

Body Turn

A Fresh Look at Muscular Masculinities

**Hard Bodies. Aesthetic, Materiality, and
Mediality of Masculinity in American
and European Art and Visual Culture,
c. 1900–today.** International
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[Zum Programm ↗](#)

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The Hard Body and Its Ambiguities

The hard male body remains a problematic subject for arts and humanities. The cultural discourse around it has been shaped by a curious dichotomy of fascination and rejection: while its continuous omnipresence in the broader spheres of culture and society, from sports to cinema to politics, testifies to its mainstream appeal and iconic power, feminist scholars and contemporary artists seem to invoke the hard body only to deconstruct it as a symbol of hegemonic masculinity and white supremacy (Connell 1995, Mosse 1996). The queer studies too, particularly in art history, have traditionally preferred to examine the soft and vulnerable body as a potential site of queer identity and desire, while ignoring the eroticism of its muscular counterpart (Solomon-Godeau 1997).

Reflecting the renewed art-historical interest in corporeal extravagance (Golsenne 2024) and queer masculinities (Maniu 2023, Sappol 2024), the conference *Hard Bodies: Aesthetic, Materiality, and Mediality of Masculinity in American and European Art and Visual Culture, c. 1900–today*, invited an international and interdisciplinary scholar community to address this contradiction and reconstruct the ambivalent history of the enduring fascination with the hard male body. Taking Klaus Theweleit's concept of 'body armor' as a starting point (Theweleit 1977), the organizers – Max Böhner (Humboldt-University of Berlin/University of Potsdam), Antje Krause-Wahl (Goethe University), Clara J. Lauffer (Goethe University) and Simon Wendt (Goethe University) – sought to open the analysis of the muscular body, its biopolitics and medializations in art and visual culture, film and bodybuilding history to feminist, queer and decolonial perspectives, paying special attention to the transatlantic exchange between Europe and the US since the late 19th century.

Rather than simply critique and dismiss this masculine ideal as masculinist, racist and heteronormative, the conference attempted a more holistic approach, highlighting the inherent ambiguities of the hard body that may well be the reason for its pervasive allure across visual media, centuries and continents.

Hardening Soft Bodies

The opening panel of the conference investigated the biopolitics, cultural practices and discourses that shaped the new muscular ideal of masculinity in the 19th and early 20th century art as well as in the increasingly popular physical culture movement. The tension between the heteropatriarchal historical context of the media discussed and the potential for their queer reading was made immediately palpable. Thus, Anthea Callen (Canberra/Nottingham) revisited François Sallé's *Anatomy Class* (1888) | Fig. 1 |, which she had previously discussed in terms of connections between art education, anatomy and medicine, as well in regards to its homoerotic effect, to examine its role in the circulation of white racial ideals and eugenic concepts through the British colonial artistic and medical networks. Callen argued that this painting and Gaston La Touche's *The First Born* (1887) were both acquired by the British government at the Paris Salon for the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney to further the propaganda of a 'British Imperial master-race' in the Australian colony. Connecting the paintings' respective themes – improving the male specimen and teaching correct 'mothercraft' – to the writings of a New Zealand doctor Truby King, she recontextualized the hard body of the muscular live model being presented to a class of interested art students not as an object of the homoerotic gaze but as a marker of imperial history.

