Techno Bodies

Muscling
with Gender
in Contemporary Dance

The one overwhelming image I have of La La La Human Steps’ multimedia extravaganza Infante, C’est Destroy is of Louise Lecavalier flying through the air like a human torpedo. She gets caught by another dancer, thrashes around with him for a while, then vaults right out of his arms and halfway across the stage, only to rebound back into his face. A few minutes and who knows how many heartbeats later, she rears up from the floor one last time, shakes her mane of bleached-blonde hair and struts off the stage with an attitude that would make the most vicious heavy metal rocker look like Pete Seeger by comparison.

Louise Lecavalier is the star of Édouard Lock’s dance ’n’ rock creation, which I witnessed during the 1993 Festival International de Nouvelle Danse in Montreal. Throughout this nonstop 75-minute spectacle, Lecavalier’s body—both its hardened aerobic energy and its filmed image—is continuously on display. Pitted against the pounding sounds of Skinny Puppy, Janitors Animated, David Van Tiegham, and Einsturzende Neubauten, her dancing uses the driving beat of the music to stretch dance movements to the outer limits of physical possibility and endurance. At one point, Lecavalier grabs one of the various microphones littered around the stage and, panting, begins to discuss the metaphysical dimensions of music, heartbeat, and physical energy. She then produces a mini-mike, which she solemnly attaches to percussionist Jackie Gallant’s chest. With the kind of cosmic, synergistic intensity that makes heavy metal so seductive to teenagers, Gallant begins to pound away at her drum. The harder Gallant drums, the faster her heartbeat. The faster her heartbeat, the faster she drums to keep up. As Gallant builds quickly to the orgasmic peak of her auto-aerobic union with the drum, Lecavalier comes crashing back to center stage, riding the musical tidal wave just as Gallant finishes.

The first ten minutes of Lecavalier’s dancing are absolutely awe-inspiring. Within a few minutes, her well-defined muscles are pumped-up and her body is practically pulsating with untapped energy. The way she launches her body across the floor and at various partners is phenomenal. Physically, she is intensely powerful, a fact noted by audience members and dance reviewers alike. Lecavalier is repeatedly described in the lobby as well as in the press as a “human torpedo,” a “canonball,” a “rocket,” or a “bullet.” Similarly, her physique is ubiquitously evoked through the popular language of body building as either “chiseled,” “ripped,” or “granite.” One reviewer even took these pereasive images of violence to their logical extreme, comparing the dancing of La La La Human Steps to a war. “Arms swing menacingly like knives, legs flash like bayonets, hips are thrust forward with the aggressiveness and rapidity of machine-gun fire, and whole bodies fly like rockets through the air.”

I find the obsessiveness with which reviewers discuss Lecavalier’s body and movement and their inevitable violent or machine-like metaphors indicative of a certain unease with Lecavalier’s corporeality. Her all-encompassing focus on vaulting back and forth across the stage creates an intense physicality that both literally and figuratively crosses over gender norms, even in the midst of a cultural moment in which both men and women are encouraged to cultivate a musculely defined look in their bodies. By taking on the musculature and powerful, explosive movement that mark the achievement of high masculinity in sports, martial arts, and Arnold Schwarzenegger movies, Lecavalier’s dancing persona is not easily contained in the role of “prima ballerina,” even though Lock’s choreography is so obviously an elaborate vehicle for the display of her extraordinary physicality. After the first ten minutes of the spectacle, however, Lecavalier’s dancing begins to feel increasingly coerced. Whether she is framed by the camera, as in the huge, blown-up films showing her falling slowly through space, or by the men onstage, Lecavalier never seems to be able to break out of Lock’s own vision of her body.

Édouard Lock is a filmmaker, a photographer, and a director of mega pop spectacles. Critics frequently call Lecavalier his muse, likening her role in Infante, C’est Destroy to a blend of Madonna and Joan of Arc. Visually they have a point. In the filmed section of the dance, she is dressed in metal armor, and while she is performing live onstage, Lecavalier flaunts the same kind of sexualized power that Madonna has successfully commodified—what I call the
black leather tis and ass and biceps, abs, and quads look. But unlike Madonna, Lecavalier doesn’t immediately relieve the cultural anxiety produced by her cross-dressing with a reassuringly feminine voice. Neither, however, does she embody spiritual power or usurp the male prerogative in quite the way that I’ve always imagined Joan of Arc did. The powerful implications of her physicality are eventually diluted by the relentless repetition of the same old stunts. Most of the time, Lecavalier and her two female backups, Pim Boonprakob and Sarah Williams, dance around in various stages of undress, frequently throwing themselves at the male dancers, who are usually dressed in suits. In contrast to her male partners, Lecavalier is either totally naked, topless, or dressed in a black bustier and tight, see-through shorts. Occasionally she will sport a black leather jacket, but usually that is when she is wearing nothing

else on top. My point, of course, is not that the women get naked onstage, it is that they are the only ones who do so.

I have introduced this chapter with the example of Lecavalier’s dancing in order to foreground the complexities of talking about the physical body and gender in contemporary dance. How, for instance, can we account for the fact that Lecavalier’s dancing at once provides the means for, and yet simultaneously resists the paternalistic gaze of Lock’s choreography? In what ways can a woman physically break out of the traditional representation of the “feminine” body, and in what ways does the “feminine” become literally reincorporated to accommodate the changing fashions of physical being? For, as Judith Butler quite rightly warns us in her book *Gender Trouble*, “The female body that is freed from the shackles of the paternal law may well prove to be yet another incarnation of that law, posing as subversive but operating in the service of that law’s self-amplification and proliferation.”

Thinking about Lecavalier’s body, its delineated muscles and fierce physicality, as well as its position within Lock’s spectacle, brings us right up against one of the most ferociously contested issues in feminist and cultural studies today. What is the status of the female body? Is it entirely a product of social discourse, or is there a pre-cultural body that is connected to a natural realm of human existence? During the 1980s, feminist theory focused these questions in terms of a central debate between essentialism and constructivism. Diana Fuss’s succinct book *Essentially Speaking* is a useful primer on this issue. She defines the theoretical differences in the following manner:

For the essentialist, the body occupies a pure, pre-social, pre-discursive space. The body is “real,” accessible, and transparent; it is always there and directly interpretable through the senses. For the constructionist, the body is never simply there, rather it is composed of a network of effects continually subject to sociopolitical determination. The body is “always already” culturally mapped; it never exists in a pure or un-coded state.

