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# BODYBUILDING AS A GENDER NORM DEFIER SHREDDING THE BINARY MATERIALITY WHILE REWRITING BODIES THROUGH BODYBUILDING

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*This paper presents a peculiar approach of escaping the dual gender-identity conceptualization, using bodybuilding—which is both a sports and corporeal practice—as a tool to shatter gender stereotypes. The bodies that are transformed as a result of this practice will be analysed and interpreted as a way to develop a relevant distinction between those bodies that are objectified on stage, due to the sport’s regulations, and those bodies that are located within an artistic and activist frame as “critical flesh.” This analysis looks at the bodies of three artists involved in the practice of bodybuilding to develop their artworks in order to discuss whether or not this corporeal identity built through muscle development creates a split in the gender discourse and in the expectations that this discourse generates. This approach is developed through the visual and conceptual support from the following artists: Cassils [they/them] (Canada-USA), Francesca Steele [they/them] (UK), and the author of this paper [she/her].*

## INTRODUCTION

1 Jörg Scheller, “Sculpo, Ergo Sum,” *Harvard Design Magazine* 40 (2015), <http://www.harvarddesignmagazine.org/issues/40/sculpo-ergo-sum>; Jörg Scheller, “Transcendence: Bodybuilding as Post- or Meta-Sport and Post-Religion,” *Acta Academiae Artium Vilnensis* 80/81 (2016), 23–31.

This article develops an itinerary that seeks to present an escape from the dual distinctions of gender, taking modern bodybuilding—from the mid-twentieth and twenty-first century—as a form of corporeal transformation. Bodybuilding is a corporeal practice that involves muscle construction. Many people compare this process to that of the body-artwork process; as Jörg Scheller phrases it, “Sculpo ergo sum.”<sup>1</sup> Bodybuilders undergo a process of bodily transformation. It is often compared to a metamorphosis, and it can take several months

or even years to achieve. To build their bodies, bodybuilding practitioners control and regulate their daily life through different practices and with a high level of involvement and discipline. This usually includes a diet totally organized and fragmented by meals, the type of food and its quantity, and the frequency with which food is consumed (usually every three hours). The sports component—training—is also determined by fragmentation—in this case, the fragmentation of the body: the exercises and movements chosen, the training systems (sets and repetitions), and even the breathing patterned by a movement's execution.

During the last phase of the process before competition, bodybuilders often use different strategies to push themselves to unhealthy boundaries to achieve the dehydration phase a few hours before going on stage. This allows them to show the most ripped physique possible. Examples of these kinds of strategies include experimenting with their consumption of carbohydrates and sodium; overtraining; and in some cases, using chemical products—known as Performance Enhancing Drugs (PEDs)—like steroids, hormones, or other substances. All these strategies are applied to display as much symmetry and as many muscular striations—the fibres of the muscles—as possible, once the competitor is on stage. Over time, these practices can produce an increasingly sick body. However, when that body is displayed on stage, it is exalted through the flex pose, which lasts for only a few seconds. In competition, participants' bodies are compared with one another to determine which of them comes closest to the ideal promoted by the category they are competing in. When this bodily construction is achieved, the competitors exhibit their bodies in front of the audience and the jury by performing the regulatory poses and being assessed accordingly. Within this scheme, what matters is not the strength that the athlete has, but the image of strength through body results that they display. This leads one to raise certain controversial questions when discoursing about bodybuilding as a sport or as something different. Several theorists have posited that bodybuilding is more than just

a sports competition, drawing parallels between the practice and beauty pageants, as well as other forms of aesthetic display.<sup>2</sup>

In this way, one can argue that the main objective that determines the bodybuilding discipline is aesthetic; it is not about creating a personal physical record, nor about demonstrating a specific physical ability. Instead, the goal is to build an ideal physical condition for the category in which each individual competes. To achieve the body transformation in this discipline, it is undoubtedly necessary to follow very specific guidelines over time. More than a sporting practice, it is a lifestyle.

The focus of this analysis is the corporeal matter that results from the practice of bodybuilding when it is carried out by women and non-binary people—especially transgender and gender-fluid individuals. This essay argues that the competitive ‘sport’ of bodybuilding can be juxtaposed against other types of aesthetic events such as beauty pageants instead of only understood as a sporting event. This perspective leads to the acknowledgement that the sports frame of bodybuilding contests disqualifies them as a valid context for analysis, since competitive regulations within that framework impose limitations on participants. Instead, the spheres of bodybuilding that lean more toward art and activism are the spaces more worthy of investigation.

The methodology used in this analysis involves three approaches. First, it uses relevant theory from a variety of fields, including sports sciences, sociology, philosophy, performance art, and gender studies. Second, the study’s focus on artistic contexts will be developed by looking at works by female and transgender visual artists. All of the artists in this study use the discipline of bodybuilding to modify their bodies, and by doing so, they are able to deliver a stronger message than they would have been able to do within the context of competition. The visual material from these artists—primarily the documentation (photographs and videos) of their artworks—will be used to reinforce

<sup>2</sup> See István Aranyosi, “Body, skill, and look: is bodybuilding a sport?” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 17.2 (2017), 401–10.

this argument. Specifically, this paper looks at the work of Cassils (a transgender artist from the USA),<sup>3</sup> Francesca Steele (a performance artist from the UK who for a period of time, starting in 2008, used the practice of bodybuilding in their own flesh as a medium of exploration for developing their artistic and also reflexive work afterward),<sup>4</sup> and the author of this article, Isa Fontbona, (visual artist and natural bodybuilding competitor from Spain).<sup>5</sup> The last methodological axis used in this analysis is one that comes from auto-ethnography. In this particular case, the author of this article is involved in the practice of bodybuilding, though she does so through a critical gaze.

