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Performing Femininity by Building a New Corporal Prison. The Female Bodybuilding Body on Stage

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Abstract

The main focus of this paper involves the muscular woman's body, and if it can be considered a subversive act, trying to break the patriarchal structure internalized by our society. A structure that in the sphere of passivity limits non-action, submissiveness and so on from women's perspective.

Looking for this new identity becomes a transgressive act, due to building a new body with which to be identified by stepping into a territory limited to the male sex, of action, strength, power, sport and muscle.

The female bodybuilding practice transformed what had been always taken for granted, seeking control and power over our body, and also seeking to gain importance in the social structure.

How was the emergency of this new body perceived?

And what about the aspirations of this new female identity?

How has this transgressive act now ended up being transformed through competitions in which muscular women's bodies become a new sexualized object to analyze, compare, split and trivialize?

What happens with this body when it is shown on stage? And how is it shown by the media?

In this communication, we would like to show the comparison between two forms in which muscular women's bodies in motion, are the focus. First of all, we will show how the female's bodybuilder body moves, how it is analyzed and then shown at bodybuilding competitions. How objectivized and sexualised the female bodybuilder's body becomes, how she –the woman who broke boundaries by building a new body–, once again ends up being caged under the gaze of men. We will also show how Heather Cassils (a transgender artist), using *its* body as material with which to work, will work on the relevance of this new built female body, the body of the 'woman' bodybuilder in several performances. Starting with two ways of capturing the muscular female body, we will be able to see how, while in bodybuilding contests the body has become a showcase object, in Cassils' performances, the body is in tension and attacks us aggressively questioning us shockingly. The body of the female bodybuilder has been created with harsh violence, with difficulty and Cassils maintains this tension in the same way in which she shows it. *Its* body is the support and the work.

We can observe that the original transgressor step of searching for a new identity through our body has undergone a development. A development that we can even consider to have turned against itself.

What will happen or where will this step lead if it is taken to the extreme?

How can we interpret this new body identity?

Can the female bodybuilder be understood as a 'cyborg' (as defined by Donna Haraway)?

Key Words:

Bodybuilding, body, female, identity, transgression

1. Sitting on the fence. The repressive dualism of the patriarchal society

“... the muscular physique cultivated within the sport, radically confronts hegemony sex/gender binaries by challenging the social construction of the female body as frail, frail or limited”
(Bunsell, Tanya 2014)

It is common knowledge that we are inserted into the culture in which we live: the Western culture. Being conditioned by this context, we must be aware that there are a whole series of mechanisms that support it and that, at the same time, condition our way of looking, thinking, understanding and analyzing what is going on around us. We are not entirely “free” beings. In fact, we could easily affirm that we pay a certain price for being associated to a society, by accepting a kind of “social contract” and the implications that this has, granting us the role of “citizen”. However, the price that we pay has led us to also accept a series of rules from above us that function implicitly; rules that we have not had to learn textually, but which, through how society functions and the behavior of its members, we have absorbed and understood, in other words, interiorized as normal patterns to be followed. Patterns so deeply rooted that they have caused our behavior to be based on the performing repetition of what has been “standardized”.

In this context governed by regulatory patterns, one of the most significant ones is, without any doubt, that of the grammar of duality. Within this, we would point out the heavy relevance and the strength of one part above the other. In this context, we always find an oppressed segment complemented by another that unleashes the role of oppression. Based on this duality, what is difficult to place within the two options represents a threat, something that destabilizes, and this creates an uneasiness that needs to be overcome by controlling, neutralizing, and indeed, standardizing that strange being: the other. Our society has been based on the need to be able to position ourselves between one or the other extreme and when this does not happen or is confusing, it creates a problem.

There are many polarities that exist in our society that are governed by this rule, such as active/passive, reason/desire, culture/nature, self/other, public/private, who observes/who is observed. But the ones that we would like to particularly highlight are those that refer to mind/body and male/female.

1.1 Why talk about a patriarchal society? How the patriarchy promotes the image of “women” as “the other”¹

“We are no longer given verbal descriptions or exemplars of what femininity consist. Rather, we learn the rules directly through bodily discourse: through images that tell us what clothes, body shape, facial expression, movements, and behavior are required” (Bordo 1993: 169)

As we mentioned at the beginning, one of the patterns that governs our society is that which is based on the male-female dichotomy, a dichotomy in which males predominate and oppress females.

In a patriarchy society such as ours, the figure of the man is characterized by activity, strength, the ability to decide and so on, and is seen as a figure that empowers these features. The *man* is the strong sex, is the rational mind with the ability to make decisions, the muscled, brave body, always firm and independent. In contrast, the *woman* in a society such as ours, has a secondary, complementary role to satisfy the main figure. She is shown and promoted as the weaker sex, guided more by emotions and feelings than by reason, with a more fragile body, dependent on man and the career of her children, conditioned by her biological role of giving birth. There are many implicit characteristics that weave the framework of the structure, but as we can see, women are delegated to second place, dimmed, reduced to a body, leading to the importance of her beautiful appearance. She is, at the same time, considered the weaker sex and that which satisfies the desires of the male figure, characterized by this oppressive role.