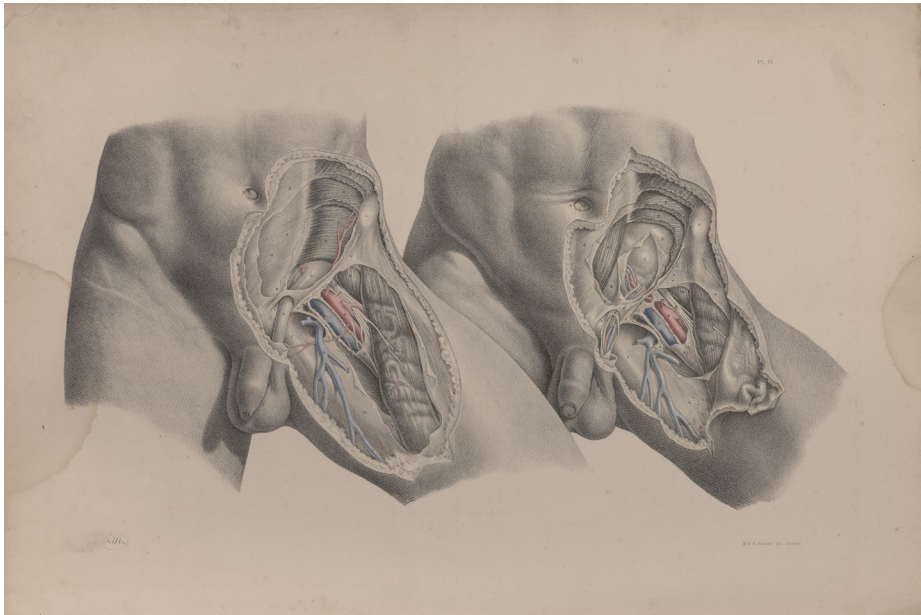
Similarly, Mechthild Fend (Frankfurt) responded to a recent queer reading of Joseph Maclise's remarkably sensuous anatomical lithographs | Fig. 2 | from a more feminist perspective, operating with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of homosociality. She argued that anatomical atlases had traditionally been a male-centric genre, exclusionary to women both as artists and as objects of anatomical study, thus universalizing the man as a generic human from whom all knowledge about the human body is derived. Maclise's *Surgical Anatomy* (1851) largely focuses on white men in their prime, unusually individualized yet homogenously beautiful and muscular – an ideal that could have hardly been embodied in each dissected corpse studied by the artist. Echoing the idea of selection and fabrication of the 'natural' body discussed by Callen, Fend proposed that Maclise used the capacities of lithography to idealize his subjects and adjust them to his understanding of normative male bodies – hard, smooth, strong and vital even when dead – which then served as the male viewer's alter egos as well as the standard by which human bodies would in turn be judged in the medical context.

Simon Wendt (Frankfurt) investigated this ambition to build a perfect male body by hardening it within the emerging bodybuilding culture in the US around 1900. He traced the origins of the physical culture movement to the turn of the century crisis of masculinity and the resulting desire to revitalize the nation that motivated white celebrity athletes like Eugen Sandow, Bernarr Macfadden and Harry Weinburgh to promote a carefully constructed image of a hard statuesque body through various commercial means, including performances, contests, text and photo publications. Despite being understood as inherently heteronormative, this masculine ideal inspired physical culture magazines like *Physique Pictorial* | Fig. 3 | that addressed a queer viewership in particular. According to Wendt, the homoerotic dimension of the bodybuilding movement was therefore a byproduct of the hegemonic biopolitical hard body project.

In contrast to these talks that sought to relativize queer interpretations, Jonathan D. Katz (University of Pennsylvania) approached the changing masculinity representations at the turn of the 20th century from a decidedly queer perspective. Katz connected



| Fig. 1 | François Sallé, *The anatomy class at the École des beaux-arts*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 218 × 299 cm. Sydney, Art Gallery of New South Wales. Anthea Callen, *Looking at Men. Art, Anatomy and the Modern Male Body*, New Haven/London 2018, p. 28, fig. 1.1



| Fig. 2 | Joseph Maclise, The surgical dissection of the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth layers of the inguinal region and their connection with those of the thigh, 1851. Colored lithograph, 54 × 38 cm. Montreal, McGill University, Osler Library of the History of Medicine. Joseph Maclise, *Surgical Anatomy*, London 1851, Plate 18 [↗](#)

the move “from soft boys to hard men” in the work of queer artists like Gustave Courtois to a definitional shift in the discourse around homosexuality: as Karl Heinrich Ulrichs’ idea of the Urning as a marginal figure of gender dimorphism was superseded by Karl Maria Kertbeny’s more universalized understanding of the homosexual, so did the prevalence of ephebic youths give way to muscular strongmen as embodiments of queer masculinity.

