

2019 - Building Mass, Mass and more Mass

work in progress

Can we enhance femininity in female bodybuilding through Drag Queen posing? Feminine competitive bodybuilders have been highly criticized for not being feminine and for being too masculine, for the exaggeration of their muscular mass.

Drag Queen instead are men with a high competence in impersonating femininity. They can pose and be more feminine than a biological female. In this text I am going to analyze the practice of bodybuilding as a subculture, the agencies that this sport has activated on the female body, as well as society's perception of an hypermuscular woman. Subsequently, I will suggest a routine that will put together bodybuilding posing and Drag Queens' in creating an alternative posing routine to enhance one's own femininity.

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Building Mass, Mass and more Mass

by Corinne Mazzoli

intro

I found myself in a foreign country, Mexico, analyzing a foreign subject to me: bodybuilding. I happened to have a studio right above Gimnasio Olimpia, a gym which from 1970 is training professional and non professional bodybuilders. I then found an archive completely covered in dust. It is mainly a collage of pictures of the greatest bodybuilders like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Serge Nubret, Rachel McLish, Lenda Murray, and many more. These pictures were taken from magazines like Hercules Moderno or Iron Man. The bodies in these pictures are extremely big.

What exactly is bodybuilding?

"Bodybuilding is a process, perhaps a sport, by which a person shapes her or his own body. This shaping is always related to the growth of muscular mass". [1]

Some people consider bodybuilders only those who actively take part to competitions, while some others think that a bodybuilder can be anyone dedicated to that lifestyle: a consistent diet, a full intensity daily training and posing. The goal (main idea) is building mass, mass and more mass. The owner of the Gimnasio Pablo is part of the second group. So, I decided to start training with him for a short period of time: 15 days. I am also dieting. 5 meals per day and a big amount of protein food. I need to train my body by dividing it into parts, biceps, triceps, gluteus, abdomen... and working each part separately through repetitions or reps. This, I discovered, is how bodybuilding works.

"The verbal language in the gym is minimal and almost senseless, reduced to numbers and a few nouns. "Sets", "squats", "reps",... The only verbs are "do" or "fail" adjectives and adverbs no longer exist; sentences, if they are at all, are simple."

"As any bodybuilder will explain, the pleasure of bodybuilding is not simply about the building of the body so that it becomes huge and powerful but of developing the mind - body link so that absolute mental control is exerted over every voluntary muscle in the body. The bodybuilder symbolizes complete ascetic discipline - a body which has been molded and pummeled into a specific shape, utterly under the command of the mind". [3]

The lack of language, the counting, the repetition of numbers collocates bodybuilding among the sacred practices and the gym becomes a temple where bodybuilders go to repeat their daily mantra. It is not a case that the historical Gold's Gym in California is now called "the Mecca". A subculture and sport that revolve around such a structure tend to select for individuals who reflect it. Punk Culture was reflected by attitudes, slogans, fanzine and "do it yourself" publications. For bodybuilding it is no different. The complete philosophy of this subculture is published and promoted through magazines such as Muscle&Fitness or Flex by Joe Weider. The latter, the Master Blaster, was the most powerful and influential man in bodybuilding business, he invented the Mr Olympia, Mrs Olympia and Master Olympia contests, he was discovering talents such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, and together with his family he started the first sport nutrition company in the 30s' and later a series of Fitness magazines, as the already mentioned Flex. The cult of bodybuilding had its best years rotating around the Weider family and the Gold's Gym.

"At the center of this philosophy are twin pillars: the individual who is committed to mastering his or her life, and the individual who is doing so by building a better body. "Better," in bodybuilding parlance, means bigger." [4]

To reach massiveness one has to train constantly, individually. The cult of muscles is super criticized by society as a unnatural aesthetic, and

bodybuilders are often considered freaks.

"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")". [5]

"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". [6]

Subculture

It is not easy to define what a subculture is, over the years subcultural studies have evolved, initially they were interpreted as forms of deviance and delinquency, then as forms of resistance, and lately as forms of distinction.

Nonetheless, the idea of dominant culture is explicitly criticized, normalcy is subverted so that individuals who feel neglected by societal standards can aggregate and develop a sense of identity.

