MAINSTREAMING 'MONSTROUS MEAT'

In recent years bodybuilding culture has provided the backdrop to a series of debates centering around issues surrounding representations of gender and in particular the potential inherent in bodybuilding bodies to rupture preconceived notions regarding ‘norms’ of masculinity and femininity; for the meticulously controlled, predetermined construction and definition of mass and muscle on the bodybuilding figure has shifted the body from an arena dominated by assumptions centering around the natural to a sphere which exposes the body itself - and with it the power structures that impose meaning onto it - as informed by culture. The bodybuilding physique reveals the body as a socially determined construct, or to cite Kuhn, with the willed construction of bodies in bodybuilding, ‘nature becomes culture’. (Kuhn 1988, 5)

The question of marketability has, over the years, emerged as a key concern in bodybuilding. Of all sports, due to its tendency towards things excessive, body building tends to stand outside the mainstream appealing primarily to a select, cult following. There have been some exceptions of bodybuilders who successfully escaped the margins and entered mainstream culture, the most successful being Arnold Schwarzenegger (seven time Mr. Olympia) who opened the doors to big-time muscle in action cinema. More recently, female muscle has also started to make itself felt in the popular sphere, with Cory Everson (six time winner of the Ms. Olympia) appearing in films such as Double Impact alongside Jean Claude van Damme, and professional bodybuilders Raye Hollitt, Shelley Beattie and Tonya Knight starring in the successful U.S. television show American Gladiators. Despite breaking through to mainstream culture, however, these bodybuilders have served as examples of ‘freaks’ in a world of ‘norms’; they signal a moment of excess allowed to seep through into the dominant, but these moments are always about controlled forms of excess - they, in a sense, constitute an orderly disruption.

What has become apparent in the last decade is the fact that popular culture has become involved in a lengthy but problematic love affair with muscle culture - though, a reduced version of its BIG muscle counterpart. Marky Mark struts his muscled stuff in his Calvin Klein underwear; the man with the rippling abs and flexed biceps comes out like clockwork at 11.30 to down his Diet Coke; Cindy Crawford and Elle Macpherson lunge and rep in their efforts to show us the secrets of supermodel muscle; and Jean Claude van Damme explodes his sweating muscled physique across the big screen in a display of action spectacle. These are the new ideal fitness men and women, and their bodies inform us that body shaping and toned muscles are ‘in’ in the 1990s. Yet within these assigned borders that define the ‘ideal’, limitations are placed on acceptable levels of muscularity on the male and female form: the male physique must be muscular and taut enough to convey signs of power, control and ‘male’ sexuality; and the female form must be toned and fit without revealing the denser, harder muscle which tampers with her ‘femininity’.

Laurie Schulze has argued that, within mainstream culture, a series of recuperative strategies are in operation whereby the subculture of hardcore bodybuilders, is taken back into the mainstream through the fitness craze and the body beautiful and the threat posed by bodybuilding (marked by its excess) is removed through these various strategies which normalize that which appears to be unassimilable. (Schulze 1990, 63) So, while the bodybuilding community worships and revels in the freakish quality of muscular excess (emphasized by the descriptions employed in bodybuilding magazines to describe various bodyparts, for example: beast with two backs, dynamo delts, pillarwide quadriceps, meat monsters, dinopectoralis etc.), mainstream culture marginalizes and makes abnormal that which it can not assimilate. In her study on the social function of horror films, Louise Krasniewicz outlines the way, in horror cinema, there is a focus on the body as an important narrative site across which ideas about the social use and abuse of the body are encoded and enacted. (Krasniewicz 1992, 30) It appears that the bodybuilding body serves a similar role in mapping out and laying on the surface the various social rules which come into play in constructing not only gender, but also the human - its very excess stretching notions of the human form to its limits. In the last three years in particular, the body of the bodybuilder, especially the female bodybuilder, has become a focal point in exposing the various recuperative strategies.
which are at work from within the bodybuilding industry itself.

Muscle mass has reached a point never witnessed before in the history of the sport, so much so that recently even within the bodybuilding culture voices of dissent have emerged with regard to the acceptability of levels of muscle size. For example, the two hundred and fifty odd pounds of rock hard muscle on the three time (and currently reigning) Mr. Olympia, Dorian Yates, has evolved into a physique that would put even the Farnese Hercules to shame. Yates’ massive physique raises questions regarding the limits of ‘meaning’ that are imprinted on the human form as gendered body. With bodybuilding we move into a territory that involves excess of meaning, and the male bodybuilding body through its excessiveness draws attention to the signs that construct masculinity and the rules of the social game that equate muscle with power, activity and the masculine. While the fitness ideal of the male body appears to normalize the signs that connote the ‘masculine’, safely containing meaning within socially defined borders that remain unquestioned, the muscle of the professional bodybuilder explodes the boundaries thus exposing the rules and signs that construct the ‘masculine’; these signs are placed in exaggerated and hypermasculinized form across the surface of the body, and as a result, the ‘masculine’ ideal is exposed simply as a set of cultural conventions.