Over the course of her book, Fuss deconstructs the oppositional position of each ideology, suggesting that essentialist thinking underlies the constructivist viewpoint and vice versa. She wonders, finally, whether “it may be time to ask whether essences can change and whether constructions can be normative.” Her point is well taken. Modern dance, for instance, was founded on a rhetoric of the “natural” (barefoot, uncorseted) female body. Yet modern dance actually (although often unselfconsciously) deconstructs its own essentialist ideology by codifying and teaching movement forms and techniques that are said to be more natural than other kinds of dance training. What becomes clear to
that has been amply documented by historians, writers, artists, and choreographers, as well as dancers. Indeed, over the last fifteen years, the dance field has become increasingly conscious of the often debilitating effects (including body image problems, eating disorders, drug abuse, etc.) of the quest to embody such an image. Although most modern and contemporary dance forms have consciously expanded the narrow image of the dancer cum ballerina (thin, graceful, feminine, white), they also create specific world views grounded in the physical contours of the body. In this chapter, I am interested in probing what ideologies are represented in works that display energized female bodies such as that of Louise Lecavalier. I want to focus here on the question of how bodies and their social identities are dialectically constructed through physical practices that directly challenge traditional models of female dancing. In other words, is being physically powerful necessarily empowering for women in contemporary dance?

In dance, the choreographer uses human bodies to create physical experiences and theatrical images that exist in a world of her own making. The presentation of those bodies carries meaning regardless of the narrative or conceptual theme of the dance. Are these bodies grounded or do they sustain an image of lightness throughout the dance? Do they use a lot of space, or is their movement contained, bound to their body by some unknown force? Anyone even slightly familiar with the origins of modern dance in America cannot fail to remark on the sheer excessiveness of its liberatory rhetoric and the passion with which seminal figures such as Isadora Duncan condemned the artifice and repressiveness of ballet. Sometimes the physical being-in-the-world of the dancer’s body and the artistic representation of that body reinforce one another to render a relatively seamless image in performance. At other times, however, there can be a disjunction between the dancer’s physicality and what that movement represents. In Lecavalier’s dancing, for instance, there is an intriguing slippage between her muscular strength and the representation of that physicality, and this jagged edge has everything to do with gender.

As its title suggests, Infante, C'est Destroy relies on the iconography of heavy metal rock concerts and videos, mimicking this genre's use of fantasy, androgyny, metal armoring, phallic imagery (such as guitars, mike stands, and swords), and a certain amount of implied violence. At once dancing rock star and imagistic muse, Lecavalier occupies two contradictory positions in relation to the spectacle as a whole. When she is dancing live onstage, she seems to control the sequence of events, jerking her partners into action or calling off the dancing by walking off the stage. Here, Lecavalier looks and acts like a male metal star, strutting, talking back to the audience, thrashing around the
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The film shows Lecavalier at first clothed in a medieval suit of armor, complete with sword, and then later falling naked through a vast bleak space. There is no coherent narrative in this short film. Jumpcuts inexplicably move Lecavalier from knight in armor, to slain figure bleeding, to a Christ-like transcendence. She is alternately aggressor, victim, and saint, all the while imaged in larger-than-life celluloid. Iconographically, the dual position is not that unusual in the late twentieth century. But what makes this example particularly striking is the fact that Lecavalier has literally (as well as metaphorically) inscribed both genders onto her dancing body. She not only occupies both subject and object positions within the spectacle, she embodies them, physicalizing a liminal territory that challenges what we know about the traditionally gendered body in dance.

When I showed a video of Infante, C'est Destroy during a conference presentation, a number of audience members who were not familiar with Lecavalier thought that she was a he. Indeed, even after I had presented my paper, some people were still incredulous that this was a female body, believing that her body was too muscular to be that of a woman. Although a close movement analysis reveals just how typically gendered Lecavalier's dancing really is, it is important not to overlook how radical her physique is for many people. Delineated muscles on women's bodies obviously challenge some very visceral beliefs about bodies and their appropriate(d) genders. I am interested in how we read muscles as marks of strength and how this affects our reading of the female body. As my discussion of Lecavalier's dancing shows, it would be wrong immediately to assume that this muscling of women dancers' bodies is inherently liberating. Nor should we assume that a woman choreographer would necessarily represent the built-up female body in a more progressive manner than Lock. Although it strains at gender conventions, the muscular female body has been incorporated in a wide variety of contemporary dances.

During the past decade, there has been a virtual explosion of dances that use upper body strength (particularly in women) and require the stamina to endure unprecedented athletic challenges. The romanticized image of the ballerina as an embodiment of feminine grace and beauty, or even the image of the early modern dancer poised proud and tall in her weighted stance has been displaced by a fearless, aerobized physicality not unlike that of Lecavalier. Now it is not uncommon to see both women and men vaulting horizontally across the stage, catching themselves with their arms and rolling down through their chests to arch back into a diagonal one-handed hand spring that takes them only momentarily to their feet before they dive across the space again. Lecavalier's dancing is one such example. The elaborate technological

stage. Similarly, her shaggy hairstyle and tight leather clothing are clearly devoted to a metal aesthetic. By vamping a hypermasculinity, all the while displaying her dancing body to the audience, Lecavalier embodies the same paradox that Robert Walser identifies as a crucial component of the appeal of heavy metal to a diverse, largely male audience. In his book Running With The Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music, Walser explains this contradictory position by invoking Orpheus: "But his story contains a built-in contradiction: Orpheus must sing in such a way as to demonstrate his rhetorical mastery of the world, yet such elaborate vocal display threatens to undermine Orpheus's masculine identity. Flamboyant display of his emotions is required as evidence of his manipulative powers, but excess makes him into an object of display himself."5

For Lecavalier, the contradiction embedded in being at once subject of the show and object of the gaze (the choreographer's, her partner's, the audience's) is amplified in the film sequences of the spectacle. Projected on an enormous

Louise Lecavalier and Michael Dolan in 2. Photo by Édouard Lock.
spectacle and punk-chic style of La La La Human Steps has obvious roots in mega rock shows. This kind of intense, driven movement can also be seen in the work of other companies, particularly contemporary European-based, or European-influenced dance/theater groups such as the British collective DV8, the work of Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker in Rosas, as well as Les Ballets C. de la B., to mention only a few of the companies working in this genre of Euro crash and burn dancing.