### BEYOND THE DUALITY OF GENDER: GIVING VOICE TO THE “SUBALTERN” AND PLACING ONESELF AGAINST THE BINARY THROUGH MUSCLE

According to theorists of gender performativity like Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Judith Lorber, Candace West, and Don H. Zimmerman, it is maintained that there are no essential gender properties. Thus, gender is conceived as a social construct maintained by prevailing power structures; gender only emerges through gender performativity. Activities and practices make a person gendered as male or female; gender is not something you are, but something you do. It is instituted through a stylized repetition of acts—that is, by wearing certain gender-coded clothing, walking, posing, dancing, interacting in certain gender-coded ways, combing your hair or styling your face in a gender-coded way, etc. Gender emerges only through these acts of gendering, and genders are true and real only to the extent that they are performed. Western culture has fostered the promotion of this sharp line marking a clear distinction between male and female gender identities. This distinction has been accompanied by other social differentiations as well, including those concerning sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, and social expectations regarding corporeal boundaries. At the top of this *phallogocentric* scale, we find the predominantly successful and powerful subject. Specifically, we find the man (sexed as such) who identifies with the male gender, is heterosexual, is of white ethnicity, and who has a high social status.

3 See Cassils, “Artist website,” accessed 17 May 2022, <https://www.cassils.net/>

4 It is important to consider that during this bodybuilding project and the following reflective work of Steele, the identity of the artist assigned at birth has been put into question mainly because of the discomfort regarding to the ‘feminine gender position’, in the artist’s own words from a conversation on 28 August 2023. See Francesca Steele, “Bodily Texts,” April 2020, accessed 17 May 2022, <https://bodilytexts.site/>

5 See Isabel Fontbona, “Artist website,” accessed 17 July 2023, <https://isafontbona.com/>

As long as these sharp lines and distinctions create opposing forces, any and all other deviations from these categorizations can only lead the subject to be underestimated and marginalized. These are the undervalued identities, many of which have been silenced or hidden. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak defends them as subalterns and she also proposes that we must give voice to these subjects who are considered subordinate or lowly in order to deconstruct the idea of a predominant subject and understand the duality promoted in our society between black and white.<sup>6</sup>

Supported by the above theories, this paper focuses on the framework of bodybuilding as it is practiced by women and people who identify as non-binary. Hence, this study gives voice to subalterns—interpreting the bodies of bodybuilders who identify as female, trans, or non-binary—leading us to understand this practice as a tool that gives voice to a ‘strange body’ but also to an identity that eschews dual categorizations.

Discourses around the image of the female body are linked to a complex mechanism of power, which uses coercive force, especially in postmodern society. Within the normative frameworks that circulate in our society, women become ambiguous when they use symbols that direct them to the sphere of strength. It is within this field that they have an opportunity to build themselves from the ground up. They carry this process out through transgression and subversion, outside the sphere that is considered appropriately feminine. This means that in many cases, the muscular body of a female bodybuilder can be read as an attack on gender norms.

6 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 2006), 28–37.

The muscular woman gestures toward the colonization of a space that has traditionally been granted to dominion of the male assigned at birth; that is true not just for bodybuilding but for sports itself. The field of sports allows us to consider many aspects through this bodily redefinition, and bodybuilding is one of the ways that most clearly illustrates this ambiguity. This is true not only

in terms of bodybuilding's subversive aesthetic materiality but also in terms of how it introduces women to active dynamic within gyms and within the framework of the training system, which breaks the traditional passivity that is often assigned to women in their conventional roles:

While male bodybuilding has often been viewed as the assertion of hegemonic masculinity... female bodybuilding has been viewed as a feminist resistance and critics have considered how / if it challenges traditional feminine iconography.<sup>7</sup>

The bodies of female bodybuilders are the sites where this challenge begins. These bodies (and their identities) destabilize the most traditional feminine iconography. We can say that this destabilization also happens, and perhaps happens even more, for the bodies of bodybuilders who identify as gender-queer or non-binary.

Keeping in mind the social and cultural expectations that are inherent in our bodies, we can find a battleground of cultural tensions in the bodies of bodybuilders. As Wesely points out, they “de-stabilize the dominant concept of gender identity.”<sup>8</sup> In fact, our society expects what has been granted to us biologically. Consequently, when there is an “iconographic fault”—that is, when there is no clear correspondence between what our body looks like and what is corporeally expected of the sex that we were granted biologically, or when we move away from gender stereotypes we supposedly have to reproduce—there is social pressure on these bodies and their identities, a pressure which has become a powerful tool for societal control and regulation.

Female and genderqueer bodybuilders create bodies that complicate the binary gender discourse and the expectations that such discourse generates. By affording visibility to these bodies, we can empower them and their respective identities. Likewise, we can rethink precepts that are still prevalent today,

7 Adam Locks and Niall Richardson, *Critical Readings in Bodybuilding* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 21–22.

8 Jennifer K. Wesely, “Negotiating Gender: Bodybuilding and the Natural/Unnatural Continuum,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 18 (2001): 162–180. I also recommend visiting the profiles of Siu Fung Law and Janae Marie Kroc, who are both non-binary bodybuilders. Siu Fung Law, “Personal website,” accessed 15 May 2022, <https://www.sfunglaw.com/>; Janae Marie Kroc, “Personal website,” accessed 15 May 2022, <https://www.janaekroc.com/bio-1>.

such as the rigidity of the link between biological attributes, the gender of each individual, and the expectations that are placed on the individual's body.

For this purpose, however, the sports competition arena of bodybuilding is not a valid object of analysis because competitive regulations establish some limitations—mostly for female bodybuilders. Even the most extreme bodies must undergo hyper-sexualization through very ostentatious jewellery loaded with glitter—especially earrings and bracelets—high-heeled shoes, bikinis with sparkles, make-up, and hairstyles.<sup>9</sup> The athletes must move on stage in certain sexualized ways. There are also those bodybuilders who have trained and modified their chests, or even gotten implants, to gain back the “femininity” that they have lost through the building of muscle.

In this way, in addition to constructing a set of bodies with muscular protuberances and large volumes, these instances are disguised with gender markers, mentioned above, that intend to reassure the bodies that are considered masculine and, in a certain way, to contain the transgression of these bodies so that they fall in line with what determines the stereotype of femininity. It certainly seems to be an inconsistency within the sport, but it is real. In the history of female bodybuilding, the rules that regulate how competitors' bodies must look have undergone major changes. Largely because of the emergence of increasingly extreme bodies—which has been due mostly to the increased use of chemical enhancements—the main federation in this area, the International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness (IFBB), established significant changes that were intended to restrain this image. As Bolin states, all of these rule changes push female bodybuilders to become less massive, reflecting the IFBB's attempts to make women fit gender expectations more closely.<sup>10</sup>

In any case, it is well known that through the mechanisms of evaluation, the IFBB intended—and still intends today—to promote “femininity” above muscular development, which leads to an exaggerated hyper-sexualization of

9 See Leslie Heywood, *Bodymakers: A Cultural Anatomy of Women's Bodybuilding* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 96.

