens” (5), “gods in ourselves” (3).

Heywood goes Beauvoir one better by arguing that what everyone, every American at least, wants is not just transcendence but “sovereignty,” “to stand out, be above the masses, different, a star” (171).⁸ Bodybuilding is a way “for women to partake of some sense of sovereignty [. . .] physically, visually” (171). To this end, “understanding female bodybuilding and female masculinity [. . .] should help us find a way to love female bodybuilders” (151). Speaking as a member of a panel held recently in conjunction with the first ever art exhibit devoted to the “hypermuscular woman,” co-curator, bodybuilder, and gender activist Laurie Fierstein described in poignant detail the abject anatomical destiny of the subject born female and then expressed angry incredulity that mainstream media don’t represent women of her “unfashionable” hypermuscular body type as beautiful and desirable, nor use them to market consumer goods. She seemed to feel that people owe hypermuscular women approbation, if not adulation (not to mention a good income).⁹ Perhaps having more images of female bodybuilders circulating in the mainstream marketplace really could do something to challenge the conventional objectification of women as weak, passive, and dependent. Perhaps there are “lives it [female bodybuilding] can save and [. . .] worlds it can build” (Heywood 129). But this is a utopian argument, and typically circular. For those images to get out there and save lives, everything would already have to be different.

The bodybuilding establishment itself has proved eager to curtail the revolutionary potential of female bodybuilding. The year 1994, as Heywood points out, “marked the growing popularity of women’s fitness competitions and a heightened criticism of large female bodybuilders” (15). Fitness competitions, which in many ways resemble beauty pageants more than bodybuilding contests, were added to the Ms. Olympia contest in 1995 and have since steadily usurped both pride of place and prize money (such as it was) that had been accorded female bodybuilders. One cannot help seeing this as a backlash against the hypermuscular, and therefore in most eyes hypermasculine, woman. Assuming (as I do) that the point of bodybuilding competition for men and women alike should be to crown as champion the competitor exhibiting the most developed and best defined muscle mass (not the one best representing a masculine or feminine ideal), this demotion of the female bodybuilder can only be read as an insult, deliberately administered.

“It’s official,” gloated Dan Duchaine, drug-promoting bodybuilding fanatic and small-time Napoleon,¹⁰ in December, 1996, to the

denizens of “Femuscle,” an internet discussion group devoted to female bodybuilding. It’s “the end of pro fbb [female bodybuilding].” There were to be no professional fbb competitions in Europe in 1997, he informed us, and only three in the United States: the Ms. Olympia, the Ms. International, and the Jan Tana—“the fat dyke one.” “Oh,” he added, “and all prize money [for fbb] has been cut in half and given to fitness. Told you so.”¹¹ Ann-Marie Crooks, a professional bodybuilder, reported on the Femuscle e-list that Wayne DiMilia, vice-president of the IFBB (The International Federation of Bodybuilders, the sport’s governing body),¹² had been heard to say he couldn’t care less about female bodybuilding because “they’re all he-she’s” whom no manufacturer would want either to sponsor or hire to endorse their products. Another bodybuilder on Femuscle confirmed this report; another noted that a meeting DiMilia had offered to have with professional fbb’s concerned about the future of their sport never transpired. Faced with fewer contests, dwindling prize money, negligible television coverage, minimal publicity even in muscle magazines (most of which are IFBB affiliated),¹⁵ and nonexistent sponsorship except from so-called “schmoes” who pay fbb’s for photos, private posing, “muscle worship,” or wrestling sessions, even world-class female physique athletes have had to acknowledge that the bodybuilding establishment wants them, in effect, dead. Why? Because the women have shown that they can become as muscular, for their stature, as many top male competitors and evidently must be pressured to shrink so that men can continue to claim the monopoly on big muscle (and continue to pretend that there’s something inherently male about muscle).

This is a familiar (if reductive) story to anyone involved with female bodybuilding, which, when it began in the 1960s, resembled the bathing suit event at a beauty pageant and served to spice up men’s physique shows. When Ben and Joe Weider founded the IFBB in Canada in 1946, they did so in part because men’s physique shows already occupied a dubious second-class niche as adjunct aesthetic displays, usually held following the more “serious” and unambiguously manly weightlifting competitions.¹⁴ As Kenneth R. Dutton has pointed out, for bodybuilding to have evolved from its position subordinate to weightlifting to its present status as “an autonomous activity” required “a gradual shift in [cultural] perspective” from a view of the muscular male body as mainly “instrumental” in the lifting of massive weights, to a willingness to view the male body’s mass as “representational,” worthy of aesthetic and (sublimated and disavowed) erotic interest (130).¹⁵ Female bodybuilding is apparently

not to be permitted to evolve in its own opposite direction. Why this is so, why bodybuilding is killing the (female) bodybuilding star, is even more complicated, however, than the conspicuous politics of gender would suggest.

People who consider bodybuilding to be mainly entertainment explain the demise of female bodybuilding as the logical consequence of the self-evident fact, which they refuse to analyze, that it doesn't "sell," doesn't, that is, attract paying audiences, and financially cannot stand on its own (without the men). It is difficult to understand how female bodybuilding could possibly sell, however, when the bodybuilding establishment will not promote it. It is not just that mainstream media decline to feature the hypermuscular woman as either positive role models or advertising lures. The bodybuilding media, the magazines and the supplement manufacturers, are themselves squeamish about allowing her to appear. One did not find the face of the massive Kim Chizevsky, Ms. Olympia from 1996 to 1999, featured on cans of protein powders or on the covers of muscle magazines surrounded by doting admirers. That fbb's failure to sell is an overdetermined and viciously circular cultural symptom is made apparent, for example, by the simultaneous phobias aroused by the 1991 Ms. Olympia contest in its audience, management, and producers. The first professional female-bodybuilding competition to be broadcast live, the 1991 "Ms. O" was held in Los Angeles and televised on ESPN.¹⁶ This display of powerfully phallic-looking women strutting their big, hard, visibly veiny muscle shocked and offended viewers, many of whom telephoned immediately to complain about the "grotesque" spectacle to ESPN, and through them to the IFBB. It was supposedly in deference to this consumer outrage that at the next Ms. International contest the IFBB would deem it necessary to reassert and reenforce its explicit rules requiring that female competitors be judged according to an (undefined) standard of "femininity," beyond which muscularity was not to be rewarded.¹⁷ (There is no language about "masculinity" in the judging guidelines for men.) But the fact is that during the Ms. Olympia, before the television audience had had a chance to register its opinion, Joe Weider had already discovered that after only two rounds the judges placed Bev Francis, a former power-lifter and perhaps the world's most muscular woman, in first place way ahead of the rest. Weider immediately slipped the head judge a note saying that "under no circumstances shall Bev Francis win this contest."¹⁸ 'Nuff said. Win she didn't.¹⁹

Ambivalence and self-contradiction are endemic to female bodybuilding. As I know from my own experience and from ample anecdotal evidence, the criteria for judging women, fuzzy at best, change unaccountably, hysterically, from show to show and venue to venue, faster than one could revamp her physique even if she could predict, and wanted to supply, what would be desired next.²⁰ The women's judges (whether male or female) cannot be counted on to respond positively to the best developed and most muscular woman they see onstage in front of them. Overall, female bodybuilders today, and even fitness competitors, are vastly more muscular than they were twenty years ago. In those early days, writes Mike Bogen, sports journalist and senior editor at *Women's Physique World*, "the average contestant all the way up to the highest regional levels was often a college gymnast, who'd merely lifted for six months, stripped off the leotard and donned a posing suit." The massively muscled women who compete today were unthinkable then, yet they do not win now. "The upward spiral in judging has not kept up with the upward spiral in physiques," writes Bogen. "The best" female bodybuilders "are [. . .] passed up in favor of [. . .] third or fourth best." The growth of the sport, he concludes, "has been retarded."

