

QUEER EXERCISES

Amber Hawk Swanson's Performances of Self-Realization

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Exercise requires a dual commitment to self-improvement and self-punishment. For its capacities to be transformed, the body is pushed to its limits and overworked. It becomes an object defined through its potentials and its deficiencies, with any positive, self-affirming account of exercise realized only through self-imposed objectification and penance.

When one's body is simultaneously seen as worthy of cultivation yet disdained for its inadequacies, one becomes both victim and victimizer, hero and villain. Such polarities are generally kept safely apart, but it has been the aim of the performance and social media artist Amber Hawk Swanson to collapse them dramatically. Indeed, a recurring theme of her practice has been to investigate the unstable boundaries between the roles of victimizer and victim, inhabiting their uneasy interdependencies. She has done this, literally, by making her body into her own object.

Hawk Swanson's recent works allegorize both the positive and the negative sides of exercise. She has undertaken a series of performances for video and social media that use her own family traditions of practical fitness and its popular commercial legacy in the CrossFit group exercise program. In these works, Hawk Swanson punishes herself through impossible tasks and serial workouts while playing out the potentials and dangers of self-realization. The empowering masochism of her exercise performances, as I discuss, derives directly from her earlier work in which she engaged in a romantic and artistic relationship with a life-size sex doll made in her own image. In her collaboration with this sculptural self-portrait, Hawk Swanson concurrently made herself the object of care and of harm. In what follows, I examine the ways in which an analogous dynamic of self-objectification and self-realization informs her subsequent exercise performances and their concerns.

Any one of Hawk Swanson's works is difficult to extricate from her ongoing practice in which each new work is spawned by public reactions to the last. From the beginning of her career, she has engaged with social media, broadcasting her performances through YouTube, Vimeo, and other video platforms in order to generate comments and reactions that, in turn, become the foundations for new projects. In the present article, I limit my account of Hawk Swanson's prefitness works to a short discussion of one (albeit major) project, for it was the reactions to it that spurred Hawk Swanson to undertake exercise as performance.

In 2006 Hawk Swanson commissioned a life-size RealDoll in her own image. RealDolls are hyperrealistic, poseable, life-size sculptures made of silicone flesh over a PVC skeleton. They were initially designed as sexual surrogates, and they contain penetrable ribbed orifices for this purpose. Expensive and intricately created, RealDolls frequently become for their owners far more than sex objects. They serve as companions in whom their owners become emotionally invested. Such an attachment has proved to be a recurring response by doll owners, and an extensive but barely public community has emerged. (This community was publicized on a larger scale in response to the release of the 2007 Oscar-nominated movie *Lars and the Real Girl*, which explored the social complexities incited by the protagonist's love for a RealDoll.)

In 2005 Hawk Swanson had found herself drawn to the online community of "doll husbands" during the years in which she was struggling to establish her own relationship to same-sex love and desire. Hawk Swanson is articulate about her personal and political reasons for pursuing projects, explaining that she often uses moments of unexpected identification to challenge herself.¹ Such was the realization of the affinities with the doll husbands. After a series of failed attempts at finding female companionship herself, she saw in the doll husband community avenues of unlikely identification. While her initial impulse was to be critical of the entire production and use of RealDolls, she increasingly found sympathy in these men's stories of their difficulties with interpersonal relationships with women, feelings of inadequacy, and a longing for companionship. She came to admire the satisfaction they found for themselves in caring for and living with their RealDolls and became committed to getting one for herself. In Hawk Swanson's autobiographical narrative of her practice, the decision to undertake the *Amber Doll Project* was underwritten by this desire to achieve an ideal of same-sex love that eluded her, and this queer context informs the project's objectives. However, Hawk Swanson then raised the stakes and complicated the issues by envisioning a RealDoll made in her own image.²



Figure 1. Amber Hawk Swanson, *To Hold, In Bed* (from the *Amber Doll Project*), 2007, Archival Pigment Print, 21 inches \times 14 inches (on 24 inch \times 17 inch Paper), Edition of Five (5) and Two (2) Artist's Proof. Copyright Amber Hawk Swanson, 2013