Perhaps the most extreme example of this kind of high-risk, aerobicized dancing in the United States is the work of Elizabeth Streb and her company, Ringside. Over the past fifteen years, Streb has been involved in making pieces that focus the audience's attention on how a human body (or bodies) interacts with various kinds of equipment such as poles, balls, hoops, plexiglass walls, a board on wheels, a coffin-like box suspended sideways in the air, two four-by-eight-foot birch plywood panels, trapeze harnesses, various kinds of adult-sized jungle gyms, and finally, in her 1995–1996 tour, a trampoline that can catapult people up to thirty feet in the air. Streb's dancers hurl themselves through space, slamming their bodies into the various pieces of equipment. Although the fierce physicality and built-up musculature, as well as the way her dancers vault through the air, are analogous to the dancing in La La La Human Steps, Streb's work is much plainer, with a lot less theatricality, a lot less "attitude," and a lot less pretension than Lock's mega spectacles. Typically in a Streb concert, one walks into the theater while the technicians are testing and adjusting the equipment. The dances start with the dancers casually walking on stage, shaking a limb here and there to loosen up, and preparing themselves as if for a race or some kind of sports event. They are invariably dressed in bright colored bodysuits that reveal every muscle's contour. These bodysuits are standard Ringside gear, and while they make the dancers' bodies very visible to the audience, their full coverage and uniformity actually make them seem quite modest. In a way, this uniform deflects our gaze, rendering these bodies democratically equal (there are no stars here, no distinctions in costume between the men and the women) and slightly anonymous.

Once they have arranged themselves and glanced around to see if everyone is ready, the dancers launch into whatever physical challenge is being attempted in this particular dance. In a piece such as Wall (1991), five dancers throw their bodies against an upright bright red wall. Over the course of the short piece (and Streb's work often has a slightly clipped feel to it, as if to say, "Let's do it and move on"), these dancers support one another in their attempts (sometimes individual, sometimes communal) to climb the wall, slide down it, bash against it, and hang from various body parts on it. They coordinate their ef-

forts by calling out instructions to one another, simple words such as "drop," "feet," or "arms." Just as suddenly as the piece began it is over, and the dancers walk unceremoniously offstage to prepare for the next physical contest.

Elizabeth Streb started making dances in 1979, and formed her company, Streb/Ringside in 1985. Although she began with simple props such as poles, hoops, and balls, Streb now designs and commissions very elaborate equipment that allows her dancers to scale walls, fling themselves through the air, and use trapeze-like harnesses to swing around a twenty-two-foot vertical pole. Despite her never-ending variety of props, Streb's choreographic goals remain basically the same from piece to piece. Her program notes for "Pop Action," her 1996 tour, spell out her vision: "Ringside is a platform for the investigation of movement, an attempt to expose movement, an attempt to expose movement's true nature by harnessing it, without debilitating it, within a confined space. Ringside's approach is to isolate the basic principles of time, space, and human movement potential." In her pared-down, no-frills style of dancing as well as her narrow focus on the physics rather than the interpersonal dynamics of movement interactions, Streb's work is deeply connected to both the seminal work of Merce Cunningham and the early ground-breaking work of postmodern dancers such as Trisha Brown (who created a whole series of environmental equipment pieces in the seventies), Steve Paxton, and Yvonne Rainer. In an essay on Streb's choreography, Judy Burns discusses her connections to these artists: "Like Cunningham's chance dances and Trisha Brown's equipment pieces and number grids, to name just a few examples, Streb's choreographic structures remove dance from the realms of narrative, individual habit, or direct personal expression, demystify the choreographic process, and focus on movement for its own sake."

Streb's intention to highlight the formal beauty of bodies in motion is absolutely clear in her recent work UP! (1995). In this piece, six dancers alternately dive off two facing platforms onto a trampoline and then rebound into the air, sometimes hanging onto pipes overhead and at other times bouncing back onto the platform. The effect of seeing bodies swirl in the air and fly past one another is quite awesome, and speaks to an archetypal desire of earth-bound bodies to take flight. Also, the ways in which the dancers land back on the platform, as if they were butterflies alighting on a tree branch (without any visible rebound or dropping of their weight), is astonishing. Nonetheless, the wonder of these physical acts never entirely satisfies me. I find that the repetition quickly becomes relentless and the feats themselves eventually become pointless.

Watching Streb's dances is a bit like watching a sports event or a circus
spectacle, an analogy invariably mentioned by critics in discussions of her work. (Streb herself acknowledges this aspect of her work with her tongue-in-cheek punning on both circus and boxing rings in her company's name Ringside.) Streb believes that her work, precisely because it gives the audience a kinesthetic thrill similar to sports and circus events, is essentially populist. She thinks that there is often an element of elitism in modern dance, and she sees her work as being different precisely because it is accessible. “Making action is what I do. I want my movement to read physically for everyone in the audience.”

This desire for her movement to read for everyone in the audience and her focus on (one could say fetishization of) human movement potential is connected not only to a belief that movement is a universal language, but also to an ideology embedded in the formalist aesthetics of postmodern dance that separates movement from the body that is moving. What interests Streb is the fact of a body in flight, not whose body is doing the flying. Her choreography frames dancers not in terms of their cultural identity, but rather in terms of their ability to master the different physical challenges she presents them with. Because she treats the human body as a sort of physical machine, Streb's dancers begin to strike us as automotons by the end of her concert. Ironically, the physical strength of her dancers actually serves to mask their individuality, to hide the distinctiveness of their movement personalities.

Although she claims to be interested in movement for its own sake, Streb makes dances that give the performers very little time to register their own experience of movement. The relentless pace of most of her choreography combined with the spare directness of the dancers' instructions (climb here, jump here, hold on here, etc.) gives the dancers little opportunity to pay attention to more than their own safety. Because they need to be so focused on their own activities, they rarely acknowledge the spatial and rhythmic interactions between one another, giving each dancer an odd sense of isolation within the whole group. As a result, the audience receives a very flat and one-dimensional sense of the dancers; their movement begins to feel coerced and they become objects—missiles self-propelled in the air. There are exceptions, of course. I remember a moment where a dancer balanced on the edge of two boards before they suddenly opened, forcing him into a split and setting up a comic situation that the audience enjoyed immensely. Another exception is Streb's signature solo in a box, Little Ease (1985). In this dance, Streb is suspended in the air in a three-by-six-foot wooden box that looks like a coffin lying on its side. Moving urgently but not frenetically, Streb places her body in all imaginable positions: crouching, leaning, standing sideways, etc. Short but nonetheless poignant, this dance evoked a whole series of metaphors about both spatial and
psychological confinement. Most of the moments in which a dancer emerges as an individual within the group dances, however, are moments performed by men dancers. Despite their strong bodies and intense, high-risk dancing, the women dancers in Streb/Ringside tend to be the most anonymous figures in the group.¹⁰