In her discussion of films dealing with cross dressing Annette Kuhn has approached these moments in the films as modes of performance in which the ‘socially constructed nature of sexual difference is foregrounded’ and ‘what appears natural then, reveals itself to be artifice’ (Kuhn 1985, 49) She elaborates in another article by suggesting that muscles function like clothes in performance (Kuhn 1988, 17), and that the pleasure in these performative moments is their ‘momentary capacity to offer a vision of the fluidity of gender options’, in other words what she calls the ‘utopian prospect of release from the ties of sexual difference that bind us into meaning, discourse, culture’. (Kuhn 1985, 50)

Muscle in bodybuilding further collapses the cultural demarcations that define gender by problematizing the equation that unites masculinity, muscularity and power. Because bodybuilding introduces into the picture the reality of female muscle, the question of sexual difference is threatened dramatically because muscular women ‘disrupt the equation of men with strength and women with weakness that underpins gender roles and power relations’ (Holmlund 1989, 40), and the controversy of the role of steroids in the sport takes this one step further - tampering with ‘sexual difference’ along biological lines.

Anabolic steroids, which primarily comprise of a synthetic version of the male hormone testosterone, are often used to enhance muscular capabilities: they can increase muscle mass, decrease body fat, increase endurance rates and improve muscle recovery and growth. (Wright, 1993) With increased steroid dosage the boundaries of biological difference become even more tenuous and unstable. Prolonged and excessive use by women can result in androgenic transformations including clitoral enlargement, skin and voice changes, increased facial and body hair, decreased breast size as well as menstrual irregularities. Furthermore, in the case of men, the increase of testosterone via steroids leads to the body shutting down its natural production of testosterone; instead, the testosterone is converted into estrogenic components, which are a feminizing hormone (Weber 1993a, 100). Aftereffects of these symptoms are know as gynecomastia, better known in gyms as ‘bitch tits’ which involves the production of breast tissue on male bodybuilders that has to be surgically removed.

FEMALE MUSCLE OR FEMININITY vs. MUSCLE?

‘Everyone loves to train arms. They are, after all, “glamor” muscles and, being quite visible, give one a very powerful feeling when they’re flexed. Just sitting in a chair, then pulling them up toward you and watching the muscles swell fills you with a sense of strength and power. That sensation never leaves a bodybuilder.’ (Francis 1993, 69)

This biological tampering, however, merely highlights the social threat posed by the presence of female muscle. Muscle has conventionally been associated with the ‘masculine’ and a series of binaries have emerged as a result: muscle / power / the masculine comprising one side of this culturally assigned border and softness / weak / the feminine occupying the other. Yet if the muscle of the male bodybuilder threatens to disturb the ‘order of things’ through exaggeration, the question which has been raised,
particularly in relation to the 1984 film *Pumping Iron II: the Women*, in which Bev Francis made her controversial entrance, is what happens when women don this mantle of muscle? A great many changes have occurred since Francis entered the bodybuilding scene rocking the foundations of the ‘natural order of gender’ (Kuhn 1988, 17) with previously unwitnessed levels of female muscle density. In discussing *Pumping Iron II*, Gaines and Butler, in 1983, expressed concern that female bodybuilders failed to feature greatly in magazines that report on and advertise the sport, and that ‘women’s bodybuilding is now almost totally represented by slim, athletic, graceful, pretty women on whom muscles do not show until they are flexed’. (Gaines & Butler 1983, 69) Since then, however, changes have occurred: not only are female bodybuilder featured in magazines but female muscularity is on the rise and, in some circles at least, it is gaining increasing acceptance. However, with the muscle peaking in 1991 to heights not witnessed before, slight tremors were increasingly being felt as the International Federation of Bodybuilders (IFBB) began to react in an effort to control the growth in female mass.

Over the last three years the powers that be in the IFBB have been confronted with a dilemma which has been voiced in the pages of the numerous muscle magazines, including *Flex, Muscle and Fitness, Musclemag* and *Muscular Development*. The dilemma? What is to be done with this new breed of hard, cut, densely muscular female bodies? This proved to be a problem for two closely interrelated reasons. Primarily, there was the question of the marketability of the female bodybuilder who was beginning to reach levels of muscularity never seen before. The Ms. Olympia competition is a case in point; while attracting the hardcore fans, it has never been a big crowd puller of mass level appeal. The IFBB, on the other hand, have decided that they desire this mass appeal, and this desire is closely related to notions of sexual difference (and its marketing potential) as well as the underlying fear that this new breed of bodybuilder threatens to destabilize the gender power structures that be by possessing excess muscle that align her with masculinity - and no longer contain her ‘femininity’.

