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Critical Mass: Synthesis of Art and Sport in the Bodybuilding Industry



On the evening of February 25th, 1976, busy New Yorkers carefully shuffled their way through a bundled-up crowd outside the Whitney Museum of American Art, inching their way past overwhelmed gallery staff to purchase tickets to an unprecedented, one-time event. Stepping inside the museum, the eager spectators entered a world far from the brisk winter weather they had left outside. Visitors gawked alongside a panel of art critics and historians at the Whitney's *Articulate Muscle*, as the epitome of the powerful human body was presented atop a rotating platform to be scrutinized, admired, and envied by the gathered crowd. These well-developed bodies reflected the classical ideals of form and beauty championed by the sculptors of antiquity and the Renaissance masters, but stood apart in one significant respect: these commanding figures were living men.

Articulate Muscle, The Body as Art presented three young bodybuilders named Ed Corney, Frank Zane, and Arnold Schwarzenegger in a gallery setting (Fig. 1), where the athletes posed and flexed for an exuberant crowd of curious fans and art critics to begin a discussion of the human form in the history of art. The event proved to be an enormous success for producer Charles Gaines and helped fund the 1977 independent documentary *Pumping Iron*, which featured a young Schwarzenegger and helped springboard the Austrian immigrant to a future in cinema and eventually politics.¹ The lasting importance of this singular occasion lies not in its critical or financial success, but in the consequence and precedent of placing the bodybuilder within the context of an artistic milieu.

At the time of the Whitney show in 1976 professional bodybuilding rested on the margins of the American popular culture awareness, while athletes like Schwarzenegger quickly began to make names for themselves through the growing health and fitness industry. The acceptance of these rising-star bodybuilders by the artistic community at the Whitney served to demonstrate the curious nature of modern bodybuilding as a crossroads between sport and art by consolidating crucial themes of both artistic ideal and presentation and the physicality and conditioning of competitive sport. The synthesis of art and sport through exploration of classical aesthetic and athletic representation and performance, critical engagement with concepts of sexuality and physical perfection,

and economic and commercial capacities has enabled bodybuilding to become a prominent industry in the mainstream social consciousness.

Classical Form in the Contemporary Setting

The human form, especially the muscular male body, has been a central subject and thematic element of art since antiquity. Within the spectrum of bodily representation in ancient sculpture, the divergence of the athletic body of the sporting athlete from the overtly articulated musculature of the herculean figure becomes evident. The representations of the muscular form marked in pieces like the *Discobolus* (Fig. 2) and the *Farnese Hercules* (Fig. 3) provided inspiration for early bodybuilders and allowed for the development of a standardized image of strength and power. The transition to the living body and the body of the bodybuilder as art object embraces these crucial themes from the past, as the presentation of the athlete strives to represent an idealized human form both upon the competitive stage and as a marketable object in the media.²

Pioneered alongside the emergence of 'readymade' art, Pop Art, and performance art from the beginning through the middle of the 20th century, the adherence to classical aesthetics in the work of the bodybuilders of the 1970s and 80s, who sought to mold their own bodies through years of extensive weight training and dieting into replications of classical statuary, adopted this concept of formal artistic purity; the historically-sanctioned form of the herculean muscular body was accepted by the bodybuilder, and later by the popular culture of the United States throughout the last decades of the 20th century and into the present as the ideal male physique. The development of the bodybuilding industry can realistically be marked with the early success of Eugen Sandow at the turn of the 20th century (Fig. 4), whose calculated self-promotion and employment of classical themes of form and presentation through photography allowed the progenitor of modern bodybuilding to create a precedent for the 'golden age' athletes to follow. Harkening to the great statuary and herculean heroic imagery of antique statuary, Sandow produced an image both in his live presentation and in his photographic recreation that found the median between a pure appreciation of the human body for its aesthetic exhibition and a deliberate and early

manipulation of male sexuality in the reproduced image. Sandow's work in the late-19th and early-20th century, though initially a sideshow attraction in which one could enjoy the physical prowess and hyper-masculine form of the male body as a means of entertainment, essentially opened the door for what was possible for the living man. Sandow reflected the themes that would be developed to the greatest extent by the bodybuilders of the 50s, 60s and 70s: an aesthetically pleasing, powerful body with an overt commentary on what would come to define the sexually superior man of the 20th century.³