10 Anne Bolin, “Buff Bodies and the Beast: Emphasized Femininity, Labor, and Power Relations among Fitness, Figure, and Women Bodybuilding Competitors, 1985–2010,” in *Critical Readings in Bodybuilding*, eds. Adam Locks and Niall Richardson (New York: Routledge, 2012), 29–57.



bodybuilding competitors. As we have previously mentioned, muscularity has traditionally been seen as a masculine trait, while femininity has usually been associated with features such as smallness, weakness, fragility, and limitedness. Women are expected to occupy only a little space, which is why they are often associated with the image of a slim woman conditioned by food. When women, through the practice of bodybuilding, are able to push against and break free of these societal boundaries, it provides a space for empowerment. However, by making hyper-femininity a requirement at women's bodybuilding competitions, this practice has ultimately become an infertile terrain for interrogation and resistance.

#### ART AS A SPEAKER FOR SUBALTERN IDENTITIES, ART AS AN INSTRUMENT OF EMPOWERING BODIES BUILT THROUGH MUSCLE

Considering the relevance of our bodies when they are located in the social arena, and being aware of the limitations that exist within the context of bodybuilding contests, it is easy to see why it is necessary to find an alternate way to examine these bodies, their fluidity in terms of identity, and their ability to break away from regulations. This alternative path is only possible if it develops in full freedom, and this is a capacity that the artistic field, particularly the field of performance art, can offer. Showing the body in a context outside the regulations of competition, providing the body with a space where its voice can be heard, performance art allows practitioners to emit a stronger message than they would be able to do within conventional bodybuilding competitions.

The art field is a fertile terrain for exploring these possibilities. Within that space, the body becomes the means to emit a message, but at the same time, it becomes the message itself. It is the space where the flesh becomes the word. To develop this point in more detail, we will focus especially on the case of Francesca Steele (a performance artist from the UK who for a period of time, starting at 2008 used the practice of bodybuilding in their own flesh as

a medium of exploration for developing their artistic and also reflexive work afterward); Cassils (a non-competing, non-binary, transgender artist in the US and Canada); and the personal contributions developed by Isa Fontbona, the author of this article, a performance artist and female natural bodybuilder from Spain.

#### FRANCESCA STEELE: LOCATING IDENTITY: BETWEEN MUSCLE AND FAT

Recently, I have taken on bodybuilding as part of my artistic practice. Whilst using the unusual and specific techniques of female bodybuilding as art itself, I am aiming to allow my body to become a vehicle to explore physical concerns in an impersonal, critical yet artistic way. I hope to challenge stereotypical assumptions of “masculinity” and “femininity,” whilst amassing a framework of both qualitative and quantitative research and data. The project is also providing the background for a series of video and performative artworks, using themes of embodiment, mind over matter and further visual investigations into the relationship symmetry has to beauty. Here, it is my body itself, that will become the document of my practice.<sup>11</sup>

In this quote from Steele, which dates to the beginning of their project (between 2008 and 2009), Steele explains their framework and the direction in which they began to conduct their project that to this day continues in this line of exploration. It is important to clarify that whilst Steele’s work does not focus intentionally on the gender debate, during the development of their artistic and reflexive work it has brought them to question their own identity and also prompted questions regarding the issue of gender, such as its materiality and the projections located in the bodies with respect to the stereotypes at the two poles of gender. Steele’s main point of exploration and creation is to use their own body and its reconfigurations as “a vehicle to explore physical questions in an impersonal, critical and artistic way”.<sup>12</sup>

11 Francesca Steele, “Bodybuilding Project,” 11 February 2009, accessed 16 May 2022, <http://francesca-steele.blogspot.com/>

12 Steele, “Bodybuilding Project”.

In this body transformation manoeuvre, it is easy to establish a link with what has been traditionally encoded under the male “domain” through the treats of the muscle and strength. It is for this reason that when facing this muscled female body, some can find on it a sort of example of the iconographic fault I have mentioned previously. The soft and more rounded forms that in our culture have been linked to the feminine sphere are modified by rougher, sharper, and more voluminous forms, thus clashing with the expectations that are socially projected on bodies and especially on the gender baggage inscribed on them. This fact means that throughout their project and their experience of different phases of bodily transformation, Steele detected what they mention as social alarms activated in the face of their physical changes.



Fig. 1. Competition image I (front)  
 Francesca Steele, Backstage at NABBA West  
 Britain, 2011. Photography by: Simon Keith.  
 Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 2. Competition image II (back)  
 Francesca Steele, Backstage at NABBA West  
 Britain, 2011. Photography by: Simon Keith.  
 Courtesy of the artist.

It is important to keep in mind that in bodybuilding preparation, the body goes through different stages or transformations, like reducing the percentage of body fat, acquiring a tighter and more voluminous muscle tone, and obviously in the case of women, there are more visually detectable changes (Figs. 1 and 2). In some cases, the addition of chemical consumption to this process makes the visible effects even more noticeable. In the case of Francesca Steele, at an advanced stage of their project, they chose to introduce the use of substances such as steroids and synthetic enhancement into their practice, in a supervised way, which led them to experience some physical changes in line with what some people who undergo gender transition or gender reassignment experience in a premeditated way, as Steele explains:

I had gone through the early stages of a female to male gender transition. The side effects included a deeper voice, increased facial hair; increased body hair, including a new line of growth from my pubic hair to my navel; and enlarged clitoris; and altered personal odour . . . [leading to a] hyper masculine body. . . The changes were not significant to me, but remarkable for others.<sup>13</sup>

Taking advantage of the changes their body underwent, which were built through the development of their muscles, Steele created a number of artworks, including works of performance and video art. One particularly powerful performance piece, *Routine* [Fig. 3.], which they developed in 2010, indisputably reflects how muscle development makes the established borders between gender an ambiguous space, and how it affects social expectations people may have about the body in general.<sup>14</sup> In *Routine*, on a stage immersed in darkness, and with the projection on a screen of what is taking place behind Steele, the artist stood completely naked and performed bodybuilding poses in front of an audience that was invited to experience the performance in a “close-up” live setting, one by one, in a small and intimate space.