"The 'culture' of a group or class is the peculiar and distinctive 'way of life' of the group or class, the meanings, values and ideas embodied in institutions, in social relations, in systems of beliefs, in mores and customs, in the uses of objects and material life. Culture is the distinctive shapes in which this material and social organisation of life expresses itself." [7]

In Little Big Men: Bodybuilding Subculture and Gender Construction, Alan Klein writes that "Within a large, complex society there is every likelihood that specialized and/or disenfranchised groups will be forced to create a form of culture that by definition, respectively, expresses narrow interests and/or deviates from the established norms". [8]

This is what competitive bodybuilding is actually doing, through its expression, exaggeration and abuse of hormones and steroids. This abuse of drugs has created a different aesthetic of the female bodybuilder body, specifically what Johanna Frueh describes as a 'Monster Beauty'. Female bodybuilders can be considered the most deviant form of this subculture because "the bodybuilder's aesthetic and erotic over-articulation provokes discomfort and lust. Whether the bodybuilder has created a sculpted form that merely exceeds a normative (relatively flaccid) appearance or one that is hypermuscular, the deliberately built older female body violates categories". [9]

Workout to overcome binary heteronormative system

"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." [10]

In her book The Primitive Subject of Female Bodybuilding: Transgression and Other Postmodern Myths Marcia Ian talks about feminine bodybuilding as destabilizing, because it is a direct attack to the globally accepted categories of sexuality, sex and gender. In competitive bodybuilding, today even more than during the 80s', female bodybuilders are required to sculpt their bodies in order to transgress the feminine; on the other hand the sport requires also a display of femininity through make-up, hairstyle and of course the pose.

Female bodybuilding has often been labeled as feminist resistance, imagine 'pumping iron' women pushing their bodies to the limit, struggling to achieve recognition into a male dominated subculture. In Flex-rated! Female bodybuilding: feminist resistance or erotic spectacle? Niall Richardson claims that "Bodybuilding is surely one of the 'queerest' activities within

postmodern culture as, dependent upon its context, the flexing female bodybuilder may be read as either embodying feminist politics and challenging traditional feminine beauty or as a strangely erotic spectacle. Either way bodybuilding challenges the traditional sex/gender/sexuality continuum not only by de-essentializing the gendered body but also by challenging the narrow perception of heteroerotics". [11]

"If there is one thing that is clear about bodybuilding to date, moreover, it is that it remains an entrenched bastion of gender fundamentalism"[12]

The enactment of a double impersonation

"If the body is not a "being," but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, then what language is left for understanding this corporeal enactment, gender, that constitutes its "interior" signification on its surface? [...] Consider gender, for instance, as a corporeal style, an "act," as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where "performative" suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning". [13]

In an interview Laurie Fierstein affirms that "There is no historical prototype for the hypermuscular woman. There's no historical prototype in flesh, and there's no historical prototype in art." [14] In the same interview Seth Michael Forman talks about the muscular man as "basically exaggerating the stereotype of what a man should be in the first place. So there's something slightly subversive that is perhaps more challenging and exciting about hypermuscular women." [15]

The female bodybuilder, observes Doug Aoki, "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". [16]

I agree with Fen Coles In *Feminine charms and outrageous arms*, when she writes that within the concepts of "naturalised sex and gender, not only muscles and 'femininity' but muscles and woman are exclusive categories. The female bodybuilder would seem then to be an impossible term. [...] Ultimately, the female bodybuilder's muscle constitute a kind of drag." [17] Judith Butler, in the early 90s, was already writing about the fact that "As much as drag creates a unified picture of "woman" [...], it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency*" [18] [italic in the original].

According to Butler, the the idea of primary gender identity is often mocked by drag and cross-dressing practices.

Coles declares that we can ultimately "see drag as an imitation of an imitation. Drag can therefore radically undo traditional ideas of a natural gender/natural sex. Through drag, the supposedly fixed binaries of masculinity/femininity, male/female overlap and fall apart. All categories are exposed as false, artificial". [19]

And more "The female male impersonator shows us then that the 'real' is in fact a lie" we need to accept the fact that female bodybuilding shows off this lie because she creates a disruption in the normative system. This will probably always position bodybuilding into the 'subcultures' but this is also where its representational strength relies: "Spectacular on her stage, seeing her is disbelieving, for finally she cannot be accommodated on either side of any binary. Enacting a double impersonation, her 'female' body fills out a masculine body drag, laced with super-feminine embellishments". [20]

The intent of this text is not to compare physically female bodybuilders with Drags, but rather to highlight how the impersonation of femininity works similarly in those subjects: the act of female-male impersonation, in Coles words, "is subversive when done by a Drag Queen but it is even more when performed by the bodybuilder." [21]