According to Katz, and in opposition to Wendt’s argument, it was therefore the wish to represent a more varied homosexual masculinity that produced the hard body image typically viewed as heteronormative.

While this theory proposes an interesting connection between the written and the visual discourse, it does not account for the cyclical nature of masculine body ideals in 19th century art, discussed among others in the work of Solomon-Godeau and Fend, whose reserved approach to queer perspectives can in turn be perceived as pushback. It appears that the balance between feminist and queer, between acknowledging the historical context of a given artwork and recognizing that artworks have agency beyond their creator’s intent is still hard to achieve.

Gazing at Hard Bodies

Even at this early stage the dissemination through media was fundamental to the construction of the hard body ideal, which is why its influence grew exponentially with the advent of film and television. Interrogating the continued relevance of the hard body in popular movie culture, Robert Rushing (University of California) reconstructed the history of the ‘peplum’ genre from the 1910s Italian cinema through the 1980s Hollywood to the present-day TV. Described by Rushing as “a century-long meditation on biopower” that stages the muscular male body as a symbol for the nation’s vitality, the peplum’s development from affirmative and largely comedic strongman heroics to a violent spectacle of tortured, dissected and emasculated hard bodies testifies to a new ambivalence in regard to this masculine ideal, now rivaled by an interest in speed, agility and quick thinking in high-risk situations that might reflect the values of the male-centric world of finance and IT.

While this genre primarily addresses male viewers, the 2023 blockbuster *Barbie* intended to engage women audiences first and foremost – and the hard body of Ken, played by Ryan Gosling, was one of the key elements of that engagement. Änne Söll

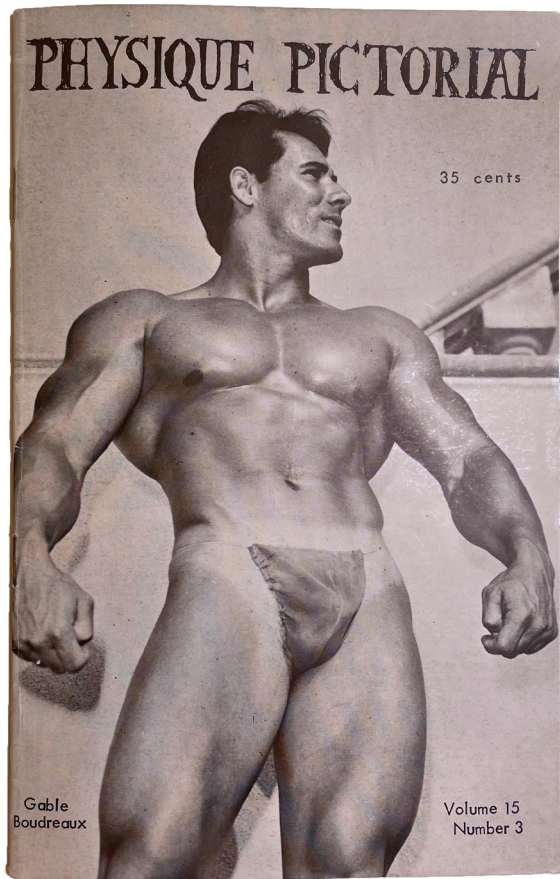


Fig. 3 | Bob Mizer for Athletic Model Guild. A Cover of *Physique Pictorial*, 1966. Photography, 13,97 × 21,59 cm. San Francisco, The Bob Mizer Foundation. *Physique Pictorial* 15, 3, 1966. Image courtesy of the Bob Mizer Foundation, San Francisco, CA ↗

(Bochum), who unfortunately could not attend, and Florian Freitag (Essen) prepared a deep-dive into the historic connections between the plastic bodies of Ken toys and the fit muscular bodies of the actors who played them, unpacking the many pop-culture references the movie invoked to stage its ironic re-enactment of hypermasculinity – that ultimately fell short of making a critical statement about men and their bodies. While the changes in Barbie’s body indicate her ability to rise above the rigid rules of her seemingly utopian, post-feminist world, Ken’s hard body remains unchanged in its rigidity. Freitag therefore concluded that the film reaffirms the status quo

and relegates the change of men to the nebulous future.