Society is created and designed by men, while women are always reduced to playing the role of “the other”, they are a simple complement, the object, not the subject. Therefore, we can talk about women as objectified beings, because they are not only promoted for their physical appearance, but also for having an attitude of maximum passiveness, closer to objects than human beings, that is considered most suitable for their female gender. The activities that “belong” to a woman are those linked to confinement, to the home and to an enclosed space, as well as those that are to do with their biological role as carriers of life, such as giving birth and looking after children. However, the attitude that is promoted for their role also determines their space-time context. We have seen the effects of confinement to the home, but we would also highlight the relevance of the control carried out on their time, dedicated to cultivating their physical appearance, their body. Therefore, we can talk about this reduction of women and of femininity to their corporality, to their appearance.

Is there any possibility of changing this deeply-rooted dualism?

How can women act to break the role of power between the genders²?

2. The social burden on bodies, and in particular on “female” bodies

“Women learn to internalize their surveillance, their ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ more than men do”
(Richardson 2010: 14)

“... the panoptic gaze defines perfectly the situation of the woman under patriarchy” (Copjec 1989: 54)

2.1 The construction of identity through the body. Control through panoptic gazes and mimetic performance

“... the physical self as it is culturally constituted in terms of metaphor and embedded in social structure”
(Locks-Richardson 2012: 55)

Our body is unique and, at the same time, it is our mediator. We establish relationships of all kinds through it, in fact, in a certain way, and going beyond Cartesian dualism —body/mind— which undervalues the body over the mind, existing is also, in a relevant way, being a body. However, our uniqueness expressed through the body is modulated by a series of implicit precepts; patterns of what is considered “normal” and gender patterns are some of them. There is a cultural inscription that coerces and determines the difference between genders that comes from this fiercely interiorized dualism. The interweaving of culture and its mechanisms of power and control are exercised on bodies, which is why we can say that our body is a cultural creation, inasmuch as it is determined by this. Therefore, corporal neutrality is unthinkable in a social context.

In this dual context, we could say that a bottom line is established that determines what adapts and what does not adapt to the standardized, accepted structure, and what does not fit in, labelled strange, is coerced and undervalued by the gaze of those who do fit in, or try to follow the regulatory precepts, the Caucasian standards of beauty. There is no need for watchman, no need for police. There is no need for anybody to apply this discipline to bodies, according to Michel Foucault, we do not need the authority of a member to apply the power, as was the case in previous eras. The structure of panoptic surveillance³, of continued control through the gaze, is what exercises the power of control over those who are seen to be different. A control that starts on bodies, but that, at the same time, affects an attitude, a behavior, a way of living, a specific space and time for each member of this gender separation

In turn, in the dualism of our society, as we have already mentioned, different behavior is promoted between men and women, which is considered appropriate for one or the other. Obviously, they are very different positions which, we can confirm, can be complementary and opposed. The behavior that is considered suitable for each member of society is governed by this interiorizing of the dual gender code. No explicit learning is required to be able to carry it out, as we have already seen, we simply absorb it based on corporal gestures of gender, by interiorizing and imitating them. Thereby inscribing, on the surface of our bodies, a way of being, of doing things, of behaving and acting within the parameters of this society and in keeping with what “we are supposed to be”. As Judith Butler states, we perform our gender. Following Butler's line, gender is not a biological question but a social one. It is this social circle that conditions us and determines us. Therefore, our gender is conditioned by our body, in terms of the discourse promoted by the patriarchal society and it should act by performing in keeping with the gender it is given.

“... the performative approach is enormously insightful as a framework for exploring to ongoing, interactive, imitative processes by means of which the self, gender (I would add race as well), and their illusions of authenticity are constructed. What cultural gestures are involved in the performance of masculinity, femininity, heterosexuality, homosexuality, maternity, paternity, whiteness, blackness? How is authenticity ‘fabricated’ and convey? How is the “binary frame” (of race as well as gender) enact and regulated? [...] What is ‘natural’ and what is ‘unnatural.’” (Bordo 1993: 290)

In this way, male behavior is understood to be a driving force behind action, which is why the sports area is considered to be masculine sphere, as well as the control of knowledge and power. The first women to take the first steps in the sports sphere, in high labor positions, when they started out in the scientific, artistic or technological world, where they had been vetoed, were badly considered, and some of them were even accused of “deviations” with respect to their sexual preferences.⁴ It was not a suitable attitude in keeping with the prevailing “phallogocentric” discourse. Women got away from passivity, weakness and subordination to become carriers of wisdom, strength, power and knowledge.

“Thus, while men are the cultural theorists *of* the body, only women *have* bodies” (Bordo 1997: 198)

2.2 Dualism in the construction of corporal identity in terms of masculine muscularity and slender femininity

“While male bodybuilding has often been viewed as the assertion of hegemonic masculinity [...] female bodybuilding has been regarded as a feminist resistance and critics have considered how/if it challenges traditional feminine iconography” (Richardson 2012: 21-22)

Generally, the idea that the muscular male body and the slender female body are both iconic symbols of a correct attitude have traditionally been promoted. Being able to tame and control one's body, modelling it in keeping with these precepts moves individuals to believe that they will be more successful with respect to their social relationships, professional success, and so on. Putting together a letter of presentation, one's body, in keeping with the standardized patterns of beauty is a commitment to construction for a successful life. This is why the world of cosmetic surgery has also earned so many fans. “Change what you don't like, build your own you” promotes this form of corporal modification. However, this is not the only option possible; diets, training and so on can all be used as a mechanism to manage to model one's original body to achieve a body that is closer to the promoted stereotype. The individual feels that they are free, a false freedom, to modify their body and to create it to their liking, but what usually ends up happening is that they model their body in keeping with the stereotypic rules, they end up undergoing cosmetic surgery, following restrictive diets, training sessions and so on to standardize their body to hegemonic precepts.

