

the

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modern  
amazon

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edited by Joanna Frueh, Laurie Fierstein, and Judith Stein

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*RIZZOLI*  
NEW YORK

To Al Thomas; and the women who build big muscle

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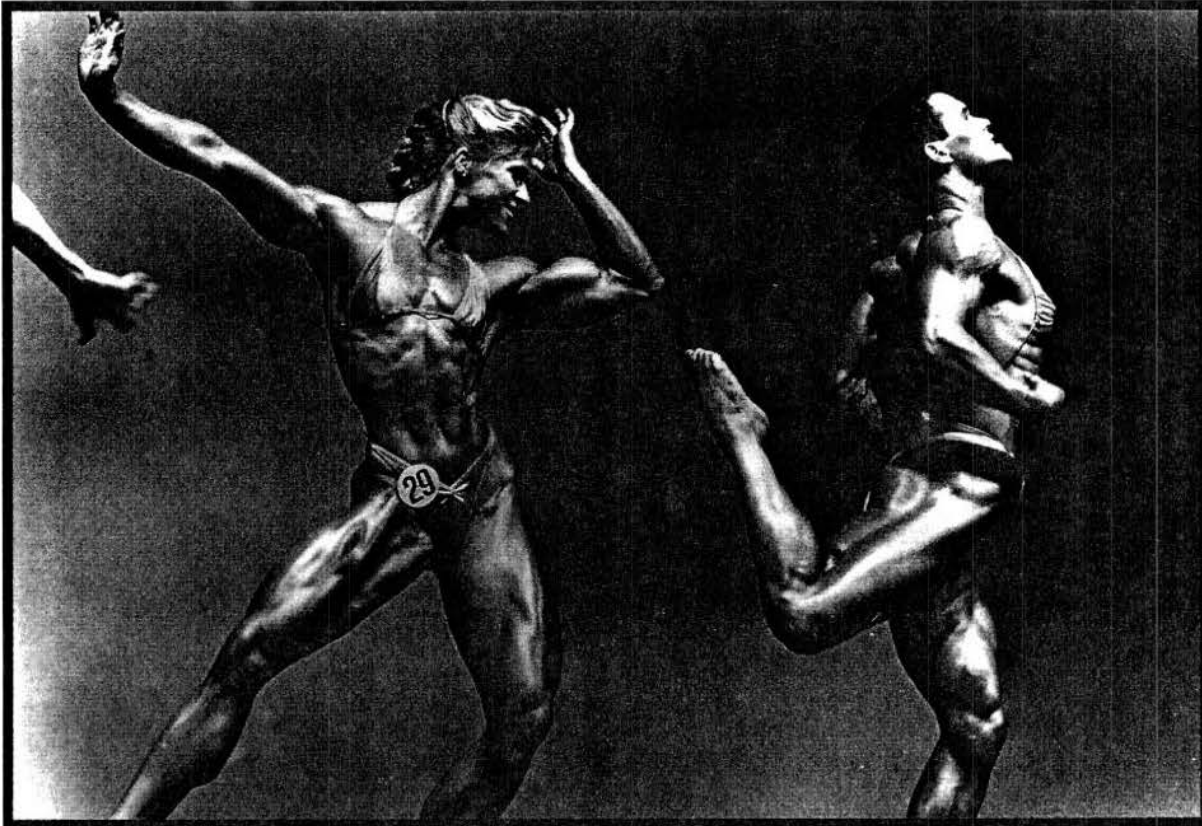
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preface

# the body artist

Irving Lavin



ANJA LANGER (LEFT) AND CHRISTINA FRANKEN (RIGHT), 1986, GERMAN BODYBUILDING CHAMPIONSHIPS, MUNICH.