As an institution, a sport, a business, or a discourse, bodybuilding shows, at the very least, what psychoanalysis would call "resistance"—denying its own putative interest in muscle, the reality of what is onstage, and the fact that muscle does not *have* gender. (Muscle has form—more about that later.) It is fairly routine for the obviously best—that is, the most massively muscled and impressively displayed—women's physiques to come in well below first place, and for some fans in the audience at such shows to express their contempt for these "retarded" judges in raucous boos and catcalls when the placings are announced. And yet it is almost equally routine to hear both fans and judges express contempt for the big women. "One judge at a small local contest was confronted by the parents of a woman who had placed low. His response to them was [. . .]: 'She's got no tits, no ass. I wouldn't fuck her, so whadaya expect?'" Another "gym insider" happened to remark that he couldn't admire a woman "whose back is bigger than mine[. . .]. I mean, what the fuck!" (qtd. in Klein 224).²¹

Women in sports so frequently try to accommodate such attitudes, attempting to palliate the anxiety their athleticism arouses in others by subtly limiting their own prowess and aggressivity or otherwise

marking themselves visibly as “feminine,” that this behavior has been recognized as a syndrome and named by Janet J. Felshin “the feminine apologetic” (Lowe 121, 129). This double bind is not new but has structured and contained women’s sports since ancient times, as sports historian Allen Guttman shows. To take a few diverse examples: even in mighty Sparta young women’s athletic performance was encouraged not for its own sake but as a kind of advertisement for marriageable maidens; during the Victorian period a few radical women of Darwinian persuasion thought to improve humanity through sports and calisthenics for would-be mothers (i.e., girls); and during the 1920s so violent a recoil from even heteronormative athleticism occurred that not until the 1960s did competitive games become almost acceptable for middle- and upper-class women in America (17–32, 111, 142).²² But even Guttman, a level-headed historian, cannot hide the extent to which he shares the view prevalent throughout the history he charts that there is something uniquely weird about the “Amazon lifestyle.”²³ He may not share the belief expressed, for example, in 1927 by a doctor he quotes, that female muscle per se interferes with reproductivity, but he does find that “women who ‘pump iron,’ as body builders or as weightlifters, are an extreme case that tests the limits of liberal opinion” (140, 217).

As Jacques Derrida wrote, paraphrasing one of Freud’s central insights about clues to the unconscious, “always, coherence in contradiction expresses the force of a desire” (279). The bodybuilder’s desire may seem to be to secure the look of, or to look extremely like, a woman or a man, but just what this means remains elusive, complicated by its own performance. In a Lacanian analysis of female bodybuilding, Doug Aoki suggests that “the female bodybuilder looks like a woman who fails to look like a man who fails to look like a woman; she is performing a failed impersonation of a failed impersonation” (64). However, neither articulating that desire nor analyzing the contradiction makes it go away. It is the entrenchedness and persistence of such contradiction, rather than its content, not only in bodybuilding but in academic writing about it and “the body,” that is my ultimate concern here. Of all crimes, murder (I say murder because the bodybuilding establishment has all but “disappeared” the female bodybuilder) is likely the most ironic, revealing more about the perpetrator—his fantasies, his “involuntary ideas”—than about the victim. I am not interested here, however, in the impresarios and others who want to terminate professional women’s bodybuilding. There are enough ironies to go around, extending to the pro women themselves,

who take anabolic steroids and growth hormones and train in such a way as to build and showcase massive striated lean muscle mass, but then get breast implants and other plastic surgeries to counteract the “masculine” appearance they’ve worked so hard to create.²⁴

Bodybuilding shows more concretely, more polymorphously, and more nakedly than any other practice—here defined as embodied theory—the absurd impasses of patriarchal gender, in which the primitive and the ideal, the imaginary and the symbolic, the normal and the perverse, the masculine and the feminine, reify, disavow, define, mirror, and depend on each other. Beyond this, however, what I hope this discussion of bodybuilding will show is that what *seems* to be about gender is not always *about* gender but may be about something more primitive and persistent that masquerades as gender and for which current psychoanalytic theory is reviving the term “drive” (as in “sex drive” or “death drive”) in order to name that elusive intransigent something in us that makes insight difficult to sustain and personal and political change difficult to effect.²⁵ We can talk about gender until we’re blue in the collective feminist face and gender will not care. On the contrary, the more we talk about it, the more it will remain gender precisely because, as we postmoderns are fond of saying (and here the joke is on us), “gender is a discursive construction.” Unfortunately, as we see all too clearly in our daily lives, and as is confirmed by the mainstream media, achieving this particular enlightenment has not much changed the material facts of hegemonic patriarchal heteronormative gender. How could it? Despite the dizzying pace of technological innovation and “knowledge production” in our era, the cultures we inhabit are profoundly resistant to change; they are—as a species we are—as Freud put it in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, overwhelmingly “conservative,” no matter what we may think (36, 42). The question is, what are we conserving and for whom?

***The Primitive Subject of Female Bodybuilding:
Some Assembly Required***

Unlike any other sport, bodybuilding exists to build, display, and assess muscle, pumped and prime, as if muscle were a, or the, thing-in-itself, the realization of the “purposiveness without purpose” that for Immanuel Kant defines the aesthetic object. Whereas powerlifters and weightlifters compete to see who, pound for pound, can move the most weight, bodybuilders compete to see who, in the eyes of the judges, best

conforms to some unquantified and unquantifiable ideal.²⁶ The one who appears best to embody this ideal—which, unlike Pico della Mirandola’s God, resembles a circle whose center is nowhere and whose circumference is everywhere—is said, colloquially, to have the “total” or “overall package.” Muscularity, symmetry, and presentation are the three components comprising this package, plus, in the case of the women, something called “femininity.” Women thus comprise a subset of the ideal, a second ideal that is less than ideal. The ideal comes in stereo types: the total package and the feminine package. The IFBB reminds its judges that:

First and foremost [. . .] he/she is judging a women’s bodybuilding competition and is looking for an ideal feminine physique. Therefore, the most important aspect is shape [. . .]. The other aspects are similar to those described for assessing men, but in regard to muscular development, it must not be carried to excess where it resembles the massive muscularity of the male physique.²⁷

Femininity, oddly, is thus defined as “shape,” which must not resemble an “excess” defined as male when and only when it belongs to a female.²⁸ (More on this point below.)