After a complex series of negotiations, Hawk Swanson convinced Abyss Creations, the only American company that made RealDolls, to collaborate with her. She funded the project herself, and the company agreed to make a custom doll with her features. The project formally began with the digital scanning of Hawk Swanson's face on August 14, 2006 (her birthday, so she and Amber Doll could share the same date). Such portraiture was extremely rare for Abyss Creations. In general, most doll purchasers could only make customizations to one of the company's standard templates. The technical and production demands of creating RealDolls necessitated such standardization, as it would have been prohibitively expensive for the company to develop, each time, an entirely new model body and face. Furthermore, most purchasers of RealDolls desired the stereotypically perfect, athleticized bodies on which the models were based, so there were relatively minor derivations from normative bodily ideals across the company's eight templates. The company agreed to replicate Hawk Swanson only from the neck up and required her to rely on one of the model bodies used for other RealDolls. The digital scan of Hawk Swanson's face was three-dimensionally printed as a base form. This was then used to custom-sculpt her precise features in silicone. While Amber Doll was made in Hawk Swanson's image, the resemblance



Figure 2. Amber Hawk Swanson, *To Hold, Kitchen* (from the *Amber Doll Project*), 2007, Archival Pigment Print, 21 inches \times 14 inches (on 24 inch \times 17 inch Paper), Edition of Five (5) and Two (2) Artist's Proof. Copyright Amber Hawk Swanson, 2013

extended only to her face. From the neck down, Amber Doll remained a standard template—body number 8, to be precise.

The *Amber Doll Project* lasted two years and involved multiple series of performance events documented in video and photography, the full range of which are beyond the scope of the present discussion.³ *The Making of Amber Doll* (2007) tells the story of Amber Doll's creation in January 2007 through video and photographs. *Las Vegas Wedding Ceremony* (2007) immediately followed and involved Hawk Swanson's marriage to Amber Doll in Las Vegas (during the 2007 Miss America contest). The ensuing performance, photography, and video series *To Have, to Hold, and to Violate: Amber and Doll* (2008) documented the public and participatory performances by Hawk Swanson and Amber Doll. This extended collaboration between the two also involved the staging of a series of scenes from domestic life and from popular cinema. Hawk Swanson considered Amber Doll her partner in these endeavors, and she developed honest feelings of love and affection during their year together. As with the doll husbands about whom she had been conducting research, the life-size surrogate became woven into her life as a daily companion.⁴

Hawk Swanson's identifications and feelings toward Amber Doll were made more complex than those of other doll owners for the obvious reason that

Amber Doll was made in Hawk Swanson's own image. In this, the creation of the *Amber Doll Project* was an extreme act of self-objectification on Hawk Swanson's part—an attempt to cast herself as her own object of love and aggression. While this project was sometimes read as narcissism by viewers, it exceeded and resisted that category and the ways it has been used to pathologize homosexuality.⁵ More pointedly, Hawk Swanson's identicalness with Amber Doll both triggered and disrupted clichéd (heterosexual) fantasies of lesbian desire and of twin sexuality, both of which repeatedly surface as erotic ideals in popular culture as well as mainstream pornography. Hawk Swanson's act of self-portraiture was a bold and unmistakable assertion of artistic intentionality that critically framed the *Amber Doll Project's* allusions to pornographic fantasies of identical sex. That is, Hawk Swanson's conception and realization of the *Amber Doll Project* put her at its center as its authoring subject just as it literalized her own transformation into an object.

In (literally) making herself as her own object, Hawk Swanson accessed and critiqued not just mainstream pornographic fantasies but also deep-seated cultural proscriptions regulating how we regard ourselves. Hawk Swanson's mash-up of self-love and same-sex love (played out in spectacular fashion) allegorized how homoerotic potential is, more fundamentally, an ineluctable outcome of the ways in which we objectify ourselves to become another's object of desire.⁶ That is, when one regards or cultivates oneself as a sexual object (for another, for oneself), one necessarily engages in an extended process of self-assessment. By definition, that self-regard encodes a degree of (however disavowed) homoeroticism.⁷ Self-assessment is based on sameness, identicalness, and congruity. One must look at one's own (self-same) gendered embodiment as a potential object of desire to consider how one would be attractive or appealing to another (regardless of that other's gender). Thus the objectification required by self-cultivation inexorably establishes recursive pathways of same-gender desire as one attempts to estimate oneself as desirable. Hawk Swanson exaggerated this inescapable elision between self-regard and its homoerotic valence, embodying it for all to see.