Critical analysis of bodybuilding as a contemporary phenomenon inevitably finds difficulty in placing definitive terms on the practice; with precedence in both the realm of the sport through its fundamental physical element and in the pretense of artistic presentation, it becomes inherently difficult to place the tradition in any fixed location in the spectrum between the two.⁴ This incidence calls into question whether bodybuilding can be considered *fully* sport or *purely* artistic. Arnold Schwarzenegger has described his practice of bodybuilding in sporting terms, confidently defending his training as definitively athletic:

Definition of a sport is a physical activity that involves competition. Since bodybuilders certainly train and then compete, we are certainly a sport. The unique thing about bodybuilding is that when I compete it is just me on a stage alone... All other athletes have to use equipment... But I don't use anything in competition except myself.⁵

The physical element of which Schwarzenegger speaks takes place in the training that leads up to a competition and in the posing that takes place on stage, but unlike the football or baseball player, the bodybuilder's physicality serves the single purpose of accentuating the aesthetic advantages of a particular physique for visual judgement by an official, rather than allowing the athlete to perform a specific task. In the related fields of competitive powerlifting and Olympic weightlifting, the appearance of the athlete is not paramount; in bodybuilding, appearance is conclusive. However, Schwarzenegger and many other successful practitioners of bodybuilding have stressed the importance and integration of the arts in their work,

including International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness (IFBB) professional bodybuilder Kai Greene. "The thing that we're very directly in touch with when preparing your physique to get onstage," Greene says, "is the artistic mind."⁶ The artistic mind of which Greene speaks provides the distinction between bodybuilding as a traditional sport and bodybuilding as a permutation of sport and art. The aesthetic of the bodybuilder's physique is irrelevant, regardless of the quality of conditioning and muscularity, if the bodybuilder cannot or does not present him or herself artistically upon the bodybuilding stage. Schwarzenegger compares the presentation of the bodybuilder onstage to the presentation of a painting:

I remember seeing some paintings in a storage area... from Andy Warhol to Roy Lichtenstein. A number were shown to me... unframed and under poor lighting. Under those conditions, it was hard to appreciate what great works they were. Later, when they were appropriately framed and displayed in an aesthetic setting... the effect was totally different. That's what you have to do with your physique to compete in a bodybuilding contest... you can win or lose a show with the same body! It isn't your physique that is being evaluated; it's your physique as you are able to present it to the judges.⁷

The intersection of sport and art through physicality and artistic intent is highlighted by many of these concepts of execution and presentation, and help to accentuate the distinct traits of each in the bodybuilding competition. This correlation is heightened to a great extent by the similarities in performativity of the bodybuilder's craft and the work of the post-modern performance artists in which the artist's body serves as both the creator and as the artwork itself. Borrowing crucial traits of athleticism and functionality from sporting and presentation and performativity from art, bodybuilding rests most comfortably as a product of each while evading exclusive allegiance with either.

With the vast reach of the sport of bodybuilding, the inevitability of crossover between the realm of sport and the realm of art is inherent. Gaines' *Articulate Muscle* event in 1976, regardless of intention and strategy, was undoubtedly a financial success; with the profits from

the Whitney show, Gaines and George Butler were able to finish financing the independent documentary project *Pumping Iron*, which later became a critical success and saw positive reception in the box office.⁸ Contextually, the Whitney event was designed and billed as a discussion of the male muscular body in art to be articulated by a panel of art critics and historians gathered by the museum. Despite the academic setting, *Articulate Muscle: The Body as Art* proved most significantly to be an exhibition of the human body outside of the carefully constructed boundaries of artistic foundation. The Whitney event, to this extent, must be considered for what it was: a ploy to attract customers and create a profit. The symposium of art critics and writers brought together to discuss the artistic history of the physical form failed to draw the attention of any major art circles, and the footage taken from the Whitney show was cut from the final draft of *Pumping Iron*.⁹ The Whitney's eventual involvement in the project can only suggest the organization's willingness not only to assert new, ambiguous boundaries of high art, but also to accept a project that could create publicity and increase museum attendance with a curious, modern audience.