13 Francesca Steele, “Breaking the Mirror,” *Performance Research* 23.8 (2019), 51–58.

14 For a short video documentation of *Routine*, see The National Review of Live Art (NRLA) “Francesca Steele. Routine,” accessed 16 May 2022, <https://nrla30.com/the-artists/francesca-steele/>.



Fig. 3. Routine. Francesca Steele, *Routine*, screenshot from NRLA30 documentation, 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

In one of the conversations carried out with the artist,<sup>15</sup> they explained that their intention in this work was not simply to reproduce the compulsory poses that take place in a bodybuilding competition, but to carry out a body-to-body relationship with the audience where vulnerability and empathy were the nexus of dialogue and not the mere exhibition of the body.

Although one reading of the documentation of the piece might lead us to interpret this short distance between the bodies in terms of violence, as if the female muscular body of the artist were claiming their position of power through discomfort, Steele's real intention was to offer this space for an exchange of experiences, to feel vulnerability together through their bodies in tension, especially by focusing on the feeling of the audience's body that in a

<sup>15</sup> Conversation with Francesca Steele, 28 August 2023.

certain way acts as a reflection of their own, standing in front of it, alone and, although dressed, also vulnerable. Any individual who positioned themselves in front of the artist could watch how Steele carried out the regulatory poses from the bodybuilding competition, but they could also experience and feel their breath and the smell of their sweat.<sup>16</sup> It is certainly an exchange between the two bodies in dialogue, face to face.

Undoubtedly the art piece *Routine* has a strong touching component for the audience and for the artist as well, as Steele points out, “extremely emotional encounters” took place during the performance.<sup>17</sup> Taking the piece to an alternative reading in line with the arguments defended in this article, by re-thinking or destabilizing the binary categories of gender, we can locate in the visual documentation of the piece a form of re-reading of the female body in codes traditionally considered masculine, or, as Steele highlights, a sort of “female reconfiguration within codes of male identity through bodybuilding” that socially generates tension and discomfort and even leads to rejection or part disassociation from the traditional concept of the female body and its usual connotations.

As I have mentioned previously, the years devoted to the practice of bodybuilding involve intense discipline and regulation in order to create a certain ideal body. But this discipline is also accompanied by control and pain. Steele valued the exploration of other avenues that moved away from the dynamics of bodily control. They wanted to access a bodily reconfiguration outside the stereotypical physicality associated with women in Western culture, outside the framework of boundaries that control the body, and outside a context where one struggles—in line with the female stereotype—against one’s own body.

<sup>16</sup> Steele, “Breaking the Mirror,” 53.

<sup>17</sup> Conversation with Francesca Steele, 28 August 2023.

In the process of reshaping the physical body to transcend its material limitations, several key factors come into play. Steele raises questions about the

consequences of this bodily redesign in activities like bodybuilding, where elements of control, destruction, and pain are inevitably present to foster muscle growth. The inquiry revolves around whether these factors serve as valid tools or instead steer practitioners towards a dead end. In essence, it questions whether this strategy leads to a constructive reformulation or a path toward self-destruction. While utilizing destruction as a strategy often results in unexpected growth, it may not necessarily lead to the desired outcomes.

It's crucial to bear in mind that this process of bodily reformulation deeply impacts one's identity. It's not just an artistic endeavor but a vital project that intimately intertwines with personal experiences and identity. Cassils, Steele, and Isabel Fontbona emphasize their inability to separate our work from our lives, as what we go through becomes an integral part of our existence.

This point raises questions about the impact of physical transformation, encompassing elements such as control, discipline, growth, as well as the potential for pain and destruction. It prompts us to contemplate whether modifying the body through rigorous control and struggle to dominate it, particularly through muscle development, is a viable strategy for entering the traditionally masculine realm—that of muscle-building. Alternatively, it leads us to consider whether such an approach may result in a form of self-destruction, causing the body to rebel against such strict control. For instance, Steele, at a later stage in the project explores the embodied practice of bodybuilding from a unique standpoint (Fig. 4). Rather than adhering to the conventional standards of femininity demanded by sports regulations, which often involve an exaggerated performance akin to a “masquerade”, as termed by Joan Rivers, Steele positions themselves from the perspective of a muscular body concealed by a layer of fat. This vantage point potentially enables a more transgressive message to be conveyed while simultaneously fostering an alternative and more emotionally charged connection with the body.



Fig. 4. Manuel Vason and Francesca collaboration #3.  
Francesca Steele in collaboration  
with Manuel Vason, 2006.  
Courtesy of the artist.

Thus, on the one hand, we can find in the voluminous body with fat, a subversion of this Western feminine stereotype characterized by the body being thin, filigreed, slender, and weak. Echoing Susie Orbach's *Fat Is a Feminist Issue*,<sup>18</sup> the author explains how the body with fat is a body that generates rejection and occupies a space that is associated with male dominance. The bodily presence in space has traditionally been a male domain; women on the other hand have been characterized by containment and a very reduced presence. Choosing to occupy space with a bulky corporeality, especially with a body covered by fat, is generally considered the opposition of the ideal of beauty, and it is even associated with the grotesque or abject. It is a transgression of roles and a reappropriation of codes.

18 Susie Orbach, *Fat Is a Feminist Issue* (New York: Berkeley Books, 1978).

However, when revisiting Steele's project and considering the connotations related to body fat, we see that after years of embarking on an embodied journey primarily focused on muscle, Steele decided to halt the relentless



cycle of hyper-control imposed upon their body, allowing it to find its own voice. Consequently, their body underwent a transformation, with fat gaining a newfound agency. Their body became a medium of protest, providing another canvas for reinterpretation—a testament to their perspective on the body as a means of protest. As Steele reflects: “Can muscle or fat become tools to rethink femininity, and the views we attach to gender? Can these bodily materials also ‘undo’, ‘un-become’ or simply, create a physical space to locate thoughts on gender?”<sup>19</sup>