What does this mean? How can these women dancers who have such extraordinary bodies have so little physical presence? The answer, I believe, lies not only in their movements per se, but also in the bodily ideology of their physical training. During a post-performance discussion of Streb’s “pupation” concert in Cleveland, an audience member asked Streb’s dancers what they did to build their muscles. Many had gymnastics training as young adults, but almost all (including Streb) said that they lifted weights as part of their fitness regime. As I was leaving the theater, I heard two women joking about wanting to start lifting weights so that they could look like Streb’s dancers. Their remarks made me realize that Streb’s work is accessible not so much because it creates a kinesthetic experience in which the audience can participate, but rather because her dancers’ bodies are recognizable icons within the syntax of the American fitness craze.

One of the most pervasive beliefs in popular culture is that building a fit and firm body, that is, building muscles, is tantamount to building one’s self-confidence. Although for some people this may be right on the mark, it is important, nonetheless, to probe the popular myths that represent muscles as empowering (especially for women), in order to examine the somatic results of weight lifting. We need to ask: What are the physical effects of this kind of training? What kinds of movement priorities does it set up? For as Elizabeth Dempster points out in her essay on women and dance, “Social and political values are not simply placed or grafted onto a neutral body-object like so many old or new clothes. On the contrary, ideologies are systematically deposed and constructed on an anatomical plane, i.e. in the neuromusculature of the dancer’s body, and a precise reading of this body can only proceed if the reader/spectator’s gaze is not deflected by, but penetrates beneath, the brilliance of the body’s surface.”¹¹ In the section that follows, I will shift my focus from dance performances to women’s bodybuilding in popular culture for a moment in order to “penetrate the brilliance” of the highly muscular female body. I will look at both the neuromuscular effects of weight training technologies, and various ways in which bodybuilding is portrayed as empowering for women.

Over the last twenty years, the fit and muscular body has become a privileged icon in contemporary American culture. Thirty years ago, it would have been unheard of for most middle class women to have desired clearly defined arm muscles. Today, not only are delineated biceps de rigueur, but the fashion industry has even provided women with the perfect apparel with which to display their upper body muscles in a variety of racing back dresses, jogging bras, and newly feminized versions of the muscle shirt. For the first time in Western history women are entering athletic clubs (traditionally bastions of homosocial bonding) in droves to “work out” with the Nautilus machines, Universal gyms, and free weights (to mention only the most common of the ever growing realm of exercise commodities). Given the ways that women’s bodies have been physically constrained and historically represented as “naturally” passive and “weak,” there can be no denying that sensing the rush of adrenaline and the aliveness of one’s body after exercising can be an incredibly powerful experience. Certainly the physical realization of one’s own strength can build one’s self-confidence, and aid in the presentation of a physical demeanor that demands respect. This physical liberation comes with its own form of enslavement, however, for the development of a muscular body requires considerable resources and time if one is to avail oneself of the various contemporary fitness technologies. Although some feminists have argued that the new muscled body image represents an unfortunate diversion of women’s energies away from the world and onto themselves, both the media and the fitness industry portray bodybuilding as a progressive opportunity for women.

Gloria Steinem’s most recent collection of writings is entitled Moving Beyond Words.¹² The two epigraphs she uses to preface the book both contain the expression “moving beyond words” in some form, and suggest that the title of the book is a call to actualize the possibilities indicated by the rhetoric of seventies feminism. The essays in the book reveal how Steinem (who is now, as she puts it, “doing sixty”) blends the political stances of feminist thought with her personal experience in order to come up with a kind of evangelic prose that is clearly meant to inspire other women to “realize” themselves more fully. This sort of inspirational writing is particularly striking in the section on women’s bodybuilding. Although the introduction to this section is called “The Politics of Muscle,” the essay is less a sociological analysis than a description of Steinem’s conversion from a couch potato to a feminist fitness fan.

Like many women who came of age in America in the fifties, Steinem grew up more concerned with her visual image than with what her body could physically accomplish, believing that “the most important thing about a female body is not what it does but how it looks.”¹³ Steinem’s epiphany comes much later in her life, by way of Bev Francis, an Australian athlete and women’s powerlifting champion turned bodybuilder who is the underdog heroine of
George Butler's 1984 film *Pumping Iron II: The Women*. “But seeing Bev taught me there were frontiers of strength few women had even been allowed to glimpse. Just to give you an idea what an impact meeting one strong woman can have: I went out and bought weights. We’re talking personal revolution here.”¹⁴ What Bev Francis represents for Steinem is a model of female strength who is so excessive in the bulk of her musculature that she cannot be readily incorporated into a commodified version of a “strong, yet sexy” identity. Although Steinem claims that “the strongest woman in the world can inspire you to go beyond . . . your limits of strength and daring,” she repeatedly refers to Francis in terms that underline her otherworldliness—“Such a peak of muscularity that she seemed to represent another species.”¹⁵

What is fascinating to me in Steinem’s discussion of her own physicality and the whole budding phenomenon of women’s bodybuilding is the way in which the external display of extremely developed muscles signifies, for her, an internal experience of personal strength, an experience of individual agency. Now this slippage of outside and inside, of reading the surface of the body as if it were a window to the soul (or at least the “inner self”), is a very common one. Indeed, capitalism and its resultant commodity fetishes have encouraged us to “read” one another’s class, gender, and ethnic and sexual identities by way of our skin, clothing, jewelry, and other forms of bodily ornamentation. Even a cursory glance in women’s magazines will give one a sense of the manner in which advertising conspires to convince women that, if they wear such and such a dress, or carry a particular bag, people will be more likely to pay attention to them.¹⁶ Of course, what these ads leave out—what is not readily for sale—is the appropriate physical countenance to successfully wear the identity the styles evoke. Some of the most interesting examples of cultural subversion occur precisely when those dresses and those bags get worn by the “wrong” body, appropriated across race, class, or gender in order to signify something entirely different. Rather than reading Francis’s body within its performative situation, however, Steinem tends to read her muscles as directly equivalent to an inner strength and subjectivity without accounting for the representational context of the bodybuilding contest for which Francis actually produced her muscles. Although Steinem records in detail Francis’s training regime and therefore has to recognize how constructed her body is, she nonetheless essentializes her surface musculature as indicative of an inner power and control.