Mapplethorpe: Critical Commentary and the Human Form

The potential for critical interpretation within the sport of bodybuilding and the presentation of the muscular body was given critical artistic expression in the work of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, and in particular, his work in the early 1980s that featured Lisa Lyon as model. Despite the intense backlash caused by much of Mapplethorpe's work, his photography transcends the realm of pornography through its careful attention to classical notions of beauty and composition. The artist once said of his own work that he was "looking for perfection of form. I do that with portraits. I do it with cocks. I do it with flowers. It's no different from one subject to the next. I am trying to capture what could be sculpture."¹⁰ Notably, Mapplethorpe's work often finds harsh criticism in content and ignorance in artistic presentation, while both content and form are critical to the artist's work; the awareness of content is necessary for the appreciation of form just as the attention to form elevates the vulgarity of subject.

Some of Mapplethorpe's most significant studies of

the human body come from his relationship with Lisa Lyon, winner of the IFBB's first World Pro Bodybuilding Championship.¹¹ First introduced to Lyon in 1980, Mapplethorpe quickly established a bond with her and she became as a reoccurring subject of his work, including numerous photos and a 1983 book entitled *Lady: Lisa Lyon*. Mapplethorpe's photographs of Lyon emphasize not only her body as a physical and formal entity, but also draw attention towards the femininity and cultural expectations of women in a rapidly evolving society. Mapplethorpe's work thus produced an image that is both aesthetically pleasing and still asked questions about the culture from which it came. Lyon's position as a bodybuilder and as a woman within a sport overwhelmingly dominated by men at the time of her participation does provoke the question of whether the female bodybuilder has the ability to create a position of critical assessment within her field. The IFBB Hall of Fame notes Lyon's work and promotion of the sport with high consideration, and claims that her contribution as an early female athlete helped to "elevate bodybuilding to the level of fine art."¹² The question remains whether Lyon's work with Mapplethorpe classifies her and her body presentation as high art in itself, or if Mapplethorpe's photographs of Lyon are the art. Figure 5 shows Lyon executing a "most-muscular" pose – one of the mandatory posing elements of the modern bodybuilding competition. Positioned in front of a neutral background in a studio setting, Mapplethorpe balances Lyon symmetrically in the center of the frame with her arms and torso composing a diamond shape in the image. Lyon is cropped from the neck up and the knees down, focusing the image squarely on the center of her nude body. The composition of the image is balanced and quite beautifully organized aesthetically. Mapplethorpe's controversial and critical approach to this work comes not in this attractiveness of form, but in the questions that he poses in the careful presentation of Lyon and her body. Lyon's pose accentuates her muscularity in her chest and vascularity in her arms (both of which would be criterion for judgement in bodybuilding competition), but the fact that her breasts are uncovered and central in the photograph becomes unavoidable. Lyon's hands also cover her genitals, obscuring the viewer from this element of her physical femininity while exposing another. Mapplethorpe manipulates the social expectations of women through the presentation of the nude, muscular female

body, combining traditionally masculine traits with conventionally sexual feminine presentation. The break from purely classical formalism and normalization in Mapplethorpe's work comes from his careful selection of subject and content by injecting aesthetically beautiful images with inherent connotations of sex. By presenting the female form in Lisa Lyon, Mapplethorpe accentuates the breakdown of gender roles and expectations through the depiction of a woman with a muscular body traditionally reserved for images of highly-masculine, male figures. This manipulation of sexuality and social norms propels Mapplethorpe and his work to a level of fine artistic appreciation.

The artistic relationship between Mapplethorpe and Lyon takes into consideration an important element of the bodybuilder's position within the realm of critical art. In Mapplethorpe's work with Lyon, Mapplethorpe is 'billed' as the artist, while Lyon serves as the model and subject of the photography. This exchange cannot be considered final, however, due to Lyon's level of influence on the work being created. Mapplethorpe's selection of Lyon as model is unavoidably due to her participation in competitive bodybuilding and weight training; the perfection in form that he sought to find in the subjects of much of his life's work is evidentially found to a great extent in Lyon, allowing the pair to work together and produce a successful product.¹³ While Mapplethorpe's artistic intent is evident in his photography and the final production of each image, Lyon's presence through her posing and through the condition of her own body is inherently hers; Robert Mapplethorpe's work with Lisa Lyon evidences a partnership between artists to create a final product, one that demonstrates the potential for critical commentary while maintaining traditional aesthetic expectations of high art.