The practice of more aggressive sport, seen as a typically male sphere, is well viewed in masculine behavior as a display of control and mastery over the body, at the same time as giving the result of the image of ideal masculinity linked to vigor and musculature, energy, power and control. This is why the masculine bodies of sportsmen who practice bodybuilding are generally well considered, as long as they are not too extreme, in which case they could be labelled freaks. In any case, despite the possibility of going beyond the limits and being socially penalized in their evaluation, however extreme, a muscular male body will always be better accepted than a muscular female body, inasmuch as it is even further away from the idea of the standardized body of what a woman is. This image, that of femininity, is characterized by the promotion of sweet, delicate, fragile, evanescent bodies which, at the same, time promote an attitude of vulnerability, over which one can exercise control and authority. This is why when we come across the image of a woman's body modelled with finely tuned, rocky muscular protuberances showing muscular striations, it shocks, creates rejection, anguish, unsettling our coded radar in terms of duality with respect to gender. The female body stereotyped as fragile was easily docile on which to be able to exercise this male control and power, but when the body itself is modelled in terms of musculature, apparently, it can no longer be reduced to the oppressive power of the male gaze, which is why, fleeing from duality, it generates this rejection, this “fear” in the gender considered antagonist, of losing the role of control and authority.

3. The maneuver of the women bodybuilder: corporal empowerment through muscles. Is a female bodybuilder a possible option for resistance?

3.1 Why appeal to a new identity constructed by means of the body? The feminist turn should not be just a gesture towards psychic empowerment, but also physical

3.1.1 Barbara Kruger's cry

“Barbara Kruger exemplifies [the] conception of resistance in a poster that represents the contemporary contest over reproductive control through the metaphor of the body as battleground [...] “sites of resistance” precisely because they recognize that body is a battleground whose self-determination has to be fought for.

The metaphor of the body as battleground, rather than post-modern playground, captures, as well the practical difficulties involved in the political struggle to empower “difference” (Bordo 2003: 263)

Women are immersed in the search for control over their bodies, neutralising the battleground to be able to reconquer it, breaking with the impositions of the predominant patriarchal normative power.

Conforming with stereotypes and the consumer models thrust upon us is a never-ending battle. These consumer models, many of which come from their genetic disposition, look to establish an aesthetic ideal to conform to through imprisonment. Attempting to conform to these prototypes, women find themselves thrown into an exhausting, eternal struggle. And so, this anxiety-fuelled desire for better corporeal promotion serves to promote these masculine edicts. Barbara Kruger, immersed in some feminist postulates, promoted women's awakening and reaction, so that they would throw off their chains and regain control over their bodies. And so, Kruger's slogan became a war cry for women.

Kruger's complaint revolves around the difficulty of finding a single sphere for corporality, particularly in the case of female corporality, within a society dominated by double standards. This is why, in this area, she conceives our own body in ongoing conflict seeking that non-existent delimitation, between moral, biological, political and sexual disputes. The body becomes the framework on which all these battles between human beings can be fought, at the same time as leaving their print. We can come to understand it as a stage on which each culture and historic moment is shaped in keeping with its regulatory systems.

Therefore, in the face of this call for a change through a woman's body, the body that receives most oppression within our society, Kruger becomes a clear starting point to promote research into corporal activism, an empowerment that enables us to recover the authority and the power over it, with a clear desire to re-think its social position. This change lies in acting on the fragile body of the woman to managed to free her from the chains that have made her a slave to it, as a woman and linked to her biological role; as a mother and wife, as associated to an unblemished appearance of beauty and seduction through aesthetic care, makeup and operations, among others.

3.2 The challenge of ambiguity. Challenging rigid gender roles

“Women bodybuilders' extreme muscularity and quest for largesse is subversive to the gender order of an emphatic femininity that includes the insertion slenderness, smallness, and conventional beauty [...] efforts at subverting gender containment” (Locks-Richardson 2012: 52)

To break away from the asphyxiating limitations of the patriarchal system, we need to act from within the confines of this mandate, according to Mary Daly. Duality cannot be subverted by moving outside it, it needs to be involved in it to a greater or lesser degree. This is why the bodybuilder option can be considered an interesting response to create resonance in the latent limitations and restate the borders between genders. Female bodybuilders pose a breaking away by means of their body construction and they push the gender limits to places where they had never been sent before. This new corporal presence can therefore give rise to an act of resistance.

The women who introduced themselves in the bodybuilding circle, looking for a reconquest and self-control of their own bodies, did this to defeat some boundaries which were imposed to them only for the fact of being a woman. With this new muscular body, a new femininity appears which overcomes the traditional notion. The corporal result of this fight doesn't have as a consequence the need to justify their degree of femininity because of their muscled body, as Bev Francis defends. A woman is not more feminine by the fact that she is less muscled but this new muscular physique brings attention to another way of understanding femininity, in case it exists, or to the way in which a woman embodies her own life.