### CASSILS: A PHYSICAL BODY MELTING AWAY THE GENDER DISTINCTION

Cassils is a transgender visual artist who generally works through the medium of performance. Cassils uses their body as the main material of their art. It is a blank canvas from which to work, though they are always aware of the fact that even though “the body as material can always be worked on to be modified, never can it be completely controlled”.<sup>20</sup> The malleability of the body of Cassils, modified through the discipline offered by bodybuilding, allows them to redraw the deeply embedded and still latent line between the gender binary (masculine-feminine). Through their interventions, the artist also plays with the fluidity of gender, taking flight from the conventional male-female dichotomy. In this way, Cassils creates a transgressive body, a body that, as long as it is a transgendered body linked to hyper-masculine aesthetics, has been read as ‘monstrous’, ‘grotesque’, asexual, and sterile. Through the creation of this kind of flesh, the artist proposes some paradoxes about the transgender body. Cassils proclaims that, in some ways, we are all trans(gender),<sup>21</sup> in that we construct our image in accordance with the gender to which we belong. This allows them to elude categories that are considered to be black or white, as we can see in the photos for Cassils’ *Lady face//Man body* (2011) taken by the photographer Robin Black (Fig. 5).<sup>22</sup>

19 Conversation with Francesca Steele, 28 August 2023.

20 Lianne McTavish, *Feminist Figure Girl. Look Hot While You Fight the Patriarchy*. (Albany: Sunny Press, 2015), 31.

21 Cassils and Blake Gopnik, “The Terminatrix. The Daily Pic: Artist Heather Cassils moved toward an uber-male ideal, gaining 23 pounds in 23 weeks,” *The Daily Beast*, accessed 3 June 2022, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/heather-cassils-at-ronald-feldman-is-the-daily-pic-by-blake-gopnik>.

22 See Cassils and Robin Black, “Lady Man//Face Body (Blog),” accessed 16 May 2022, <http://www.ladyfacemanbody.com/?zx=e95c0fe93b423bd0>.



Fig. 5. Advertisement: Homage to Benglis – Lady Face//Man Body. Cassils. *Advertisement: Homage to Benglis*, 2011. c-print face mounted to Plexiglas 40 x 30 in. Photo: Cassils with Robin Black. Courtesy of the artist.

The *Lady Face//Man Body* series, also known as *Advertisement: Homage to Benglis*, is a reinterpretation of a provocative and satirical work by feminist artist Lynda Benglis (1941), *Artforum Advertisement*, in which the artist used her body as a protest and presented herself completely naked, wearing sunglasses and defiantly holding a dildo in front of her genital area. This piece

was undeniably controversial, causing a significant stir. However, on the flip side, it evolved into a critique of gender hierarchies and stereotypes ingrained within the patriarchal system. It cleverly utilized the dildo as a symbol of gender, subverting and reclaiming the traditional male dominance associated with the phallus symbol. With this, Cassils crafted their own unique interpretation of it.

In the same line as Benglis, Cassils also collides with the visual signs of sexual difference. Playing with the terms included in the title of the artwork, “Lady Face” and “Man Body”, the work emphasizes and mixes the features considered masculine—especially muscles and short hair but also the underwear and the volume located in the area of the genitals—and those coded as feminine—such as the use of a powerful and showy red lipstick—to play at merging and blurring gender boundaries. It ultimately presents Cassils from a position of ambiguity or non-categorization, outside the norm. An uncomfortable position.

Cassils is the leading exponent of an ongoing debate about escaping gender conceptualization by using the body—in Cath Lambert’s terms—as a “social sculpture”,<sup>23</sup> a medium to fight against society’s power mechanisms. When bodybuilding is driven to its extremes, it is certainly a terrain where gender borders are blurred. It is a space that enables new interpretations, although those who are not familiar with this context may feel uneasy. In fact, as Scheller highlights, a bodybuilder is a being who irritates.<sup>24</sup> They make people with binary expectations feel uneasy, a result that is also generated, in many cases, by the performances they carry out in competition. However, as exemplified by Steele and Cassils, this sense of unease is far more prevalent within the realm of art, where artists employ their non-conforming bodies to compel us to reevaluate our own identities. In terms of Cassils’ work, we could say that it is not just their body or their art that can be found in this constant state of flight; their very identity is also shifting. They don’t identify as a transgender individual aiming to transition from one fixed, predetermined state to another. Instead,

23 Cath Lambert, “Queering Identity: Becoming Queer in the Work of Cassils,” in *Reconstructing Identity: A Transdisciplinary Approach*, ed. Nicholas Monk et al. (Melbourne: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 131–155.

24 Jörg Scheller, “Kontrolle über den Körper oder: Auf dem Weg zur Herrschaft,” *Telepolis Magazine*, 24 May 2014.

they view themselves as a fluid being, someone who evolves in alignment with their feelings and how they wish to present themselves. In doing so, they break free from oppressive categorization.

Cassils is not interested in an idea of embodiment that is related to rigidity. They locate, feel, and work with fluidity and mutability. It is in this way, then, that Cassils' expression of identity is an appropriate example of this 'queer' way of being in the world, as it tries to disrupt and challenge norms, representations, and mechanisms of state power. In that line, as Lambert highlights, Cassils can "offer a generative example of queer becoming that resists fixity in terms of gender but at the same time demonstrates a commitment to the politics of identification. [A] tension between gender/sex fluidity and stable categories from which we can articulate a political stance".<sup>25</sup>

Although Cassils has carried out many works that would exemplify the arguments in this article, we will focus specifically on two works: *Tiresias* (2010–2013) and *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* (2011–2013).<sup>26</sup>

The first piece, *Tiresias*, immediately draws our attention by destabilizing the duality of gender (Fig. 6).<sup>27</sup> In this work, a performance that lasts for four hours, Cassils pressed their naked body against a neoclassical Greek male sculpture carved in ice, melting it with the warmth of their body. This gesture of melting the male ice sculpture through their queer naked body becomes a fusion between genders. It is a fusion that also takes place in competitive bodybuilding. Within this frame, we find what is properly associated with 'masculinity'—the act of building oneself through the flesh, occupying more space—in communion with the more 'feminine' act of removing matter. We also see this in the artwork of Eleanor Antin, and her intentions of presenting herself in more slender ways, which are discussed in more detail below.

25 Lambert, "Queering Identity," 132.

26 Note here that *Lady face//Man body* series is part of the artwork *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* (2011–2013).

27 See Cassils, "Tiresias artwork," accessed 17 May 2022, <https://www.cassils.net/cassils-artwork-tiresias>.



Fig. 6. Tiresias. Cassils. *Tiresias*, Performance Still, video installation and sculpture (ANTI Festival, Kupio, Finland), 2012.

