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## LUCAS Graduate Journal Volume 10 (2023) Bodies Matter

Kentrotis-Zinelis, D.; Dam, D. van; Eenink, B.; Haak, N.; Jansen, H.R.J.; Kok, C.

### Citation

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**LUCAS**  
GRADUATE JOURNAL

10  
2023

# Bodies Matter

The LUCAS Graduate Journal (formerly known as Journal of the LUCAS Graduate Conference) was founded in 2013 with the intent to publish a selection of the best papers presented at the biennial LUCAS Graduate Conference, an international and interdisciplinary Humanities conference organized by the Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society (LUCAS). The peer-reviewed journal aims to publish papers that combine an innovative approach with fresh ideas and solid research, and engage with the key theme of LUCAS: the relationship and dynamics between the arts and society. Starting with this issue, the Journal's affiliation with the LUCAS conference is downplayed, signalling a shift as the Journal maintains its distinct identity as a standalone entity.

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The Journal of the LUCAS Graduate Conference, ISSN 2950-5283, is published once a year by Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society (LUCAS) (Witte Singel 27, 2311 BG Leiden, the Netherlands).

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**LUCAS**  
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# Bodies Matter

# CONTENTS

# 10

- 1** Introduction  
*Dimitris Kentrotis - Zinelis*
- 7** Foreword  
*Elleke Boehmer, Oxford University*
- 10** Foreword  
*Willemijn Ruberg, Utrecht University*
- 13** Turning Wounds into Wisdom and Pain into Power:  
Recognizing Strategy in Enslaved Women's Resistance to Bodily  
Exploitation in the Antebellum US South  
*Marcella Schute*
- 32** Bodybuilding as a Gender Norm Defier:  
Shredding the Binary Materiality while Rewriting Bodies  
through Bodybuilding  
*Isabel Fontbona*
- 63** Cao Fei's 曹斐 *i, mirror*:  
Bodies in Surveillance Culture in Contemporary Chinese  
Expanded Media Art  
*Shiyu Gao*

# Bodies Matter

# INTRODUCTION

Since global antiquity, the body has played a central role in culture and society. From physical figures to political metaphors, objects of analysis to sources of value, bodies take multiple forms. They ground emotions, desires and identities, and are inflected by technology. They connect to histories of place and space, both online and offline, and are framed by political, environmental, spiritual, and other discourses. All too often, conceptions of the body have sought to delimit or exclude bodies deemed ‘other’ for reasons of race, gender, class or other markers of identity. Never isolated, bodies are also arranged into larger units, from cultural groups to nation states. Thinking through the body not only reshapes our body of knowledge, it also moves us to rethink our lives otherwise in a time of political, ecological and health crises. No matter which perspective on bodies one adopts, bodies do matter.

The central theme of this LGJ issue revolves around two prominent concepts that are at the heart of contemporary critical discussions. ‘Bodies Matter’ focuses on the significance of the human body, including the ways in which our physical forms shape our perceptions and how we are perceived in the world. It also underscores the importance of the materiality of the body, emphasizing its physical and tangible nature, which both enables and constrains our experiences. Discussions concerning the body and its various roles have been ongoing for many years, and they are gaining even greater prominence with the ongoing digital transformation of society and the increasing prevalence of artificial intelligence.

The interconnected ideas encapsulated in ‘Bodies Matter’ go beyond their individual significance, serving a prism through which we can examine the broader

dynamics of human existence. In a time marked by swift technological progress, globalization, and evolving power dynamics, our comprehension of the body transcends mere physicality. It now serves as a battleground for asserting rights, a canvas for self-expression, and a mirror reflecting the intricate interplay between personal autonomy and societal conventions. The body, as a space where conflicts and expressions converge, embodies the quests for equality and freedom, challenging established norms and reshaping societal values.

As a consequence, the 'Bodies Matter' theme urges us to look beyond the superficiality of the physical form and delve deeper into the complex interplay between bodies, technology, society, and the environment. It is a call to reassess our values, priorities, and ethical frameworks, encouraging us to recognize the intricate ways in which bodies, both individual and collective, shape and are shaped by the ever-evolving landscape of the contemporary world. In this context, the exploration of bodies and their significance extends into the realms of identity, diversity, and inclusivity. It prompts us to consider how various aspects of identity, such as race, gender, sexuality, and class, intersect with the understanding of bodies. The lived experiences of individuals from different backgrounds and social contexts are deeply entwined with how their bodies are perceived and treated. Recognizing and acknowledging these intersections is vital to addressing issues of inequality and discrimination that persist in our societies. Moreover, it invites us to question how technological advancements and the virtual world impact these intersections, as digital spaces provide new arenas for both expression and oppression. By centering our discussions around the theme of 'Bodies Matter,' we can better navigate the intricate dynamics of identity, technology, and social change in the contemporary landscape.

The inspiration for the current issue stems from a conference hosted by LUCAS on 15-16 April 2021, also titled 'Bodies Matter'. Originally planned as an in-person event in Leiden, the conference was shifted online due to Covid-19



restrictions. Despite the challenges in organization, the conference proved to be a resounding success, drawing numerous participants from both LUCAS and various other institutions. We are particularly appreciative that the two keynote speakers from the 'Bodies Matter' conference, **Elleke Boehmer** (Oxford University) and **Willemijn Ruberg** (Utrecht University), have graciously agreed to contribute forewords to this issue. Boehmer touches on the body as the most loaded of iconic symbols and contemplates its transformative potential. Ruberg, on the other hand, discusses the 'bodily' turn that has taken place in the humanities since the 1990s.

The articles featured in this issue of the LUCAS Graduate Journal are the result of the diverse and interdisciplinary exploration of the multiple actions, states, and meanings of bodies from a range of disciplinary perspectives. Each of them, in its unique manner, delves into some of the concerns outlined in this introduction: What does it mean to be seen as having a body that is considered other or less? How are bodies constructed as gendered, sexed, raced, abled or constrained? What if the focus is on the body as a constitutive category which in fact contains multiple and varied bodies? These are among the inquiries posed within the articles presented in this LGJ issue.

**Marcella Schute** opens the Journal with an article that delves into the potential for resistance exhibited by enslaved women. Schute aims to show that women whose bodies have endured the hardships of slavery displayed a systematic resistance against their physical exploitation. This challenges the longstanding perception that enslaved women's resistance historically appeared to be less confrontational and organized compared to their male counterparts. Schute's research focuses on the Antebellum US South and traces how the enslaved women there discovered effective ways to resist their sexual and reproductive exploitation, and how they ultimately managed to turn their wounds into wisdom and their pain into strength. Schute examines various acts and methods of resistance, such as the opposition of Black enslaved women to the

practice of wet-nursing. She also highlights the acknowledgment of abortion and infanticide as deliberate and strategic choices to counter forced slave breeding and the authority of the master. Schute uses a variety of primary sources to identify such instances of gender resistance, including slave narratives, journals, newspaper articles, reports, interviews, and letters. She also brings forth accounts of slave owners, journalists, abolitionists, politicians, and doctors, in which acts of resistance to physical exploitation are showcased. The primary source she relies on the most is *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs. Shute concludes her paper by emphasizing that the majority of enslaved women did not passively accept sexual abuse and reproductive exploitation; nor were they impulsive in their methods of resistance. Instead, she argues that they developed a series of effective strategies to reclaim personal agency. The enslaved female body, rather than passively accepting limited freedom, consistently found unexpected ways to push back.

**Isabel Fontbona** tackles the theme of the Body from a completely different angle. In her article she discusses how the practice of bodybuilding challenges gender stereotypes and undermines the binary perception of human bodies. Viewing bodybuilding both as sports and a corporeal practice, Fontbona investigates the gender politics of corporeal transformation, as this is achieved through bodybuilding. As a bodybuilder and performance artist herself, Fontbona incorporates her own performative work, as well as the work of two other bodybuilders and artists, Cassils and Francesca Steele, into her analysis. Her specific focus is on the female and non-binary bodybuilder's physique, aiming to highlight and ultimately subvert the gender expectations historically imposed on Western bodies. Fontbona argues that while artistic bodybuilding may be less renowned than its competitive counterpart, it is within this realm of bodybuilding that one can more effectively challenge the presumed rigid distinctions between male, female, and transgender body identities. Using constructivist theory of gender performativity to support her argument, Fontbona goes on to pinpoint how the practice of bodybuilding blurs gender boundaries

and gives rise to a new understanding of personal agency in respect of body self-definition and transformation. Fontbona concludes her article suggesting that the body of the bodybuilder, irrespective of gender, evades closed and fixed identifications. The intricate specifications and needs of the bodybuilder's body, the constant change and flux that it undergoes, decidedly attest to this. Bodybuilding transcends established dualities of the body, offering a more nuanced and fluid perspective.

**Shiyu Gao** concludes the Journal with a paper focused on the topic of body surveillance in the People's Republic of China (PRC). This represents a shift from individual considerations of the body to a collective and communal understanding of it. At the core of Gao's investigation lies the identity of the collective body and its biopolitics. Gao argues that due to the rapid advancement of digital technologies, surveillance in PCR is not solely linked to state and corporate ways, but it is also connected to people's daily lives. The ever-increasing individual dependency to information infrastructures and the growing reliance on the digital in human interactions have led to the formation of new power asymmetries between the body and the state. To critically reflect this emerging culture of body surveillance, Gao introduces the artwork *i, mirror* by the female Chinese artist Cao Fei. Fei's *i, mirror* is a machinima created within the virtual platform Second Life (SL), where users can generate their avatars and immerse themselves in a three-dimensional virtual world. This platform's ability to defy established boundaries has attracted numerous artists who use it for art exhibitions, political discussions, and free communication. Cao Fei's virtual persona, known as China Tracy, is the focus of *i, mirror*, allowing viewers to follow China Tracy's virtual life in SL over six months. Throughout this period, China Tracy is aware of being under constant surveillance, with all her interactions and thoughts shared with the viewer. Through her virtual experiment, Cao Fei promotes the concept of political counter-surveillance by strategically appropriating and disrupting technological surveillance methods. To theoretically support her argument about the issues of permanent and unverifiable

visibility in PRC, Gao also refers to the well-known Foucauldian paradigm of the Panopticon. In conclusion, Gao emphasizes that Cao Fei, through her SL avatar China Tracy, effectively questions the legitimacy of digital surveillance that has permeated the private sphere of people's lives.

In the lead-up to the publication of this issue, the Editorial Board of the LUCAS Graduate Journal witnessed significant developments. After leading the Journal since its inception, the longstanding series editor, **Sara Polak**, stepped down and was succeeded by **Emma Grootveld**. We want to express our heartfelt thanks to Sara for her vital and passionate role as series editor of JLGC. Sara has shaped the journal with warmth and expertise, and we are grateful for the dedication she demonstrated in guiding us during the preparation of this issue. In line with the handover of the role of series editor, **Dimitris Kentrotis - Zinelis** was appointed as the new editor-in-chief of the Journal. Together with Emma, they concurred that the Journal required rebranding and that its affiliation with the biennial LUCAS Graduate Conference should be less emphasized. Consequently, the previous title of the Journal - Journal of the LUCAS Graduate Conference (JLGC) - was replaced with a simpler one: LUCAS Graduate Journal (LGJ). Then, with the assistance of **Sara**, **Emma** and **Dimitris** embarked on the process of recruiting new editors to comprise the editorial board. These are **Cynthia Kok**, **Henric Jansen**, and **Nathalie Haak**. They all showed dedication and diligence towards the publication of this issue, and we would like to express our sincere gratitude to them. Finally, due to the current transition phase of the Journal, the number of papers included in this issue may be smaller than usual, but we are all highly satisfied with their quality and the diverse approaches they bring to the theme of 'Bodies'. We are excited with what comes next for LGJ, looking forward to address new themes and host new authors, in the issues that will follow.