Therefore, neither power nor musculature, are confronted with femininity, but they are simply other approaches. This way to represent femininity has in it a subversive which goes further than a corporal transformation focusing on the rethinking of gender codes. This new corporal formulation, clearly exemplified by Bev Francis' case, melts, blurs, the traditional differences between genders. This new form to understand the femininity, through the body representation, allows us to keep in doubt the normative dual corpus. In which men and women have simply been opposite categories. Thus, taking this other option, the traditional notion of gender becomes something to be fragmented, rethought with categories less restrictive, more fluid.

The construction of this body without any superficial layers of hidden fat, allowing us to see the tautness of the muscle fibers, making it look like the body of a different species. Creating a sense of disorientation.

“To many, the competitive female bodybuilder represents a grotesque distortion of the female body, a woman how has divorced herself from the norms of feminine bodily development. The defining characteristics of bodybuilding are, after all, associated with the Western notion of the ideal male body: muscularity, hardness, broad shoulders, and narrow hips, all of which render the opposite of the ideal female body. Women's participants in bodybuilding appears to challenge the Western notion of masculinity and femininity as exclusionary categories and, more specifically, the idea that muscle, which is associated with physical strength, is a definitive male characteristic. Thus women's bodybuilding seemed to us a probable arena in which to find women attempting to subvert the idea of women as the weaker sex and, at the same time, generate a new model of female embodiment” (Castelnuovo-Guthrie 1998: 39-40)

3.2.1 Is a female bodybuilder's body a new icon of resistance? Or does it once again come under a stereotype?

As we have already seen, this new corporal entity provided by female bodybuilders promotes a new discourse, a textuality that breaks away from the social definition of gender embodiment, stretches the borders of what to date had been socially accepted as traditional for a woman. However, is taking patriarchal tensions to a destabilized context sufficient to offer resistance, to manage to overcome them?

We can understand this form of body construction as a form of release, inasmuch as it enables us to get away from the pressure imposed by standardized stereotypes of femininity. Yet, at the same time, other requirements of authority are implicit. Maintaining this body requires complying with strict, perpetual discipline, not just a physical one based on training and diet, but also a mental one, although some people will interpret it as a way of promoting and empowering themselves as well, of this rational ability that had been conceded to the male sphere.

Analysing this decision as an individual act does not, however, enable us to think in a consequent act of resistance to overcome patriarchy. To make this icon a genuine option, one needs to think about the implications that this decision may have, in a collective way, either through promoting a stronger body, doing away with the corporal weakness promoted in feminine circles, as a means to promote a new safer performance of herself and with greater strength to take her own decisions. Therefore, thinking about the repercussion of this new way of understanding femininity by a group, resistance is more feasible and has a greater echo.

Despite the implications that this decisive change may involve, a hindrance still remains that makes it difficult to be able to understand them as a purely resistant feature. Female bodybuilders choose to construct a physique within the confines of what patriarchal culture has considered standardized, they enter into the terrain of what has been considered masculine to reformulate themselves, to construct themselves based on muscles, doing away with the image of frailty. This resulting construction, despite giving women physical and mental strength, features that had been taken away from them, also converts them into a gazing point for submission and control. Once again, they find themselves determined to the search for physical perfection. Sculptural modelling using muscles is a very long, guided process. Building this body requires daily commitment, following a new set of rules: training hours, with the corresponding intensity and pain and, at the same time, guided food intake—which is more rigorous in the case of competition bodybuilding, when even the time of meals is controlled, as well as the amount of each foodstuff that makes up the meal—in fact, despite being a personal decision to go ahead with it, it is not so far removed from the regime followed by the young people locked up in a prison as described by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, where everything is guided and determined.⁵ In this case, everyday life is organized into training times and meals, what is left over between them is the time to develop what is considered “a normal life”.

Therefore, we can consider these bodies to be bodies that generate confusion in the gender dichotomy, however, by trying to get away from the social pressure that models the standard body, they end up demanding new straitjackets for themselves. These new control mechanisms to manage to achieve a transgressive, subversive result, releasing themselves from oppressed femininity, lead women to follow new rules of control over their bodies; to be able to achieve that new flesh sculpted body, they are prisoners of a new stereotype.

3.3 How can we interpret the emergence of this strange female body modelled through its muscles?

The clearest personification of “the other”

“Otherness thus has many changes” (Bordo 1997: 195)

In view of the ambiguity that this reformulation of femininity awakens, many ideas have been associated to it. Often, the rejection and, to a certain degree, the fear have mainly led it to be associated to something negative, as if it was a monster or something grotesque, although we also find other interpretations with a more hopeful slant in the line of resistance to gender dualism, like the idea of a cyborg or the image of an Amazon.

Traditionally, the woman has always been characterized as “the other” in contrast with the man. But, when women build a new identity, this categorization is emphasized because they are threatening the patriarchal system. Can we take in the notion of “the other” through Haraway’s “cyborg”?

From the science fiction context to our reality, Donna Haraway uses the term “cyborg” so that women can run away from and defeat the dual grammar which is highly rooted in our society.