Photo: Cassils with Pekka Mekinen. Courtesy of the artist.

Bodybuilding, as part of this traditionally embedded duality of classifying bodies and the subjects that live in them as either feminine or masculine, has conventionally been associated with masculine characteristics. Gaining muscle, growing, being strong, becoming more corpulent, and occupying

28 For a small fragment of the artwork, see Youtube 2022, "Heather Cassils. Cuts artwork," accessed 15 May 2022, <https://youtu.be/RZFumYzWYGA>.

29 Robin Black and Cassils, "LadyFace // ManBody," 2011, accessed 16 May 2022, <http://www.ladyfacemanbody.com/?zx=e4767c65a0bdf56a>.

more space have all traditionally been considered expressions of a decisive attitude of empowerment and control, and those attitudes have been linked to men. As we see in Cassils' *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture*, however, this association can be questioned (Fig. 7). This was a performance piece that took place over six months, and it was documented in a video installation,<sup>28</sup> a series of photographs, and a magazine.<sup>29</sup>

For Cassils, *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* was

an exploration of where is the line in the sand in regards to how we classify people as male or female. Rather than having surgery or taking

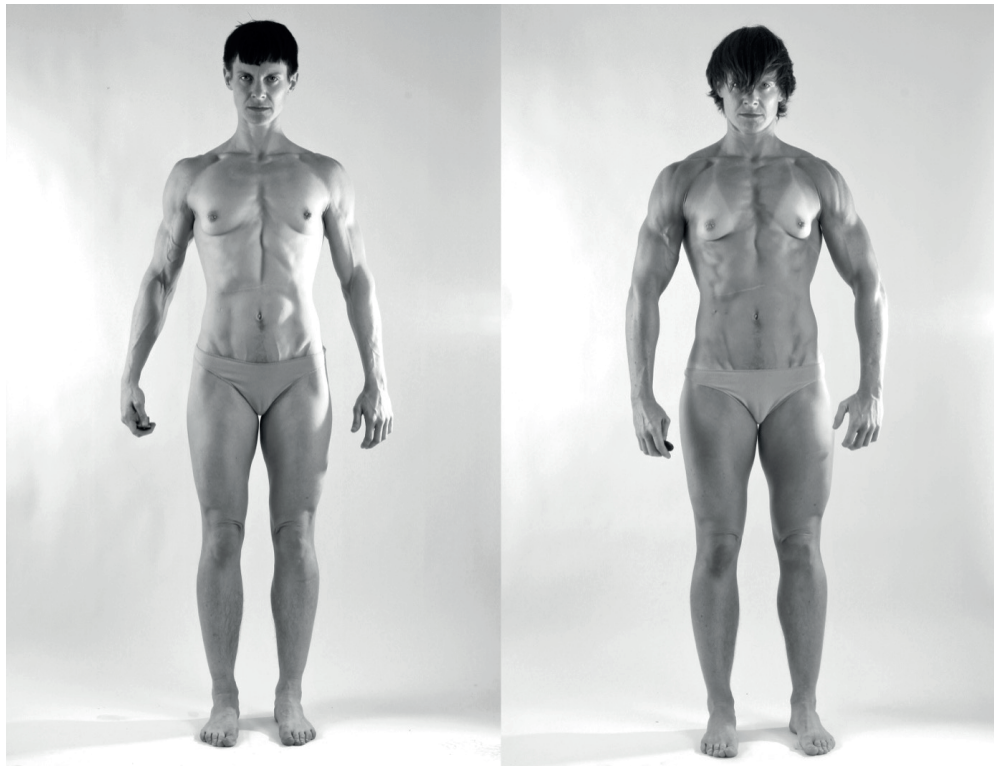


Fig. 7. *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture*. Cassils. *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture*, Timelapse Before/After (Detail), 2011. Performance (6 months), video and photography, Los Angeles, California, USA. Courtesy of the artist.

hormones, I was interested in exploring my body as a material condition—how can I work with flesh and manipulate flesh sinew? . . . For me it's about hyper-performing the things that we take for granted.<sup>30</sup>

Cassils' work reinterpreted Eleanor Antin's 1972 performance, *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, in which Antin went hungry for forty-five days to transform her body into a stereotypical feminine object while at the same time showing and experiencing this debilitating act that is traditionally associated with 'femininity'. This process was documented with photographs, showing the body's changing material. Instead, Cassils used bodybuilding—nutrition, training, and chemical supplementation—to gain twenty-three pounds of muscle over twenty-three weeks. This reinterpretation presented a striking contrast. Antin's work depicted the feminine pursuit of weight loss, while Cassils, in contrast, reclaimed the traditional masculine muscular form as a queer body.

As Steele points out, through this transformation, the body “dramatically fractured ideas of binary gender, mapping bodybuilding in art, not only as an opportunity to redefine self-image but, pivotally and politically, as trans body becoming”.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, in Cassils' performance, which transcends the confines of sports regulations while employing similar techniques for body sculpting, duality is not only challenged but also dissolved, thereby creating opportunities to break free from pre-existing and rigid categorizations. The queer component of their built body, and of their body's expression, allows for resistance against imposed categories; it escapes, flows, and moulds, both in terms of their own body and in relation to their own identity. It is in ambiguity where the strength, confusion, and rupture of what is expected of this body resides. It is a body that recreates and resists the norm, overcomes it, confuses it, and crashes it. Cassils' body expression as an example of a queer body allows us to clearly understand it as a “locus of violence and resistance to normalcy”.<sup>32</sup>

30 Noah Michelson, “The Powerful Reason Why This Artist Has Been Saving His Urine for The Last 200 Days,” *Huffington Post*, 16 September 2017, accessed 16 May 2022, [https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/cassils-monumental-pissed-urine\\_us\\_59bbeace4b0edff971b88f4](https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/cassils-monumental-pissed-urine_us_59bbeace4b0edff971b88f4).

31 Francesca Steele, “Breaking the Mirror,” *Performance Research* 23.8 (2019): 51–58

32 Lambert, “Queering Identity,” 132.



THE AUTHOR: SELF-EXPLORATION IN TERMS OF BODILY TRANSITIONS,  
BODYBUILDING AS RESISTANCE ACT OR A SUBMISSIVE ONE?