That none of these criteria—shape, excess, maleness, symmetry, or even muscularity—can be specified or measured by the judges reinforces the qualitative, subjective, ideological, and ritual, in other words symbolic, “nature” of bodybuilding. Perhaps instead of being called a sport, bodybuilding should be called *écriture masculine* or added to the contemporary genre of “extreme” sports as Total Thingification. It might be even more appropriate to think of bodybuilding as analogous to the Mock Turtle’s “regular course” at school that, as he tells Alice in Wonderland, consists of “Reeling and Writhing,” followed by “Ambition, Distraction, Uglification and Derision” (Carroll 93). Like that of the Mock Turtle, bodybuilding’s “regular course” consists in a program of abjection, of self-inflicted “reeling and writhing” whose ultimate product is the schooled Subject—a “mock” subject, as demonstrated by the frequency with which bodybuilders are described as cartoonish, ludicrous, or hyperbolic by outside observers who do not approve of these figures. The bodybuilder’s regular course moves cyclically from abjection (the aggressive division of the physique into body parts that must be individually trained in separate workouts) through self-objectification (using the mirror to see if the parts add up to the total package), to climax briefly in

the spectacle of symbolic subject-formation performed onstage in plain view of the gaze (of the judges at the “show”).²⁹ In its peculiar conflation of “pain” and “gain”,³⁰ the sadomasochistic psychological trajectory of bodybuilding follows that of sacrifice, embodying philosopher Georges Bataille’s definition of eroticism as the “heavy animality” that comes with “assenting to life up to the point of death,” pursuing the “pure avidity to be *me* [. . .] the pure hope of the me that dies” (*Death* 11; “Sacrifices” 132).

As bodybuilders continue occasionally to die, offstage and on, as the direct result of the extremes to which they subject their bodies, this statement is not metaphorical but indicates the precarious boundary between life and death, self and body, inside and outside, person and thinghood that the bodybuilder tests, in the hope of merging, however briefly, with that ideal image of totality that only the gaze of the judge can ratify. It is the status of intact, embodied subjecthood itself that (for the bodybuilder as for anyone) is the ultimate impossible ideal. When the bodybuilder comes before the judge, she in effect offers her narcissism as an object for him to evaluate.³¹ She asks him to confer upon her in return the status of subject, which he has the authority to do because as a Judge he represents the Law (of bodybuilding). The whole scene seems like a made-to-order dramatization of Jacques Lacan’s topological theory of the subject, which it may be suggestive to apply here, in reverse. By reverse I mean I am going to start at the end—before showing why it is not the end. The end here refers first to the bodybuilding competition itself, which caps months if not years of grueling preparation and is intended to coincide with the carefully timed “peaking” of the competitor’s physique. The end also implies the figurative *telos* of Lacan’s “mirror stage,” literalized by the bodybuilding show, as the “ideal I” of the physique perceived for months in gym mirrors gives way to the “ego ideal,” represented now by the judges, as, onstage nearly naked, the bodybuilder is mirrored by a crowd of hooting fans before whom she performs her “image,” in a “flutter of [. . .] activity” that at least *appears* “jubilant” (she is instructed to smile, but that’s actually a grimace, clenched facial muscles, not a smile, on her face), observed and evaluated by the judges who bring their gaze to bear upon her (1).³²

However crass, personal, and self-interested some of the judges are in their decisions, they nevertheless embody a function larger (and other) than themselves. In Lacanian terminology, they embody at once the “screen” and the “gaze.” As Kaja Silverman explains, in Lacanian theory these terms are always conceptualized in relation to each other and used

to describe how “the subject relies for his or her visual identity on an external representation” that is more complicated and less reassuringly synchronous than the perfect reflection of self we encounter in the mirror (18). The “screen” refers to the array of cultural images that confronts us at every turn and in relation to which the subject must continually establish herself *as* a subject, perpetually weaving and unweaving her subjective sense of identity and difference. Because what culture seems to be telling us never quite coincides with how we see ourselves (complicated by the fact that how we see ourselves also varies), the image we see on the screen continually introduces discord and anxiety.

The “gaze,” the third term that regulates and triangulates subject and screen, locking them into a dualism that morphs continually, like a fun-house mirror, does not emanate from the subject’s own point of view (termed the “look”), but rather resembles a site of impersonal judgment seemingly outside the self, within whose purview the subject must find recognition (by means of the screen), or else feel like an outsider (which may feel good or bad). In a sense, what the gaze evaluates and relays to the subject is the extent to which she has appeared onscreen or failed to do so. We may experience this success or failure simply as a feeling of being okay or not okay. The subject therefore, as Silverman rightly points out, is always the product of “a three-way rather than a two-way transaction, requiring a symbolic ‘ratification’” (18). The gaze then is in effect located “in the world” and maintains its consistency (as world) by keeping us within parameters (Foster 107).⁵⁵ As functionaries of the gaze, the judges at a bodybuilding show gauge how the contestant shapes up in relation to the cultural screen of idealized gender types. The judges see in time-honored stereotypes, holding the competitor up to their dual ideal: on one side, the male muscular thing-in-itself, on the other, the feminine non-male “shape”—a split screen, a mirror in which, as Virginia Woolf once said, man sees himself reflected as twice his real size, while woman is dwarfed by his imaginary excess (35).⁵⁴

The vision of the judges seems unwittingly to replicate the mechanics of eyesight: our two eyes see slightly different pictures, but our brain produces a single image out of this incongruity. We are conscious only of the single image of reality, a unity produced by the brain, and unaware of the two incongruous views. The judges analogously reconcile two incongruent gender norms by means of which they operate to produce a singular image of the phallus or total package (“package” is even a slang term for male genitals). As spectators observing a parade of tumescent

bodies, each a phallic impersonator cavorting onstage, claiming to be *the* Platonic type of the phallus, the judges watch their antics and name which comes closest. (Will the real Phallus please stand up?) Of course, without the appearance of impartiality that cultural history has conferred upon them, the judges could not enact these coercive hetero norms; the symbolic order is “operative,” as Slavoj Žižek points out, insofar as it is “‘virtual’ (it does not ‘actually exist’ anywhere), yet determines the fate of things” (*Plague* 100). From this point of view, the female bodybuilder doesn’t stand a chance. Precisely because she “aspires to embody or incarnate the ideal[, she] most typically derives [. . .] her definition of that ideal from normative representation” (Silverman 40), in this case enforced by the competitor’s “feminine apologetic,” the IFBB, and the culture at large, represented by the people in the audience, of whom some cheer for the big women (sometimes for salacious reasons), while some find them repulsive.

Even so, such a contest is the climax of the training cycle (for male and female), a visual as well as a psychological peak. I say visual rather than physical because, by the time the contestant appears onstage, she may look amazing, like transparent anatomy personified, but feel (or be) near physical collapse. After grueling months if not years building as much muscle as possible through self-battering workouts, as the contest draws near she concentrates on dieting and aerobicizing away as much fat, retaining as much muscle, as she can, all the while continuing to train, which grows increasingly difficult as she slashes her calorie and carbohydrate intake. As her physique becomes leaner and more defined, she practices contracting her muscles in the compulsory static “poses” that will afford the judges the opportunity to inspect each muscle group, and prepares in addition a ninety-second posing routine set to music, which she will perform twice, to demonstrate her personal style and presence. Then, she tans and dehydrates her body in order to achieve a shrink-wrapped appearance for optimal display to the judges on contest day of her version of the “total package.”⁵⁵ From her point of view, she is not there to find out whether or not she is feminine, although in effect that is what she will learn.