The idea proposed by Haraway makes the escape between man/woman but also between machine-human being/animal possible. Therefore, taking fiction as a starting point, she offers an alternative to restructure our contemporary culture, or at least, the symbols that control us.

It is in this frame where we can understand the bodybuilder’s decision as a “cyborg” entity. This is because it evades the unwritten gender dichotomy regulations between what is considered masculine and feminine. The woman bodybuilder becomes the personification of the third way to overcome the imposed gender dualisms, taking the gender roles to something more liquid. Driving the body to the limit through musculature, performing this corporal construction, we give an identity that allows us to think masculine and feminine in another way.

“... the cyborg permits the preparation of a series of liberating metaphors on the mixture of races, sexes and genders; in other words, everything that refers to the ‘other’”.
(Azpeitia *et al.* 2001: 35-36)

4. Performance and the Female Bodybuilding Body. The Body on Stage, Performing Femininity

“... we shall deal with the physique contest as a serious performance [...] A physique contest is really both a subjectively judged competition and a theatrically-oriented public body concert. At the higher levels, bodybuilders spend a great deal of time practicing the skillful presentation of their muscles. The similarity to dance is unmistakable. Fran Zane, Mr. Olympia 1977-78, regards bodybuilding as being very similar to ballet, and acknowledges that he has learned a lot by carefully observing ballet movements.

Each ninety-seconds posing routine is carefully choreographed, lighted, and sometimes accompanied by music. The outcome of the competition is frequently influenced by the grace, poise, and overall skill of presentation of the contestants. In a closely-contested event, charisma and audience reaction may be a deciding factor with the panel of judges. The bodybuilder, on the night of the competition at least, must be a performer. **He**⁶ must stand up alone before hundreds of people, subject to their judgement, and display what **his** work has produced. Some bodybuilders enjoy this aspect of their sport. Others seem to dread the event. It is probably true that most of those who achieve a high level of competition will be able to enjoy performing before an audience.

As the time for the contest approaches, the preparations of the bodybuilder are intensified. More time is spent in practicing posing, the workouts become more briskly paced, time must be spent in the sun to bring the skin to a healthy tan, and a strict diet becomes even more rigid. Many bodybuilders reduce their diets to only water, meat, and vitamin and mineral supplements, in the attempt to reduce the content of subcutaneous fat on their bodies and bring out the condition of muscular clarity called “definition.” It is highly desirable for muscle tissue to show striations and divisions when displayed under the posing lights, and no contestant, no matter how large his muscles, can hope to emerge victorious without possessing good definition.

There is no team competition in bodybuilding, and this is probably the factor which draws **men** into the sport. It is not necessary for the bodybuilder to coordinate **his** activity with the activities of others; **he** is on **his** own to work out intensely or take the day off; to eat ice cream or steak. At this time there is no competition other than from **himself**’ (Thirer-Greer 1978: 192)

4.1 The distinction between practicing bodybuilding and competition bodybuilding. The construction of an illusion, the ephemeralness nature of the body

However, although female bodybuilders take this corporal textuality that used to be considered typical of the male area, when exhibiting themselves on the stage they are found once again to be emphasizing feminine behavior through the regulation when posing, either in the movements or in all the complements that characterize them: a gemmed bikini, jewels, makeup, manicure, hairstyle and so on, including even surgical interventions that emphasize the “femininity” lost among the muscles. Therefore, women enter into the terrain of bodybuilding through musculature — considered to be something masculine— but when they are assessed on the stage, in most categories⁷, they are limited, they cannot take their body to a total extreme development, unlike their male counterparts. In the case of female bodybuilding, if women take their body to the most grotesque extremes, depending on the category to which we refer, they can be penalized, and in many cases, their work will be undervalued, with the accusations of “masculinization” and other pejorative criticisms taking on greater force, that do not give any value to the effort and the result obtained. Apart from their appearance as shown on the stage, the regulation ends up limiting them, conditioning them, to promote an image that is not too far removed from what the patriarchal society associates with “femininity”. Female attraction must be guaranteed. Therefore, in many cases, a bodybuilding competition and a (female) beauty competition are not that different from each other.

“... the problem is that within the competitive contest, both female and male judges emphasize femininity as a critical component for winning. Thus women’s muscular development is always kept in check [...] Although size, symmetry, and muscularity are critical variables in determining success, judges most often select as winners women who maintain stereotypical femininity (e.g., long-haired, blond, pretty women with discernible breasts)” (Castelnuovo-Guthrie 1998: 59)

Therefore, we consider it to be relevant to distinguish between practicing bodybuilding as a hobby or as a lifestyle, but not taken to the competitive sphere, which has the aim of exhibiting and assessing results on stage. Although in both cases, everyday life is governed by discipline, both with respect to training and the nutritional plan, and physical perfection is considered a goal to be attained, obviously people who wish to perform on stage follow a stricter path, with the consequences this involves.