While it is unconventional to employ first-person and reflexive voice within an academic context, in this section, I believe it is fitting because I am discussing my own contributions, research (from an autoethnographic standpoint), and experiences within the realm of art.

I consider this research as an embodied and situated one.<sup>33</sup> I am not only immersed in this practice of body modification—bodybuilding—as an athlete, but also the same theoretical and critical reflection based on an approach to the theories of art as an object of study has led me to become involved in artistic practice using the muscular body as a material for creation. I am talking about an incarnated research, situated in a material, the flesh, that is sculpted through training and nutritional guidelines but which in turn emits a message in different contexts—competition scenarios, gyms, conferences, libraries, university classrooms—but also in action—thinking, sweating, exerting myself, exposing myself to the public when explaining the research, or performing an artistic piece where my body has become, in the words of Michael Quinn Patton, an “instrument of research.”<sup>34</sup>

33 Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledge: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14.3 (1988): 575-599.

34 Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002), 45.

35 *Transmogrification* has clear resonances with the work of Antin and Cassils, but as will be exposed next, with a different proposal.

As we have already seen, bodybuilding allows one to live in their own flesh while constantly modifying the boundaries that make up their bodies. Having this freedom of modification gives one a certain sense of empowerment, but at the same time, it allows one to become aware of how implicit cultural inscriptions are still latent in one’s bodies. What I want to highlight in this section, taking two of the works I have carried out, is the awareness of this cultural weight on our bodies, even when we have had the freedom to modify our own flesh guided by our own determination.



To this end, I would first like to mention the piece entitled *Transmogrification. Between Carving and Bulking. Destroying an Evanescent Body Searching for Self-Identity* (2019–2021) (Figs. 8 and 9).<sup>35</sup> This piece was made in collaboration with the photographer Sergi Pérez, and it documents through photography and self-reflective text the transformation of the body experienced in the flesh during the preparation of a bodybuilding competition after a period of recovery in which it had gained considerable weight.



Fig. 8. *Transmogrification* (general view exhibition). Isa Fontbona, *Transmogrification. Between Carving and Bulking. Destroying an Evanescent Body searching for Self Identity*, Performance (2 years), photography, and texts. Photographer: Sergi Pérez, Vic, Barcelona, Spain (2019-2021). At the exhibition “L’altre ubic. Migracions del cos fragmentat” (The other ubiquitous. Migrations of the Fragmented Body). Arts Santa Mònica. Barcelona, Spain (2020). Photographer: Jordi Play.



Fig. 9. Transmogrification (detail).  
Isa Fontbona, *Transmogrification*.  
*Between Carving and Bulking*.  
*Destroying an Evanescent Body*  
*searching for Self Identity*,  
Photography, and texts.  
Photographer: Sergi Pérez, Vic,  
Barcelona, Spain (2019-2021).

After having undergone what had been my last competitive experience at that time in November 2017 with a fragile state of health, and having made the decision to reverse the result achieved—an evanescent and battered body—I decided to set aside all the guidelines that structure my daily routine and that have led me to pathological extremes, with the intention of regaining my health. This decision, carried out over the course of a year (2018), translated in bodily terms into an increase in weight, directing my body to a “place” that felt very uncomfortable. In the year prior to completing the artwork, my weight increased by more than 30kg [66lb], taking as a starting point the competition weight (52kg) [114,6lb], which was well below my healthy weight, and reaching 84kg [185lb], which was well above the weight considered balanced according to my height and stature. In February 2019, at a particular point of bodily discomfort, I started work on *Transmogrification*, a journey that allowed me to document how my body underwent this physical transformation and the transformation that was also taking place internally.

Throughout this two-year process, in which the body loses weight and the muscle regains its space, there is a dialogue between the photographs that captures the change of the body but also the expressions of my face, which show how I feel about these changes. These attitudes are made even more evident through the self-reflective texts that accompany the photographs, which explain the relationship between this body and my mood or feelings about it:

Often, I have often felt repulsed in relation to my own body, and I have damaged it in different ways. Within the framework of sport, this exhaustion and abuse can be justified through the framework of discipline and preparation for a competition, but unfortunately, assuming an athletic identity can “justify” a lot of bad behaviours.<sup>36</sup> This is even more so in the sport of bodybuilding, where the discipline required by the sport guides the process of bodily transformation. Everything is scheduled and controlled to determine very specific and premeditated changes, as if I were creating a sculpture. This type of control makes me feel uncomfortable. Aware of this internal dialogue between self-destruction and sports regulations, I try, through my exploration, to understand my identity.<sup>37</sup>

In *Transmogrification*, I look for the relationship between my own identity and the body and the changes it undergoes. Even though there is a pattern to this process, this exploration gives rise to resonances at a personal, emotional, and mental level. I analyse these with a harsh and honest introspection, which sometimes creates discomfort. The path that the individual pursues in bodybuilding—and its goal of sculpting the flesh—is a corporeality that is the result of an invisible process, a process that I intend to make visible through performance. It is also a painful process. It involves intense effort and the weight of female stereotypes—where to be a woman is usually linked with the idea of being slim and thin—that are involved in the changes that are lived through this body. In the body of a female bodybuilder, one considers muscles and

36 The pathological link between bad behaviours, health, and sports allowed me to materialize this research in one publication: Isabel Fontbona, “The masquerade of identity built through bodybuilding. Hiding the somatophobia,” in *Do Desporto/On Sports. Theory vs Praxis*, ed. Constantino Pereira Martins (Portugal: Universidade de Coimbra. Faculdade de Letras. Instituto de Estudos Filosóficos, 2021), 197-225.

37 Isabel Fontbona, “Reflections through a Post-Competition’s Body,” [unpublished manuscript].

size, but there is also a drive to be under a certain percentage of body fat. In line with the mainstream feminine stereotype, fat is always analysed as abject material that should be eliminated. In this way, *Transmogrification* can be seen as an exploration of one's own flesh, a way of making the most intimate material visible, of exposing one's own vulnerability, of shedding light on the dialogues that one establishes with one's corporeality and the construction of one's identity.

38 See YouTube, 2022 "Isa Fontbona, Corporeal Turbulences artwork," accessed 14 May 2022, <https://youtu.be/wQJ44j3qTOg>.