By being at once internal and external, underneath the skin and yet read on the surface of the body, muscles force us to interrogate the meanings of the “natural” body. Often there is a tendency to think of the physical constructedness of the female body in terms of aesthetic or scientific representations—how bodies are most obviously culturally framed. Sure, we might think about fashion, or makeup (remember how high heels, bras, and lipstick were the favorite iconic targets of seventies feminism?), but rarely of our own physical contours and posture as part of that process. Although the fitness boom of the eighties encouraged people to “wear” their muscles visibly as a kind of bodily fashion, muscles are not, in fact, easily put on or taken off. In order to create a clearly defined and visible musculature, most women need to do intensive training with weight machines or free weights—straining the muscles until they literally break down and then heal with more bulk. In addition to building muscles, most women also need to drop a significant percentage of fat from their bodies, so that the muscles will show through their skin. As Susan Bordo argues in her extensive work on body image in contemporary culture, the last two decades have seen a radical shift in the social meaning inherent in a visible musculature.

Given the racial and class biases of our culture, [muscles] were associated with the body as material, unconscious, or animalistic. Today, however, the well-muscled body has become a cultural icon; “working out” is a glorified and sexualized yuppy activity. No longer signifying lower-class status (except when developed to extremes, at which point the old association of muscles with brute, unconscious materiality surfaces once more), the firm, developed body has become a symbol of correct attitude; it means that one “cares” about oneself and how one appears to others, suggesting willpower, energy, control over infantile impulse, the ability to “make something” of oneself.¹⁷

It seems to me that Bordo has identified exactly what Steinem is glorifying under the trope of “strength”—a “correct” attitude toward one’s body, which includes a willingness to “master” its “natural” tendencies. Although in many ways weight lifting can be seen as a powerful blow to the limitations imposed on women’s bodies by the patriarchal concept of their inherent weakness, it still operates within contemporary culture as part and parcel of the various body technologies (such as diet, fashion, breast enlargement, etc.) that women are encouraged to participate in. It is with good reason that Steinem champions a woman who has shattered any previous notions about women’s physical limitations. At the same time, however, she fails to recognize the incredibly disempowering social context in which Bev Francis, “the strongest woman in the world,” is forced to operate. In the section that follows, I propose to reread Steinem’s discussion of Francis’s bodybuilding career in order to articulate the various contradictory impulses embedded in contemporary feminist (re)constructions of the female body. Seeing the complex network of competing dis-
courses within the realm of bodybuilding cultures will, in turn, help us to identify the key contradictions at work in the dancing of Lecavalier and Streb/Ringside.

Although she acknowledges the "beauty contest" atmosphere of the women's 1983 Caesars World Cup Bodybuilding Competition—the importance of makeup, hair, bikinis, and, of course, the ubiquitous smiles—and although at one point Steinem provides a very cogent analysis of the racial dynamics of bodybuilding, she is curiously uncritical of the various bodily transformations that Francis goes through in her ten-year quest to win a woman's bodybuilding competition. In the 1983 contest (which is fictionally "documented" in Butler's film *Pumping Iron II: The Women*), Francis, who is by far the most muscular woman in the semifinal lineup, is relegated to last place in a move that is clearly meant to send a message to women contestants about the acceptable limits of an appropriately "feminine" masculinity. Instead of delineating the ways in which Francis had been culturally "framed," Steinem touts Francis's continually unsuccessful attempts literally to remake her body for each different competition as the efforts of a champion athlete who sees defeat as a challenge to work harder next time. In trying to get "built-up" and still look appropriately feminine, Francis is negotiating a contradiction in terms, one that affects many women in contemporary culture, and one that will cause her alternately to get a nose job, dye her hair, lose more weight (including muscle mass), and then rebuild her musculature all over again in a futile attempt to outguess what the judges are looking for this year.

One of the most striking things about the 1983 competition as documented in *Pumping Iron II* is the frankly illogical shifting between the scenes of sweat and grimmaces as the women exercise and lift weights in preparation for the contest—scenes that are clearly coded to foreground these women's extraordinary determination—and the vapid Miss America-esque sound and light show of the actual contest, in which the women display their bodies but don't actually "do" anything except to pose. The strength that Steinem reads into Francis's body is never an issue in the contest. Muscles function as empty signifiers, visible, but apparently meaning nothing. Indeed, throughout all the behind-the-scenes shots of the film, the active consequences of these women's physical strength (as in "don't touch me or I'll beat the living daylights out of you") are continually downplayed. What is most troubling to me in this particular film is not the fact that some of these women's musculatures exceed gender norms, but rather that their behavior never follows suit: they remain perfect ladies from start to finish.

What for me is ultimately a pathetic story about one woman's desire to fit into a system that will always identify her as "other" than acceptably feminine is, for Steinem, an empowering narrative about the persistence of one woman's personal revolution. Steinem argues that Francis's example of the possibilities of bodybuilding for women, while it may not have won her any championship, created a ripple effect that has changed our preconceptions about women's strength. This may be so. However, what Steinem does again and again in her discussion of Francis's career is to confuse the individual experience of physical self-construction with that of social power and cultural change. Rather than being a testimony to how far we have come, I see women's bodybuilding contests as well as the majority of women's fitness programs as another normalizing practice, one that, to quote Bordo (referencing Foucault) again, trains the female body "in docility and obedience to cultural demands while at the same time being experienced in terms of power and control." 19