For a number of years, debates have been raging in the bodybuilding world over what constitutes acceptable muscle on the female body. The underlying fear which manifests itself—both in the actions of the IFBB and in the pages of the bodybuilding magazines—centres around the capacity for female bodybuilders to disrupt traditional notions of what constitutes the feminine; so much so that in order to ‘market’ the Ms. International and Ms. Olympia competitions in 1992 the professional female bodybuilders were informed that the ‘freaky’ muscles that dominated the male arena were out, and that the women were going to be judged according to ‘feminine’ muscles. The problem was, of course, that no one really could define what constituted ‘correct feminine muscle’. This confusion was revealed in the chaotic events which occurred in a number of 1992 female bodybuilding competitions; the women contestants were totally confused as to what precisely the IFBB judges wanted of the female bodybuilding physique. In an attempt to deal with the confusion a memo was sent around at a meeting of contestants of the Ms. International (held on February 29th) in order to ‘clarify’ judging criteria - but the memo simply created further confusion (Fitness 1993, 25) by asking for ‘the acceptable level of muscularity’, the assumption being that there was some ‘natural’ level of acceptable female muscle that everyone knew about. It became clear during the judging of the Ms. International, that ‘acceptable’ meant the softer, less striated, smaller muscle which was epitomized in the form of Anja Schreiner who won the competition. During the contest, however, the crowd grew restless—especially as a result of the fact that more massive bodybuilders like Paula Bircumshaw were penalized for their larger size (she was placed eleventh); the drama reached its peak when Bircumshaw was banned during the 1992 Ms. International for two years (later reduced to one) for ‘unsportsmanlike behaviour aggravated by the obscene gesture... made towards the judges’ table’ (Bircumshaw 1993, 66)

The competitions throughout 1992 led to a spate of criticisms voiced in bodybuilding magazines regarding the ‘Femininity vs. Muscle’ controversy, and the overwhelming belief was that the two terms did not necessarily have to imply opposition. Due to growing pressure from fans and IFBB members alike, the International Federation of Bodybuilders had to rethink their insistent stance regarding this more conventional, softer, ‘feminine’ form which they deemed as being more appropriate to the female bodybuilder. By the 1993 and 1994 competitions, a bigger, more muscular female physique was back in vogue, and as Bradford outlined in his report on the 1993 Ms. Olympia, the IFBB reversed their 1992 decision to ‘tone down the beef levels on the ladies’ and despite the realization that the smaller physiques are more marketable to the general public, ‘it seems that the IFBB brain trust (at least temporarily) accepted the fact that women’s bodybuilding is a cult sport, designed for specialized appreciation by a
limited audience’. (Bradford 1993-4, 89) The general feeling regarding the re-introduction of female mass in the sport is best summed up by the following passage:

`To my delight, the Ms. International was actually judged as a bodybuilding show this year!!.... this increasing development of the female physique, of course, continues to prompt the debate (will it ever end?) over the "femininity" issue.... If we are going to call these competitions "bodybuilding shows", then they should be about who is the best bodybuilder, not the most beautiful or the most appealing to men, or who has the marketable image... it is always so much clearer when it comes to judging men's shows. Why is that ? Is it the steroids issue...i.e., the masculinization that the androgenous substances seem to produce in some of the women's appearances? Or because muscles on women (you know, the "weaker sex") still makes a lot of people uncomfortable?'.

(Weber 1993b, 12)

Flipping through the pages of bodybuilding magazines after the 1992 decision, it would appear that there was a general consensus that big muscle was back - and everyone seemed to be applauding its return. In the 1993 Jan Tana Classic, Tonya Knight's return to bodybuilding was qualified with praise for the extra twenty pounds of muscle that she had packed on her body (Weber1993-4, 56); Denise Rutkowski was hailed because during the 1993 USA Bodybuilding Championships she `eclipsed the competition with her combination of sci-fi muscularity and breathtaking femininity'( Ross 1993-4); Kim Chizevsky's win at the Ms. International in early 1993 was seen as marking a turning point that revealed a swing that was one step further towards masculinity and a sign of things to come for the Ms. Olympia in October (Fitness 1993, 23); and Lenda Murray's fourth Ms. Olympia win that year, and subsequently her 1994 win has proved that massive female muscle is in - but not without a price.