Beyond the experience of her life with Amber Doll as a kind of durational artwork with these aims, Hawk Swanson also amplified larger questions around the power dynamics of objectification and identification through her performances that exposed the pair's artistic and romantic relationship to audiences in both nonart and art contexts. As mentioned above, the *Amber Doll Project* has many subsets of work, each of which is documented separately. One such series focuses on the pair's domestic life with photographs of their mundane and ordinary-looking existence in a small apartment, while others move into public spaces. Their collabora-



Figure 3. Amber Hawk Swanson, *Shower Curtain Kiss* (from the *Amber Doll Project*), 2007, Archival Pigment Print, 21 inches \times 14 inches (on 24 inch \times 17 inch Paper), Edition of Five (5) and Two (2) Artist's Proof. Copyright Amber Hawk Swanson, 2013

tion extended to participatory and public performances the two undertook in which Hawk Swanson would abandon Amber Doll in social settings: a football tailgate party, a roller rink, the “Girls Gone Wild” booth at a pornography convention, and so on. This practice, characterized as collaboration by Hawk Swanson, amplified the discrepant power dynamics central to her self-objectification in the form of Amber Doll. She submitted her self-image and her collaborator to uncontrolled audiences in order to document the actions taken by passersby on Amber Doll’s passive and unmoving body. Fraught with the emotional complexities of seeing her own image being violated and assuming responsibility for relinquishing her protection of Amber Doll in the name of art, Hawk Swanson repeatedly dramatized the unstable boundaries of victimizer and victim that were the work’s main theme.

With their exaggerations and ambivalent ethics, her abandonment performances presented viewers with an anxious set of choices about how they would interact (or not) with this immotile body double.⁸ Not just anonymous strangers, but also colleagues and friends often reacted to this situation of power by taking physical liberties with Amber Doll as Hawk Swanson was compelled to watch. A telling instance was one of the first—the wedding reception to which Hawk Swanson invited friends to provide a background crowd for staged photos of her and Amber Doll. She recalled,

It was her first public event, and that's when I felt like I had accomplished embodying victim and victimizer more successfully because I had put her in this situation and failed to protect her. . . . The real take-away from that night was the video of people exploring her so aggressively, compared to what I thought would happen. Folks were pulling her tongue out, pulling her skirt up. People who knew me in a professional capacity were really going wild on her. . . . I was so surprised.⁹

Amber Doll seemed to provide viewers with an unwitting consent because of her passivity, and Hawk Swanson was not prepared at first for the ease with which her friends and acquaintances could objectify her. By the end of the *Amber Doll Project* and its expansion of this tactic of abandonment, such dynamics were no longer a surprise.

Hawk Swanson's work does not give the viewer assurances of a comfortable critical distance. Her practice calls into question such distance as both impossible and smug, and she deliberately collapses distinctions between complicity and critique. She recognizes that any denunciation is a speech act that makes the object of that denunciation into a victim (even if it is denouncing that object's own victimization of another). One may decry Hawk Swanson for her treatment of Amber Doll, but this has the countereffect of positing Amber Doll as a sympathetic subject to be defended. That is, Amber Doll's ersatz personhood becomes a positive performative effect of her exploitation just as any critique of Hawk Swanson makes the artist, as well, into a victim whose agency over her own self-image has been impeached. The *Amber Doll Project* keeps ethics partial and in flux as we find ourselves projecting personhood or declaring inhumanity on both collaborators. To enact such two-way interdependencies and contradictory effects is precisely the point of Hawk Swanson's artistic project.

Hers is an uncomfortable proposal, since it leaves no stable moral ground from which to judge. Instead, the positions of judge and offender, champion and villain spiral into each other. Hawk Swanson's deliberately messy exaggerations and conflation of sensitive and contentious issues expose the ways in which power and victimization are not cleanly demarcated. Her work often incites anger because of this Foucauldian message in which all positions are implicated and guilty and in which all viewers are suspended between being defenders and exploiters.

The reactions to her works are pronounced and polarized, with viewers rushing to claim Hawk Swanson as many, often contradictory, things—as self-

serving, as self-sacrificing, as artist, as pornographer, as lowbrow panderer, or as sophisticated cultural critic. This range is played out in the online comments that Hawk Swanson's work generates. During and after the project, Hawk Swanson posted videos and stills to social media and video distribution websites in order to attract and to cull such responses. Her YouTube page received millions of unique views (at the time of writing the number topped 17 million). Hawk Swanson recorded the many comments (both admiring and disdaining) from her YouTube page as well as those made on other online presences for the project (such as those made in response to a high-profile online version of an article in the weekly newspaper the *Chicago Reader*).¹⁰ While there are many comments defending the work as art, the balance was weighted to negative comments that castigated Hawk Swanson for the project. (Such a balance might be expected in the murky world of anonymous posts and invectives.) A few examples from Hawk Swanson's archive of the comments (which runs over forty pages and twenty thousand words) include the following:

Rob at 12:13 PM on 8/4/2007

Interesting project. Who can say its not art, or just some fantasy she's playing out? Hat off to her, i'd bone them both if she wants to fly me out there :-)

Kitwilly at 2:30 PM on 8/4/2007

I would so hit it. I mean them. Both of them. At the same time. You know what I mean, dammit.

bing at 4:12 PM on 8/4/2007

matilda: it sucks because it's didactic, heavy-handed, gimmicky, preachy, derivative, sensationalistic, and utterly predictable. her claims to be making some sort of important feminist statement are belied by the fact that her whole stock-in-trade is prurience and sexual commodification.

Matilda at 4:28 PM on 8/4/2007

bing: She's taking control of her own sexuality, and that is what feminism is all about. Just because you may not like the work, or agree with it, doesn't mean she's not doing a good job.

aaahhhhh at 7:45 PM on 8/4/2007

Fascinating. Her "identical" doll is so much better looking than her. And I imagine more interesting as well.

Rich at 9:07 PM on 8/4/2007

Reverse the roles. Amber is Adam, a macho gay guy. People would say it's disgusting narcissistic porn. There is something sublimely appealing about girl-on-girl even if it is girl-on-her sicko submissive alter-ego sex doll.

arnold r. lane at 12:45 AM on 8/5/2007

as a performance artist..i must say she displays a certain amount self love and conceit . . . inest has nothing on this..doing "yourself"? this bird is cooo-cooo crazy and willing to do anything for . . . ehem.. exposure. when she's finally famous..she can simply go into rehab to get publicity.

cneg at 12:51 AM on 8/5/2007

if a male did this, it would not only be stupid, it'd be gay and that person would be out \$12k. Yay double standard. That said, I'd love to see her f herself.*

JujuBee at 2:19 AM on 8/5/2007

She's not fat people. She's morbidly obese AND ugly. Ugly is just like wearing black clothes in that it's slimming.

spoolington at 7:38 PM on 8/5/2007

the doll is no where near identical- it is so much more attractive. this girl is delusional.

Anonymous at 1:44 PM on 8/7/2007

lol women artists

ken nava at 10:59 AM on 10/5/2007

I would question the motives of ANY artist who uses sex in art. Sex is an easy way to get attention. It does not mean the artist is not good, just that they need to prove more. Robert Mapplethorpe was brilliant; this women is not.

There are too many problematic attitudes to critique in even this tiny sliver of the comments. It is clear, however, that issues of gender and sexuality took center stage in Hawk Swanson's detractors' attempts to attack her and the project. In many ways, the generation of such ruthless and negative comments was the desired reaction. Hawk Swanson pushed to the limits cultural expectations as a way to generate statements by viewers that were frank and clear in their prejudices.

Not only did commentators decry such expected topics as the project's les-

bianism, its autoeroticism, and its feminism, many focused on Hawk Swanson's divergence from the ideal female body. (Hawk Swanson remarked that there were "hundreds and hundreds of comments about my body weight" in response to the *Chicago Reader* article.)¹¹ Others rushed in to defend Hawk Swanson as an artist, as a person, and as a desirable sex object. Debates about art, ethics, and body image erupted in the pages and pages of comments sparked by the story. In my view, it is the generation of the comments that is the main payoff of Hawk Swanson's work, for they demonstrate how crushingly swift and crude the attempts to enforce normativity really are. In short, she put herself forward in her work as both agent and object in order to expose herself both to these verbal insults and to the attempts at defense or admiration. Just as she had created Amber Doll as a way to be both victimizing owner and victimized image, Hawk Swanson sacrificed herself to these online comments in order to let the war rage over her ethically confrontational practice.

Hawk Swanson's work would have a very different meaning if it did not operate within the realm of social media, and she uses that platform as a central component of her practice. That is, the work is really about participation and response, and its disruptions perform best when they are played out in public arenas. Many artists deploy social media as a way to distribute their work, but Hawk Swanson develops her projects with the generation of social media response in mind. She uses the commentary as text for later performances, seeing it as raw material to be worked. As I discuss presently, such was the case with her CrossFit performances in which she disrupted the efficiency of her workouts by reading those online comments to the *Amber Doll Project*.