This paradox throws an interesting wrench into a feminist discussion of the body's physical and social constructedness. Bodybuilding is, on the surface, an example of women refusing the social ideology that equates women with physical passivity. Muscular women actively participate in reconstructing their bodies for maximum bulk. Yet, as the example of Bev Francis illuminates, the fact that these muscular women contest conventional images of femininity does not mean that they don't also participate in a very traditional experience of being objectified—of making their bodies over to be judged and approved by men. (Indeed, women bodybuilders most often choose men to be their managers and trainers.) In his book *Little Big Men: Bodybuilding Subculture and Gender Construction*, Alan M. Klein devotes a chapter to women bodybuilders. In "Sally's Corner: The Women of Olympic," Klein reads his firsthand ethnographic experience of working out with and interviewing women bodybuilders in various "elite" gyms on the west coast against the swell of media attention and popular representations of women's bodybuilding. To his credit, Klein is one of the few theorists who try to take physical experience into account when they analyze cultural images of women. Klein cautions against easy interpretations of women's bodybuilding as an act of resistance without understanding the bodily experience of weight lifting. He argues that there is a great deal of internalized objectification of one's body in the very process of working out with weights and machines. "The bodybuilder's perception of the body as being made up of parts (chest, abs, back, arms, legs) and subdivided ('traps' [trapezius], front and rear 'dells' [deltooids]) . . . extends into the psychosocial realm, in that bodybuilders view each body part as objectified." 20 Here Klein touches upon the muscular effects of weight training, and begins to explain why built-up muscles don't necessarily
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constitute a powerful presence or somatic agency. I believe this is a direct result of the very static use of the body and the way weight training focuses only on building specific body parts, not on coordinating the entire body for maximum momentum and force. Bodybuilding practices don't address the ways in which women use their weight or physical space. Most of the time these women are, in fact, strapped into machines—a physical experience that reflects the ambiguity of identifying exactly who is controlling what.

There are, of course, experiences of weightlifting that can be very empowering and resistant to the status quo. In a footnote to a chapter on “The Body as Inscriptive Surface” in her recent book Volatile Bodies, Elizabeth Grosz identifies two possible approaches to bodybuilding: “On the one hand, it may, depending on the woman’s goals, be part of an attempt to conform to stereotyped images of femininity, a form of narcissistic investment in maintaining her attractiveness to others and herself. On the other hand, it can be seen as an attempt on the part of the woman to take on for herself many of the attributes usually granted only to men—strength, stamina, masculinity—in a mode of defiance of patriarchal attempts to render women physically weak and incapable.”

Taking up the “other” hand, Diane Griffin Crowder describes the strategies of lesbian weightlifters in her essay entitled “Lesbians and the (Re/De) Construction of the Female Body.” For Crowder, lesbian communities have long valorized defined muscles and the display of physical strength. At once a practical measure of self-defense and a way to define a new aesthetic, muscles help create what Crowder sees as a distinctly “lesbian” body. “If the conventionally feminine or even female body is unlivable and the masculine body unthinkable, then lesbians must re-create the body. The problem is how to do so.” Interestingly enough, in her explanation of “four major interrelated concepts underlying the various movements to “re-create” and make new “sense” of the lesbian body, Crowder discusses not only muscles but physical movement as well. “Lesbians often cultivate movements (gestures, stride, motion of arms and legs) that, unlike the circumscribed movements of most women, occupy the full volume of space around the body.” Although Crowder acknowledges that this lesbian body is purposefully constructed, she also describes a physical comportment that, over time, serves to “naturalize” this body—a performance that sinks so deeply into a body that it no longer seems presentational or overtly performative the way much women’s bodybuilding does (in order to prove that deep down inside these are really “nice” women.)

In their recreation of the female body, lesbian weightlifters extend the physical experience of strength and muscle into the psychophysical movement of their lives. What Crowder is evoking in her discussion of lesbian embodiment is similar to what Merleau-Ponty calls “being-in-the-world.” For Merleau-Ponty, the self cannot be separated either from the body or the world. Indeed, the self is constituted precisely as a lived body. This lived body is the source of our interaction in the world and, as such, is the place of both cultural inscription and resistance. Merleau-Ponty’s work differs from Foucault’s in that it focuses on the constant dialogue of sensory perception and individual reception, and he is committed to exploring aspects of our embodied existence that usually remain outside of theoretical language. For Merleau-Ponty, I am not a self housed in a predominantly passive body. Rather, my body and my self are continually creating and being created by the world around me. This dialectical relationship of self and world can provide an important model for any discussion about the body’s role in organizing reality. His being-in-the-world suggests the complex situatedness of both affecting and being affected by the material world. Even though I gave up philosophy in favor of dance as an organizing principle in my life, I am still fond of the down-to-earth quality of phenomenology and I find particularly useful the work of feminists who reinterpret Merleau-Ponty’s insights about the body-in-the-world in terms of gender.

In her work on the physical attributes of gender conditioning, Iris Young tries to articulate the phenomenological basis of feminine bodily comportment by distinguishing three modalities of feminine movement: ambiguous transcendence, inhibited intentionality, and discontinuous unity. Basically this is fancy philosophical language for throwing like a girl—which is to say, using a body part in a manner that is totally disconnected from the rest of one’s weight and strength. By analyzing the ways that young girls and women are trained not to take up the space around them, not to use the capacity of their whole body when engaging in physical activity, and not to fully project their physical intentions onto the world around them, Young describes the tensions inherent in experiencing one’s body both as a thing and as a capacity for action, both as passive object and as active subject. “According to Merleau-Ponty, for the body to exist as a transcendent presence to the world and the immediate enactment of intentions, it cannot exist as an object. As subject, the body is referred not onto itself, but onto the world’s possibilities... The three contradictory modalities of feminine bodily existence... have their root, however, in the fact that for feminine existence the body frequency is both subject and object for itself at the same time and in reference to the same act.”

This very tension, which has also been articulated by art historians as the tension between looking and being looked at, gives us another perspective on
the central paradox of women’s bodybuilding competitions in which women’s muscles function not as a product of physical intention, but rather as a new style of spectacle. At first sight, dancers such as Lecavalier and the women in Streb/Ringside would seem to have escaped this condition of ambiguous transcendence. After all, not only are their bodies incredibly built-up, but these women also use those muscles to accomplish extraordinary physical acts. Yet at the same time, the tension between experiencing the body as a thing and as a capacity for action (as an object as well as a source of agency) that Young describes as a critical underlying component of female bodily comportment is still embedded in their physical being-in-the-world. In spite of their strength and physical prowess, these women often move in an oddly distanced, object-like manner, often giving one the impression that they are manic, self-propelled rag dolls.