Leiden, December 2023

Dimitris Kentrotis - Zinelis

# FOREWORD

## Transfiguring Again—When Bodies Matter

The body is the most loaded of iconic symbols. It has always been the canvas on which the pains and distresses of the oppressed, the othered, the voiceless, have been marked. But, by the same token, the body is also a primary site of resistance, where the unvoiced finds through some form of language, a voice. Or, where ‘the figured begins to figure by figuring the Other, itself’, as I once put it, several decades ago, in words that continue to resonate for me, though I might like now to add: where that ‘itself’ is always taken to be multiple and various.<sup>1</sup>

Under empire, the other was the physical, the corporeal. In the present-day, under continuing conditions of inequality world-wide, the body remains a primary place of abjection. The body of the other is still made to represent its own difference from the norm, as black or female or queer or trans or steatopygic or disabled, and so on.

Yet, where the body speaks its own experience, as in testimony or analysis, it becomes the subject of its own narrative. Uttering its wounds, whether in spoken or in written language, whether in symbol or in sign, it negates that

1 Elleke Boehmer, “Transfiguring: Colonial Body into Narrative,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 26.3 (1993), 268-276.

inflicted muteness. The story of the self becomes self-recuperation. By signifying, the once-silenced, apparently ‘timeless’ subject-body places itself within diachronic narrative—the syntax of history. It steps out of the cyclical time of empire. It becomes manifold. Its story is transmogrifying.

Within some transformative stories, words re-embodiment the life even when the body is no longer here to speak. In NourbeSe Philip’s haunted and haunting long poem *Zong!* (2014), the terrible history of the titular late eighteenth-century slave ship is narrated through the broken voices of those who were cast overboard to obtain a return on an insurance claim.<sup>2</sup> Yet, though the bodies may be lost, their spirit endures, called up by the poem. Their ghostly presence speaks their bodies’ pain and anguish through the poet who gives them voice. The epic relays to the reader through this insistent susurrations what it is to experience such terror, yet also what it is to participate in community and survival.

2 Phillip NourbeSe, *Zong!*  
(Middletown Conn.: Wesleyan UP, 2008).

3 Quoted as Afterword to: Jaco Boshoff, Jaco Jacques, Lonnie G. Bunch III, Paul Gardullo, Stephen C. Lubkemann, *From No Return: The 221-Year Journey of the Slave Ship São José, 1794* (Washington D.C.: National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2016). See also: Charne Lavery, “Diving into the Slave Wreck,” *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies* 6.4 (2020), 1-15.

4 Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory,” in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Zinsser (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 83–102.

5 Mary Evans, “Curatorial Statement,” *Gilt* exhibition, Zeitz MOCAA gallery, Cape Town (16 February-29 October 2023).

A similar re-membering of the lost through poetic commemoration is found in South African poet Diane Ferrus’s ‘My naam is Februarie’ (2016). This response to the 2015 discovery of the wrecked slave ship *Sao José* off the coast of Cape Town, is presented as if spoken by one of the drowned slaves, Februarie.<sup>3</sup> Reminiscing, Februarie ticks off the body parts of the lost—breasts, eyes, brain—that ever and again break apart, with each new storm that strikes, as does the surrounding wreck on the seabed. The poem gathers the fragments back together, performing with each iteration what Toni Morrison calls a “truth invention”—an imaginative act that “[yields] up a kind of truth”, here a submerged history restored to utterance.<sup>4</sup>

In a different medium, the Nigerian-born British artist Mary Evans uses disposable materials—brown-paper cut-outs, tinfoil—to reflect on how the Black body has been treated in history, right up to the present-day: “shipped, broken, consumed, disposed of and feared”.<sup>5</sup> ‘Gilt’, Evans’ 2023 exhibition at the Zeitz

MOCAA art gallery in Cape Town, plays on the homonyms *guilt* and *gilt* to probe the fragility rather than the resilience of Black survival. At the same time, she reminds her audiences that the Black figures in her work, framed in gold tinfoil, stand for all of humankind.

The voices of *Zong!* and the figures in Evans' work are restlessly plural. Februarie's memories in Ferrus's poem are at once singular yet representative of many other enslaved Africans lost at sea. Assertions of plurality comprise an important technique in queer writing, too — writing in which the binary oppositions that structure gender representation within western culture, are collapsed and mashed together, their polarity destabilized.

For the Kenyan activist and writer Binyavanga Wainaina, the release of a polyphony of voices has the force to upturn the colonial myth of the corporeal and objectified other. In his talks collectively entitled 'We must free our imaginations', he calls for bodies and minds to be disobedient, unruly, quintessentially queer. Only in this way can they resist the restrictive, top-down impacts of a colonial education: "People are dying in exactly the boundary that the *mzungu* made [...] that's a bankruptcy of a certain kind of imagination".<sup>w</sup>

Against this, he urges, "We are in charge of our fate, and in charge of our future". To make new things, the experiences of many different bodies and many different minds must be endorsed and affirmed. We need to celebrate conceptual *and* corporeal plurality to encourage imaginative freedom. We need ever and again to proclaim that our bodily realities are divers and strange.

Elleke Boehmer  
Oxford University, Oxford, UK

6 Elleke Boehmer, Archie Davies, Zimpande Kawanu, "Interventions in adolescent lives in Africa through story," *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 24.5-6 (2022), 821-40.

### **Bodily Integrity and the Bodily Turn**

It is no coincidence that two of the best-selling books in recent years address the body. Psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk pleads for more attention to the body in healing mental trauma in *The Body Keeps the Score. Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma* (2014).<sup>1</sup> And author Olivia Laing explores in *Everybody. A Book About Freedom* (2021) how we can inhabit a free body without fear: 'A free body need not be whole or undamaged or unaugmented. It is always changing, changing, changing, a fluid form after all.'<sup>2</sup> Laing builds on the work of psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957), who put forward the idea that our bodies carry our unacknowledged history, everything we try to suppress. But Laing also connects our – free or hindered – bodily experiences to power: the disciplinary power that steers our bodies into certain, often productive, behaviour, as well as conservative ideas limiting the expression of our gender or sexuality on the one hand, and on the other hand the energy inherent in our bodies. As Laing writes of our bodies: 'their power is not despite but because of their manifest vulnerabilities'.<sup>3</sup>

Here, I think, Laing gets to the core of why the body has become the epicentre of present-day politics, cultural analysis, and academic scholarship. The body

1 Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score. Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma* (London: Penguin, 2015 [2014]).

2 Olivia Laing, *Everybody. A Book About Freedom* (London: Picador, 2022 [2021]), 309.

3 Laing, *Everybody*, 15.



is the site per excellence to study the material effects of power on embodied individuals, but also provides an avenue to find ways of strength and resistance. Most of all, bodily –and thus human– vulnerability has regained attention, not only in human rights discourse but also in policy and self-fashioning. Only think of the 2010 TEDx talk ‘The Power of Vulnerability’ (viewed over 61 million times) by professor in social work, author and inspirational speaker Brené Brown.<sup>4</sup>

The body found itself at the intersection of power and vulnerability during the Covid 19-crisis. Protesters against (compulsory) vaccination and the wearing of facial masks emphasized that their rights to bodily integrity and autonomy were endangered. Ironically, they used the feminist slogan ‘My body, my rights’, which was known from the second feminist wave and its advocates for the right to abortion. Other demonstrations rather supported governmental policies aimed at protecting bodies, particularly of the most vulnerable such as the elderly and people with underlying medical conditions.

The cultural and social prominence of the body dovetails with new scholarly attention to the body. Particularly since the 1990s, the fields of history, sociology and cultural studies have witnessed a ‘bodily’, ‘somatic’ or ‘corporeal’ turn.<sup>5</sup> Whereas at first most academic attention was focused on the ways discourses on gender and sexuality exerted power on bodies, often to the exclusion of women, homosexual, transgender, non-White, lower-class and disabled people, increasingly phenomenological and psychoanalytical approaches have highlighted (gendered or racialized) *experiences* of the body, such as in the work by feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young or postcolonial thinker Frantz Fanon. In the last decades, particularly since ca. 2000, the new ‘material turn’ has emphasized the material aspects of the body, sometimes in connection with discursive or phenomenological analyses. Judith Butler thus called for attention to the ways in which certain bodies materialize and are acknowledged, whereas others do not ‘matter’ and are not mourned.<sup>6</sup> And recently this material turn has become entangled with an ethical turn, in which it is discussed, for

4 [https://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_the\\_power\\_of\\_vulnerability/](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability/)

5 For an overview, see Willemijn Ruberg, *History of the Body*. Theory and History series (London: MacMillan International/Red Globe Press, 2020).

6 Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (London: Routledge, 1993).

)

instance, how museums should deal with body parts in their collections that were appropriated by colonial explorers or medical scientists.

The issue of bodily integrity, whether in regard to the ethics of body parts in museum collections, the physical examination of rape victims, or the recent curtailing of abortion rights in the US, testifies to the politicization of the most individual and vulnerable aspects of being human.<sup>7</sup> It is only one of many aspects of the body – material and discursive, individual and collective, experiential and ethical – that needs to be explored in future scholarship.

Willemijn Ruberg

Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

<sup>7</sup> This text is partially based on my keynote for the LUCAS conference Bodies Matter, 16 April 2021. Both were made possible by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, grant agreement no. 770402, research project 'Forensic Culture: A Comparative Analysis of Forensic Practices in Europe, 1930-2000'.

# TURNING WOUNDS INTO WISDOM AND PAIN INTO POWER RECOGNIZING STRATEGY IN ENSLAVED WOMEN'S RESISTANCE TO BODILY EXPLOITATION IN THE ANTEBELLUM US SOUTH

Marcella Schute

Leiden University and Roosevelt Institute for American Studies,  
Leiden and Middelburg, the Netherlands

*Whereas the scholarship on enslaved women's resistance to the most intimate forms of bodily exploitation has grown over the years and developed into different directions, not enough attention has been paid to the use of strategy by enslaved women. As a result, enslaved women's resistance to bodily exploitations has wrongly been interpreted as impulsive. To correct this myth, this study broadly explores enslaved women's strategic gendered resistance by looking at a variety of different sources. It looks at how enslaved women were strategic in resisting sexual abuse, it recognizes enslaved women's adopted strategies in the practice of wet-nursing, and it explores how enslaved women thought strategically about using methods of resistance such as abortion and infanticide. In an effort to combine these different sources and bring separate directions into which enslaved women's resistance developed together, this study aims to elucidate that, without denying their victimhood, enslaved women were intellectually decisive and calculated in their acts and methods of resistance used when resisting the most intimate forms of bodily exploitation.*

## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, more scholars have begun to explore how enslaved women resisted to not only slavery in general, but also to sexual and reproductive

exploitation in particular. As early as 1942, Raymond and Alice Bauer turned to gender specific forms of resistance in the antebellum US South, arguing that one method of resistance was “the possibility that a significant number of slave mothers killed their children”.<sup>1</sup> Whereas there was a noticeable lack of follow up on Bauer and Bauer’s findings, historians turned their attention to enslaved women’s resistance in the 1970s due to the rise of the discipline of women’s history. Darlene Clark Hine, for example, expanded on Bauer and Bauer’s observations by focusing on how enslaved women resisted sexual exploitation and used abortion and infanticide as methods to resist their masters’ reproductive desires.<sup>2</sup> Hine demonstrated that the body of enslaved women was more than only a personal and private matter, becoming a political sphere through which Black women resisted. Whereas since the 1980s more scholars picked up on the topic of enslaved women’s resistance and particularly how most forms of resistance for enslaved women were closely connected to their bodies, these scholars also began to argue that enslaved women’s resistance was less confrontational than male resistance because enslaved women rarely participated in or organized slave revolts and rebellions in contrast to men. Foremost, enslaved women aimed to survive dehumanization and abuse, it was argued.<sup>3</sup>

More recently, historian Stephanie Camp strongly disagreed with this claim. In her groundbreaking work *Closer to Freedom*, Camp argued that enslaved women participated in “everyday forms of resistance” that could be every bit as challenging to white slaveowners’ dominance as the actions of enslaved men.<sup>4</sup> Camp asserted that the attention of historians needed to shift from public rebellions and revolts that were visible and organized to acts of resistance in the private sphere which were frequently hidden and informal. Only when these private spaces were recognized and analyzed could it be understood that the bodies of slave women were inevitably “political arenas” and served as a site of “both domination and resistance”.<sup>5</sup> Since Camp’s study, the scholarship on how enslaved women resisted bodily sufferings in particular has developed in

1 Raymond A. Bauer and Alice H. Bauer, “Day to Day Resistance to Slavery,” *The Journal of Negro History* 27, no. 4 (1942): 388–419.