A recurring insult laced throughout the online comments to the Amber Doll videos was that Hawk Swanson's body failed in comparison with Amber Doll's. One commentator snidely wrote, "Guess they don't have plus sizes in real dolls." Another pushed it far beyond this, saying, "She's just another chick on the street who needs to hit the gym. The doll is a hottie and her wannabe." Even though the actual bodily discrepancies were relatively minor, many commentators chose to attack Hawk Swanson by denying her sexual availability and attractiveness. Of course, such comments were nothing other than attempts to denigrate Hawk Swanson's art by casting her as desperate and unlovable. This, they implied, explained her choice to engage with the doll (which they saw as a retreat from the "real" world) and, by extension, her same-sex desire.

Even as her attachment to Amber Doll as collaborator and companion grew daily in response to their performance work and cohabitation, the ever-increasing online comments highlighted the pair's differences. (Another example: "Wow. It

would be like dating twins. One is shy and quiet, but has an awesome body. The other is a little beefier, and is the funny one.”) As time went on, there emerged wider discrepancies between Hawk Swanson’s body and Amber Doll’s unchanging and idealized one. They grew apart despite their identical faces and tightening emotional entanglements. The comments mounted, and Hawk Swanson admits developing a degree of resentment toward her companion’s unchanging and idealized body.¹² In many ways, this brought the project full circle, for now she felt herself victimized by Amber Doll despite her pursuit of ever-more ambitious abandonment performances. Such slippery lines between subject and object, agent and target, and enabled and acquiescent were, after all, what Hawk Swanson’s project sought to address with its embodied self-objectification. Upon realizing this situation, she engaged more aggressively with exercise—both to address her own body and to develop from the *Amber Doll Project* a related set of performances that turned its self-objectification back inward. The series of exercise works cumulatively titled *Fit* (2008–present) resulted from her reaction.

In keeping with her methodology of hyperbole, Hawk Swanson sought out extreme exercise. Much as she had previously immersed herself in the doll community, she now moved into the almost cultlike community of CrossFit, which centers on “military-style” practical exercise routines. CrossFit’s members are devoted, and a nationwide community has emerged with its own vocabulary, online and local social networks, and material culture.¹³ In CrossFit Hawk Swanson saw an extension of one of the key issues that had initially inspired her to pursue the *Amber Doll Project*: the anxious interdependence of self-objectification and self-realization. CrossFit members come together to perform workouts of the day (WODs) in which they relentlessly push themselves to their personal limits. Personal goals are externalized and compared, as statistics allow participants to gauge their own and others’ fitness in relation to each other. In short, CrossFit itself takes the thematics of exercise to the extreme, creating personal potential out of submission to a peer group and achieving bodily ideals through self-objectification, competition, and punishment.

This is not to deny the effectiveness, the appeal, or the value of such group activities as CrossFit (as with, indeed, the emotional satisfaction achieved by the doll husbands). CrossFit has proved catalytic and important to many people’s lives, and Hawk Swanson participated in the community as a committed and sincere member. The overall *Fit* project began with her immersion in this community starting in 2008 and has been distilled in the past few years into a range of fitness-related works.

For her performances involving CrossFit, Hawk Swanson undertook back-

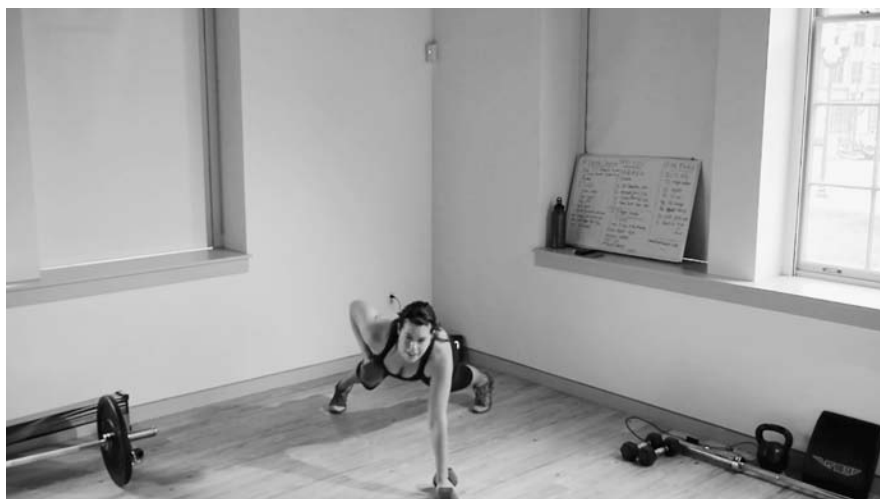


Figure 4. Amber Hawk Swanson, *Online Comments* (August 2007—February 2012) (from the *Fit Project*), 2012, Still from Digital Video (3 hours) Edition of Ten. Copyright Amber Hawk Swanson, 2013