One of the inadvertent compensations for the tribulations of parenthood is that we may learn from our offspring lessons at least as valuable as those we impart to them. Such was the case when one of my daughters, Amelia, became a photographer and conceived an abiding interest in bodybuilders. Showing my wife and me some of her work one day she described her subjects as body-sculptures, and my life was transformed. In that instant I realized that I had spent a large part of my professional career as an art historian blindly studying the representation of the human figure in the visual arts (particularly sculpture), without seeing the subjects who

were hidden within and behind the objects of my devotion. Visually speaking, the body is an agglomeration of muscles, each of which has the potential to become a kind of brush- or chisel-stroke, of which the self-artist must become self-conscious, learn to develop, and then work into an overall design. The body may thus become a living work of art, no less thoughtfully conceived and laboriously executed than the painting or sculpture or photograph that portrays it. Behind and within the history of the humanistic tradition in art there lies a prior and inner history of art, that of the artists' models—those largely anonymous and unsung people who preceded and provided the raw material of inspiration. Was the model for the Venus of Willendorf a "body-builder"? What were her designs? How did she achieve those extravagant shapes, and what did they mean to her? This last is a crucial point, for every human being comes equipped with a virtually infinite endowment of physical and psychological potentialities, which the individual develops in finite ways to create, willy-nilly or deliberately, a person, a style, and ultimately a message about the meaning of the world as we understand, or fail to understand, it.

Having later witnessed with Amelia a bodybuilding exhibition (*Celebration of the Most Awesome Female Muscle in the World*, organized in 1993 by Laurie Fierstein, who also participated), I further realized that I had an entirely mistaken preconception of the nature of the activity because it is grossly misrepresented in the medium of still photography through which it is best known. Bodybuilding's initiates call it a sport, whereas what I saw was a dramatic action, a performance, and inevitably so, when one thinks about it, because we cannot understand what the body-artist's muscle-strokes have achieved without seeing them in action. The artist/work-of-art is practically never at rest, and the quality of the movement is no less eloquent than the glistening, streamlined forms themselves—balletic is

the only adequate word.

And I am convinced that evocations of the body beautiful such as

Giambologna's flying figure of Mercury, the messenger of the Gods—

familiar to everyone from the flower-telegraphy logo, and distinctly recalled in the volatile forms of Christina Franken and Laura Creavalle illustrated here—cannot be understood apart from contemporary developments of the ballet.

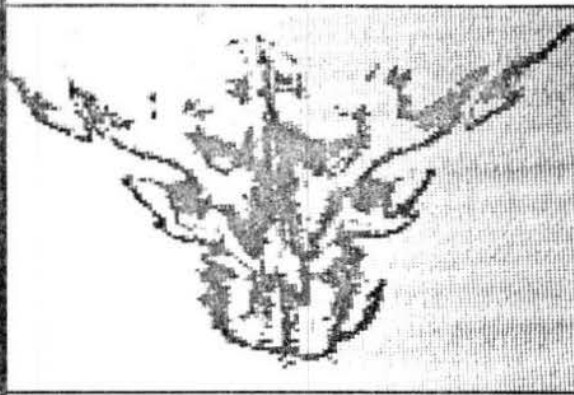
But the term bodybuilding, which we use *faute de mieux*, does have at least one virtue: it suggests the idea of structure, as if the physique were a kind of edifice. In fact, the bodybuilder's body is, I think, a shrine, erected by those who have the imagination and the courage to endure the agony of transforming the inward and outward self into a work of art. They make the supreme sacrifice to the Temple of Beauty, sacrifice of the self.

I have deliberately avoided the term "Amazon" adopted in the title of this book, for reasons that are steeped in irony or paradox. First, because unlike the modern female bodybuilder, the Greco-Roman Amazon, however formidable, never exceeds the classical norms of feminine nobility and pulchritude. Second, because bodybuilding, male as well as female, tends to blur the conventional distinctions between the sexes, diminishing breasts and magnifying thighs among the women, magnifying breasts and diminishing genitalia among the men (the penis being one "muscle" that is not durably enlarged through exercise, so far as I know—as witness the ancient type of the mountainous, muscle-bound Resting Hercules). Through bodybuilding the sexes tend to merge in a common vision of humanity. The only apt analogy for this ideal, anthropomorphic androgyny are the angels, those other heaven-sent messengers of superhuman beauty and strength, incorporeal embodiments of the dream of human perfectibility.

LAURA CREAVALLE, 1988, IFBB WORLD AMATEUR CHAMPIONSHIPS, SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO.



BACKGROUND IMAGE: MARGUERITE OF "MARGUERITE AND HANLEY" SHOWN PERFORMING HER FAMOUS ONE-ARM PRESS AND OTHER STRENGTH FEATS WITH HER PARTNER, 1908. TINTED LITHOGRAPH FROM RINGLING BROTHERS COURIER, "RINGLING BROS. WORLD'S GREATEST SHOW".



AMELIA LAVIN, *TIGRESS*  
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