Even though it is common knowledge that the judges have already made their decisions hours earlier during the prejudging, the high point of the show is the evening performance, when each competitor performs her posing routine for the general audience. This routine is a *tableau vivant* for one, ninety seconds of music during which the body-

builder moves as fluidly and gracefully as possible between static poses, each of which she holds long enough to flex hard while showing spectators the details of her musculature.⁵⁶ In his discussion of its characteristic relation to modernity, Žižek has called the *tableau vivant* “a dialectic of mortification” (*Plague* 87). In the case of the bodybuilder, mortification suggests both the paradoxical near death experience to which her interest in “fitness” has brought her, and the necessary humiliation of appearing nearly naked before the judges and fans: reeling, writhing, uglification, and derision. The bodybuilder alternately strikes immobile statue-like poses so viewers can examine her body as if it were a flayed, exhibitionistic corpse and resurrects herself into movement. Her performance unites the “statue’s [. . .] infinite pain” with the magic of resurrection (Žižek, *Plague* 87). She can only see herself as reflected by fans and judges, in their appraisals of her flesh.

In other words, the pinnacle of the bodybuilder’s training cycle is the moment when she offers this body, which she has disciplined with religious intensity as if preparing it for sacrifice, to the reigning social ideology of gender, masked as an impersonal aesthetic ideal with which she has nearly killed herself to merge. It is a psychotic scenario demanding that she disidentify and dissociate from her own body in order to view it as if from the point of view of the judges she is trying to please. To do this she must both internalize the standards she imagines those “out there” to value and externalize the body image she has constructed. And yet this scenario is not dissimilar from the unspoken requirements of everyday life for every subject who tries to become his or her self while sensing at the same time that those parts that could be designated as “he” or “she” constitute but the tip of the subjective iceberg. Bodybuilding reveals the interpenetration of the so-called imaginary, represented here by the image or ideal “I” that the bodybuilder glimpses in the mirror and strives to embody, with the so-called symbolic, represented by the disavowed dualistic gender-differentiated norm (or ego ideal). As a kind of totalitarian drag, gender is the fantasy that masks the fact that “death is the symbolic order itself, the structure which, as a parasite, colonizes the living entity” (Žižek, *Plague* 89). The recent invention of a psychological disorder called “dysmorphia” (a diagnosis applied frequently to atypical children and adolescents) indicates, for example, how current medical discourse seeks to align the imaginary with the symbolic, insisting that healthy individuals are supposed to conform “naturally” and without undue anxiety to certain ideal types or forms. Those who don’t identify

with, or who don't appear to their parents or others to identify with, the gender their sexed bodies would seem to make appropriate, can find themselves diagnosed as suffering from "gender dysmorphism." Analogously, "muscle dysmorphism" has recently been said to afflict those so obsessed with their muscularity or lack of it that they develop an "unhealthy obsession" (as opposed to a healthy obsession?) with pumping iron.⁵⁷

Identity-formation and socialization are necessarily ongoing and reciprocal processes, neither of which is ever complete. Nevertheless it is almost a cliché of our way of understanding these matters, a cliché made familiar and almost persuasive to us by psychoanalysis and its abuses, that one precedes and lays the foundation for the other (that is, first comes identity, then sociality) in the sequence of development. Freud's radical idea that behind their repressions, "normal" adults remain until death the polymorphous bisexual perverts we were born all too often takes a back seat to his normative narrative of psychosexual development, according to which we learn to subordinate all other desires to the heterogenital normalcy in service to which we marry a younger version of our preferred parent. Even Lacanian theory is frequently misread to emphasize a developmental (rather than a structural) model in which the subject progresses from the narcissism of the infantile imaginary, associated with the mother and the prehistoric, prelinguistic realm, into his proper subordination to the symbolic order and the law of castration, associated with the father, language, and the "impossible" but inexorable sexual relation. Countless psychoanalytic and other narratives both specialized and popular—including feminist ones—in many genres tell us that the health and well-being of the subject depend on growing away from a state of primal fusion with the mother to mediated individuation achieved by entering the realm of the father (or phallus or culture).

As Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel sees it, for example, it is axiomatic that "the bedrock of reality" is the "apprehension of the difference between the sexes" (*Ego* 189). From birth the subject (of whichever sex) longs insatiably for a primary fusion with the mother that would annihilate this difference, and must be diverted from this desire by the ego ideal in order to "mature" (192). Another way to put this is to say, with Freud as she reads him, that the subject is supposed to proceed from auto-eroticism via narcissism to mature object-love (227);⁵⁸ at the end of this trajectory the "mature" subject arrives, happy at last, at hetero object-love. We count on gender, in other words the "apprehension" of sex difference, to save us from and lead us out of the wilderness of our most primitive and pressing

desire to merge with—what? The psychic poetics of bodybuilding reveal that the subject is never finally mature, that she (or he) can never be or stay (at) one—but is obliged to seek, albeit in a “fictional direction” (Lacan 2), if not congruity with, then at least something like congruity between, the imaginary she projects and that which she introjects.

These incongruous images that must be unified for the subject to survive as such, to star in her own narrative, are not most fundamentally the images of masculine and feminine but those of life and death, being and nonbeing, appearance and nonexistence, adequacy and fragmentation, identity and autism. Whether male or female, the bodybuilder comes to the contest hoping to have conferred upon him or her the status of “total package,” proof that s/he has achieved thingification, however fleeting, in the eyes of the other. (Immediately after the contest, the moment she stops restricting her intake of water and food, the competitor’s physique is past peak, post-ideal.) She is there to have confirmed the fact that other people can see her, can integrate her parts into a whole for her—that she exists for others as an object in space, an object or self-object with which she can identify. Idealizing this intersubjective self-objectification leads some to think of bodybuilding as art and bodybuilders as body sculptors. We are so used to thinking of women as signifying “to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey 63) that we don’t ordinarily think of men as needing, passively, to be seen, to be mirrored; but bodybuilding shows that this is not the case. Bodybuilding is the one relatively mainstream venue dominated by men in which the central activity is exposing to view the passive and objectified male physique.⁵⁹ Placing high in such a contest momentarily exalts the competitor and makes her feel hyperreal, ratified by hundreds of eyes, even while subjecting her to the standards of mere ideal normativity; at this moment the bodybuilder confronts the “two faces of power, one scowling, the other smiling” (Moore 129). By acceding to the will of these faces, the bodybuilder confers upon them a unity they do not possess in exchange for that unity she does not possess either.

On the contrary, the bodybuilder is the epitome of *le corps morcelé*, the body in parts. It is as if someone has given her all these parts and she has to assemble them herself. She apparently has to build her own body. This is the logic of bodybuilding, as well as its fundamental fantasy. She must do it all by herself, but she won’t know whether or not she has done it until someone else says so. She trains her physique by dividing it into parts and “working” each part separately: calves, quads, hamstrings, abs, lower back, lats, pectorals, chest, triceps, biceps, forearms, shoulders,

trapezius, each according to a regimen of specialized exercises performed in sets of repetitions or “reps.” The compulsion to repeat, in excess of any rational reason to repeat, is, according to Freud, an expression of the death drive. Lacanian parlance sometimes refers to drive as “that which is in us more than ourselves,” but it could also be described as “that which is in us less than ourselves” or, perhaps better, “that which is in us not ourselves.” The ruthless operation of the drive, as Joan Copjec writes, helps answer such questions as: “What’s the matter with bodies? Why do they seem to suppurate (for that’s the word for it) so much trouble for themselves? [. . .] Why are they more often inhibited or compulsive in their actions than creative or productive?” The drive, Copjec adds, “is a kind of demand that awakens us to our bodily existence” but at the same time causes us to “battle biology” (12 emphasis removed).