2 Darlene C. Hine, “Female Slave Resistance: The Economics of Sex,” *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 3, no. 2 (1979): 123-127.

3 See Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women Of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988); David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

4 Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 2.

5 Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 3, 62.

many different directions. Several scholars, for example, have researched how enslaved women resisted sexual abuse.<sup>6</sup> Other scholars have focused more on the methods used to resist reproductive exploitations by looking at infanticide, abortion and contraception.<sup>7</sup>

Whereas the scholarship on resistance to intimate forms of bodily suffering in the antebellum US South has thus certainly grown over the years, scholars have also argued that these acts and methods of resistance were often “desperate” or “impulsive”.<sup>8</sup> As Veta Smith Tucker argued, the “crafty tactics that black women used to resist slavery have been understudied and generally mischaracterized as either impulsive or mystical”.<sup>9</sup> As a result, our understanding of how strategic Black women’s gendered resistance remains rather clouded. Since the scholarship on enslaved women’s resistance to bodily exploitation has developed in separate directions, this asks for revisiting and combining the existing sources in order to recognize strategy in these acts and methods of bodily resistance more broadly.

In an effort to thus not only broaden but also deepen our understanding of the relationship between gendered resistance to bodily exploitations and strategy, this study brings together sources which cover ‘acts of resistance’ and those which cover ‘methods of resistance’. By looking at strategy in these sources, as well as at inventiveness and “intellectual decisiveness”, it pays attention to how enslaved women could be just as strategic and calculated as men in resisting slavery.<sup>10</sup> Enslaved women premediated their actions too and thought carefully about planning *how* and *when* to resist. Although not denying that enslaved women were victims of sexual and reproductive exploitation, this study shows that they also found inherently strategic ways to turn their wounds into wisdom and their pain into power.

This article is divided in two parts. The first part focuses on ‘acts of resistance’. It looks at how enslaved women were strategic in resisting to sexual abuse and

6 See Thelma Jennings, “‘Us Colored Women Had to Go Though A Plenty’: Sexual Exploitation of African-American Slave Women,” *Journal of Women’s History* 1, no 3 (1990): 45–74; Renee Harrison, *Enslaved Women and the Art of Resistance in Antebellum America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2009).

7 See Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “Strategies and Forms of Resistance: Focus on Slave Women in the United States,” in *In Resistance: Studies in African, Caribbean, and Afro-American History*, ed. Gary Y. Okihiro (Amherst, Mass., 1986), 143–65, esp. 147–48; Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985); Liese M. Perrin, “Resisting Reproduction: Reconsidering Slave Contraception in the Old South,” *Journal of American Studies*, 35 (August 2001), 255–74; Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 46–49; Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 113–114. See also Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 110.

8 Angela Davis, for example, considers abortion and infanticide to be

“acts of desperation,” motivated by “the oppressive conditions of slavery”. See Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, 212. Darlene Clark Hine and Kate Wittenstein have argued that enslaved women’s resistance was “impulsive”. See Darlene Clark Hine and Kate Wittenstein, “Female Slave Resistance: The Economics of Sex,” in *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*, ed. Filomina Chioma Steady (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman, 1981), 289.

9 Veta Smith Tucker, “Secret Agents: Black Women Insurgents on Abolitionist Battlegrounds,” in *Gendered Resistance: Women, Slavery, and the Legacy of Margaret Garner*, ed. Mary E. Frederickson and Delores M. Walters (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 78.

10 “Intellectual decisiveness” is a term borrowed from Veta Smith Tucker. See “Secret Agents: Black Women Insurgents on Abolitionist Battlegrounds,” 78.

11 On wet-nursing, see Emily West and Rose J. Knight, “Mothers’ Milk: Slavery, Wet-Nursing, and Black and White Women in the Antebellum South,” *Journal of Southern History* 83, no. 1 (2017).

12 Perrin, “Resisting Reproduction: Reconsidering Slave Contraception in the Old South,” 257.

13 Harriet Ann Jacobs, *Incidents*

how they found ways to exert agency and power in the practice of wet-nursing. Especially since the history of enslaved women being hired out as wet-nurses remains severely understudied, this article deems it important to include the practice of wet-nursing and to demonstrate how—although resisting the practice remained extremely difficult—enslaved women found particular strategies to deal with the bodily exploitation of wet-nursing.<sup>11</sup> The second part focuses on ‘methods of resistance’. It recognizes abortion and infanticide as methods and demonstrates that women were strategic rather than impulsive in carrying out these methods. Primary source materials consulted for this study include slave narratives, journals, newspaper articles, reports, interviews, and letters. Since many enslaved women were illiterate, accounts of slaveholders, journalists, abolitionists, politicians and physicians in which acts of resistance to bodily exploitation can be spotlighted will also be used. It has to be acknowledged that, due to intimacy of bodily acts of resistance, source material overall is scarce. This is especially the case with sources related to birth-control, which was a topic that was often “frowned upon” in the western world until approximately the mid-twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, this study not only reuses, reinterprets and combines the existing sources on gendered resistance to bodily exploitation, but it also reads between the lines, which is necessary to spotlight strategy in resistance to bodily exploitation at all.

## ACTS OF RESISTANCE: STRATEGIES ADOPTED TO RESIST SEXUAL ABUSE AND THE PRACTICE OF WET-NURSING

Before explaining how enslaved women served as strategic agents in resisting bodily exploitation, it is first necessary to take a closer look at the role enslaved women served both on the plantation and in the household. “Slavery is terrible for men, but it is far more terrible for women”, wrote enslaved woman Harriet Jacobs in her diary *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, several circumstances made the lives of enslaved women particularly more challenging than those of enslaved men. Enslaved women carried the double burden

of plantation labor and responsibility for the domestic sphere. While enslaved women often performed the same kind of undertakings as men, they were also expected to take care of the plantation household and their own families. On the southern plantations, the hours of work for slave women were longer. Whereas both men and women worked on the plantation during daytime, after their work on the field ended, the women moved on to household labor such as cooking, cleaning, washing, and spinning. While they sometimes carried on their labor within the household of their masters and mistresses, they more often had to provide the primary needs for their own families. Although sometimes slave men also performed extra work in the field at night, the second shift of enslaved women was recognized as “a greater and more consistent burden”.<sup>14</sup>

The atmosphere inside the slaveholders’ homes also differed from the one found on the plantation field. Whereas enslaved women were not as home-bound as domestic White women were, the household was a place where they were constantly surrounded by their slaveholders. The household was a site of production and reproduction, an economically exploitative and an intimately abusive sphere. The home was thus more a public than a private domain. It was a place where enslaved women experienced power dynamics and the economic consequences of the slavery system, where they dealt with race, gender and class relations day in and day out. This also meant that when tensions in the household heightened, the enslaved women working in the household felt the consequences. On many plantations, White planters and non-elite men took advantage of the bodies of enslaved women, which were not only “exploited in the fields and sexually violated in the quarters” but also within the plantation household.<sup>15</sup> Since sexual violence and physical abuse towards enslaved women often took place behind closed doors, this also made it less visible to the public. The household provided a sphere where relations between enslaved people and slaveholders were more personal than on the plantation.

*in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1861, 1987), 119. Available at <https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/jacobs.html>.

14 Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 32.

15 Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 42.

What mostly distinguished the lives of enslaved women from men is, according to Camp, their reproductive labor and sexual exploitation and abuse, which were “unique forms of bodily suffering”.<sup>16</sup> Even though reproduction was an ongoing process in the US South, historian Thelma Jennings claimed that “forced interracial sex was more frequent than slave breeding”.<sup>17</sup> The prettier an enslaved girl was, the more unfortunate. As Jacobs wrote, “if God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse”.<sup>18</sup> Some masters would buy enslaved girls and women just because they were pretty. One former enslaved woman from Georgia recalled how “white men went with colored gals and women bold. Any time they saw one and wanted her, she had to go with him and his wife didn’t say nothin’ ‘bout it”.<sup>19</sup>

Resisting sexual exploitation was extremely difficult and could lead to whippings or other forms of physical punishment. If an enslaved woman, for instance, refused to bear children, they would make her work to death or sell her. On the contrary, the enslaved were rewarded with more free time and often spared whippings when they participated in the act of forced breeding. Although resistance to these practices existed, there are only a few sources available which focus on the resistance of enslaved women against sexual abuse. This is not only because many enslaved women were illiterate and did not write down their experiences, but also because the prevailing nineteenth-century value system in the United States among the upper and middle classes was The Cult of True Womanhood, which contained the four attributes of piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Embracing these virtues are supposed to form the ideal of a typical Victorian lady and not adhering to these principles could harm a woman’s reputation.

Precisely because of this prevailing value system in the United States, the narrative of Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is so insightful. The narrative emphasises that enslaved women struggled on many fronts, one of which was their experiences with sexual exploitation and abuse. Rather

16 Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 64.

17 Jennings, “Us Colored Women Had to Go Through A Plenty,” 61.

18 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 31.

19 Ex-slave from Georgia, in Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of the United States of America From Interviews with Former Slaves*. Typewritten records prepared by the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938, vol. 4, part 4, 133. Available at <https://www.loc.gov/resource/mesn.044/?st=gallery>



than following the conventions of nineteenth-century discourse of true womanhood, Jacobs made the decision to reject these Victorian principles for a strategic goal: to elucidate the true horrors of the slavery system. She does not appear to shy away from intimate details of her enslavement. In her introduction, Jacobs confesses: “I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery”.<sup>20</sup> When she was fifteen years old, she experienced sexual actions which destroyed the “pure principles inculcated by my grandmother”.<sup>21</sup> By sharing the horrific consequences of the notion that Black women are not pure, Jacobs is “challenging the norms of white motherhood”.<sup>22</sup> Although the recognition of strategy in Jacobs’ behavior is not new and other scholars have recognized this as well, this nonetheless forms the perfect epitome from which to proceed.

Jacobs mentions in her diary how, when she reached the age of fifteen, her master began to “whisper foul words” into her ear. “Young as I was”, she explains, “I could not remain ignorant of their import”. As a response, Jacobs describes how she “tried to treat them with indifference or contempt”.<sup>23</sup> Strategically, she paid no attention to her master’s acts. In doing so, she made his actions seem ineffective. Later in the narrative, Jacobs narrates how she decided to be impregnated by another man rather than her master to protect herself from her master’s verbal sexual abuse. When her master decided to build Jacobs a house, she began to realize that he had started his own plan to keep her close to him and to keep control over her. To circumvent her master’s obsessive desires, Jacobs initiated a relationship with a white lawyer named Samuel Tredwell Sawyer. She refers to him in her autobiography as Mr. Sands and describes him as a “a man of more generosity and feeling than my master”. Because she was “desperate” and “shuddered to think of being the mother of children that should be owned by my old tyrant”, Jacobs chose to be impregnated by Mr. Sands:

20 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 84.

21 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 60.

22 Melissa Daniels–Rauterkaus, “Civil Resistance and Procreative Agency in Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” *Women’s Studies* 48, no. 5 (2019): 502.

23 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 30.

I knew the impassable gulf between us; but to be an object of interest to a man who is not married, and who is not her master, is agreeable to the pride and feelings of a slave, if her miserable situation has left her any pride or sentiment. It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment.<sup>24</sup>

This section in Jacobs narrative reflects Jacobs' intellectual decisiveness in resisting sexual exploitation. The passage reflects her selective choice as a way to escape from the abusive situation with her master that she found herself in. When her baby was born, her master continued to visit her, both to check on her health and to remind her that her child was "an addition to his stock of slaves".<sup>25</sup> By choosing to become impregnated by another man—a selective choice Jacobs was able to make as a victim—Jacobs nonetheless strategically resisted her master's sexual abuse.