Influence of an Industry

Since the 'Golden Age' of bodybuilding in the 1970s, the cultural appeal of the idealized muscular form has saturated popular mass media and played an integral role in morphing contemporary expectations of the male body. Building upon the momentum created by bodybuilders like Sandow at the turn of the century, the popularity of the muscular form in American culture slowly began its climb towards widespread social awareness. The celebrity of bodybuilder-turned-actors like Steve Reeves and Reg

Park in the 1950s and 60s, as well as early depictions of the bodybuilding athlete in works of high art such as Richard Hamilton's pioneering Pop piece *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* (Fig. 6), helped lay the foundation for the explosive growth in the bodybuilding industry in the latter half of the 20th century. With the creation of Joe Weider's Mr. Olympia contest in 1965, the composition of an 'ideal' male muscular body became an achievable concept.

By the height of the 'golden age' of bodybuilding in the late 1970s, the cult following of sideshow entertainers like Sandow was moving from the margins to an integral position in western culture; home weight sets and gyms, supplements, and athletic apparel saw a tremendous rise in popularity, allowing the everyman to build himself into the macho bodybuilder that he saw on sunny Venice Beach, California, in the fitness magazines.¹⁴ This pop-culture shift in body expectations during the 1970s and 80s helped spark the rise of the 'macho' action film genre, and many successful bodybuilders like Schwarzenegger began to follow the mold championed by their predecessors like Reeves and Park and re-market their own image to create a new career in the movie industry. In the years since the Whitney show, the bodybuilding and fitness business has grown into a multi-billion dollar industry. The marketability and influence of the bodybuilding industry reflects the necessity of the financial element in art, as both fields rely heavily on the production of revenue to sustain the athletes and artists that participate. Throughout the history of art, the financial position of the artist has shifted considerably, but throughout the modern and post-modern eras, the necessity of business has been paramount. Following this trend, the bodybuilding industry has formed itself upon the marketability of the classical muscular physique and helped to construct expectations of body presentation that have spread throughout the popular culture in social media, film, and sales. Drawing from two of the largest global revenues (sporting and art entertainment industries), bodybuilding lies in an exceptional position between two the fields and benefits financially via two distinct promotional markets.

A New Generation of Athlete/Artist: Critical Avoidance in Contemporary Sporting

Formalized bodybuilding since the first Mr. Olympia competition in 1965 has striven to retain a strict appreciation for the physical appearance of the athletes as entities disconnected from the personal lives and social interactions of the competitors.¹⁵ The sport as a competitive tradition is intended to rest purely on unbiased judgement by a panel of officials based on the visual characteristics of the competitors while they are on stage. The body of the athlete, to this extent, is removed entirely from context much like the presentation of the classical sculpture within the perspectival vacuum of the Black Cube gallery style; the musculature and appearance of the individuals on stage are proposed to be the only demarcation between participants.¹⁶ To this extent, the actual competitive procedure of bodybuilding is almost entirely sport. The IFBB, as well as other major bodybuilding federations and organizational funding boards, has not wavered to any extent from this traditional approach, which naturally places organized bodybuilding in a position where critical analysis of cultural constructs is nearly impossible. The artistic freedom of the bodybuilding athlete must then come from his or her life off of the stage where one has the ability to take these artistic liberties using the body as artistic medium. IFBB bodybuilding athlete Kai Greene, one of the most popular and artistically driven minds in the sport today, has revolutionized the presentation of the bodybuilder both on and off the competitive stage through his innovative posing and impromptu, dramatic street performances in his hometown of Brooklyn (Fig. 7). Greene's activity in social media and articulate commentary on his own position as an artist has helped to break down the stereotype of the bodybuilding athlete as a non-intellectual; his official website lists him as "Bodybuilder, Artist," and "Inspiration for the Ages."¹⁷ Despite this inherent positivity, Greene has encountered significant setbacks within the IFBB organization in recent years, placing second in the Mr. Olympia contest during his last three appearances. During the period of Greene's ascension to the becoming one of the predominant bodybuilding athletes in the world, sexually explicit images in which Greene was involved saw considerable circulation in bodybuilding blogs and video commentary by various popular figures in the industry.