“I’m swimming in an animal bag,” writes musician, author, and lifter Henry Rollins. “Everything smells like meat” (147). Julia Kristeva terms “abject” the subject who is less than the subject, a non-I, a mere “twisted braid of affects” “on the edge of non-existence” that nonetheless causes the I a “brutish suffering” indistinguishable from the *jouissance* of mindlessness (1–2). The abject is ourselves as an “animal bag” inside of which everything smells like meat, that is, like ourselves. “I don’t like to think of myself / I like lifting those weights though,” confides Rollins (145). How might one reconcile the self-indulgent narcissism everyone thinks drives the lifter with the lifter’s own sense that while lifting he has no self? Perhaps by acknowledging that what the bodybuilder shows is how tenuous and even unnatural is the self, with what difficulty it is constructed and maintained, and through what necessary self-alienation it is grasped. In Rollins’ poetry the speaker feels he “live[s] behind a wall of scar tissue / Scare tissue” producing “Scarce issue” (145).

“Behind the wall of scar tissue” the poet feels “hemmed in tight” (145–46). Without the “scar tissue” comprising the emotionally hardened—and reflective—armor of the subject, it is not possible to separate oneself from those affects that threaten to disintegrate one into the not-I.⁴⁰ The bodybuilder looks into the mirror in order to compose her battered “parts” into an uncanny whole that can hem her in tight—and that looks back at her from the alienated exteriority of the mirror offering itself as both an object she feels obliged to force into coherence and as the image of an illusory semipermanent I. By pumping iron to the point where the muscles themselves become paralyzed—that is, by taking each exercise to “failure,” which forces muscles to hypertrophy, or grow—the

inchoate abject strives to become an “animal bag” tightly secured by “scar tissue.” As Georges Bataille has written, “the external violence of the sacrifice reveals the internal violence of the creature.” What the creature sees mirrored, because she cannot see it in herself, is “the fullness [sic] of blood-swollen organs, the impersonal fullness of life itself” (*Death* 91).

*From Rupture to Rapture:
Utopias of Transgression*

Hal Foster writes that, “[i]n contemporary art and theory, let alone in contemporary fiction and film, there is a general shift in conceptions of the real: from the real understood as an effect of representation to the real understood as an event of trauma” (107). In her essay, “Shaved Heads and Marked Bodies,” Kristine Stiles finds that, “especially since the mid-1970’s in Western culture, alternative groups” have used forms of body modification such as that named in her title to express a sense, nearly ubiquitous since the Holocaust of World War II, of “powerlessness to change the world” (54). She calls such groups “cultures of trauma” that point to, and identify themselves with, “traumatic circumstance [anywhere on the planet] [. . .] discernible at the intersection of aesthetic, political, and social experience [. . .] both within the conventional boundaries of visual art and the practices and images of everyday life” (36). Even though, and perhaps because, they seem to insist on their hypernormality, to my mind bodybuilders constitute a “culture of trauma” that attests to, and reenacts continually, the trauma of embodiment, driven to repeat almost daily the body’s fragmentation in an attempt to enclose its meat in scar tissue/scar tissue.

But these days more than ever, and this is the point both Foster and Stiles make, everybody is a walking culture of trauma seeking the “perks” such an identity has to offer. Those who are not talking about or wearing their traumas on their sleeves are presumed to have some hidden away, perhaps unbeknownst to themselves but ripe for representation. Trauma therefore has become, in the United States if not more generally, “normal.” Foster finds that “a *lingua trauma* is spoken in popular culture, academic discourse, and art and literary worlds,” as well as “in therapy culture, talk shows, and memoir-mongering,” producing a veritable “trauma discourse” in which “the subject is evacuated and elevated at once” (123, 124 emphasis removed). The idea of a *lingua trauma* con-

tradicts an older idea of trauma as by definition unspeakable. If trauma has become quotidian to the point of banality, is it still trauma? (Analogously, if everyone appears to be a sadomasochist, even adolescents in underwear ads, such that sadomasochism is in effect redefined as normal and even normative, can sadomasochism still define the perverse?) We may need to redefine trauma as meaning something other than the unrepresentable and unsymbolizable; either trauma must mean something other than the unspeakable, or we are in voluble denial about what trauma such discursive screens as gender might obfuscate.

In my discussion of bodybuilding I have tried to show how gender can mask the traumatic operations of the drive. Perhaps the trauma most frequently discussed these days on talk shows, one that easily unites its audience in sympathy and outrage, is sexual abuse or violation: wives abused by lovers and husbands past or present, children sexually violated by adults.⁴¹ In such cases, as in other forms of trauma, the victim attests to a terrifying loss of control, specifically of the boundaries that constitute identity. What should be respected and protected, what should be the inviolate physical and psychological interior of every self, becomes polluted when the outside forces itself in, uninvited. Trauma can rip through any screen, certainly that of gender identity (violated males, for example, may feel traumatically feminized), but also that of nation or ethnicity. What is traumatic for the violated subject is becoming subject to the drive of another. Some accounts of trauma—Otto Rank’s famous *The Trauma of Birth* (1929), for example—have defined it as the fact or feeling of being cut off from any nurturing other, “discontinuous” (as Bataille would say) and alone. But one could also describe trauma—and this is certainly accurate in the case of rape or similar invasion—as an excessive, unwanted continuity with, or proximity to, another, a continuity that results from the penetration of boundaries that normally keep selves separate.

The desire, even the need, to bring as much continuity into our discontinuous lives as we can bear, says Bataille, is the motive for eroticism, whether sexual or religious (*Death* 19). Eroticism, in other words, can be seen as a kind of modulated trauma, self-administered. Bodybuilding performs in public the cycle of trauma (self-battery in the gym) and recovery (posing before the mirror or judge) we usually perform in private, whether through erotic acts or psychological vicissitudes. Total continuity or discontinuity would mean death or psychosis; we patrol, but do not abandon, our borders. We need our screens in order to function, even in the so-called privacy of our own bedrooms where, as Angela

Carter described in *The Sadeian Woman*, we perform even more numerous fantasmatic roles than Freud gave us credit for. (Freud acknowledged mainly the parental imagoes; to these Carter added diverse internalized cultural personae.)

Ironically, the competitive bodybuilder recognizes and reclaims her atomized flesh only in the presence of the gaze by submitting to its judgment. “The dialectic of mortification” that constitutes the subject is both meaningless outside the view of the gaze—as is shown not just by the bodybuilding contest, but also by talk shows and by the latest fashion in triangulation, TV shows like “Temptation Island” and “Survivor” —and guaranteed by its presence. The cyclical events of the bodybuilding show reveal that what is most devoutly, and rightly, to be feared by the subject is totalization, whether through disintegration into mere meat or exaltation into unity with the ideal. The bodybuilder needs the judges, as every subject needs the gaze (regardless of whether “gender” is the structure imposed), to protect him from the lure of the imaginary, the illusory alternatives either “to be, or not to be, a god” (Moore 130); to become “divinized flesh” (130) or die trying; to revel in narcissism like His Majesty the Baby (Freud’s phrase) or Heywood’s sovereign queen; to become, or not to become, like Foster’s talk-show guest, “evacuated and elevated.”