When a bodybuilder appears on stage and engages her posing routine, she is

displaying a high dose of theatricality. "Flexing, she camps up and puts on male muscle. Crucially, however, her cross-dress does not disappear once she is offstage. [...] For this reason, the female bodybuilder performs the transgressive potential of cross-dressing in a particularly radical way - her challenge to traditional ideas of sex and gender is not a costume (like hat and tails) which she can take off after the show; this challenge appears on her body". [22]

From the 80s' to nowadays we have seen radical changes in the female bodybuilder's body, several categories have been added in competitions that sees the idea of a more soft muscular aesthetic such as the 'bikini' or 'figure' categories where the women shows their routine on high heels. What I am analyzing here is the pure Bodybuilding category, the one that has been analyzed also in Butler's and Coles' essays. This type of female bodybuilding is the most extreme, the one that is challenging more the heteronormative binary system.

Training as a bodybuilder, posing as a Drag to enhance femininity

In this paragraph I wish to describe and combine together the idea of posing routine in bodybuilding together with the pose striking routine in Drag Queens.

It is well known that Arnold Schwarzenegger took ballet and choreography classes to prepare and sharpen his poses and present himself in the best way. His posing was delicate, his arms were open widely, he had grace.

Professional Drag Queens are extremely good not only at cross-dressing but also at striking poses and show off their femininity in front of a camera or on stage in front of her audience. We cannot say the same for many professional female bodybuilders. When watching routine videos of bodybuilders in the 80s' there was a fluidity that today got lost somewhere; the extreme and unnatural enlargement of the muscles through steroids created hyper-shaped bodies, the female bodybuilders have the desire to grow more and more, to be more, they want to 'build mass mass and more mass' neglecting the posing in a feminine and dramatic way, thinking that some makeup and a ponytail would fix everything.

Coles text underlines the fact that "it is precisely through the ideas of drag and cross-dressing that the female bodybuilder's subversiveness can be measured [...] Female bodybuilders in particular are made to 'dramatise their sexuality'" [23] so the perfect Drama Queen teacher would actually be a Drag.

What could ever happen if we created a posing routine based on the combination of poses taken from bodybuilding routine combined with Drag Queen poses?

Could a Drag Queen be a femininity coach for female bodybuilders?

[1] Acker, Kathy, Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the body, in The Last Sex: feminism and outlaw bodies, New World Perspectives, Montreal, 1993.

[2] Acker, Kathy, Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the body, in The Last Sex: feminism and outlaw bodies, New World Perspectives, Montreal, 1993.

[3] Richardson, Niall, Flex-rated! Female bodybuilding: feminist resistance or erotic spectacle?, Journal of Gender Studies, 2008, 17:4, 289-301, DOI: 10.1080/09589230802419930

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[9] Frueh, Johanna, *Monster Beauty Building the Body of Love*, University of California Press Berkeley and Los Angeles, California 2001

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[11] Richardson, Niall, *Flex-rated! Female bodybuilding: feminist resistance or erotic spectacle?*, *Journal of Gender Studies*, 2008, 17:4, 289-301, DOI: 10.1080/09589230802419930

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[13] Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge New York, 1999

[14] Janet A. Kaplan, Andrulla Blanchette, Bailey Doogan, Laurie Fierstein, Seth Michael Forman, Joanna Frueh & Judith Stein (2000) *Picturing the Modern Amazon*, *Art Journal*, 59:4, 80-99

[15] Janet A. Kaplan, Andrulla Blanchette, Bailey Doogan, Laurie Fierstein, Seth Michael Forman, Joanna Frueh & Judith Stein (2000) *Picturing the Modern Amazon*, *Art Journal*, 59:4, 80-99

[16] Doug, Aoki quoted in Ian, Marcia. *The Primitive Subject of Female Bodybuilding: Transgression and Other Postmodern Myths, differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 12 no. 3, 2001, pp. 69-100.

[17] Coles, Fen, *Feminine charms and outrageous arms*, in "Feminist theory and the body a reader", Ed. by Price Janet, Margrit Shildrick, Routledge New York 1999

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[20] Coles, Fen, *Feminine charms and outrageous arms*, in "Feminist theory and the body a reader", Ed. by Price Janet, Margrit Shildrick, Routledge New York 1999

[21] Coles, Fen, *Feminine charms and outrageous arms*, in "Feminist theory and the body a reader", Ed. by Price Janet, Margrit Shildrick, Routledge New York 1999

[22] Coles, Fen, *Feminine charms and outrageous arms*, in "Feminist theory and the body a reader", Ed. by Price Janet, Margrit Shildrick, Routledge New York 1999

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