Speculation as to the correlation between the public

awareness of this video and Greene's failure to secure the Olympia title has led many members of the bodybuilding community to consider the possibility of bias within the event's judging.¹⁸ This incident involving Greene helps to demonstrate the IFBB and other major bodybuilding federations' stance regarding the image of competitive professional bodybuilding. As a sport, bodybuilding is intended to be purely aesthetic; athletes are to be compared and judged based solely on their appearance and presentation on stage, and all outside factors are to be ignored. This purity of sport, however, becomes inevitably tainted in the contemporary age with the availability and complete permeation of mass media. Critical social issues have become unavoidable for major sporting enterprises, as perhaps most clearly evident in the recent domestic abuse scandals in the NFL as well as Michael Sam's seventh-round draft by the St. Louis Rams in 2014 to become the first openly-gay athlete in the league.¹⁹ Contemporary bodybuilding inevitably becomes subject to the same societal issues faced by major sporting federations, and both competitors and leadership organizations within the sport must begin to acknowledge and incorporate the demands of post-modern society. While organized athletics have struggled to adopt the social progressions of the past few decades, trends in fine art have brought these issues to the forefront of critical conversation and set the precedent for active social commentary in creative works. The IFBB and other leading bodybuilding associations will inevitably be forced to consider these social issues in coming years, and despite the industry's consummate approach to maintaining a purely-competitive sport, an artistic-level of attention to critical commentary will have to be introduced to maintain a level of progressive attention as an artistic medium and as a sports entertainment industry.

Endnotes

- 1 Robert Fiore and George Butler, directors. *Pumping Iron*. eds. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Lou Ferrigno, Franco Columbu, George Butler, and Charles Gaines. Film. United States: Cinema 5, 1977.
- 2 Kenneth R. Dutton, *The Perfectible Body: The Western Ideal of Male Physical Development* (New York: Continuum, 1995).
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- 5 Ian Coleman, and Schwarzenegger, Arnold. "64 Arnold Schwarzenegger Quotes on Bodybuilding, Motivation and Success." Muscle & Strength Online. 2015.
- 6 Kai Greene, 2015. "BodyPower Expo UK. Kai Greene Guest Appearance." Cutandjacket.com.
- 7 Bill Dobbins, *The New Encyclopedia of Modern Bodybuilding* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).
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- 9 Footage from *Articulate Muscle*, both during the show or behind-the-scenes, is included in a DVD featurette from *Pumping Iron* entitled *Raw Iron: The Making of Pumping Iron*.
- 10 Franca Falletti and Jonathan Nelson, eds. *Mapplethorpe: Perfection in Form [Robert Mapplethorpe: La Perfezione Nella Forma]*. Trans. Lily Prigioniero and Julia Weiss (New York: teNeues Publishing Company, 2009).
- 11 IFBB Professional League Profile: Lisa Lyon [cited 11/2 2015]. Available from <http://www.ifbbpro.com/hall-of-fame-welcome-message/lisa-lyon/>.
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- 18 Marc Lobliner, "The sexual darkside of bodybuilding." TheTigerFitness. 2012 [cited 10/5 2015]. Available from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sSvTkXOzpM>.
- 19 "NFL 'less progressive than the flintstones' in LGBT." 2016. Dave Zirin, MSNBC.



Fig 1. Elliott Erwitt, 1976.
Arnold Schwarzenegger,
"Articulate Muscle: The Male
Body in Art" at the Whitney
Museum. Magnum Photos.



Fig 3. Farnese Hercules, c. 4th century BCE



Fig 2. Discobolus, c. 450 BCE



Fig 4. Eugen Sandow posing as Farnese Hercules, 1893



Fig. 5. Robert Mapplethorpe, Lisa Lyon, 1982, gelatin silver print, 15 1/8 × 15 3/8 in.



Fig. 6. Richard Hamilton, Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?, 1956. Collage, 26 cm × 24.8 cm. Kunsthalle Tübingen, Tübingen.



Fig 7. Vlad Yudin, Generation Iron, eds. Kai Greene, Phil Heath and Arnold Schwarzenegger, ed. Edwin Mejia. The Vladar Company, 2013.