The imaginary bounds of the subject, then—her “shape,” ringed round by “scare tissue”—is the taboo that must not be transgressed. Contrary to what one might expect, in professional bodybuilding, femininity, not masculinity, is the fetish uniquely capable of guaranteeing the intactness of the subject, which protects the bodybuilder from merging with the ultimate lure of his own imaginary. Muscle has no gender and genitalia are irrelevant in (indeed, are an inconvenience during) the bodybuilding performance. But the homophobic bodybuilding world cannot acknowledge that here men and women are the same and that they share the desire to be mirrored as abject remnants of the ideal. It cannot understand that this ideal is an effect of “the naturalism and the idealism which the European tradition has moulded into one” (Dutton 63), an image with which it longs and fears to merge. It cannot acknowledge that the bodybuilding ideal is not masculine and active but feminine and “passive”—a word whose Latin root, the same as that for “passion,” means to suffer, to be acted upon. Only the spectre of femininity, or gendered abjection, protects the masculinist bodybuilding ethos from acknowledging that its own ideal is sublimated meat shaped into muscle. To acknowledge this would mean to acknowledge the irrelevance of gender;

more, it would mean to acknowledge a longing for loss of gender. It is the job of the judge to enforce gender difference precisely where gender is beside the point, to punish the female bodybuilder for the male's desire to sacrifice his gender for his ideal. In this way, the male bodybuilding world keeps femininity for itself while disavowing it as "other."

A familiar story. Which suggests how masculinity or femininity (or black-ity, Jew-ity, national-ity, disabil-ity, whatever id-ent-ity) may function as a guarantor of difference for somebody other than those to whom these traits are assigned. (As an autistic adult recently said to me, the diagnosis of autism seems to reassure other people more than it helps him.) It is difference itself—a kind of epistemological scar tissue—that adheres and may seem to cohere, but does not inhere. Difference need not mean gender; indeed it seems that gender is an idea whose time has gone. Despite the exasperating ubiquity of gender as the master signifier of difference, it still seems as desirable as ever to imagine, as did Gayle Rubin in 1975, a world without gender but not without sex—although we don't seem significantly closer to it now than we were then.⁴² Ironically, despite its explicit commitment to gendered heteromorphism, the panoply of drugs pro bodybuilders take may make it possible for them to erase the signs both of gender and sex difference, as athlete and personal trainer Steve Townsley joked to Femuscle:

[W]e just give them [pro bb's] a few years and the aromatization of testosterone to estrogen and the overload of androgens will bring mbbs and fbbs respectively closer together hormone-wise, at which point we won't need separate competitions [...]. They'll all get judged on the same criteria and whoever truly has the best package will come out the winner. Oh, yeah, no need for posing suits either. Gyno and testicular shrinkage (and the concomitant penile shrinkage) would about equal the effects of cliteromegaly [clitoral enlargement] and the dieted down breast tissue. We can actually achieve the androgynous human! The Olympia winner of 2000: It's Pat!⁴³

A minority of bodybuilders purposely strive for such changes in their physiques, while some accept them as "the price you pay for the price you pay" to get freaky. Steve, an "all natural" athlete, is satirizing here what he takes to be an ominous tendency in bodybuilding.

But for many in academia who have written on bodybuilding, this is just what interests them. For example, in her contribution to

a collection of essays on *Freakery*; Cecile Lindsay discusses bodybuilding as a “postmodern freak show.” The conclusion to her essay is an ecstatic introduction of this newly discovered species, bodybuilder, to the genus “category transgressor,” which the postmodern ethnologist can apparently recognize by its characteristically Lyotardian body “without interiority or exteriority”:

The confusion operated by today’s bodybuilders and other category transgressors such as homosexuals, transsexuals, in vitro parents, pregnant women who seek to abort, or white middle-class youths who sport nose rings and tattoos is threatening, even sacrilegious to a society in the grip of cultural conservatism and resurgent religious fundamentalism. In the waning millennium, bodybuilding is at once an arena of ever-expanding corporal potentialities and a domain where a panicked politics of bodily control seek to limit corporal experimentations through the construction of the postmodern freak as pathological other. (Lindsay 366)⁴⁴

A heady, postmodern fantasy reveals itself here, one that imagines some advanced cadre of allied corporeal experimenters, a divine array of mutant subjectivities deploying a potent brand of “confusion” as their special biological weapon.

I am impressed more by the diversity of this list than its commonality, and distressed by Lindsay’s indiscriminate lumping of all these people together to serve some would-be transgressive critical agenda. If there is one thing that is clear about bodybuilding to date, moreover, it is that it remains an entrenched bastion of gender fundamentalism; it is not about to pick itself up off its ersatz classical foundations to launch an attack on cultural conservatism. As Anne Balsamo has sensibly written, while female bodybuilders’ physiques could hypothetically help “re-design” femininity, and masculinity too, they are instead “delegitimated” (47). What she “discover[s], not surprisingly, is that despite appearing as a form of resistance, these technological body transgressions rearticulate the power relations of a dominant social order” (54). Lindsay’s passage, however, does bring into focus three critical problems, or what I would call fantasies (or even delusions), at which I have been aiming my own critique throughout this essay. My conclusion will comprise a brief statement of and response to these fantasies: one, that “transgression” is radical and meaningful because it deconstructs or even destroys harmful boundaries,

clearing the way for something new; two, that “difference” is expendable because it is “constructed”; three, that we critics are on the right track when we read “the body” as a text and “the text” as a body.

Writing about the meaning within late capitalist popular culture of the female bodybuilder’s physique, Laurie Schulze found herself up against these problems. In an essay first published in 1990 that has more recently appeared at the head of an anthology on bodybuilding, Schulze praised “the female bodybuilder [because she] threatens not only current socially constructed definitions of femininity and masculinity, but also the system of sexual difference itself” (9). She applauded the female bodybuilder for causing “ideological strain” whether she were “relegated to the margins of the cultural system as a freak, or recovered as the site of flex appeal” (15). In her work at the time Schulze was eager to map “female muscle culture as a terrain of resistance/refusal, rather than giving ground to the terrain of control” (17). But reconsidering the piece in 1995, she felt troubled by the way the erotic “kick” she (as a lesbian) got from watching these women seemed to have guided her argument. This, she felt, made her “complicit with a ‘phallo-centric aesthetic’” because at the same time that she enjoyed this kick, she played the self-masking critic pretending that the body of the other could “*transcend* ideology” (28–29). She realized, in other words, that it was an error in judgment to equate her own excitement or interest in an object with a potential for something radical or even transgressive. In the act of reading herself, she became conscious that both visually and intellectually she had objectified the female bodybuilder.

I am not saying that one shouldn’t objectify, or can stop objectifying, objects of desire; we call them that for a reason. What I do want to point out is the dialectical complementarity of transgression with transcendence: Schulze realized that by imagining the bodybuilder as capable of transgressing “the system of sexual difference itself,” she was attributing to this body the ability to transcend ideology. Once the latter fantasy collapsed, so did the former. Further, these two complementary chimeras only lasted so long as she imagined herself to have transcended their dialectic through a “self-masking” she identified as “phallo-centric.” Etymologically as well as phenomenologically, the terms “transgression” and “transcendence” are quite similar; both mean “a going beyond” some limit or boundary, although the former can specify a stepping “across” or breaking a law, the latter a going “above,” either in a material or immaterial sense. Both take their meaning, however, solely from the fact

of a limit crossed. In use the terms differ mainly in their affective and moral connotation: “transgression” has something naughty or criminal about it, “transcendence” something higher and holy.