These contributions suggested that the popular media made ‘for men’ are more inclined to question the hard body ideal than those made ‘for women’. In this regard, one would have wished to see the relations between hard male bodies and women’s desires be made subject to a more substantial discussion. For beyond the room of women academics lining up to deconstruct the hard male body’s relation to toxic masculinity there is a whole world of women who simply love to gaze at muscular men.

Queer men form another demographic who likes to gaze at them, as discussed by Thomas Waugh (Montreal) in his retrospective on erotic gay media of the pre-Stonewall era, when production and distribution of explicit pornography was yet illegal but the line between erotic and pornographic media was getting ever thinner. By analyzing the changing masculine iconography in gay mail order videos and magazines of the mid-1960s, he drew attention to how the limitations put on erotic media shaped the fantasies and masculinities they visualized. Complementing Waugh, Maxwell Sutter Zinkievich (London) zeroed in on this industry’s central figure Bob Mizer, the industrious publisher of *Physique Pictorial* (1951–1990), and gave a detailed insight into the multi-media collections and the work of the non-profit foundation created in San Francisco around Mizer’s considerable estate.

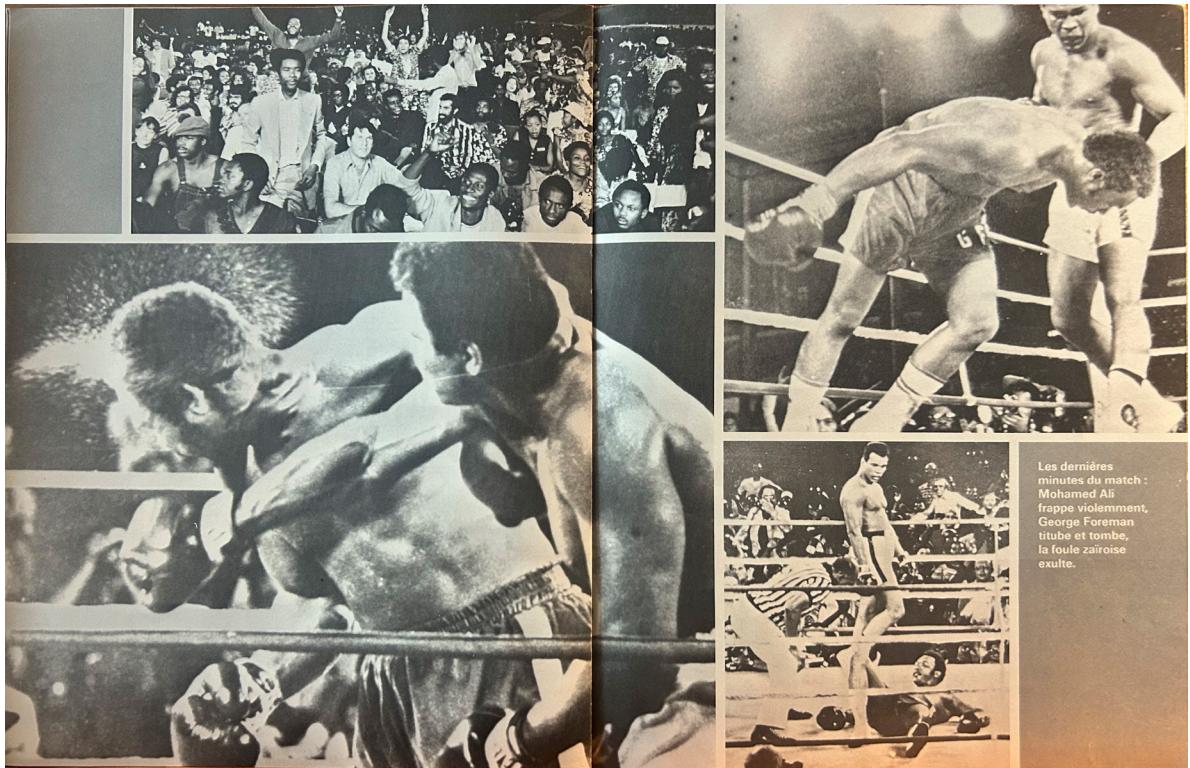
By contrast, the spectacular medialization of hard male bodies in the context of sports events can attract billions of viewers across various demographics and nationalities. Jessica Hanson (University of Southern California) examined the pitfalls of such mass-media coverage, using the 1974 ‘Rumble in the Jungle’ boxing match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman as a case study. Paying special attention to the role athletes played as politicized icons in postcolonial Africa, Hanson stressed the distinction between raw muscle power and endurance of an athlete’s body central to this particular match and considered the problem of medializing this dis-