Other examples in which sexual abuse occurred are present in the Works Progress Administration (WPA) narratives. The WPA was an American New Deal agency that recruited interviewers for the Federal Writers Project from 1936 to 1938. The aim was to gather the stories of former enslaved people so that these stories would not be lost. It has to be pointed out that the people employed for this administration were mostly White men, and interviews were conducted many years after emancipation which may have affected the answers of the respondents and created problems concerning reliability. Although some controversy exists around the WPA narratives serving as a primary source, the respondents still provided the interviewers with rich, personal observations about their motivations to resist forms of bodily exploitation. The fact that the dominant power structures at the time likely incentivized respondents to sugar-coat their experiences of slavery makes the insights they provide into resistance even more powerful.<sup>26</sup>

24 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 61.

25 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 68.

26 Scholars who discuss the value of the WPA narratives, see Vann. C. Woodward, "Woo," *American Historical Review* 79 (1974): 470–81; Thomas F. Soapes, "The Federal Writers' Project Slave Interviews: Useful Data or Misleading Source," *Oral History Review* 2 (1977): 33–38.

As someone who was interviewed by the WPA narratives explains, enslaved women who were considered pretty did not always accept the exploitation of their bodies. One enslaved girl, described as “a mulatto of fine stature and good looks”, was sold by a slave trader. One night, the slave trader took the girl to his room to “satisfy his bestial nature”. The girl, who was “of high spirits and determined position” could not be “coerced or forced” to have sex with the slave trader, which is why he attacked her. The person who was interviewed mentioned how, in the struggle with the slave trader, the girl “grabbed a knife” and “sterilized him”. As a result, the slave trader died the following day and the girl was charged with murder. Evident in this highly rich example of resistance is that the man who plans to sexually abuse the enslaved girl was a slave trader and not her master. The status of the perpetrator in this example could have influenced the girl’s decision to resist the act, knowing that she was not his property and that she did not live in the same house as him. The fact that she was described as a girl with a “determined disposition” who “could not be coerced or forced” increased the likelihood that she had decided beforehand to resist any form of sexual abuse. It is also worth wondering where the knife suddenly came from with which the girl murdered the slave trader. Although it remains unclear in this situation whether she had noticed the knife beforehand or not, or even brought the knife with her herself, it is very unlikely that she was ‘lucky’ to find it during her struggle with the slave trader. As such, some kind of tactical ingenuity can most certainly be recognized in this girls’ behaviour.

A clearer example from the WPA narratives in which the strategy of enslaved woman to resist sexual abuse is recognized is a story told by respondent Anna Baker. Her mother had decided to run away from the plantation because of the abusive behavior of the overseers. Baker informed the interviewer that “Dey kep’ a-trying to mess ‘roun’ with her an’ she wouldn’ hav nothin’ to do wid ‘em”. When her mother was in the field one time and the overseer asked her to go over to the woods with him, she said: “All right, I’ll go find a nice place

an' wait'". In reality, however, she "swum de river an' run away. She slipped back onct or twict at night to see us, but dat was all".<sup>27</sup> This example reflects the inventiveness of enslaved women in resisting sexually abusive behavior. By using trickery and cunning as a strategy to distract the overseer, the enslaved woman turned herself from a victim to an agent in a setting where the overseer normally exercised control.

27 Anna Baker, in Federal Writers' Project (FWP), *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of the United States of America From Interviews with Former Slaves*. Typewritten records prepared by the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938, vol. 7, part 2, 13. Available at <https://www.loc.gov/resource/mesn.001/?st=list>.

28 Betty Curlett, in Federal Writers' Project (FWP), *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of the United States of America From Interviews with Former Slaves*. Typewritten records prepared by the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938, vol. 2, part 2, 77. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn022/>.

29 Stephanie Jones-Rogers, "She Could...Spare One Ample Breast for the Profit of Her Owner': White Mothers and Enslaved Wet Nurses' Invisible Labor in American Slave Markets," *Slavery and Abolition* 38 (2017): 339-340.

Wet-nursing forms another practice through which the bodies of enslaved women were brutally exploited. Several studies have pointed out that wet-nursing in the antebellum US South appeared more often than historians have previously recognized. Several reasons existed for White women to desire to hire a wet-nurse. Whereas some women believed that they were too weak for breastfeeding, others were convinced that breastfeeding was unhealthy. Some White women refused to breastfeed due to their elite class status. For example, WPA respondent Betty Curlett, a 66 year old woman from Arkansas whose mother had been enslaved, recalled: "White women wouldn't nurse their babies cause it would make their breasts fall... Rich women didn't nurse their babies, never did, cause it would cause their breasts to be flat".<sup>28</sup> The perspective of some White mistresses was that the children of enslaved women grew up healthy while their own children died of illnesses and poor health. While it was certainly a myth that Black women were better at breastfeeding than White women, such ignorance was not uncommon in the antebellum US South.<sup>29</sup>

Precisely because of the intimacy and brutal exploitation of the practice of wet-nursing, some enslaved women were also able to carry out small acts of resistance. For example, as Cassia Roth demonstrates in her article on wet-nursing in nineteenth-century Brazil, enslaved women would tell stories about Africa to the children whom they nursed, in which they also detailed their hatred towards the child's parents. Other enslaved wet nurses would eat lots of pepper, which served as a strategy to ruin their milk. In very rare

cases, they would overfeed the white infants, or wrap them so tight that they would suffocate.<sup>30</sup> Although in recent decades, more studies on wet-nursing in households in the American South have appeared, the practice is still assumed to be one in which resistance was almost impossible. For example, historians Emily West and Rose Knight argue that resistance by Black wet-nurses was rare.<sup>31</sup> Wet-nursing created a physically close relationship between an enslaved woman and her mistress, leaving no room for disobedience. Whereas it is certainly the case that resisting wet-nursing was challenging and almost impossible, this is not to say that enslaved women were innovative in finding particular forms of agency in the practice. Although the sources that could be found on wet-nursing do not necessarily demonstrate direct forms of resistance to wet-nursing, a close reading between the lines of advertisements in antebellum US southern newspapers suggests that enslaved women who were hired out as wet-nurses invented particular forms of negotiations to benefit themselves. These negotiations can be interpreted as strategies to deal with the ways in which their bodies were being taken advantage of.

For example, in *The Southern Patriot*, a local South Carolina newspaper, the southern broker and auctioneer Theodore Whitney hired out both a wet nurse and her child. He wrote:

WET NURSE; SEAMSTRESS, WASHER, IRONER, AND HOUSE SERVANT TO HIRE – A young healthy Woman with her child about six weeks old, and a boy to attend to it. She will be hired either as a Wet Nurse, or either of the above capacities.<sup>32</sup>

The words “and a boy to attend to it” emphasize that the woman in this example was trying to negotiate to serve as a wet nurse only if she was allowed to bring her own child with her. Against the backdrop that medical doctors sometimes discovered that mothers whose children had been taken away from them suffered from emotional trauma which subsequently affected their

30 Cassia Roth, “Black Nurse, White Milk: Breastfeeding, Slavery, and Abolition in 19th-Century Brazil,” *Journal of Human Lactation* 34 (2018): 804-809.

31 West and Rose, “Mothers’ Milk”.

32 *The Southern Patriot* (Charleston, South Carolina) 10 May 1842: 3, quoted in Jones-Rogers, “‘She Could...Spare One Ample Breast for the Profit of Her Owner,’” 344.

breast milk, this example of negotiation makes sense. But enslaved women might also have used this information as a way to negotiate about the presence of their own children while serving as a wet-nurse. Whereas bringing their own children along while being hired out as a wet-nurse was thus considered a necessity by some, it is also possible that enslaved mothers were aware of this form of leverage and only claimed to be able to serve as a wet-nurse if their children would be allowed to come along with them. This inventive form of systematic concession making demonstrates that enslaved women were knowledgeable about particular spaces in which they could find implicit forms of power and agency.

Wet nursing was one of the most traumatic experiences for enslaved mothers because slaveholders monitored them constantly. Enslaved mothers were often not allowed to bring their own children into the house of their master and mistress, since this would distract them from breastfeeding the White infant. Mistresses wanted to prevent competition between their own children and the infants of enslaved women. They desired their own child to receive the wet nurse's full attention and milk supply. This harmed the affectionate relationship between a mother and her own children. Some sources even demonstrate that the children of slave mothers were taken away from them so that the enslaved mother could pay full attention to the White infant.

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that southerners who hired out their enslaved women as a wet-nurse specifically mentioned that the enslaved mother was available to be hired "without a child".<sup>33</sup> Several advertisements show that southerners looking for wet-nurses specifically wrote that they desired to hire a Black wet-nurse "without incumbrance" or "without a child".<sup>34</sup> In contrast, other advertisements suggest that enslaved women who agreed to be hired out as wet nurses tried to bring their children with them. For example, *The Charleston Daily Courier* included the following advertisement: "TO HIRE, a WET NURSE, young and healthy, with her first child".<sup>35</sup> Since in some cases

33 *The Charleston Daily Courier*, November 16, 1858.

34 *Richmond Dispatch*, April 1, 1856; *The Charleston Daily Courier*, July 8, 1859.

35 *The Charleston Daily Courier*, June 23, 1847.

it was not mentioned whether the hirer preferred a wet-nurse without a child or not, these advertisements provided enslaved women with the opportunity to negotiate whether they could bring their child with them. As this shows, even when it came to the most intimate and bodily exploitative practices such as wet-nursing, enslaved women were able to exercise tactical ingenuities to empower themselves.

#### ABORTION AND INFANTICIDE AS STRATEGIC METHODS OF RESISTANCE

Historians David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine consider “attempts to limit reproduction” to be the most prevalent form of enslaved women’s resistance.<sup>36</sup> First of all, the practice of forced breeding of enslaved women was not uncommon in the antebellum US South. Various circumstances contributed to this. In 1662, the Virginia House of Burgess passed a law stating that a mother conferred her own legal status onto her baby. Other British colonies in the Americas, and later the United States, soon adopted the same legislation, which made every baby born to an enslaved mother one born into slavery, even despite the father being White or a free man. After the international slave trade was abolished in 1807, the domestic slave population could only be increased by methods of natural reproduction. As a result, slaveholders put their economic aspirations in enslaved women’s reproductive capacity. Slaveowners began to view the reproductive lives of enslaved men and women as comparable to their agricultural products and materials, where a slaveholders’ property consisted both of livestock and enslaved people. As Angela Davis writes, slave owners classified Black women as “‘breeders’ as opposed to ‘mothers’”. When their children were sold, they were taken away from their mothers “like calves from cows”.<sup>37</sup> By treating the enslaved like domestic livestock, slaveholders could distance themselves from the wrestling thought that reproduction was immoral. Just as domestic livestock was meant to reproduce, they believed, enslaved women were meant to “increase”.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Gaspar and Hine, *More Than Chattel*, 240.

<sup>37</sup> Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, 19.

<sup>38</sup> Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 82.

Primary source analysis reveals that the main reason for using methods such as abortion was because pregnant women and mothers refused to allow their children to become enslaved. These women understood that their acts could impact their masters' capital. If the process of reproduction was central in the economics of slavery, resistance through reproductive choice was an aggressive act through which enslaved women aimed to undermine the slavery system.