As mentioned, the question plaguing the industry has centered around how to market bigger female muscle, and the myth that holds the commodification of the female bodybuilder body at bay is the myth that masculinizes a woman for possessing an overtly muscular physique. Gary Day falls into this trap which equates muscle with masculinity when he states that: `In bodybuilding this abolition of the difference between bodies occurs even at a biological level for women are judged according to how far they can develop male physiques' (Day 1990, 50-51). Steroids aside, the assumption made is that, by building up muscle mass, female bodybuilders are somehow `tampering with nature' and turning their back on some kind of essentialist femininity. 8 But, it is culture not biology or nature which equates muscle (power) with the masculine. A questionnaire of two hundred and five female bodybuilders conducted by the IFBB in 1982-3 attempted to discover how female bodybuilders define their roles and none expressed a concern that they were in any way `masculinized' by possessing muscle (albeit smaller muscle during this period); in fact, the main limitations they felt were imposed in terms of acceptability of degrees of muscle density were as a result of society and its image of femininity (Duff & Hong 1984, 378). This pressure of social conformity exists even with today's women bodybuilders; despite the increase in muscle mass, social limitations still restrict the body builder's construction of her body. Lenda Murray, for example, has explained that she only works out with light to moderate weights because if she trained heavier, she would scare even herself because of the dimensions she knows her muscles are capable of reaching. (Bradford 1994, 66)

In an issue of Muscular Development, for example, Carol Ann Weber, took issue with the stress placed on the femininity question. Because most professional female bodybuilders lose breast tissue due to pre-contest diets, they have, over the years been put increasingly under pressure to `prove their femininity'; the result has been a rise in plastic surgery for breast implants. Where in 1990, 2% of the American female population had breast implants, in the world of professional bodybuilding this rose dramatically to 81%. (Weber 1993a, 98-100). The primary fear on the part of the bodybuilders being that the judges would mark them down because of that lethal combination of `woman' and `muscle mass'; adding breast implants somehow retrieves what is seen as a `lost femininity'. As Weber points out, the breast augmentation craze was, in fact, started by Cory Everson, bodybuilding’s golden girl of the eighties. Everson was one of the very few bodybuilders to be assimilated into mainstream culture not only having her own television `body shaping' show, frequent pinup calendars, but also more recently seeing a rise in movie offers. Weber makes the perceptive point that Everson was in many ways instrumental in the bodybuilding arena in creating an image which was close to the American ideal:
`Glamorous, almond-eyed, blonde, slender (albeit, muscular, in Cory's case) and full-breasted does seem to be the “beauty myth” now being perpetuated in fashion and cosmetic ads across the country. In fact, since Cory has gone Hollywood, she has apparently increased her breast size and decreased her muscle size, conforming even more to society's more conventional image of the perfect female’. (Weber 1993a, 100)

RECUPERATING THE 'FEMININE' - THE HARDCORE BODYBUILDER VS. FITNESS MANIA

So in many ways, with her more streamlined muscle definition, Everson was instrumental in further perpetuating myths about the ideal fitness brand of femininity both within and outside the sport, and even though she is no longer a professional competitor, she is continually featured in bodybuilding magazines as a model that women can aspire to emulate. Everson’s more accessible ‘fitness’ image (and along with her more recent bodybuilders such as Sharon Bruneau and Anja Schreiner) appears, therefore, to be one of the possible avenues from which to sell the female bodybuilder. However, because of growing dissent from groups within the bodybuilding scene regarding the IFBB’s desire to reduce muscle, the result has led to a rethinking of marketing strategies.

Where Schulze argued that it is mainstream culture that employs various recuperative strategies in order to assimilate aspects of bodybuilding culture, thus normalizing all that appears threatening, what is occurring in this instance is that these strategies are now being employed from within the system. In their attempts to popularize the marginal world of female bodybuilding, the IFBB has employed a series of tactics which aim at highlighting the binaries of sexual difference, and in many ways, this has involved the marginalization of the female bodybuilder from within bodybuilding culture.

These recuperative strategies, driven by the desire for profit, have had increasing ramifications for the meaning that has recently been distributed across the body of the female bodybuilder, both in competitions and in her representation in magazines. This meaning manifests itself both overtly (in open debates that take place in the magazines regarding the ‘femininity vs. muscle’ debate) and covertly through a variety of methods which will be discussed below. The overwhelming emphasis being an attempt at re-establishing the clear gendered demarcations that the female bodybuilder was seen as disrupting.