In the passage on postmodern freakery quoted earlier, for example, Lindsay describes a panoply of naughty category transgressors who, she hopes, will help us transcend “cultural conservatism” through sacrilege. The tricky part here is that “sacrilege” actually means someone who steals sacred objects; the transgressor, then, is merely hoarding the sacred stuff for herself, while imagining that she is thereby above the law. As Georges Bataille succinctly put it, however, “transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it”; transgression “suspends a taboo without suppressing it” (*Death* 63, 36). By definition, transcendence requires transgression; they are codependent. Transgression, the crossing of boundaries, results in the transcendence of what has been transgressed. Transgression is not in itself either good or bad. Sex is transgression in which bodies open themselves desirously to each other. Trauma is transgression in which boundaries are crossed wrongfully. A characteristic response to trauma is the urgent need to reestablish or remark boundaries. Some victims respond to extreme cases of sexual abuse, for example, through the pathological but necessary self-transcendence of multiple personality disorder. Some subjects of less intimate forms of abuse—feminists who are painfully aware, for example, of the pervasive, omnivorous cruelty of patriarchy—may respond in more mediated ways, through intellectual acts of negation or repetition, as for example in the case of our critical work on “the body,” in which we remake and remark on its boundaries while thinking of ourselves as working on “gender.”

Joan Copjec has implied that such work, taken as a corpus, seems compulsively to catalog its traumas and repeat its disfigurements, producing in the end a monstrous taxonomy:

Volumes have been written and compiled on the body zoned, fragmented, pierced, tattooed, peeled open layer by layer, armored, fitted up with prostheses, weighted down by adornments and protective gear, scarred by accident or war, ravaged by disease, withered by age, pumped up by steroids, emaciated by hunger, anorexic, bulimic, and above all sexed. (12)

She seems both weary and wary of such work because, predictably, it wants either to transcend, remaining in the realm of pure representation, or to transgress, imagining itself as naughtily material, refusing to see these as connected. Such work treats us either to analyses of the body as

constructed, “in which case the body [. . .] loses out to representation,” or as essentially material, “in which case representation loses out to biology” (12). She is right. Even so, feminists have had good reasons to be interested in the body, if only because, having been identified for centuries by patriarchy as being themselves the essence of sexed corporeality, without soul or consciousness, it has felt good to get some intellectual distance from that thing, the body, and to analyze it as an effect of representation rather than a squishy animal bag.

As women we have been traumatized by having had this thing, the body, crammed into the center of our beings, and we have responded by trying to get some distance from it, to transcend it by (intellectually) objectifying it. More than this, we have taken our revenge upon it, morseled it up and reconfigured it. Has this helped? It has long been evident that to dwell upon, foreground, and expose our bodies to scrutiny is just what patriarchy has always already been doing. It’s just that now sisters were doing it to themselves. When Luce Irigaray proposed woman’s natural, vaginal auto-eroticism as the paradigm for her subjectivity (79, 210), and Hélène Cixous purred that we all write with our milk and blood (200), some of us weren’t certain whether we had been empowered, seduced, or undressed. We are still operating at a loss, but not a loss our bodies can recoup for us. Bodies can no more free us from ideology than we can free them from death. We may want out of both but we’re not getting out of either any time soon. “I’m asking for a new sense of complicity,” says Manthia Diawara, “cadres of professional conspirators who can offer a way out of immanence” (63). Ironically, all ways out of immanence, and all ways back in, are trans.

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Notes

- 1 Controversy over female bodybuilding, invariably gynophobic, was brought to the public eye in the 1985 movie, *Pumping Iron II: The Women*, which showed judges instructed behind the scenes to choose as the winner in a Las Vegas contest someone “feminine”, meaning not overly muscular. One novice judge objected to this constraint, without effect. *Leonard Maltin’s Movie and Video Guide* describes the movie as about a “non-event” in which “[p]outy-lipped sexpot Rachel McLish, manlike Aus-

- tralian Bev Francis, and two dozen more female bodybuilders compete" (1072).
- 2 As discourse, it is unclear what genre bodybuilding might be. Bodybuilders themselves disagree as to whether it is mainly sport, art, or entertainment.
 - 3 Klein thinks that women competitors are nicer to each other than the men and that the men should be nicer, too. Lowe concludes that female bodybuilders may have control over their own physical development but virtually none over the direction of the sport of bodybuilding (161).
 - 4 Fierstein's remark appears in *Picturing The Modern Amazon*, a beautiful, informative, and provocative volume published in connection with the first ever art exhibition (of the same name) devoted to the hypermuscular woman, held in Spring 2000 at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City. Concurrently, an exhibition of performance art and sculpture on "Gym Culture," called "Achieving Failure," was on display nearby at The New School Thread Waxing Space.
 - 5 Some think only active competitors should be considered "bodybuilders." Others think a bodybuilder is anyone dedicated to the "bodybuilding lifestyle," which means, above all, that one consistently physically trains oneself according to the principles of bodybuilding, at or near full intensity.
 - 6 See Marcia Ian, "When Is a Body Not a Body?" on the relations among gynophobia, homophobia, and male fears of interiority; "How Do You Wear Your Body?" on female bodybuilding as phallic masquerade; "From Abject to Object" for a more empirical account of the subjective morphing generated by female bodybuilding; and "Individuality and the Semiotics of Gender" on sexism and social prejudice against females in sport.
 - 7 This line of thinking was stimulated by reading Manthia Diawara, "Homeboy Cosmopolitan."
 - 8 In her use of the term "sovereignty" Heywood follows Georges Bataille in *The Accursed Share*. Later in this essay, as elsewhere in my work, I rely upon a different, in fact quite opposite, concept from Bataille, namely that of "continuity," from *Death and Sensuality*.
 - 9 Concerning the exhibit, see note 4. Fierstein spoke at The New School, New York City on April 3, 2000. I spoke the same evening as part of the same program, on a panel entitled "Interrogating the Space of the Gym and its Culture," organized in conjunction with the "Achieving Failure" exhibition of sculpture and performance art that ran concurrently with "Picturing the Modern Amazon." The point of view I expressed there, as here, was antithetical to Fierstein's.
 - 10 This image is from Tom Waits's "Diamonds and Gold": "Small time Napoleons / Shattered his knees / But he stays in the saddle for Rose."
 - 11 Dan Duchaine was a kind of mad-dog personal trainer and "steroid guru" who published definitive guides to "supplement" usage for muscle building. Duchaine died at home in 1999. The generally accepted but unauthenticated rumor is that he developed kidney or similar problems, perhaps related to steroid use,