Many enslaved women seemed to have been knowledgeable about birth control and found the most creative ways to carry out these measures. During the Middle Passage, men and women had brought knowledge regarding fertility control from Africa to the Americas. From the early seventeenth century onwards, enslaved women had practiced several methods to limit births. Plants were mainly used as abortifacients, which came from different parts of the world. Okra and aloe, for instance, were effective abortifacients coming from West-Africa. John H. Morgan, a doctor from the US South, wrote in the mid-nineteenth century that the plant most used amongst enslaved women was tansy, because it often grew in gardens: "single tansy (*Tanacetum vulgare*) is probably employed more than any other herb, because it is more convenient, and its reputation as an abortive more generally known, being commonly cultivated in our gardens". Medicine and plants often used by enslaved women to effectively practice abortions were "the infusion or decoction of tansy, rue, roots and seed of the cotton plant, pennyroyal, cedar berries and camphor, either in gum or spirits".<sup>39</sup>

Cotton root, a plant growing on large cotton trees in the US South, was, as Morgan mentioned, also considered useful. When enslaved women worked on their knees on the cotton plantations, they often recognized the plant and used it for birth control. Mary Gaffney, a former enslaved woman born in 1846 in Seville but brought to Texas in 1860, used this type of abortifacient when her master forced her to marry a man she did not like. When she became pregnant, she used the cotton plant to get rid of the fetus:

39 John H Morgan, "An Essay on the Causes of the Production of Abortion among Our Negro Population," *Nashville Journal of Medicine and Surgery* 19, no. 2 (August 1, 1860): 117-8.



Maser was going to raise him a lot more slaves, but still I cheated Maser, I never did have any slaves to grow and Maser he wondered what was the matter. I tell you son, I kept cotton roots and chewed them all the time but I was careful not to let Maser know or catch me.<sup>40</sup>

Mary Gaffney was aware of the fact that this type of plant would obstruct her pregnancy. She used cotton root regularly yet made sure that her master would not catch her, demonstrating that she strategically premediated her act of resistance and that chewing cotton root served as a calculated ploy to obstruct her masters' reproductive desires.

According to historian Marie Jenkins Schwartz, this "herbal wisdom" of enslaved women was an alternative to "orthodox medical care" and challenged the scientific knowledge of doctors.<sup>41</sup> Doctor John H. Morgan wrote in his journal about a family who, for a period of twenty-five years, had four to six female enslaved women. While these women were all of "the proper age to breed", only "two children had been born on the place at full term". The master of this family noticed that every fourth month, the women had terminated the pregnancy, and at some point "finally confessed that they did take medicine for this purpose, and showed their master the weed which was their favorite remedy". The master had brought the "weed" to the doctor, but Morgan confessed: "I do [know] not what it is".<sup>42</sup> In this case, acts of resisting reproductive capacities were not only strategically planned, but also inventively carried out.

Other enslaved women were inventive in their ways of obstructing reproduction by openly admitting that they refused to bear children. Cynthia was an enslaved woman who confessed that she refused to reproduce. She used abortifacients as a method of resistance. Cynthia was enslaved by Edwin Fay and his wife, purchased for the purpose of bearing children. When Edwin Fay was away to fight in the Civil War as a Confederate soldier, his wife stayed on their plantation in Louisiana. In 1863, Sarah Fay wrote to her husband that she had

40 Marry Gaffney, interviewed in George P. Rawick, *The American Slave: Supplement Series 2, Volume 5: Texas Narratives, Part 4*, ed. George P. Rawick (Greenwood Press, 1979), 1453, quoted in Liese M Perrin, "Resisting Reproduction: Reconsidering Slave Contraception in the Old South," *Journal of American Studies* 35, no. 2 (2001): 262.

41 Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave*, 110.

42 Morgan, "An Essay on the Causes of the Production of Abortion among our Negro Population," 122.

trouble handling Cynthia. Edwin Fay answered: “Tell Cynthia that if she does not begin to show some signs that way when I come home that I’ll either whip her to death or sell her to the meanest man I can find on Red River”. Edwin Fay’s threatening did not seem to help. As expressed in letters, both Sarah Fay and her husband “agreed that Cynthia was trifling” and that her “behavior consisted of a steadfast refusal to either work or bear children”. When Edwin Fay discovered that Cynthia used abortifacients, he told his wife to forcefully convey the message to Cynthia that her behavior was unacceptable: “If she does not have children, I will not keep her for the work she does herself”.<sup>43</sup> While they had both threatened Cynthia before that she should remain pregnant or face sale, Cynthia continued to avoid a full-term pregnancy. What makes Cynthia the rational agent in this particular situation is the effectiveness of her refusal, which serves as her calculated ploy. Both Sarah Fay and her husband were puzzled by her attitude and desperately tried to find new ways to manage her behavior – seemingly to no avail.

In addition to birth control, some mothers sought ways to intentionally end the lives of their babies because they refused to let their children grow up in slavery. It was not always clear to the master that enslaved mothers had murdered their own infants. Some mothers rolled over during the night in bed and thereby smothered their children. Many babies also died of natural causes, such as diseases. Some mothers were unable to provide their children with adequate nutrition, since slaveowners often denied mothers the right to nurse their babies. While several babies certainly died accidentally and unintentionally, enslaved mothers also used other specific methods so that infanticide was not necessarily recognized by their slaveholder if it occurred. Mothers understood that infanticide came with significant risks, especially since slave owners viewed it as “a crime against their master’s property”.<sup>44</sup> As such, they often kept silent about their actions.

43 Edwin Fay to Sarah Fay, June 4, 1863, in *This Infernal War: The Confederate Letters of Sgt. Edwin H. Fay*, ed. Bell Irwin Wiley (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958), 279-80, quoted in Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 116.

44 Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 324.

Nonetheless, infanticide was not an uncommon practice in the South.<sup>45</sup> When former slave Lewis Clarke from Kentucky was asked the question “Have you ever known a slave mother to kill her own children?”, he responded that he had heard of two stories in particular. He had heard of an enslaved mother who did not want to be separated from her infant and therefore took her child into the cellar and ended the baby’s life. Another mother with three children apparently took her children to a well, threw them in and then jumped after them, drowning all of them. Especially the latter case reveals that—despite the abhorrence of the act and the severe hopelessness the mother must have felt—she thought strategically about how to end the lives of her children. Assuming that neither she nor her children knew how to swim, it seems that the well was purposefully chosen as a place where — once the attempt was made — escaping death was not possible. In addition to these two occurrences, Clarke stated that he had frequently heard of other instances.<sup>46</sup>

In another example, a physician from the US called Charles Grandison Parsons wrote about a slaveholding family he visited in Georgia in the 1850s, where he learned that the enslaved woman of the family called Sylva had killed all of her thirteen children with her own bare hands. As Parsons learned, Sylva was a true victim of her master’s abuse. One time, her slaveowner was so angry that he wrung off four of Sylva’s toes, leaving her with only six toes left; four on one foot, and two on the other. Rather than bringing her children into this evil world, Sylva decided that they should never suffer the same horrors she endured. While she had given birth to thirteen children, it was confessed to Parsons that Sylva had killed all of them in their infancy.<sup>47</sup> Whereas this powerful source has been used and re-used by historians with the purpose to demonstrate not only Sylva’s agency but also the fact that infanticide appeared in the US South, it is also important to emphasize Sylva’s strategic planning of these acts. The fact that Sylva ended the lives of all thirteen children emphasizes not only her calculated premeditation, but also her awareness of being a victim of the patriarchal system and of the gendered role she had to fulfill in the economy of slavery.

45 One of the most popular cases of infanticide in the case of Margaret Garner, which also served as inspiration for Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*. Due to the popularity of that case and the numerous references of historians, this article has decided to instead focus on other cases of infanticide in the US South. See, for example, *Gendered Resistance: Women, Slavery, and the Legacy of Margaret Garner*, eds. Mary E. Frederickson and Delores M. Walters (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

46 Lewis Garrard Clarke, *Narratives of the Sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke, Sons of a Soldier of the Revolution, During a Captivity of More Than Twenty Years Among the Slaveholders of Kentucky, One of the So Called Christian States of North America* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1845), 111. Available at <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/clarke/clarke.html>.

47 Charles Grandison Parsons, *Inside View of Slavery: Or A Tour Among the Planters* (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1855), 212.

One of the most important reasons why infanticide was practiced by mothers is because they did not want their infants to be sold. One of the WPA respondents recalled a story from an enslaved woman she knew and whose master did not allow her to keep her babies: “when her babies would get about a year or two of age he’d sell them and it would break her heart. She never got to keep them”. As a result, the enslaved mother “just studied all the time about how she would have to give it up”. When her fourth baby was two months old, the woman “got up and give it something out of a bottle and purty soon it was dead”. Smith also described how everyone who was aware of what happened kept silent about the incident since otherwise her master would “beat her nearly to death”.<sup>48</sup> This very rare yet insightful testimony perfectly demonstrates that enslaved women thought carefully about ways to prevent their children from growing up enslaved, seeking knowledge about plants and other medicine to figure out the best remedy to get rid of their offspring.

## CONCLUSION

By combining a wide variety of sources which collectively focus on the bodies of enslaved women and forms of resistance, this article underscored how enslaved women were strategic and inventive in the way they resisted sexual abuse and reproductive exploitation. They also used forms of negotiation to exert agency in the practice of wet-nursing. Additionally, they thought strategically about using methods such as abortion and infanticide to obstruct their masters’ reproductive desires. Whereas wet-nursing appears the most difficult practice to resist, enslaved women nonetheless discovered strategic ways by which they could influence the power dynamics. Although infanticide might serve as the most extreme form of resisting bodily abuses — whether it is resisting forced reproduction or preventing infants from growing up in slavery — the sources indicate that even acts of infanticide were sometimes premediated and carefully planned. Altogether, by shedding light on the tactics enslaved women adopted, this article refutes the myth that enslaved

48 Lou Smith, in Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of the United States of America From Interviews with Former Slaves*. Typewritten records prepared by the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938, vol. 13, 302. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn130/>.

women were impulsive in resisting bodily exploitation. Instead of viewing enslaved women as intellectually ill-equipped, the sources in this study clearly show their intellectual decisiveness, which make their acts and methods of resistance no less confrontational than those of their male counterparts.

Marcella Schute is a PhD candidate in American History at Leiden University and the Roosevelt Institute for American Studies. Her PhD project focuses on covert and overt efforts by the state of Louisiana to reopen the transatlantic slave trade in the late 1850s. Besides Marcella's interest in the history of slavery and politics in the mid-nineteenth century American South, she is also interested in women's history. For the master American Studies at the University of Amsterdam (UVA), she wrote her thesis about enslaved women's resistance, which formed the basis for this article.

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

Isabel Fontbona

University of Girona, Girona, Spain

*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 “SUBALTERNS” 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 unfertile 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 Steele 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

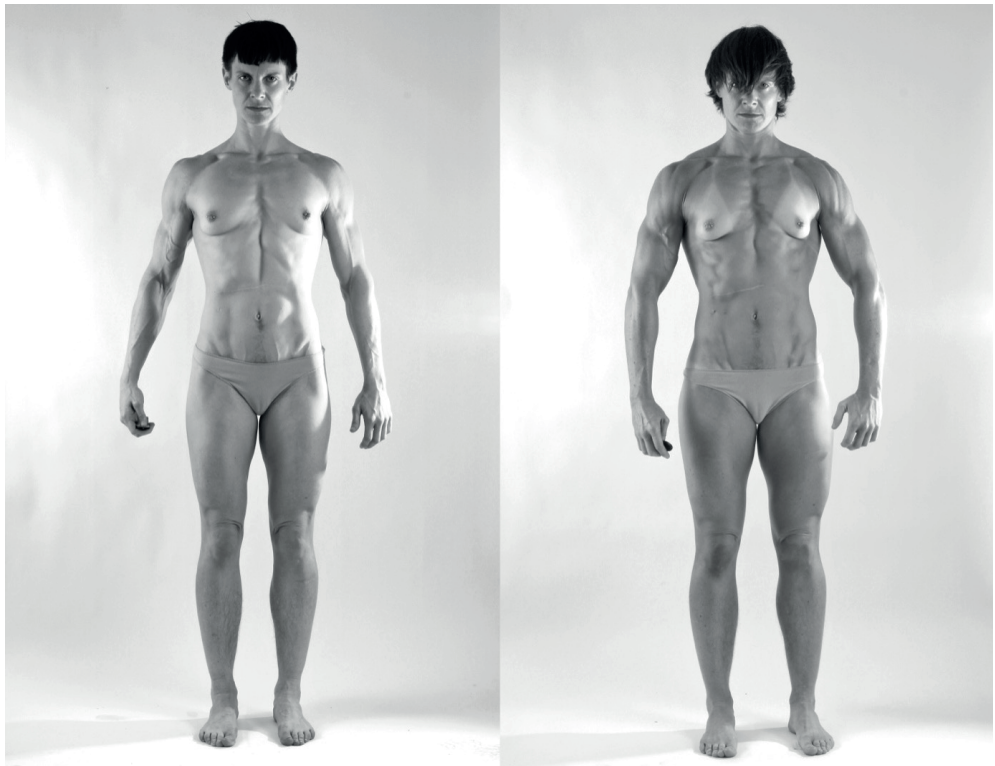


Fig. 7. *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture*. Cassils. *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture*, Timelapse Before/After (Detail), 2011. Performance (6 months), video and photography, Los Angeles, California, USA. Courtesy of the artist.