The major shifts have been towards the attention being paid to putting a great deal of publicity and money into new fitness shows in order to attract a mainstream audience - the shows being a fitness version of beauty contests (competitors are judged according to fitness performance as well as swimwear and/or evening wear criteria). The emphasis again is on myths being circulated that centre around the body beautiful of the 1990s - where everyone strives to simultaneously be beautiful and fit. Aside from the 1994 Galaxy Fitness Show run by George Snyder (which included an obstacle course performance as well as a swimwear section), the main changes have occurred within the IFBB itself. In 1994, the IFBB Arnold Schwarzenegger Classic & Ms. International also incorporated a Ms. Fitness section with the same prize money ($20 000) going to both the hardcore bodybuilders in the Ms.International and the fitness ideals in the Ms. Fitness.9

The aims of these new ‘fitness’ concerns are clearly outlined by Joe Weider in his editorial in the October Flex 1994 (7-8). Here he states that his desire is to broaden the sport and ‘make it attractive and accessible to a larger audience’. In terms of female bodybuilding he believes that we have ‘reached a crossroads’ where action needs to be taken. His reasoning being motivated by two issues. Firstly, female bodybuilding is seen as having ‘evolved to a point where bodybuilders possess breathtaking muscularity but not all bodybuilders can achieve that look and are discouraged from entry’. In other words, the more marketable bodybuilders like Sharon Bruneau and Anja Schreiner, with their smaller physiques and ‘fitness’ looks were placing poorly in the competitions in the last two years. Secondly, Weider voices the fear that if only the ‘big look’ dominates the sport, then ‘non-weighttraining women will think that "if a woman lifts weights, she'll sprout huge muscles overnight, and I certainly don't want to look like that"’. Clearly, the first reason is linked to the second: if recognition is given to the ‘excessive’ female bodybuilders alone, as opposed to the more ‘ideal’ muscular women, there is a danger of alienating your
potential market. So as of 1994, the Ms. Olympia will now first judge the overall Ms. Olympia, but also include the subdivision of Ms. Olympia ‘Superfitness’ for the leaner (more profit oriented) bodybuilder.

The question which needs to be asked, however, is who is the market? Who is the target audience? Is it the women who Weider does not want to alienate from the sport, or is it the male audience who constitute the higher percentage of the magazine readers? The fact is, there is a publicity machine devoted to marketing female muscle to a male audience at different levels and, while attempts are being made to take female bodybuilding seriously, what has persisted are not merely attempts at pulling the female bodybuilder back into a more acceptable space where she is not as threatening and thus more popular (Schulze 1990, 59) - which is what has occurred with the Ms. Fitness focus - but there are also instances where the female bodybuilder’s power via muscle is not elided. The reason? To cater to male fantasies and perversions that play on phallic women narratives. These more specialized marketing strategies are to be found in advertisements that cater for those with tastes for the ‘harder’ female body (found especially in muscle magazines such as Musclemag which have a ‘tits and arse’ tendency ). Herein lies the contradiction that the body of the female bodybuilder exposes. Where Muscular Development includes articles on "How to know he’s a schmo” (a schmo aside from being the ‘most unpalatable, slimy, sleazy, vermin to emerge from the maggot-infested underbelly of our bodybuilding subculture’, is also someone who is obsessed with sadomasochistic fantasies involving muscular women and is sometimes involved in making videos of female bodybuilders and wrestlers) (Weber 1994, 16-17), magazines like Female Bodybuilding, which apparently cater to a female audience, also include ads for videos showing ‘Sexy and Sensuous Female Muscles in Action’ including boxing, bodybuilding, wrestling and catfighting; the photos promoting the videos available include a woman wrestling with a man, her knees pinning down his arms while she sits astride his face (Female Bodybuilding September 1994, 1). Other ads are for ‘Mass Muscle Videos’, which are ‘Professionally produced videos depicting muscular women bodybuilders... and girl vs. girl action. We have it all from competition to fantasy, to sensual, to exotic’ as well a ‘Female Fighting Directory’ which has been given the seal of approval as a ‘grabber of a publication’ by Playboy. (65) Add to this ads catering to fitness female fantasies, including posters with titles such as ‘Muscle Melons’ and ‘Loose Puppies’ (the loose puppies referring to a pair of breasts which have inadvertently exposed themselves as a result of someone neglecting to add fabric to the upper part of the model’s bathing suit) (Musclemag August 1994, 46-7), and what is revealed is the layering of meaning in operation in these magazines - and it appears that ‘femininity’ is quite a fluid concept that alters and caters to different commercial needs.

So muscle mass has been allowed to stay, but only on the condition that it is sandwiched in between the more conventional ‘ideal’ female forms in the Ms Fitness guise, or the ‘fantasy’ females in the magazine ads. And somewhere within this array of different types of femininity, the question remains: what do we do with the hardcore female bodybuilder? What will emerge in the future is, at the moment uncertain, but what is beginning to occur is a surreptitious marginalization of the hardcore female bodybuilder through the establishment of new dichotomies from within bodybuilding culture - with the ‘superfitness’ bodybuilder (aligned with conventional beauty) on one side, and the muscular bodybuilder signalling excess and the unconventional on the other. One thing that is becoming evident is that her representation in the bodybuilding magazines is filled with contradictions which threaten to continually expose the dynamic at work behind the system that attempts to patch up what is seen as the gender threat.