Let us return now to *Infante, C’est Destroy*, the dance with which I began this whole discussion, in order to review Lecavalier’s dancing within the framework of Young’s insights about the female body’s being-in-the-gendered-world. Although Lecavalier is clearly the main figure onstage, ironically, her dancing presence doesn’t create a performative subjectivity. It is true that Lecavalier’s dancing is awesome (I would guess that Lecavalier has more developed muscles than her male counterparts—but since the men are invariably dressed in buttoned-up shirts, long pants, and jackets, one can only speculate), but there is also a distracting manic edge to her movement, which can easily translate into just another representation of female hysteria. Even though Lecavalier is the keystones of the spectacle, even though she is dancing the hardest, breathing and sweating the hardest, she still exhibits the existential ambiguity Young identifies as a trait of female bodily comportment. A close reading of her movement will help us to discover why.26

*Infante, C’est Destroy* begins with a drum solo. The pounding drum is soon joined by a squealing guitar as the lights fade up on Lecavalier and her partner standing still. Even in this brief moment of stillness, Lecavalier’s stance is far less relaxed and weighted than that of her male counterpart. Like a racehorse who is too anxious at the gate, Lecavalier is drawing all her energy into her body. Because she is so bound up, her first movements seem like mini explosions, hair and limbs flying like bits of shrapnel all over the place. The music is pushing her to a frenetic pace such that she always seems to take off and land on either side of the downbeat. This creates a slightly frustrating sense of her never quite being there with the music. Her movement is not just fast, it seems rushed, almost driven by an outside force. This manic quality in her dancing has a lot to do with the fact that she rarely releases her weight into the floor.

Even when she is not engaging in full-body activities such as vaulting or rolling across the stage, even when she is sitting on top of her partner who is sprawled out on the floor, something is going on in her body—her head is shaking furiously, her arms are circling or punching the space in front of her, or her feet are doing little tippy-toe steps.

Much of this frenzied, almost chaotic movement seems pointless; it doesn’t affect the space around her or her partner’s motions, and it rarely has any rhythmic relationship to the music. There are times when she quickly performs a series of arm gestures, something like condensed semaphore, that seem to enact some sort of mysterious ritualized act. Yet those gestures never expand beyond a very limited space around her body, making them into bizarrely private acts. Lecavalier’s movements rarely extend beyond her own limited reach space to affect the stage space, the theatrical space of the world around her. For instance, when she does an arabesque, her leg abruptly kicks up behind her body and then drops back with no spatial intention. Her movement never extends through the space, and her gestures often refer back onto her own body, even when she is grabbing or pulling her partner. It is as if she reaches out only to retract into herself. This is particularly striking given the enormous stage on which *Infante, C’est Destroy* was performed at FIND. I would identify much of Lecavalier’s dancing as a prime example of Young’s “discontinuous unity,” particularly in terms of her use of space and weight. Her body tends to move as a series of disconnected parts. Often, an arm thrown behind her body doesn’t motivate a turn in that direction, or even a windup to turn in another direction, but rather is simply thrown out and then flops back wherever it lands. It seems as if Lecavalier loses connection with her limbs once they are launched. Because she lets go of any spatial intention in her movement, her dancing can take on a brutal, almost masochistic quality. After a while, she seems to be just throwing her body up in the air, not particularly caring where it lands.

There are exceptions, of course. In a trio with the two other women, there is a much more lyrical quality to her dancing. Their partnering has a more relaxed, almost embracing feel about it, and there is none of the sense of rough competitiveness that underlies Lecavalier’s duets with men. Likewise, the enormous video of Lecavalier naked, falling in slow motion, has a peaceful, almost religiously ecstatic quality to it. Still, at the end of this seventy-five-minute spectacle, I had a very conflicted sense of Lecavalier’s (not to mention Lock’s) whole attitude toward her body. On the one hand, I was astounded by the daring and physical audacity of her movement and wondered if I could ever train to be tight enough and strong enough to do similar feats. On the
other hand, I realized the sheer vulnerability of her body put under that kind of physical stress. During one performance of Infante, C'est Destroy, Lecavalier reportedly dislocated her hip, but only stopped dancing once the spectacle was over. This disturbing sense of disconnection with regard to her physicality is alluded to in an interview in which Lecavalier is quoted as saying, “to me, all dance is violent to the body... dancers are always pushing their bodies to do excessive things.”

By analyzing her actual physical movements as well as her position within the spectacle as a whole, I am arguing for a more complex awareness of how dance operates as a form of representation. I believe it is important not only to look at the narrative, iconicographic gestures, symbolic images, and social relationships within the choreography, but also to recognize how meaning is literally embodied in the dancer’s physicality. As mysterious as it may seem to the audience, I believe a performer’s theatrical persona is grounded in the phenomenological realities of weight, space, and movement intentionality—her literal being-in-the-world. While we may not be entirely conscious of these elements within a performance, they undoubtedly affect how we perceive the dancing as well as the dancers. What is intriguing in the example of Lecavalier’s dancing is the way that her visible musculature and powerful dancing on the one hand, and her gendered use of space and weight on the other, contradict one another within Lock’s rock spectacle. While her built-up body radically challenges a conventionally feminine body or movement style, Lecavalier’s disconnected intentionality reinforces her traditionally gendered role within the spectacle. Because Lecavalier’s dancing produces these physical attributes simultaneously, her theatrical presence remains an enigma, at once refusing and enacting the bodily codes of gender.

La La La Human Steps and Streb/Ringside are two of the more visible companies working in a genre of contemporary dance that privileges a fast, explosive, and intense physicality. This work, which is the backbone of companies as different in their aesthetic aims as the Stephen Petronio Dance Company, Bebe Miller Dance, or Contraband, draws on a physical training that includes dance technique (both modern and ballet), Contact Improvisation, and fitness conditioning. For me, some of the more intriguing examples of this kind of physicality take place within an alternative dance environment—the so-called “downtown” dance scene in New York City. Here, we see women such as Yoshiko Chuma, Yvonne Meier, and Jennifer Monson (to mention only a few), who use this kind of fierce dancing not in order to display their muscles and dancing stamina, but rather as a physical basis for their improvisatory and choreographic explorations. In the smaller and more informal venues in which these women often perform (St. Mark’s Place, Judson Church, Movement Research, PS.122, The Knitting Factory), the physical strength of their bodies is at once visible in their movement (they don’t generally wear body-hugging or body-revealing garb), and yet framed in a manner very different from companies such as La La La Human Steps or Streb/Ringside.

**Finn’s Shed**, by Jennifer Monson, begins with a duet between Monson and John Jasperse. Jasperse runs full tilt across the space, turns and runs back—smack into Monson. They flip one another and then Jasperse slides away, only to get tackled by Monson as she flies horizontally through the air. In some ways, the beginning rough-and-tumble energy of this duet is similar to the kind of whipped-around-the-space pounce-and-smash dancing that is the signature of Lecavalier’s partnering. There is a lot of horizontal catapulting of bodies across the space in which one partner catches and then the other returns the favor. Sometimes after a beautiful catch, a partner will simply let go and drop the other dancer splat on the floor. At times affectionate, at times combative, Monson and Jasperse come together and then separate as if they can’t really figure out what they want from each other.