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.

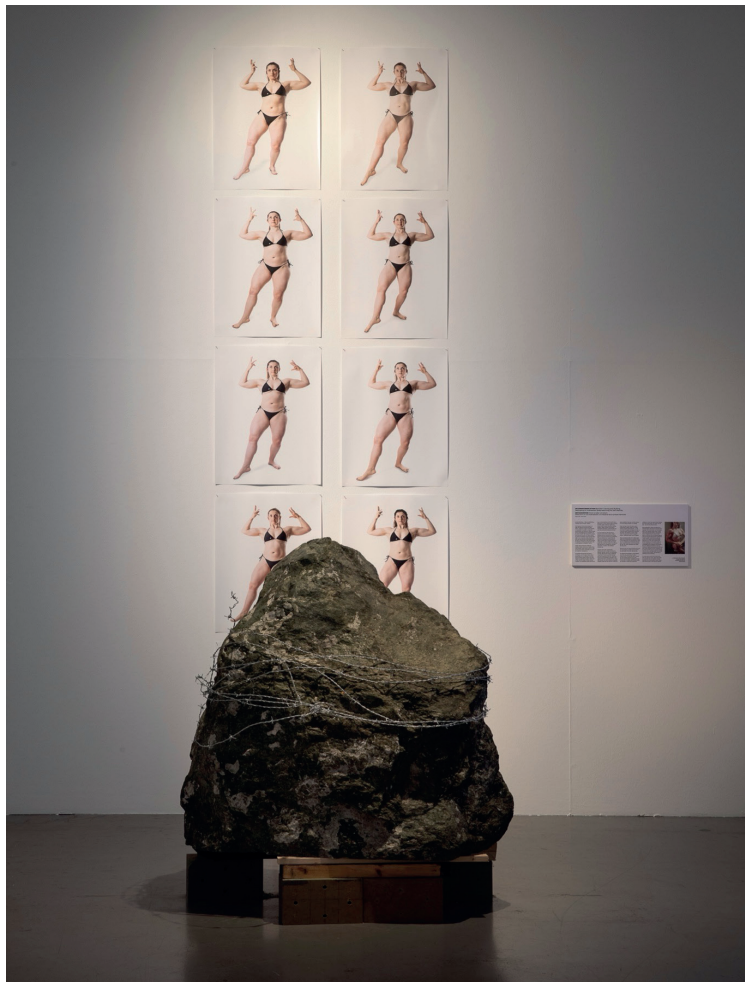


Fig. 8. *Transmogrification* (general view exhibition). Isa Fontbona, *Transmogrification. Between Carving and Bulking. Destroying an Evanescent Body searching for Self Identity*, Performance (2 years), photography, and texts. Photographer: Sergi Pérez, Vic, Barcelona, Spain (2019-2021). At the exhibition “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.

# CAO FEI'S 曹斐 *I, MIRROR*

## BODIES IN SURVEILLANCE CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE EXPANDED MEDIA ART

Shiyu Gao

The University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

*With the advancement of digital technologies, surveillance in the People's Republic of China (PRC) has evolved from state and corporate modes towards everyday domains. This integration occurs through the growing reliance of individuals on digital infrastructure in their ordinary interactions, which embodies the concept of 'surveillance culture'. These novel surveillance methods and control mechanisms have given rise to new forms of institutional power imbalances. This paper focuses on multimedia artist Cao Fei's 曹斐 (b. 1978) artwork *i, mirror* (2007) to explore the artistic strategies employed with updated media to reflect on the PRC's developing surveillance culture critically. Through a thorough analysis of *i, mirror*, the research investigates how the artist represents the virtual body to complicate the notion of post-panoptical surveillance culture as a mechanism of control beyond the real realm. The paper examines how the body's shifting identities, as both the object and the subject of the subtler surveillance collectively undertaken by the PRC's authorities and civilians in their everyday lives, leads contemporary artists to explore the potential for new subjectivities in the new age of 'digital China'. The overarching aim is to explore how contemporary Chinese artists can strategically utilise surveillance technologies as a way of political counter-surveillance to challenge systemic power asymmetries.*

### INTRODUCTION

With the advancement of digital technologies, surveillance in the People's Republic of China (PRC) has increased from state and corporate modes toward

1 Beyond the previous scholarship on discourses on art practices with creative media, I propose Chinese *expanded* media art as artistic experiments that incorporate, alter, and address emerging forms of media technologies since the 1980s. It extends from film (video and moving images) to digital, informatics and computer-based technologies, robotics, genetics and biotechnology and others. It includes various art forms such as digital art, interactive art, bio-art, Internet art, and virtual art explored by Chinese artists and diasporic ones in a globalised art world. The term emphasises the 'expanded' to highlight the organic and active quality of contemporary Chinese art incorporating updated media. See more in Shiyu Gao, *Beyond the Binary Body: Reconstructing Subjectivity and Identity in Chinese Expanded Media Art, 1988 to the Present*, PhD diss., The University of Edinburgh, 2023.

2 David Lyon, *The Culture of Surveillance: Watching as a Way of Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

integration within mundane life through information infrastructure and individuals' increasing reliance on the digital in ordinary relationships. The new surveillance methods and control mechanisms lead to the creation of new forms of institutional power asymmetries. The paper will focus on Cao Fei's (b. 1978) artwork *i, mirror* (2007) to investigate the artistic strategies of utilising novel media to reflect on the developing surveillance culture critically. With a close analysis of *i, mirror*, this paper intends to complicate the ideas of the post-panoptical surveillance culture as a way of control beyond the real world. The paper will examine ways in which the artist represents the virtual body to shed light on the evolving panoptic monitoring, instituting the panoptic control systems and power imbalances. This research aims to rethink the interrelated identities of artists and the audience to explore an alternative subjectivity in digital surveillance expanded into the everyday domain in the digital PRC. The ultimate goal is to explore how contemporary Chinese artists can create a political counter-surveillance by tactically using or disrupting surveillance technologies to challenge institutional power asymmetries.<sup>1</sup>

## THEORETICAL CONTEXT

From its very foundation, the PRC could be considered a surveillance state, with the severity waxing and waning depending on leadership and political atmosphere.<sup>2</sup> Each ensuing regime has increased the levels of oversight culminating in today's surveillance state under Xi Jinping. Xi has expanded control over every aspect of daily life; art and culture are no exception. Beyond the political sphere, the use of surveillance has extended to commercial purposes with giant corporations, such as Alibaba Group and Tencent, constantly collecting, analysing, censoring, and controlling individual activities driven by advances in data science and the use of big data in commercial practices. These combined aspects of surveillance have stimulated a wave of contemporary Chinese artistic creation that critically responds to the growing surveillance in various forms with representatives like Ai Weiwei 艾未未

(b. 1957), Zhang Peili张培力 (b. 1957), Song Dong宋东 (b. 1966), Cui Xiuwen 崔岫闻 (b. 1970–2018), and many more.

In addition to traditional surveillance forms, the rapid development of social media has offered citizens' phones and smartwatches opportunities to collect personal data, activities, and medical information, especially with the impacts of COVID-19, which generated new surveillance methods as a control mechanism in all spheres of life.<sup>3</sup> To better understand surveillance catalysed by the rapid development of social media nowadays, David Lyon develops the term 'surveillance culture', which goes beyond the boundaries of main theories such as 'surveillance state' and 'surveillance society' to emphasise surveillance conducted by ordinary people.<sup>4</sup> The PRC is constructing an unprecedented 'surveillance culture', as David Lyon identifies, through "organisational dependence, political-economic power, security linkages, and social media engagement".<sup>5</sup> In Lyon's point of view, the culture of surveillance received attention at the beginning of the twenty-first century, particularly after the 11 September attacks (also known as '9/11') on the United States. It became less visible with the advent of social media, especially after Edward Snowden (b.1983) copied and disclosed classified information from the US National Security Agency (NSA) in 2013. During the post-Cold War period, surveillance states focused on capturing significant aspects of surveillance such as the activities of intelligence agencies, primarily governmental and corporate forces. According to Lyon, the concept of a surveillance society is applied initially to show the ways in which surveillance has extended beyond its initial space, such as government departments, police agencies, and workplaces to change ways of everyday life, including the 'mass surveillance' engaged in by the NSA and its 'Five Eyes', which refers to the partnered foreign intelligence agencies of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States, and the 'big five': Apple, Google, Microsoft, Amazon, and Facebook.<sup>6</sup> Despite the emphasis on how certain agencies manipulate surveillance to affect the routines of social life, the notion of 'surveillance society'

3 Kazuhiko Shibuya, *The Rise of Artificial Intelligence and Big Data in Pandemic Society: Crises, Risk and Sacrifice in a New World Order* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2022).

4 David Lyon, *The Culture of Surveillance: Watching as a Way of Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

5 David Lyon, "Digital Citizenship and Surveillance | Surveillance Culture: Engagement, Exposure, and Ethics in Digital Modernity," *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 826.

6 Ibid.

is insufficient to examine the ways in which ordinary people engage with surveillance in their daily lives.

In the PRC, a surveillance culture, facilitated by advanced new technologies and grounded in previous corporate and state modes, has been developing toward integration within mundane life through information infrastructure and individuals' increasing reliance on the digital in ordinary relationships. This rapidly rising surveillance culture in the PRC, calls for a different approach to artistic practice. Multimedia artist Cao Fei's series of art pieces based on the virtual platform Second Life (SL) would be a good instance to expose the increasingly invisible surveillance of ordinary people in their everyday lives generated by social media and digital supervision. There are various typical features of today's surveillance, including data being effortlessly quantified, highly traceable, easily monetised, and collectible at a distance. This development shows that surveillance in the digital era is 'deterritorialized'.<sup>7</sup> Surveillance culture today relates to social, economic, and political conditions and is constructed by "organisational dependence, political-economic power, security linkages, and social media engagement".<sup>8</sup> Individuals living in the context of a surveillance culture are not only being watched but also monitoring others as well, as surveillance itself has become a way of life.

Expanding surveillance culture is constructing a subtler form of control and power that is 'post-panoptical'.<sup>9</sup> The concept of the Panopticon is derived from the eighteenth-century design of the modern prison created by Jeremy Bentham. It features a circular architecture with a central control tower for the guards to watch inmates at the periphery so that the prisoners in the cells cannot tell when they are being observed or detect the presence of the inspector hidden in the tower. Although it is uncertain when 'watching' actually takes place, prisoners and their inspectors are constantly aware of their interrelationships. Michel Foucault built on Bentham's panopticon to develop the concept of the disciplinary society. The idea of a panopticon became one model

7 Lyon, *The Culture of Surveillance: Watching as a Way of Life*, 11.

8 Lyon, "Digital Citizenship and Surveillance | Surveillance Culture," 826.

9 Lyon, *The Culture of Surveillance*, 33.



of surveillance and a vital way of maintaining control in modern times through facilitating movements among watchers while prohibiting them among prisoners. By that, the Panopticon induces “a sense of permanent and unverifiable visibility that ensures the authority of control and surveillance”.<sup>10</sup> The central tower’s privileged position, all-seeing without being seen, produces “a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad”, according to Foucault—the invisible reach of power is ever-present.<sup>11</sup> In David Lyon’s opinion, the current surveillance culture is ‘post-panoptical’ as the inspectors can “slip away, escaping to unreachable realms” through advanced digital technologies.<sup>12</sup> The remainder of the paper focuses on Cao Fei’s *i, mirror* to complicate the idea of post-panoptical surveillance culture expanded into the daily life of the digital era.