inction: while the spectacular knock-out punch captured in still photography | Fig. 4 | belied the real reason of Ali's win, the television footage documenting the tenacity of his body deflecting the opponent's blows proved decidedly unspectacular. By bringing the cracks in the medialized hard body construct into sharp focus, this example addressed the dishonest media consumption of black masculinities in particular – a topic that was elaborated on in an interview with artist and curator James Gregory Atkinson, who spoke about the non-traditional ways of reconstructing, remixing and exhibiting the history of black culture and anti-blackness in post-war Germany.

Softening Hard Bodies

Once the cracks in the carefully manufactured ideal became visible, the hard body was made subject to artistic and academic deconstruction. Susanne Huber (Bremen) and Clara J. Lauffer (Frankfurt) ex-

plored American artists' attempts to dissect what Theweleit termed 'body armor' in the wake of the Vietnam War. While Theweleit's analysis focused on aggressive masculinity's basis in 'guarding' against women and was therefore built on the assumption of normative heterosexuality, Huber argued that Lutz Bacher's photo series *Men at War* (1975) approached a similar problem through exposing the ambivalent homosocial intimacy of militaristic male imagery by appropriating, fragmenting and reproducing found photos of World War II soldiers to zero in on their quiet yet disquieting symphony of sensual touch. In turn, Lauffer examined the much more bombastic means of critiquing hard militaristic masculinity used by the artists of the 1980s Pictures Generation. From Robert Longo's abject zombie soldier | Fig. 5 |, whose 'body armor' seems to dissolve before the viewers' eyes, to the literal disembodiment and disappearance of the hard soldier body in the more abstract works of Jack



| Fig. 4 | Anonymous, The last minutes of the match, 1974. Photography. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France. Ali-Foreman Numero Souvenir. Champion d'afrique 7 (November 13, 1974), 18–19. Image used with permission of the BnF

Goldstein, these artworks sought to destabilize the hegemonic and violent ideals of the century marked by never-ending wars. The ensuing discussion, however, highlighted the thin line between these works' subversive intent and their latent potential to fetishize and aggrandize what they are seemingly meant to critique.

The unstable nature of hard bodies becomes evident when contrasted with the soft materials that human bodies are actually made of – such as water, whose inherent fluidity has been commonly used by artists to produce ambiguous meanings. Max Böhner (Berlin/Potsdam) traced the motif of hard bodies immersed in water across queer iconographies from the 19th century onwards, which presented water as a site of ambivalence between hope, pleasure and danger. This he contrasted with the heteronormative reinterpretation of the motif in contemporary ads, where water is defined as a female element which the hard male body, echoed by the rocks of the shoreline, penetrates only to emerge from, reaffirmed in its masculinity. The narcissistic aspect of such imagery was further discussed by Laura König (Hamburg/

Munich) in regard to Elmgreen & Dragset's stainless steel sculpture *The Care of Oneself* (2017). Connecting the polished mirror surface of the classical bodies depicted to the culture of surveillance, relevant both to queer history and modern enforcement of gendered beauty standards online, König interpreted the sculpture as a figuration of losing one's real self to one's image.