Focusing now on *Corporeal Turbulences. Between the Absurdity and Resistance* (2020),<sup>38</sup> I wanted to highlight the invisible process of building



Fig. 10. Corporeal Turbulences. Isa Fontbona, *Corporeal Turbulences. Between Absurdity and Resistance*, 2020, performance (15 minutes), Arts Santa Mònica, Barcelona, Spain. Photographer: Damian Sansone.

this flesh sculpture and make it visible through performance (Fig. 10). With this performance I sought to illustrate the incongruences that occur in this fight against female stereotypes through the body built by bodybuilding and the ambiguities that exist within it. To make this struggle visible, I based my actions on a tense duality. On one hand, I wanted to capture the idea of resistance—as it is related to the expansion of the body and illustrated through the body’s shape as it is altered by muscle bulges—and the effort involved in trying to surpass some feminine stereotypes. On the other hand, I wanted to make visible the absurdity involved in the gesture of gaining muscle, which includes the subjection to regulations to accomplish success in the context of sports but also a subjection to some of the social pressures involved in being a woman and dealing with what is expected of you. This idea of absurdity is illustrated through the piece’s use of barbed wire and the heavy monolith that acts as resistance against my body.

Thus, the competitive body becomes a sick individual, breaking away from all biological norms. I visualize and expose my own vulnerability to the gaze of the ‘other’ through words and through the body. The body, however, is no longer a mere support but instead becomes the message, the gesture, the action, the signifier:

By modifying myself corporeally, I lose myself, I look for myself and I question myself. If my identity is my body, a body in constant modification, I do not know who I am. . . . I am not the evanescent body that looks sickly on stage; but neither the body out of the competition. For me, it is very difficult to locate my identity in just only one version of it. Maybe I am all of them, or none . . . maybe I am in motion.<sup>39</sup>

38 See YouTube, 2022 “Isa Fontbona, Corporeal Turbulences artwork,” accessed 14 May 2022, <https://youtu.be/wQJ44j3qTOg>.

39 Fontbona, “Reflections through a Post-Competition’s Body.”

CONCLUSION: BODIES OF RESISTANCE, THE TYRANNY OF PERFECTION

The body of the bodybuilder is something that escapes a closed and fixed identification. It is not only the body that shines in its most dehydrated phase, tanned and performing its flexed pose on stage in front of the audience. It is also the body in the process of metamorphosis, in an off-season of constant change, moulding itself, building muscle mass but also losing fat. Bodybuilding offers the possibility of modelling the body in such a way that it works against pre-established dualisms. But in turn, on stage, and as we think about how extreme the bodybuilder's body can be—keeping in mind relevant historical female bodybuilders such as Bev Francis, Kim Chivezsky, Iris Kyle, or Rene Campbell, but also, in contrast, Siu-Fung Law (a genderfluid bodybuilder)—in their successful attempts to become living sculptures, to sculpt muscles, and to push and pull gender categories to extremes to overcome them, these bodies are eased, slowed down, and, we could even say, neutralised, with a whole series of aesthetic strategies that attempt to re-categorise them again within pre-established standards of “femininity.”

We can say that the importance of the woman bodybuilder's gesture lies in the fact that it eludes and destabilises the normative, traditional prototype of a woman. This position, the position of the “other,” creates a kind of disorientation, which is what makes it subversive. It is modified to provoke shock, to disassemble the predominant normative binomial of the feminine and the masculine. But this turnabout toward subversive territory ends up becoming a new burden. As a result, this emergent form of resistance ends up doing an about-face 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 themselves, a new form of the Iron Maiden.<sup>40</sup>

40 Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002), 492–493.



Certainly, within the context of competition, it is difficult to find a space to talk about this corporeal identity, another form of femininity, as a departure from the traditional dichotomy of gender; we have seen this with the limitations that are imposed by the regulations of competition. However, through art, we can engage in a more pointed and direct critique, a more uncomfortable dialogue with the spectator than the one that competitive bodies on stage allows. Thus, art can reconfigure the expectations of the female body, as we have seen with Francesca Steele, who shows the muscular feminine body without distance, making palpable the sweat and the reappropriated space but also the possibility of rethinking about ourselves through other matters, both by muscle or by fat. These same ideas also inform the author's work, *Transmogrification*, and in *Corporeal Turbulences. Between Absurdity and Resistance*, which makes visible the internal dialogues that lead us to continuous criticism and negative analysis of our own body identity, often leading us to pathological behaviours.

Or, and as we have seen in both artists, Steele, and in a more explicit way in the case of Cassils, art also allows us to consider other forms of performance based on this type of body that lead to other interpretations and ways of generating a break from this discourse that is so deeply rooted in traditional patriarchy. In the performance path Cassils offers, which exists beyond sports regulations but makes use of the same means of sculpting the body, the duality is overcome, attacked, and even melted away, opening up possibilities that move away from such pre-established and immutable categorisations. And if it is true that our period is characterised by what Baumann titled "liquidity,"<sup>41</sup> we may not discover the opportunity to consistently align ourselves with a fixed identity. Everything is malleable. Why do we continue forcing ourselves to think in terms of these very narrow categories? It is not a simple matter derived from the body that the bodybuilder's practice is speaking to. It goes beyond this, to broader ways of thinking and trying to classify subjects and their identities.

41 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

Ultimately, we can say that the process of metamorphosis the body experiences during bodybuilding preparation makes sense as a way to attack binary gender categorization and work against the stereotyping of bodies that are classified according to that binary framework only when that metamorphosis takes place within the artistic context. As Lambert argues, bodybuilding allows these bodies to be built as “sites for a radical de- and (re)construction of gender to the limits”.<sup>42</sup> In doing so, both the body and the message become more powerful than they can be within the context of competition, where the woman’s muscular body ultimately results in sterility. In contrast, art is a terrain in which freedom can take place.

42 Lambert, “Queering Identity,” 132.

Isabel Fontbona holds a Ph.D. in Art History at the Department of Art History in the University of Girona (Spain). She has a BA in Philosophy and a BA in Art History, as well as a MA in Humanity Research. Her dissertation studies how the body resulting from the practice of bodybuilding can be read as an element of transgression of traditional gender and also as a tool to generate a critique of various aspects of our current society.

The foundation of her research lays out in gender studies, sociology, art theory, philosophy, queer theory, body modification, and sports. The dissertation involves theorizing body identity, representation, performance, and gender studies. Fontbona is a natural bodybuilder competitor and a performance artist too.