In both cases, there is a corporal transformation totally linked to the practice of the activity and to the regulation of the food that the sportswoman ingests. However, although this physical perfection is taken into account in both cases, it is in the case of competition bodybuilding that the focus bows to a specific event, to the creation of this physical ideal for a specific day, the day of the competition, at whatsoever price. There is an obsessive, almost sick point in the discipline that needs to be followed to achieve success in this “sports” practice. Building this illusionary body leads the sportswoman to use highly extreme techniques that are completely opposed to the traditional dogma of “doing sport is healthy”. Although competition bodybuilding and bodybuilding as a more leisurely practice share the same path with respect to phases of weight increase, corresponding to the phases when the athlete ingests a higher level of calories to be able to do training with heavier weights, to construct the muscle structure that they will later have to polish; and the definition phase, characterized by a more restrictive diet, with more shortages and training that is more focused on cardiovascular work; it is in the case of competition bodybuilding that the body is taken to the threshold of illness, requiring extreme adjustments to diet, as well as water intake, the training sessions themselves, all to achieve that evanescent, illusory body.

“Bodybuilding training, besides demanding physical perseverance, is both an extremely personal and high complex experience. Each individual becomes his own artist in the intricate and strategic quest to become the embodiment of physical perfection [...] bodybuilding training as a “sculptor of himself.” The body is often abstracted out of the first person by the bodybuilder who may regard it not in personal terms, but rather as an artist regards an art he is creating” (Thirer-Greer 1978: 189)

One becomes one's own sculptor of a work of art fashioned from one's own flesh. Each “sportsperson-sculpture” invest hours of sacrifice in training, with pain, and refrains from dedicating this time to other social activities. However, the basis of this discipline is not only the practical part, the chisel blows against the weights, but the essence or the most relevant bases of the modelling is, without any kind of doubt, what is produced through diet. In the final weeks before a competition, this turns into an insane game of shortages, of ingesting and eliminating water, food, sodium and so on with the single objective of being able, at whatsoever price, to be able to offer the best version of oneself, composed of the greatest symmetry, muscular striations, among other factors, such as a good setting, and being able to move elegantly and fluently. And as we have said, in the case of a female bodybuilder, this staging is reduced to sensuality, meaning that her work is largely reduced to the authority of it through the male gaze that assesses and cages her yet again.

“... once again, the masculinist and heterosexist institution of sport has constrained female agency”
(Castelnuovo, Guthrie 1998: 59)

“... within the culture of competitive bodybuilding the athletes are indeed required to build their bodies so that they ‘transgress the feminine’ (St. Martin and Gavey 1996: 55) but the ‘sport also requires displays of femininity, in terms of hairstyle, make-up, expression, posture and demeanor that mimic and almost exaggerate the traditional requirements of femininity (St. Martin and Gavey 1996: 55). St. Martin and Gavey conclude that competitive female bodybuilding should, in fact, be read as *both* a form of feminist resistance, in that it challenges essentialist notions of gender, but also an attempt to recuperate this body which is ‘queer’ in that it combines both the masculine ideal of phallic muscles with a hyper-feminine iconography and, in doing so, draws attention to the construction (quite literally ‘building’) of gender” (Richardson 2008: 291)

“A very literal form of ‘play’ in which your own body is the construction site, the bodybuilder’s dream is the dream of endlessly re-arrangeable flesh, the manipulation of the material without limits, the ultimate victory over ‘nature’” (Locks-Richardson 2012: 127)

“... women bodybuilders have been plagued by demands to be feminine and to do beauty in order to succeed in the body marketplace. They do this by neutralizing their muscle with superficial insignias of femininity and heterosexual beauty for their public and media personas with breasts implants and adornments. Women competitors are self-aware manipulators of their embodied presentations and they know that “femininity” lies beyond muscle (Bolin 1997: 189). Competitors will deliberately offset hypertrophied muscles with attributes associated with conventional femininity and beauty: pink posing suits, highlighting and dying their hair blond, long and fluffy hairstyles, long fingernails and other glamour jock insignias (Bolin 1992, 1998)” (Locks-Richardson 2012: 38)

“... bodybuilding exalts the flexed pose where, in that movement of static tension, the bodybuilder is a human statue”
(Locks-Richardson 2012: 145)

4.3 From the candid/naive feminine performance on stage of the female bodybuilder and the aggressive, impressive performance of Heather Cassils

“... bodybuilding is the method used by working artist to reshape the body, revealing that flesh is essentially a cultural medium, not a natural entity that pre-exists the subject or is fundamentally able to provide factual information about it” (McTavish 2015: 96)

Cassils is a transgender artist who generally work through the performance. Cassils uses *its* body as the main material (a blank page) from which to work, considering, however, that even though ‘...the body as material can always be worked on to be modified, never can it be completely controlled’.

This interesting malleability characteristic of the body modified through discipline allows Cassils to redraw the deeply embedded and still latent line between the gender binomial (masculine-feminine). Through her interventions, the artist also attempts to play with the fluidity of gender, taking flight from the dual norm, man-woman.

Cassils creates a transgressive body - monstrous, asexual and sterile ‘... hyper-masculine and transgendered body’. And with this creation the artist purpose some paradoxes of the transgender body: Cassils proclaims that in some way we are all transgender in that we construct our image in accordance with the gender to which we belong.