10 Justin Clemens, “Virtually Anywhere Real-time New-old Avatar-human Entertainment art: Cao Fei Online,” *Journal of Art* 11 (2011), 113.

11 Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 195-228.

12 Lyon, *The Culture of Surveillance*, 33.

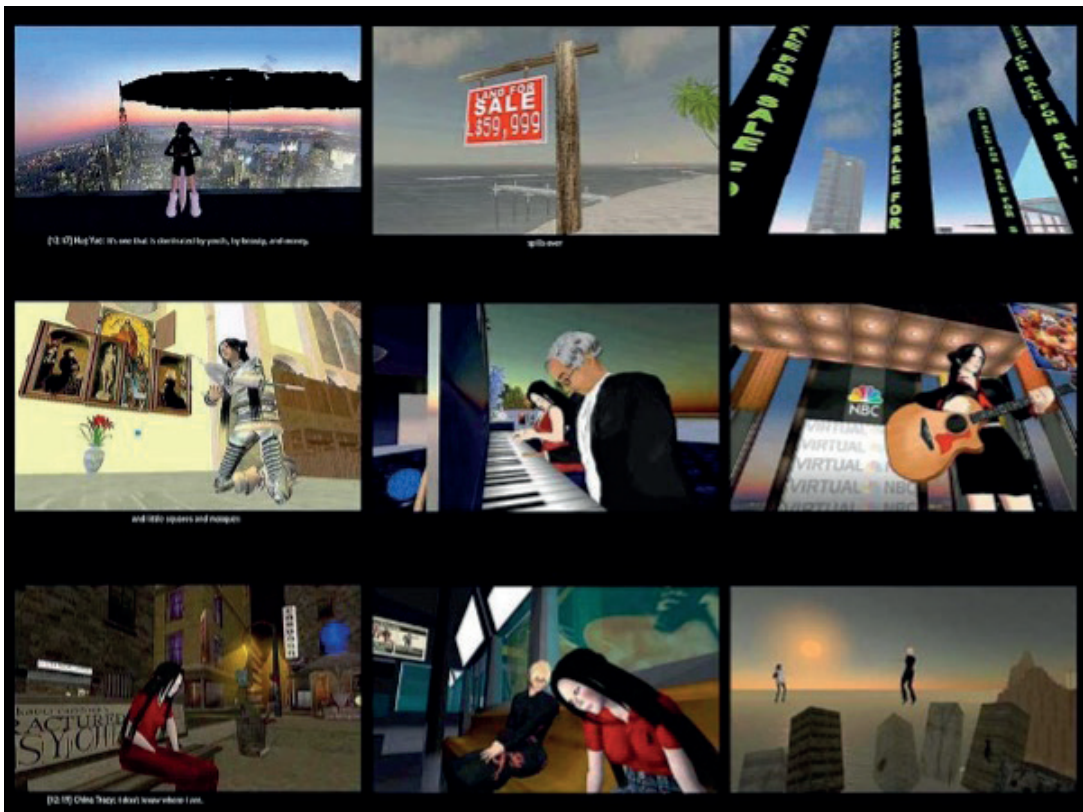


Fig. 1. Cao Fei 曹斐, *i, mirror*. 2007, Machinima, 28 minutes, video still.

13 Machinima, combining 'machine' and 'cinema', is a type of filmmaking related to a virtual environment. Machinima is entirely reliant on interactive three-dimensional computer-graphics engines to provide computer-generated imagery (CGI) in real time. See Lyon, "Digital Citizenship and Surveillance | Surveillance Culture," 825. Also, Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1958).

14 Second Life was launched by Linden Lab in 2003. "Second Life," accessed 28 January 2020, <https://secondlife.com/>. More information about the platform of Second Life can be found in Michael Rymaszewski, Wagner James Au, Mark Wallace, Catherine Winters, Cory Ondrejka, and Benjamin Batstone-Cunningham, *Second life: The official guide* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2007). Second Life has inspired research from multiple disciplinary perspectives, including Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Prodsusage* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008); Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An anthropologist explores the virtually human* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Christine L. Liao, "Avatars, Second Life, and New Media Art: The Challenge for Contemporary Art Education," *Art Education* 61.2 (2008), 87-91.

## VIRTUAL BODIES UNDER SURVEILLANCE

Cao's well-known machinima *i, Mirror* (2007), based on SL, sheds light on the subtler, less detectable and potentially repressive forms of social control embedded in digital surveillance, which is emerging as a "part of a whole way of life" (Fig. 1).<sup>13</sup> SL is an online platform that offers its users a three-dimensional virtual world. People can enter SL by setting up their self-customised avatar.<sup>14</sup> With SL's slogan, "Your world. Your imagination", the new virtual world stimulates a new artistic system beyond established boundaries, including art creation, online exhibitions, art education, and communication through a virtual environment.<sup>15</sup> There are artworks directly created for SL by figures such as Eva and Franco Mattes and Garrett Lynch.<sup>16</sup> Cao started exploring the SL world with the virtual incarnation, China Tracy, in 2006 (Fig. 2). Since then, Cao has developed various art pieces in different forms involving SL, such as the online virtual urban construction *RMB City* (2007-2011), the performance *People's Limbo in RMB City* (2009), *Live in RMB City* (2009), and *RMB City Opera* (2009).<sup>17</sup>



Fig. 2. Cao Fei 曹斐, *i, mirror*. 2007, Machinima, 28 minutes, video still.



The final scene of the first part ends with China Tracy standing naked in the sea facing the sunset, as the background voice says, “You naked. Remember. Your body was ready. Your covered with poems. Remember...”.

The second part of *i, mirror* narrates how China Tracy and Hug Yue, a young Asian-looking male avatar, meet and develop a close engagement with each other (Fig. 3). The part starts with Hug Yue wearing a tuxedo and playing the piano. It attracts China Tracy, and then she joins him with her guitar in front of the place with the NBC logo. Then the subtitles appear and show their messages indicating that China Tracy is from China and Hug Yue is from San Francisco. Subsequently, they begin to travel together around SL to urban city centres and tropical landscapes, taking a tram past skyscrapers, hot air ballooning at sea, and in bars while exchanging non-sequiturs. While they are holding hands and walking along the street with different shops, Hug Yue says, “We all do that. We do not act. We simply be who we are”. China Tracy responds, “Everybody is an actor in parallel world”. Then Hug Yue says, “All the world is a stage”. After a series of scenes with a decaying urban landscape, smoke rising from unknown machinery, and the moon over flaming fires, China Tracy and

20 Octavio Paz, *A Tale of Two Gardens: Poems from India, 1952-1995*, trans. Eliot Weinberger (New York: A New Direction, 1997), 3.



Fig. 3. Cao Fei 曹斐, *i, mirror*. 2007, Machinima, 28 minutes, video still.

Hug Yue sit at a table in the fine dining restaurant facing the floor-to-ceiling windows with expansive views of the lighted city beyond. China Tracy asks, “What do you think it about the digital world?” Hug Yue replies, “It’s one that is dominated by youth, by beauty and money... And it’s all an illusion”. At the end of part two, China Tracy and Hug Yue play a piano duet and dance waltzes. Then Hug Yue puts on old avatars and reveals his age in real life. Their correspondence in SL ends with them as friends instead of in a potential romantic relationship. The second part ends with the sea in sunrise and subtitles their poetic dialogue. Hug Yue: “That was a beautiful song. ‘When the prison doors are opened, the real dragon will fly out’”.

The third chapter of the machinima presents various kinds of avatars in SL. For instance, a young man wearing a red hat with a yellow star and a black T-shirt with a portrait of Ernesto Che Guevara is smoking in the park while there are red symbols of the hammer and sickle floating into the air; a hedgehog-like human being; a man in a green top with a tattoo of Chinese characters *wushi* 武士 (warrior) on his neck; a rabbit with long hair with a black top; a dog with spiky purple hair wearing a bra. It shows commercial and entertainment places as well, such as the shops of avatars where users can purchase faces, bodies, and other accessories. The artist used to buy “real skin” (to look better) and a “fake pussy” (to have sex in SL’s virtual-sex clubs):

I always imagine human beings behind hollow digits, all those lonely souls. We are not what we originally are, and yet we remain unchanged. Hopefully there’s new possibility of combination in our electronic second life, a new force which transcends this mortal coil. On the reality’s end of this combined ultra-space, there are still love for simplicity and the pursuit of freedom. We are thrown into this world hollow. Every world is an abyss. God loves people, but we are also each other’s salvation. To go virtual is the only way to forget about the real darkness.<sup>21</sup>

21 See more in Cao Fei, *i, mirror*, 2007, <http://www.caofei.com/works.aspx?year=2007&wtid=3>, accessed 30 Oct 2023.

With the subtitles, China Tracy, with a fluffy tail, enters the darkness, where the sunlight slowly fades.

*i, mirror* reflects the panoptic surveillance in two important but different respects. First, the Panopticon could be a reflection of Hug Yue, a random avatar China Tracy meets in the SL, genuine identity in real life. The second chapter of *i, mirror* based on the encounter between China Tracy and Hug Yue is explicit about the work's focus on surveillance and the relationship between real life and SL. At one point, China Tracy, behind a barbed-wire fence, says to Hug Yue, "Some eyes watching us, we all in the film". Then it shifts to a different scene where China Tracy is looking at her own reflection in a toilet mirror and asks, "Is my avatar my mirror?" Hug Yue answers, "Others it is reflection of things... Like aspirations". With a spinning "crane shot", China Tracy is sitting alone on a bench at night, "Sometimes I'm confusing the RL and SL. I don't know where I am". Hug Yue responds, "We all in the Panopticon".

Hug Yue, a young, handsome, Asian-look man in SL, turns out to be a sixty-five-year-old American at that time named Ed Mead, an ardent Communist who was sentenced to prison for eighteen years for robbing a bank to get his hands on 'revolutionary capital' in the 1970s.<sup>22</sup> Not until Cao tries to meet him in reality does she learn his true identity. Due to his long-term imprisonment, Ed Mead has not been socialised or experienced changes outside prison while being rehabilitated. After his release, it was not easy for him to engage with current society, which had dramatically changed from before he went to jail. When Ed Mead found SL, he quickly became obsessed with SL and his avatar, a young person who enjoyed discussing freedom. The name of Ed Mead's avatar, Hug Yue, shows his longing for intimacy and understanding. The virtual body he created represents the youthful years that this man, who has been monitored for years, craves and wishes to return to. Therefore, avatars are the connecting point between the user and cyberspace and the link between personal and virtual identity. The interaction between Hug Yue and China Tracy

22 Shuqin Cui, *Gendered Bodies: Toward a Women's Visual Art in Contemporary China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016), 174.



creates multiple layers of connections between the virtual and real world. In that respect, Hug Yue could be treated as Ed Mead's reflection of an ideal identity. As for Cao Fei, Ed Mead's experience in prison as a political inmate is a representative case for presenting the idea of imprisonment in real life and the virtual world. In addition, the conversation between China Tracy and Hug Yue could represent an idealist of the last generation engaging with the current world. The artistic ways to connect different individuals beyond a temporal and spatial dimension have been applied in Cao Fei's various works.