WORD AND IMAGE - A PICTURE TELLS A THOUSAND WORDS

The most obvious contradiction that exists in the magazines is in the clash between word and image. On the level of the word, a great many advances have been made when compared to magazines of the 1970s and the early 1980s. Where during this era, the magazines appeared to repress the existence of female bodybuilding, currently, the magazines deal objectively and seriously with a variety of issues regarding femininity and muscle - and muscle is not viewed as belonging exclusively to the domain of the male. In the last four years in particular, the masculinity question has been tackled head on, as has the questionable role played by the IFBB and judges in wanting to treat the Ms. Olympia and Ms. International as more muscular beauty contests. Aside from this, magazines also include numerous articles in each issue profiling female bodybuilders such as Lenda Murray, Shelley Beattie, Debbie Muggli, Denise Rutkowski and Laura Creavalle, articles dealing with their aims, workouts, background and thoughts about the sport.
Similarly, descriptions of the competitions are dealt with in an objective, impartial way which reveals no major discrepancies between reviews of male and female competitions. Discussion tends to be limited to judging criteria which center around the condition of relevant body parts on the day of the competition - their symmetry, musculature, density of muscle and so on. Reg Bradford, for example, in describing the competitors of the 1993 Ms. International used phrases such as: `sizable increase in her back, shoulders, thighs and arms', `powerful thighs and baseball-like biceps', `super biceps, rippling abdominals and deeply striated thighs' (Bradford 1993b); and for the male competitors of the 1992 NPC Nationals, similar terms applied: `solid shoulders and quadriceps', `great arms and superb balance', `incredible thigh separation'. (Bradford 1993a, 52) So, it would appear that the bodies of both male and female competitors are discussed on equal terms according to the criteria the judges look for (in addition to some colourful bodybuilding `lingo' that's a standard feature in these reports).

But, as the old saying goes, `a picture tells a thousand words', and in bodybuilding magazines it tells a story that attempts to bring back into play a gendered power structure. While, in one way, the written word serves to break down years of a subculture that was dominated by rigid boundaries that served to contain and construct gender according to a system of power negotiated around sexual difference, the image often contradicts the word, aiming covertly to re-establish the status quo and set up clear gender demarcations. In the January 1993 edition of *Flex*, in the midst of the `femininity vs. muscle' debate, there was a section covering the responses of a number of the top female bodybuilders to the rumored reintroduction of `thongs' (T-back bikini bottoms) and high heels into the competitions in order to `feminize' the women. The article begins:

`Women's bodybuilding has reached its *quo vadis*. For some time now, the competitors have had to wrestle with the concepts of "proper femininity" and "acceptable levels of musculature", especially since the advent of "Ms. Fitness" contests. They question what the judges are looking for and wonder what the future holds for the sport'. (Little 1993, 69)

On the level of the text, serious attempts are made to voice the opinions of the bodybuilders who are concerned with the future of the sport and the role they will be expected to play in it. Carla Dunlap, for example, states that glutes may be a muscle, and she has no problem with them being displayed, however `in our society, we view the glutes as more sexual than athletic.... Thong backs for better or worse, are viewed by some as bordering on pornography'. (69) Shelley Beattie calls into question why this is only an issue with female competition, replying: `Only if the pro men can wear those cute little Chippendale bow ties and G-strings.... I doubt the IFBB wants a T & A circus onstage; maybe they should offer that in addition to the sport that we athletes have devoted our lives to. We're up there to compete, not entertain men's fantasies'.

However, the text is accompanied by images of these bodybuilders posing seductively in conventional `feminine' poses - and most of them either wear thong backs or high heels. Where Beattie argues that they are up there to compete, not cater to men's fantasies, the images actually stress the latter, and here is the catch 22 situation of the female bodybuilder. While they have a voice and are extremely articulate in outlining their position within the industry, they often have little control of the image - that belongs to the Weider industry, and the publicity shots constitute part of their contract. The overriding attempt, in this instance, being to impose `conventional "feminine" glamour' on the bodybuilder and pull her back to the `artifice of the patriarchal feminine' (Schulze 1990, 76)

In fact, 1994 has seen the introduction of a new section in *Flex* (one of the most popular of the Weider magazines) and that is the introduction of a new spread of pinups of female bodybuilders - including Murray, Everson, Creavalle and Bruneau. The aim? Again to dispel and transform myths that formulate the equation; `muscle + woman = unfeminine + threatening', into a new equation `muscle + woman = feminine + unthreatening'. The pin up spreads are introduced monthly with the following opening lines:

`Women bodybuilders are many things, among them symmetrical, strong, sensuous and stunning. When photographed in competition shape, repping and grimacing or squeezing out shots, they appear shredded, vascular and hard, and they can be perceived as threatening. Offseason they carry more bodyfat, presenting themselves in a musch more naturally attractive
condition. To exhibit this real, natural side of women bodybuilders, FLEX has been presenting pictorials of female competitors in softer condition. We hope this approach dispels the myth of female-bodybuilder masculinity and proves what models they truly are.’ (Everson 1994, 126)

The photos include words to match image, and the women often speak of the important role bodybuilding has played in their lives in allowing them to gain power and control of their sexuality. Yet the images attempt to convey that ‘real, natural side of women bodybuilders’ in a more ‘naturally attractive condition’, this being Creavalle lying naked, facedown on a couch (Creavalle 1994, 126–30), Bruneau posing in a black G-string part chiffon bathing suit with black stilettos while flexing her biceps, deltoids and toned glutes at the viewer (Bruneau 1994, 126–30), and Lei Lani wearing nothing but stilettos and captured in the traditional ‘coy’ pose with her hands partially covering her exposed body (Lani 1994, 124–8). The image aims to remove the ‘threat’ posed by hard muscle on the female body by feminizing her in conventional ways, the result being that, at times, the images approach soft porn.

In her article ‘Vandalized Vanity: Feminine Physiques Betrayed and Portrayed’ Anne Bolin suggests that in our society, muscles are seen as emblematic of the domain of males not females, ‘implying strength and power, socially, economically, physically.... muscles encode agonic power, the power of male strength, while women’s power is hedonic, that of display’ (1990, 89), and it is precisely this clash between agonic male power and hedonic female power that comes into play on the level of the image in the magazines.

Aside from the introduction of the ‘pin up’, another way the magazines emphasize the play on sexual difference is by placing exaggerated emphasis on the ‘agonic’ displays of the male bodybuilders. This is evident in the discrepancy that exists in the representation of male compared to female bodybuilders working out. More often than not, the female bodybuilders are photographed in a straightforward way, for example, engaged in lat pulldowns, bicep curls, leg presses and so on, with the occasional bodybuilder (especially Sharon Bruneau) providing the occasional pout of full lips in addition to the sensuous back curve.

Male bodybuilders, on the other hand, grunt, groan, sweat, give cold steely stares, stand astride boulders, as they hoist and pound weights into the air. Female bodybuilders, it would appear reveal few visible signs of the power and effort needed to lift, at times hundreds of kilos of weight; in other words, the images elide the fact of the effort involved, and refuse to depict the power and physical strength required of a bodybuilder. For the women it’s a workout, for the men it’s an ordeal, a conquest, a test of strength, power, endurance and masculinity. And that is precisely the message these magazines aim to deliver, and the message is usually delivered loud and clear on the covers of the magazines.

Lenda Murray, five-time and currently reigning Ms. Olympia, while appearing in regular stories has never once appeared on any cover of the Weider magazines - despite having a Weider contract. In the editorial in Muscular Development (one of the more progressive, non-Weider owned, of the bodybuilding magazines), Alan Paul (1993, 7) takes issue with the fact that one of ‘the greatest bodybuilders in the history of the sport has never been featured on a bodybuilding magazine cover’, and following her fourth consecutive Ms. Olympia win, Lenda Murray finally appears on the Muscular Development cover with the main cover line of issue reading “It’s about time”. The Weider magazines, on the other hand - particularly Flex and Muscle & Fitness - tend to opt for covers that reproduce the more traditional play of binary oppositions: male / power, female / passivity - and it is this male power that conquers female passivity. More often than not, the covers feature male brawn in all its pumped up, freakish glory, usually with a more conventional fleshy ‘fitness’ female (or quite often females) wrapped around him, face filled with awe and worship. Within such a scheme, there can be no place for a hardcore female bodybuilder on the cover of a Weider publication.¹⁴