“Bodybuilding is a sport with no other purpose than to present a ‘perfected’ surface, and Cassils sees the construction of this unsustainable body as a stand-in for America’s insatiable appetite consume, for the vending drive of capital regardless of consequence” (Getsy-Steinmetz 2015: 20)

4.3.1 Beaten through Cassils Works

Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture (2011), Heather Cassils – 6 months (different supports)

Cassils contrasts with the work of the feminist Eleanor Antin *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972), which carried out a body transformation over 45 days. While in the Antin’s case, the artist went hungry to transform her body into stereotypical, female objectivisation (female, debilitating act). Process documented with photographs, showing the body as a changing material. On the other hand, Cassils uses bodybuilding to gain weight (male act that concedes power) and documents this process through a series of photographs that capture *its* transformation.

Becoming an Image (2011), Heather Cassils

In this case, everything happens in the most complete darkness. The attending public can only perceive the performance, only what the flashes of cameras allow them to make out (the image of the photographer is what burns on the retina of the spectator).

Cassils practically without carrying anything of clothing, hits with absolute violence through kicks and punches, a clay block weighing 2000 pounds.

The resilience of the 20% (2013)

The remaining material, the sculpture caused by violence, is also exposed with the photographs taken on the performance. This block of clay, acts as a funereal sculpture from the intervention of *Becoming an Image*. Its meaning comes from male and female transgender homicide figures for 2012, which rose worldwide by 20%.

5. Final Conclusions. The tyranny of perfection.

Female Bodybuilding: Sport, Performance-Theatre, Activism?

After this look at the various aspects linked to the emergence of this ambiguous corporal reality, that of female bodybuilders, we could generally say that the society in which she is chained conditions the need to place herself at one of the extremes of the polarities that society itself organizes. We have seen that our society is still predominantly directed by a patriarchy or structure, based on sets of dichotomies that oppose each other, and that it is this form of organization which is maintained when assessing this body and trying to “standardize it”.

Although originally, muscular women in circuses awoke the interest of the curious, and were not criticized, as happens in the case of women who practice the bodybuilding discipline, the difference that takes place with respect to a resulting, totally opposed, valuation between one and the other should be considered. While in the case of circus women, despite being covered in muscles, viewers gazed upon them with enthusiasm and curiosity, female bodybuilders awaken repulsion and the aim is to avoid them from being seen as excessively “unfeminine” through the various mechanisms imposed by the rules of this sport, to be able to transform this muscled body (associated to the

male domain) to a more “feminized” body, limiting its full development in respect to the abilities of the athlete herself, as well as respect to the way of being shown —the athlete is assessed then and there just on her results in terms of musculature, symmetry, striations and so on, as happens in the case of male athletes, but in the case of female bodybuilders, their entire appearance is evaluated: hairstyle, makeup, skincare, bikini, high-heeled shoes, jewels, manicure, breast implants, smile, how they move on the stage. The aim is to dominate this new body so that it does not encompass the sphere that belongs to it. Therefore, in many cases, the gaze set on her tends to be erotic, because if the woman's physique is evaluated from an erotic point of view, it is controllable. The detonator that establishes the distinction between one and another lies in the fact that circus women are positioned within the context in which the “other” was allowed, while in the case of female bodybuilders, the context in which they are found is not one of fantasy, of otherness, but one of normality. And by showing this body onstage, in the same way that their male counterparts do, they shock, in that they are breaking away from the standardized discourse of the demands to which a woman's body should respond. Female bodybuilders appear in this way, generating a new discourse with their body, destabilizing the binary structure of our society. Unfortunately, as we have seen, it is difficult to be able to talk about this brave decision as a liberating decision, inasmuch as despite fleeing from standard stereotypes of what female beauty is considered to be, or the pattern to which a woman should respond —and not just with respect to her physical shape, but her attitude and personal care— which lead to other control mechanisms over her, once again. Whether for the discipline to which she must be subjected to manage to metamorphose her body and flee from the stereotype of feminine beauty, or for the way in which she has to display herself on the stage, subjected to the controlling gaze of the jury, who evaluate her in a highly critical way, in a fragmented way, area by area, yet as a whole at the same time, considering all the features that make her “feminine”, in other words, docile, despite being muscled.

The feminist call to reconquer our own bodies, thereby taking on power and authority, the independence over the role of submission of women to men comes into a new conflict. Female bodybuilders end up trapped in their own body and by their own body. They need to be submitted to control to model it, believing themselves to have the power to modify it, when it is in fact they who are being submitted to the discipline and the control.

Which has the greatest weight in this case? The free decision to model one's body towards another corporal reality, or the enormous degree of control and discipline to which sportswomen must be subjected to tame their body against its own nature?

At the same time, it is well known that reaching the point of competing is the maximum goal for someone who practices this sport. However, in the case of female bodybuilding, despite the fact that the body construction path has been comparable with even the search for Socratic virtue, in the ongoing fight to surpass oneself, to improve and to get to know oneself better; on reaching the competition area, the sporting practice becomes a performance stained with fallacies, smokescreens through movements and aesthetic features that hide the diseased body. The competition body is dominated and assessed by the jury, adhering to the established regulations, and the subject interprets a role in keeping with this, standardized and directed by the conditions of each federation, as happens with the performance in which we are immersed as social beings.

It is true that the image of female bodybuilders manages to totter the gender schemes which, despite knowing that they are totally surpassed, are still encysted in the mind of most of the citizens of our society governed by this grammar of dichotomies, but it is difficult to get away from them. Their decision, to empower their body through musculature, leads them to a new slab of control, both with respect to the metamorphosis and the maintenance of this body, as well as in the way in which it is governed to be displayed.