This tension between the image and the materiality of gender is encapsulated in Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's series *Mussalmaan Musclemen* (2016–17) | Fig. 6 | that uses printing and patchwork techniques to overwrite the hard bodies shown in bodybuilder photography with soft, shiny and floral textiles. Leoni Huber (Frankfurt) investigated Bhutto's appropriation of the heteropatriarchal and orientalist imagery in order to dissect and transform the hegemonic masculinity representations both in western and in Islamic cultural contexts and to critique the colonialist depictions of Middle Eastern and South Asian men. The soft nature of the materials used emphasizes that this kind of deconstruction does not aim at the dissolution of the hard body, but rather at a reparative healing from

| Fig. 5 | Robert Longo, *All You Zombies: Truth Before God*, 1986/2012. Cast bronze on motorized platform of steel and wood, acrylic and charcoal on shaped canvas, 448 × 495 × 451 cm. New York, The Whitney Museum. Photo courtesy of the artist. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025 ↗





| Fig. 6 | Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, *Arnold in Chainmail*, 2016. Archival inkjet print on cotton, embroidery thread, 12,7 × 12,7 cm.
© Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Photo courtesy of the artist ↗

which a new subversive and empowered hybrid masculinity can arise.

As the material used to create the first humans in numerous mythologies, clay can similarly demonstrate that hard and soft, masculine and feminine are parts of the same continuum. This theme of non-binarity, of rearranging the hard body was discussed by Antje Krause-Wahl (Frankfurt) in relation to the ceramics of artists Cassils and Phoebe Collings-James. Cassils employs their well-trained muscular body in performative fights with formless blocks of clay, which they subsequently let ossify into monuments to the resilience of queer people. While they appropriate the masculine motif of wrestling with the material for their message of (gender) transformation, Collings-James' gentler mode of crafting fragmentary breastplates in clay **| Fig. 7 |** highlights the vulnerability of the supposedly impenetrable 'body armor'. The artist seeks no power over the material, instead taking an eco-feminist decolonial approach to handling the exploited soil, which is understood by Krause-Wahl as a manner of escapism from the hard realities and body politics of the late capitalist age of pervasive technology.

The Hard Body – Inherently Hegemonic or Subversive?

In response to this multifaceted artistic critique of the hard body, Jörg Scheller's (Zurich) witty talk on "the irony of the iron body" called into question the dichotomy between the muscular body's allegedly inherent hetero-fascism and its queer or feminist deconstructions. He posited that in its pursuit of hypermasculine aesthetics the bodybuilder's self-musealized body becomes a sort of camp artwork – unintentionally subversive and implicitly queer in the broadest sense. A fitting conclusion to the conference, this presentation highlighted the points of contention between art and politics, previously touched upon by many



| Fig. 7 | Phoebe Collings-James, *The subtle rules the dense*, 2021. Glazed ceramic, 56 × 40 × 13 cm. Private collection. © Phoebe Collings-James. Photo courtesy of the artist and Arcadia Missa, London ↗

speakers. On the one hand, conceptualizing the hard body as inherently queer and subversive, which the open-minded holistic analysis can sometimes result in, disregards its violent history and its continued recruitment in the service of right-wing ideologies. On the other hand, its queer-feminist deconstructions can feel like preaching to the choir that has minimal impact on the hard body's perception in the wider world. While the conference did not quite succeed in bridging the gap between these two approaches, the juxtaposition of insights from different disciplines and schools of thought did lead to a more complex understanding of hard bodies in all their ambiguities and contradictions.

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