The question remains, however, as to how successful these recuperative strategies are? On the one hand we have these muscular female physiques that threaten to disturb the operations that construct gendered power relations, and on the other hand, across the bodies of these women are inscribed a series of meanings and representations that attempt to remove the threat they pose to this system of gender relations by attempting to incorporate them back into the domain of conventional understandings of femininity. Correll has argued that culture involves a process whereby sets of discourses are superimposed
across women’s bodies, and in the process, women become Woman; various moments of cultural performance which involve excess can disrupt these moments when the ‘meaning’ of gender is constructed, and it is in these ‘moments when the body is exposed as being in the process of being gendered’; here lies the space of rupture, contestation and excess (Correll 1989, 209). It is precisely this space which is opened up through the attempts, on the part of the bodybuilding industry, at containing and controlling the ‘meaning’ of the female bodybuilder’s body. Holmlund has argued that Western society relies on images of the body to sell products and promote fictions and ‘mass media and advertising see to it that we consume visible difference daily’. (1989, 39) With the clash between word and image in the various forced attempts at constructing difference across the body of the female bodybuilder, this visible difference, in a way, becomes too visible. The muscle on the female bodybuilder, and the attempts to make it ‘perform’ according to the rules of ‘natural femininity’ merely draw attention to the constructed nature of that which poses as natural; there is an excess of meaning that spills out of the system and refuses to be contained or become ‘normalized’. And the more insistent the attempts at containment, the more the rules of the gender game lie across the surface, threatening to rupture the supposed stability of the ‘natural’ system of gender hierarchies.

REFERENCES


Wright, James E. 1993, 'Steroids' (Special two part issue), *Flex*, June and *Muscle and Fitness*, July.

ENDNOTES

1. In Australia, bodybuilding is even more marginalized in the media - though we get the occasional snippets on shows such as Wide World of Sports.

2. Offseason, in preparation for the 1993 Mr.Olympia, the 5'9" Yates weighed a massive two hundred and ninety-five pounds. (*Fitness 1994*, 34-5)

3. One of the many special issues on the use and abuse of steroids published, in this instance, as a separate two part series in June *Flex* and July *Muscle & Fitness*.
4. In the film, Charles Gaines and George Butler focused on the lead up to the 1982 Caesar's Palace Grand Prix, held in Las Vegas; the bodybuilding competition was organized by Gaines and Butler for the film. (Gaines & Butler 1983, 64-9)

5. The IFBB was founded by Joe and Ben Weider. Joe Weider in particular is reknown for the power he wields over the bodybuilding industry: aside from owning popular magazines such as *Flex, Muscle & Fitness* and *Men's Fitness*, the IFBB control the major professional competitions which are staged yearly - including the most prestigious Olympia events - and many of the most successful professional bodybuilders are under Weider contracts.

6. Gaines and Butler (1983, 69) made the point that back in 1983, the reason for the more 'toned, athletic' woman was motivated totally by 'those with a commerical interest in the sport'.

7. Lenda Murray has outlined this 'anti-muscle' decision made by the judges in 1992 in an interview for *Muscular Development*. Murray received complaints from bodybuilding fans and critics who claimed that she was not up to her 1991 condition; as she explains, the reason for this was because the IFBB wanted it this way - though they were never quite clear on what precisely they wanted, and this confusion was itself revealed across the bodies of the bodybuilders. Murray, instead, used the February Ms. International results to gauge the possible judging criteria in preparation for the Ms. Olympia in November - and what became evident was that they wanted a reduction in size. (Bradford 1993, 90)

8. While the development of muscle on the female bodybuilder does lay on the surface the constructedness of the cultural signs that create sexual difference and its accompanying power hierarchies, the fact remains that if one were to actually compare the physiques of professional female and male bodybuilders, what would become immediately evident is the dramatic difference that exists in muscle density and definition between the two - particularly in upper body mass.

9. In terms of prize money, there is little equality when one compares the female and the male first prize booty: Kevin Levrone received $90 000 as Mr. International, whilst Laura Creavalle received only $20 000 - as did Carol Semple, Ms. Fitness (though she was granted the seal of approval by being given her award by Arnold Schwarzenegger). (Wolff 1994, 92)

10. Thus losing out on potential customers for Weider gym equipment and health supplements.

11. Most newsagents tend to display the bodybuilding magazines in the vicinity of porn magazines.

12. Weber also includes a story related to her by a bodybuilder who met a schmo who 'wanted to be carried around like a baby in her muscular arms'.

13. High heels were in fact worn in female bodybuilding competitions until the 1979 'Best of the World' (which was a forunner to the Ms. Olympia which was first introduced in 1980) when Carla Dunlap walked on stage and kicked off her high heels; competitors have not worn shoes of any kind in the competition since.

14. Similar attempts at establishing clear demarcations between the male and female bodybuilders are revealed in the differences in the posing routines of the IFBB competitions. The most obvious difference is on the level of performance; the women complete their mandatory poses in highly choreographed dance routines, whilst the men strike a series of static, dramatic poses that include standard poses such as double biceps, back lat spreads, side chests as well as mimicking the poses of statues along more classical lines - the most popular being the *Farnese Hercules* and Michelangelo's *David*. For an insightful account into the trials, tribulations and classical conventions of the male bodybuilder's posing routines, see Fussell, 1991, 134-5.
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