Second, the 'mirror' included in the name of the art piece indicates Cao's intention to reflect the invisible panoptic surveillance in the digital world. The Panopticon produced in SL is a reflection of the increasing surveillance culture in the PRC. SL, populated by user-created content, disguises how it is still a computer-mediated programme run on a server, monitoring every possible experience of its virtual citizens. Any activities on SL are "always-already recordable, replayable, surveyable, and able to be reconstituted and represented in any number of forms—whether as still-life digital prints or video".<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the digital programme code operates as the central control tower of the Panopticon, which can be invisible in virtual space.

## CYBORG

*i, mirror* not only embodies the Panopticon metaphor as a way of control, but more importantly, the art piece throws the idea of post-panoptical surveillance into question through producing virtual bodies' changing multi-identities. In the virtual realm like SL, users have the chance to create their virtual bodies which can release them from the restraints of their real life, such as how Ed Mead invents Hug Yue. As Howard Rheingold states, "we cannot see one another in cyberspace, gender, age, national origin, and physical appearance are not apparent unless a person wants to make such characteristics public".<sup>24</sup> Such anonymity frees users from both real-life identity and their physical and

23 Clemens, "Virtually Anywhere Real-time New-old Avatar-human Entertainment Art," 122.

24 Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1993), 26.

social conventions, opening up an alternative way of individual interaction. However, people in the virtual world cannot entirely detached from the real world because any creations in cyberspace could be a suggestion of a projection of individuals' 'selves' with their true imagination and desires. China Tracy, Cao Fei's avatar, is linked with her national and gender identities in real life not only from the name but also from the avatar's body, including her dress code and preferences.

Avatars—the body images users create for themselves in the virtual realm—are not just a reflection of the user's physical body but also an accumulation of expectations and aspirations. More importantly, avatars “carry information about personal desires and cultural experiences, avatars do not represent the dream of cyberspace as a space without stereotype of human and discrimination”.<sup>25</sup> China Tracy exemplifies Cao's intention to reorient a new identity in this fresh virtual world, free from the constraints and repressions of real life in various aspects. In terms of the visual representation of the body's name, 'Tracy', an un-Chinese name undoubtedly might be understood as presenting constant local and global negotiation and compromise within China, conveyed by the cultural politics of the language (name) used between the margins (Chinese) and centre (English). 'China', on the one hand, where the artist is from in reality, indicates the avatar's cultural heritage. On the other hand, in SL, China is represented as *RMB City*, an imaginary urban landscape that goes beyond established social systems and the orthodox identity of China's reality.

25 Liao, “Avatars, Second Life, and New Media Art,” 89.

26 Lin Yihua, “Xüni shijiezhongde zhoongguo yishu cheng” (虚拟世界中的中国艺术城 Chinese art city of virtual world), quote from Cui Shuqin, *Gendered Bodies*, 177.

*RMB City* was created by Cao in 2007 as there was no place familiar to Chinese people in SL, and “collective identity and memory will be lost if no one ever logs onto globalised cyberspace and virtual world” (Fig. 4).<sup>26</sup> The topography of *RMB City* combines distinguishable landmarks of both historical and contemporary Chinese reality with architectural imaginings. Examples include the National Stadium (also known as Bird's Nest), where the 2008 Beijing Olympic opening ceremony took place, Beijing CCTV Headquarters designed by Rem





Fig. 4. Cao Fei 曹斐, *RMB City: A Second Life City Planning*, 2007, colour video with sound, 5 minutes 57 seconds, video still.

Koolhaas (b. 1944) and Ole Scheeren (b. 1971), Shanghai's Oriental Pearl TV Tower by Jiang Huan Cheng 江欢成 (b. 1938), and Hong Kong Bank of China Tower by I.M. Pei 贝聿铭 (1917–2019). Cao demystifies the social-historical identification of Chinese cities and creates a parody of the Chinese urban landscape. For example, she transforms Tiananmen 天安门, a historical imperial palace where the Founding Ceremony of the People's Republic of China took place in 1949 and the student-led pro-democracy protests were held in 1989,

27 Wu Hung, *Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space* (London: Reaktion, 2005), 9.

28 For more in-depth analysis of how Cao Fei's *RMB City* reinvents individual and national identity in the virtual world as a critique of China's authorised identity and social structure in the context of rampant urbanisation and industrialisation, see Gao, "Beyond the Binary Body."

29 Mayors include Ulli Sigg (SL: Ullisigg Cisse) from 10 January to 17 April 2009, a famous Swiss collector of Chinese contemporary art; Alan Lau (SL: AlanLau Nirvana) from 17 April to 2 August 2009; Jerome San (SL: Super Concierge Cristole) from 2 August to November 2009, the former director of the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA), and Erica Dubach (SL: E3A Digital) from 10 January 2010. Cao Fei, "RMB City Mayors," accessed 28 April 2023, <http://rmbcity.com/city-hall/mayor/>

30 Kanon, "China Tracy, 'Einstein on the Beach — Chasing the Moon/ 沙滩上的爱因斯坦-追月,' 2021," *Medium*, 6 September 2021, <https://medium.com/kanon-log/china-tracy-einstein-on-the-beach-chasing-the-moon-沙滩上的爱因斯坦-追月-2021-573c8c18bb>, accessed 29 May 2023.

into the People's Palace, which is the gateway of RMB City and provides information services for visitors. Tiananmen Square 天安门广场 in the real world has become the People's Waterpark, which is the multifunctional entertainment centre of RMB City. *Renmin yingxiong jinian bei* 人民英雄纪念碑 (The Monument to the People's Heroes) at Tiananmen Square holds the rotating giant Ferris wheel. Wu Hung explains that the concept of 'political space' refers to the architectonic embodiment of political ideology and is an architectural site activating political action and expression. The space can be conceived either as a conceptual sphere of public discourse or as a physical place where public events take place.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the rebuilding of the 'political space' like Tiananmen Square in *RMB City* subverts the established identification of Chinese society. Moreover, the giant statue of Chairman Mao is drifting away in the sea, and a box containing a Buddha statue is floating in the ocean. This could be seen as an analogy to the fact that political ideology and religious beliefs which used to govern in Chinese history are declining. The national flag filled with five-pointed stars has become People's Music Plaza, where people produce loud sounds in the sky. Cao shifts the national and political symbols into the virtual world as a way to undermine China's authorised identity and social structure. More importantly, the way of governing in RMB City critiques the authoritarian power in China's current reality.<sup>28</sup> For example, *RMB City* has mayors who are elected to govern the city with a three-month term of office.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, China Tracy, who is regarded as the hostess and guardian of RMB City, shows the artist's exploration of an alternative identity in the cybernetic sphere relating to reality while transcending it.

The visual representation of China Tracy's body indicates Cao's ideas of reconstructing identity and relocating individuals in virtual space. China Tracy's main appearance is that of a young, slim Chinese-look woman. She has a smiling face, "being a bit sweet and shy" with a traditional Chinese hairstyle.<sup>30</sup> More importantly, the representation of China Tracy's body is versatile, presenting various characters and styles depending on the different circumstances. For

instance, China Tracy is an elegant lady wearing an evening gown when she played the piano with Hug Yue but she is a girl in student uniform while talking to him on the bench. China Tracy's body is a mixture of Chinese heritage and contemporary pop culture. For that, the bodily interpretation of China Tracy embodies Donna Jeanne Haraway's prominent concept of Cyborg, "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction", as a way to articulate a fundamental subversion of the politics rooted in the nature of class, race and gender.<sup>31</sup> Haraway states, "Cyborgs are not reverent; they do not re-member the cosmos. They are wary of holism, but needy for connection—they seem to have a natural feel for united-front politics, but without the vanguard party".<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the emerging Cyborgs provide an alternative digital subjectivity in the transitioning society from "an organic, industrial society to a polymorphous, information system".<sup>33</sup> Through creating the mercurial, and malleable body, Cao's cyborg China Tracy in SL embodies the aspiration of a new subject or subjectivity for subverting the established social forms and material practices.

The ways of representing China Tracy as a documentary highlight the paradox of the method which is composed of the presentation of the creation itself. In *i, mirror*, the creator is China Tracy herself, the actor and subject of a creative work that is both an animation and a documentary, as well as the producer, director and editor of it at the same time. As Cao explains:

I was directly recording myself as I moved through Second Life, but as I'm watching myself, I'm also controlling myself; I'm simultaneously a director and actor. But I enjoy exploring everything and not knowing what will happen in the next step. A lot of the process is waiting for something to happen, and I didn't try to make something fake.<sup>34</sup>

As the piece is made of China Tracy's immersive experience in SL, it empowers the audience to intrude on the artist's private life in virtual life. For that,

31 Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149.

32 *Ibid.*, 151.

33 *Ibid.*, 161.

34 *i, mirror* premiered at the fifty-second Venice Biennale as part of the Chinese Pavilion exhibition, curated by Hou Hanru. Alice Ming Wai Jim, "The Different Worlds of Cao Fei," *Yishu* 11.3 (2012), 83.

the viewer becomes the inspector of the work and another individual's virtual world. China Tracy acknowledges she is being watched directly through her conversation with others like Hug Yue. However, the avatars created by ordinary users were also documented and became the objects of being watched by the artist and the unseen software.

The interchanging identities of the viewer and the viewed illustrate how individuals participate and even engage with digital surveillance. Daily activities in everyday life, such as sending messages to friends, sharing images, listening to music, watching online videos, and posting anything with tags or locations on social media, create user-generated content that produces enormous quantities of data that could be used to follow and monitor daily behaviour. In this respect, the contribution of ordinary people to surveillance is unprecedented.<sup>35</sup> David Lyon states, "What people perceive, by and large, is the amazing power of the internet to keep them connected, amused, entertained, supplied, updated, reassured and informed. As they engage with the online world, however, they not only improvise responses to the subtle ways that they are watched but also use those surveillance technologies for their own ends".<sup>36</sup> *i, mirror* reflects Lyon's opinion of the increasing surveillance in the virtual space as both the artist and the audience have multiple identities. Creating shifting identities shows the efforts to counter surveillance, which seems impossible as the inspector is the invisible control system created by digital programmes.

## CONCLUSION

The advancement of digital technologies has played a vital role in producing more invisible surveillance, expanding from monitoring by the authorities to mutual vigilance among ordinary people in every respect of daily life. The PRC's rapidly emerging 'surveillance culture' has constituted a more flexible, mutable and mobile form of control and power, generating new asymmetries. Even though the surveillance and control system in mainland China has reached an

<sup>35</sup> Lyon, *The Culture of Surveillance*, 1.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

extreme with the rapid developments of technologies, new ways of resistance have been emerging, such as the PRC's pro-democracy protests in 2022. What can art do for the current world? Despite *i, mirror's* creation in 2007, before the emergence of a more pervasive surveillance culture under the rule of Xi Jinping since 2012, the work manages to respond to this question as it allows us to re-think how the PRC and the world came to be in the current surveillance culture.

With the analysis of the body with creative media in Cao Fei's *i, mirror*, this essay shows how the artist utilises the representation of the virtual incarnation, China Tracy, to allude to Haraway's 'Cyborg' for a renewal of subjectivity. The virtual bodies' awareness of the more invisible and panoptic surveillance in the cybernetic realm could represent a method of individual empowerment, which challenges the control mechanism in the PRC. Creating virtual bodies' multiple identities in *i, mirror*, Cao alludes to the mutual engagement of the audience and the overseer in the cybernetic space and explores the possibility of countering the surveillance and control system in the digital PRC. The artistic reflection on the PRC's subtler surveillance can offer a new opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the human condition and explore the possibilities of what the future holds for humanity.

Shiyu Gao is based at the University of Edinburgh, where they are teaching Art History and Theory and have obtained their PhD degree in History of Art. Shiyu has won the Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship and their research focuses on the body, ecology, asymmetry, feminism and queer technoscience, innovative media and technology in East Asian contemporary art and visual culture. They worked as a curator for museums and galleries worldwide, including the Stills Gallery (Edinburgh), the CAFA Art Museum (Beijing), and the V&A Museum (London). Shiyu has lectured at numerous universities, including Oxford University, University College London, Peking University and the Central Academy of Fine Arts.







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