We can say that the importance of the gesture of the woman bodybuilder lies in the fact that it eludes, destabilises, the normative traditional prototype of a woman. From this position, the position of the ‘other’, disorientation is created, which is what makes it subversive. It is modified to provoke shock; to disassemble the predominant normative binomial feminine/masculine.

But this turnabout toward subversive territory ends up becoming a new burden.

“When competing as opposed to training, however, in both cases women subject themselves to the domain of the gaze of the other. This also happens with male bodybuilding where the bodies are analysed from offstage, compared, fragmented. With women, though, this happens with an obvious special emphasis, because whether she is a fitness enthusiast or a bodybuilder she must retain to the maximum the link with what the implicit and explicit norms that govern sporting events consider as feminine: the way she moves, the sparkling bikini, the jewelry, and so on. She must flaunt herself, sell herself, display herself as an object of desire to be possessed, even though it is a body that initially represents a threat to the dominant patriarchal structure because it is muscular” (Heywood 1998: 96)

As a result of that, this emergent form of resistance ends up doing an about-turn to the dominant power, sexualising and objectifying the transgressive bodies of women bodybuilders. They are brought into submission to a new concern, taking care of their bodies. They become trapped inside them. Can we interpret the muscular construction of the woman bodybuilder as a metamorphosis towards condemning the Iron Maiden’?

“The original Iron Maiden was a German mediaeval instrument of torture, a cask in the shape of a human body upon which the limbs and face of a beautiful, smiling maiden were pained. The unfortunate victim was slowly closed in, the lid then fell and was completely secured down to immobile him, leaving him to die of starvation or, less cruelly, from the knives driven through it. The modern version into whose trap women fall, either unintentionally or voluntarily, has the same rigidity and cruelty, as well as its euphemistic decoration. Contemporary culture directs attention to the image of the Iron Maiden, whilst censuring the face and body of real women” Wolf, Naomi. *The Beauty Myth*

Certainly, within the context of competitions, it is difficult to be able to talk about this corporal identity, another form of femininity, as a break away from the dichotomy, as we have seen with the limitations that the regulations impose on it. However, we can consider that other forms of performing based on this body, as we have seen in the case of Heather Cassils, lead to another interpretation and way of generating a break away in this discourse that is so deeply rooted in the traditional patriarchal context. Therefore, possibly, it is not just a question of creating this sculpture with one's own flesh with the aim of empowering oneself and holding the reins of one's own body through modelling it, but one must also be quite clear which form of performance to carry out to overcome this climate of submission, docility and tyranny.

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She has Bachelor's Degrees in Philosophy and in Art History, as well as a Master's Degree in Introduction to Humanity Research.

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In order to understand the distinctive approach to her PhD research, it is important to highlight her sports career as a natural bodybuilder competitor.

Endnotes

¹ We have written “women” in inverted commas to highlight the fact that there is not a single model of woman, but that there are many diverse ways of being a woman. As Hollingworth stated “They are women, not woman” (Bordo 1993: 241).

It is not just a question of being a man or a woman, but there are other conditioners that determine how we experience being a woman: age, social class, race, culture, sexual orientation, the times in which we live and so on.

²In fact, surprisingly, despite having been studied many times, showing that gender cannot be reduced to something binary, many of us still believe gender to be something associated to biological sex (male/female), thereby promoting an entirely dual vision: male gender and female gender without contemplating other possibilities, such as transgender.

³The person who started to study the mechanism of panoptic control was Jeremy Bentham, by studying prison architectural structures. These enabled control to be held over prisoners starting from a more advantageous position, as far as the guard was concerned, thereby achieving a better vision and creating in the prisoner an ongoing sensation of anxiety on being controlled. However, Michel Foucault was the person who directed this surveillance structure to the analysis of social control. In which, without the need for such explicit violence, or of authorities exercising control in such an unmeasured way (as had happened with the Inquisition tortures), control takes place through its dispersion in different mechanisms. Citizens themselves control each other.

⁴ In many cases, the critiques of these pioneering women, who escaped the limitations imposed by their social gender, labelled them lesbians and, in some cases, in particular with respect to sportswomen, questioned their gender. Suffice to say that still today we can come across this kind of contemptuous, unfounded criticism.

⁵“... wake up, eat, medicate, work out, eat, medicate, sleep [...] the boundaries between pleasure and pain weaken within the bodybuilding “high.” What was previously uncomfortable becomes transformed as a ‘beautiful and pleasurable’ product of pushing the limits [...] positively with this discomfort/fatigue; transforming” (Locks-Richardson 2012: 62-64)

⁶We would like to point out in bold and underlined when the quotations refers directly exclusively to males ex, although for us they are also used, obviously, for the case of the women bodybuilder.

⁷It should be taken into account that there are various sports federations and that in each federation, there are different categories. Usually, three types of category prevail in the case of women who practice bodybuilding: “bikini”, which is the most sinuous line, most in keeping with feminine beauty stereotypes promoted by the patriarchal society; “fitness/figure – body form”, in which the presence of musculature is more accentuated, but a certain line is maintained in keeping with the femininity promoted by society; and “women’s physique” which is usually the most extreme category, when women show muscular development and forceful, shocking absolute definition, meaning that they are severely criticised.