There are, however, some essential differences between their dancing and that of La La La Human Steps. In contrast to Lecavalier’s discontinuous intentionality and bound, fragmented movements, Monson’s dancing usually has a very clear and directed energy. At first, her movement style seems casual, almost random in the way she throws her limbs and head around. But a closer look at her dancing shows how refined her movement impulses are, how she gathers her center before she launches across the space, first seeing a spot on the floor before diving there. When she lands, even if it is only for a split second, Monson releases her weight into the floor with an exhalate. This ability to place and release her torso supports the erratic, sometimes chaotic flinging of different body parts. Then, too, there is such a flow of movement through Monson’s body that a gesture initiated in the foot or leg can be seen expanding diagonally out the other arm or her head. Because her whole body is affected by her movement, she seems to ride the currents of the air around her, emphasizing the spatial flow of her dancing rather than directly placing her limbs in a shape. This clarity of weight, spatial intention, and movement flow allow Monson to dance in an explosive, raw manner that is both physically subtle and pleasurably rambunctious. She is strong, but not contained. This gives her dancing a more expansive quality than do the tight, driven movements of Streb/Ringside, for example.

While Monson and Jasperse continue to tackle one another throughout **Finn’s Shed**, their relationship evolves from the playful synchronicity of their
roughhousing to a more complex physical connectedness. Instead of immediately dropping out of a catch and moving onto something else, they might choose to remain in physical contact, treasuring that embrace for a moment. Other times, Monson or Jasperse will strategically resist their partner’s direction, throwing their body as an obstacle for the other dancer to overcome. What I like best about their duet is the ways in which their physical strength can express vulnerability as well as invincibility. In the final moment of the dance, Monson and Jasperse emerge from a series of rolls to kneel across from one another. Here they pause, caught in a moment of profound stillness. Suddenly Jasperse catapults across the space that divides them to land on Monson’s arms. Accepting his weight, she lowers her body onto the floor, extending her torso across him as the lights fade.

Monson’s dancing, both in her own work and in the choreography of others (I am thinking of her extraordinary performance in Jeremy Nelson’s Rojo del Arrabia) resists the traditionally gendered body codes for women (particularly women dancers) both in terms of the shape of her physique and in terms of its movement potential. Although she is clearly a very strong and powerful dancer, Monson’s muscles are not as striated as those of some contemporary women dancers. The fact that her body doesn’t “read” as extremely muscled provides, I believe, an interesting tension here, for she fits neither into the traditionally gendered image of a lithe feminine dancer nor into its more recent reconstruction as a sleekly muscled one. Because she can’t be easily identified with these commodified images of women dancers, Monson provides us with a refreshing example of an alternative physicality. Monson’s dancing, unlike LeCavalier’s or Streb’s, is not marketed commercially as an extraordinary display of a hyperathletic body or the newest “look” in contemporary dance. Indeed, within the subculture of downtown performance Monson’s dancing has become naturalized, and there are many other women dancers within that community whose movement style is similar to hers. By not foregrounding the constructed aspects of her physicality as resistance to a feminized norm, but rather by simply expanding that norm, Monson is able to evade the commercialization of a new bodily “look”—one that has, I believe, actually limited the choreographic vision of companies such as La La La Human Steps and Streb/Ringside.

Another aspect of Monson’s dancing is important to this discussion. Earlier in this chapter, I spoke of wanting to look at the process through which bodies are constructed in order to understand the cultural ideologies that are literally incorporated into contemporary dance—to look at the meanings sewn into
the neuromusculature of the body. Much of this discussion has been devoted to examining how the ideologies of gender are layered throughout women's bodies and movement styles. Using the examples of Lecavalier's dancing and that of Streb/Ringside, I argued that the development of muscles alone doesn't necessarily give us a female physicality that resists gendered norms. Now I would like to turn to another way of reading these contemporary dancing bodies. Seeing the intensely built-up bodies in La La La Human Steps and Streb/Ringside has always made me reflect on their opposite— the legacy of frail bodies in our culture.

The obsessiveness with which American culture approaches fitness and other forms of body management makes me feel that we are desperately trying to refuse the fundamental experience of the body's inevitable loss. Building muscles creates an illusion of the body's strength, an illusion of stability (which, of course, requires vigilant maintenance). In this sense, I see Lecavalier's and Streb's relentlessly pumped-up movement style as embodying a deep cultural anxiety about the inevitable fragility of human bodies. There is something reassuring each time a dancer mounts an obstacle or completes a difficult task, a sense of satisfaction in how she or he takes charge of the physical situation. Fit and strong, young and daring, these dancers embody the possibility of success, the productive harnessing of physical energy.

But bodies are always eluding control (both physical and political). If the disciplined body has become, as Bordo suggests, a symbol of the "correct attitude," then cultural logic has it that the undisciplined, "weak" body reveals a "wrong attitude." Caught in a self-perpetuating binary of good and evil, the religious right has been trying to represent poverty, AIDS, teenage pregnancy, and the like, as endemic to undisciplined, loose, immoral bodies whose physical extravagances have brought on their own destruction. We need to refuse this binary logic (so prevalent in the rhetoric of the fitness industry as well as the conservative right), which pits fit bodies against frail ones. What I appreciate about Monson's duet with Jasperse is the way her strong, explosive movement does not preclude a softer, more tender dancing. Based on a breath rhythm as well as on the percussive sounds of Zeena Parkins, the dancing in Finn's Shed gives us the opportunity to see not just the extraordinary physical feats in this work, but all the movements around those feats as well. Being able to follow the dancers' experience before and after their leaps and lunges, being able to see how a catch affects their bodies as well as their relationship, makes Finn's Shed much less about the display of the dancers' prowess, and much more about their humanity.

Monson's explosive physicality supports a more profound experience of her being-in-the-world. While certainly linked to the strength of her muscles, Monson's body is not entirely defined by them. When I watch her dancing, I see a continuity, a movement history that bespeaks a future as well. Unlike the dancing in La La La Human Steps or Streb/Ringside, in which the hyper-fit bodies flash across the stage in a flare of immediacy that is always threatening to burn itself out, Monson's dancing is grounded in a way that can accommodate change. Although she is strong and rambunctious now, I can readily imagine her continuing to dance, even as her body begins to register the passage of time.