- but those who would know declined to reveal the postmortem specifics.
- 12 Wielding total financial and political control of the sport and its participants—Ben Weider is President for Life, and his son is currently active in its hierarchy—the IFBB is more than ever the only game in town for bodybuilders.
- 13 Edited by Steve Wennerstrom, *Women's Physique World* is the only magazine with full national coverage of women's amateur and professional bodybuilding competitions and photo features that highlight and celebrate the most muscular female physiques. By contrast, *MuscleMag International*, *Muscle & Fitness*, *IRONMAN*, *Muscular Development*, and even *Flex*, have reduced in quantity and quality their already unequal coverage of pro fbb.
- 14 See Wayne.
- 15 The technology of photography, Dutton shows, was essential to this transition, aided by a distinctly pseudoclassical visual vocabulary of columns, togas, fig leaves, and the like. The instrumental and the representational aspects were originally unified in the strongman spectacles (such as those performed by the world-famous Eugen Sandow) of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
- 16 This account of the ESPN broadcast and the public response to it, as well as one judge's narrative of how judges were obliged to defer to Joe Weider's insistence that the most muscular not win, comes from Lowe, 110.
- 17 For an outrageous account of this Ms. International contest, see Wennerstrom in *Flex*. For an analysis of this account and its rhetoric of gender, see Ian, "When Is a Body Not a Body?"
- 18 Quoted in Lowe, 70–71. Lowe does not remark upon (several) contradictions suggested by her narrative.
- 19 Repulsed by increasingly muscular competitors, Wayne DiMilia refused to sponsor the next Ms. O, which was held in Czechoslovakia.
- 20 Some current competitors feel that the inconsistency of judging criteria is even more pernicious to the development of female bodybuilding than the judges' sexism.
- 21 These quotes are both from men, but as many women seem to be "grossed out" by massive "female" muscle.
- 22 One of the most illuminating aspects of Guttman's account is how class, at least as much as gender, determines attitudes toward, and participation in, sport.
- 23 Guttman discusses the "legendary" and "notoriously martial Amazons," opining that "politics, not sexual politics, lay behind the legendary need to subdue Atalanta and repel the Amazons" (19–20). The physical and mental discipline—the "Amazon lifestyle"—required for serious bodybuilding does structure the lives of those for whom it is a calling. In *Muscle: Confessions of an Unlikely Bodybuilder*, Samuel Wilson Fussell describes what that lifestyle can be like for a man. Especially in the eyes of her fans, who do not hesitate to call her "Amazon," the female bodybuilder who follows this path may seem imbued with her mythic and erotic significance. See <<http://www.ifi.uio.no/~thomas/lists.amazon-links.html>> or <<http://www.musclewomen.com/>>.

- 24 Bill Dobbins, first editor of *Flex*, cowriter of the first IFBB guidelines, and famous bodybuilding photographer who has published books of beautiful photos only of women, told Femuscle that judges will frequently use the breast factor in determining how to rank competitors. They may deduct points, for example, if a competitor's implants are disproportionately large (obliging her, for example, to lift them up out of the way of her abdominal muscles) or distracting, or if she is flat-chested, especially if they don't like the competitor. Dobbins acknowledges that breast implants are not illegal for female bodybuilders, but feels "too many female bodybuilders have such large implants that they take away from the overall aesthetic athletic look of the physique. The whole point of the female bodybuilding physique is to celebrate the highly-developed [sic] athletic female body. Look at other sports—where do you see top-ranked women athletes with huge breasts?"
- 25 See, for example, *On the Drive*, a special issue of *UMBR(a): A Journal of the Unconscious* (1997). See also a recent interview with Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek in which they discuss the importance of introducing the concept of the drive into American Lacanian discourses.
- 26 On January 30, 1998 the International Olympic Committee announced in Nagano, Japan, that it was granting provisional two-year recognition to bodybuilding, along with sumo, motorcycle racing, and speedboat racing. It is unclear how the judges will specify their criteria, or render their judging nonsexist. Whether bodybuilders, virtually none of whom, it seems, reach the top ranks without using illegal drugs, will be willing to compete drug free remains to be seen.
- 27 Ruling in the *IFBB Professional Guidebook for Athletes, Judges, and Promoters* and reiterated in an "advisory" November 20, 1991 prior to the Ms. International. Reprinted in *Flex* (July 1992): 115.
- 28 Only one male bodybuilder, Dorian Yates, seems to possess what other bodybuilders both male and female describe as "too much" muscle, despite his having won the Mr. Olympia six times. Females especially tend to respond to him with a resounding "ugh."
- 29 In my first essay on fbb, I explored aspects of this process. See Ian, "From Abject to Object."
- 30 "No pain, no gain" is the familiar byword of serious bodybuilders, a motto that has made its way into advertising of various kinds. I recently saw a religious lifter at my gym wearing a t-shirt, the back of which read "God's Gym." On the front was a picture of an inclined cross, next to which appeared the words, "His Pain, Your Gain," and, underneath the cross, the commandment to "Bench Press This." Biblical scholar Stephen Moore's wonderful book, *God's Gym: Divine Male Bodies of the Bible*, uses the bodybuilding cycle as a metaphor to explore the fantastic oedipality and masculinity of God in Jewish and Christian writings. The book contains three sections, "Torture," "Dissection," and "Resurrection."
- 31 I use the pronoun "he" for the judges, who occupy the position of the "male" gaze. Even when the judges are women, they toe the line beneath which the female competitors are to remain. As

- Bill Dobbins told Femuscle (11 Jan. 1996) apropos of Doris Barrilleaux, a woman who participated in the founding of bodybuilding, she “did her best to hold bodybuilding for women back. [. . .] Even today a great number of those in charge of bodybuilding do not like the sport.”
- 32 The infant who notices his reflection in the mirror “overcomes, in a flutter of jubilant activity, the obstructions of his support [. . .] in order to hold [. . .] in his gaze” his own image (Lacan 1–2).
- 33 “To an extent like Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* (1945), Lacan distinguishes between the look (or the eye) and the gaze, and to an extent like Merleau-Ponty in *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), he locates this gaze *in the world*” (Foster 107).
- 34 “Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (Woolf 35).
- 35 Other than the apparent obligation for the women to seem “feminine” at contest time, there is no necessary or even advisable sex-related difference between men’s and women’s training regimens. “WOW!!” joked one fbb on Femuscle, “I forgot to rehearse ‘femininity.’ I only have 4 days to get this darn thing down pat . . . so much for the ‘terminator’ routine, huh??” Faith R. Sloan. Online posting. 16 Apr. 1996. Femuscle.
- 36 The men must perform the same kind of routine, and all competitors perform their routines during “pre-judging,” when it really counts, as well as later. Women are judged, however, not just on how they perform their routines, but on whether or not they perform femininity, even, for example, when they walk on and off stage, whether or not they do so in a “feminine” manner.
- 37 Muscle dysmorphism, already mentioned in the *New York Times*, *Muscle & Fitness*, and *Psychosomatics*, made it to the March 1998 issue of *Scientific American*, 24–25.
- 38 Alarming, in *Sexuality and Mind*, Chasseguet-Smirgel argues that the rise of Nazism can be attributed to the excessive sway of the Mother.
- 39 The gym where I have trained since 1987 is almost all male. Men there continually initiate and pursue conversations, at least with me, about their weight losses and gains, their current diets, how fat they feel, and other such topics conventionally considered “women’s issues.”
- 40 The leader of a “twelve-step” therapy group I recently watched on tv described learning to value this scar tissue as learning to place the “will to function” above the “will to comfort.”
- 41 Sexual abuse of girls is obviously more frequently discussed than that of boys. In heavy metal music genres, however, young men have with unprecedented and enraged candor begun describing their traumatic violations by parents and relatives. See Ian, “The Name of the Father is Jouissance.”
- 42 “The dream I find most compelling is one of an androgynous and genderless (though not sexless) society, in which one’s sexual anatomy is irrelevant to who one is, what one does, and with whom one makes love” (204).
- 45 Pat is a comic, androgynous character from *Saturday Night Live*

and the eponymous, androgynous
subject of the movie, *It's Pat!*

44 Thanks to Carolyn Williams for
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