to-back workouts far in excess of what would be normal practice. CrossFit uses precise, focused, and timed workouts, but Hawk Swanson chose to stack these one after the other. One performance of *Online Comments* for the 2012 exhibition *She Got Game* at the Arlington Arts Center in Virginia lasted over three hours.¹⁴ In keeping with her social media practice, this was performed in the galleries while being streamed live as an online real-time performance. She was supervised by a coach who monitored her physical safety while also scolding when mistakes were made, serving as an off-camera collaborator. While doing these exhausting routines, Hawk Swanson read the online comments from the earlier *Amber Doll Project* out loud—including those comments that rate her body as inferior to Amber Doll's. (The above-mentioned examples were all taken from her performance script for *Online Comments*.) Beyond the physical exhaustion that was apparent, Hawk Swanson interfered with her own ability to breathe by speaking the constant stream of others' opinions, thus making the workouts all the more physically and psychologically challenging for her as she narrated the debates about her body, her art, her sexuality, and her sincerity.

Online Comments offered another instance of Hawk Swanson's self-sacrifice coupled with her own self-aggrandizement. In these performances, she now ruthlessly treated her own body as she did Amber Doll's—as an object to be worked and as a person to be loved. CrossFit became for Hawk Swanson the

raw material for interrogating how self-realization and self-punishment are often indistinguishable in exercise. Hawk Swanson's work involves drawing out underlying social issues by taking to extreme lengths already extreme activities such as CrossFit and RealDolls. Both of these activities evince ethical and personal contradictions, and Hawk Swanson works in the uneasy space between their narratives of, on the one hand, self-determination and fulfillment and, on the other, self-objectification and inadequacy.

In the performances, Hawk Swanson endangered herself by excessively performing workout routines one after the other, all the while voicing others' comments both negative and positive about her as an artist, as a person, and as a sexual object. While watching the videos of these performances, one's attention wavers between listening to the comments (be they articulate or appallingly crude), observing the exercise routines, and—ultimately—staring at Hawk Swanson's body. These works fold in and expose all of this, providing the raw material that forces us to acknowledge our own complicity in objectification as well as to identify with Hawk Swanson's efforts at self-realization. In this, she becomes alternately both defiant and pathetic in the viewers' eyes, as her activities (be they art or exercise) seem earnest and futile, strong and weak.

With its empowering masochism, *Online Comments* builds on the collapsing of victimizer and victim that was at the heart of the *Amber Doll Project's* same-sex relationship and collaboration. Like the earlier project, *Online Comments* also activates questions of gender and sexuality as central concerns. The stream of opinions Hawk Swanson read aloud ensured that debates about body image, feminism, sexuality, art, and gender remained the explicit themes of the work. That is, her extreme serial exercises were performed against the backdrop of her history with Amber Doll—from her daily loving companionship to the public exposure of their collaboration and the ensuing debate about her body. In this way, the performances dramatically illustrate how practices and rhetorics of fitness are, themselves, fundamentally concerned with gender and its normative embodiments.¹⁵ Hawk Swanson was, after all, working her body while ventriloquizing others' comments about her divergences from normative cultural ideals—literalized in Abyss Creations' body template number 8.

In other words, Hawk Swanson's undertaking reminds us that any measure of success or failure in physical culture has been customarily based on a comparative evaluation with others of the same sex. The vast majority of physical sports are still sex-segregated for this very reason, and any qualification of someone as an athlete is based on measurements against others of the same sex. (The par-



Figure 5. Amber Hawk Swanson, *Online Comments* (August 2007—February 2012) (from the *Fit Project*), 2012, Still from Digital Video (3 hours) Edition of Ten. Copyright Amber Hawk Swanson, 2013

ticipation of trans folk in athletic competition raises high anxieties for just this reason.) As the Danish sociologist Henning Bech acutely observed, fitness is a crucial arena in which people work out their relationship to their own genders and sexed bodies, evaluating themselves along such axes of sameness and identification. Writing of men working out at a gym, he asked,

What makes these men toil away at the [fitness] machines? Surely not just any desire to keep their bodies operative and avoid muscle aches and other such ailments; nor the mere wish to keep age and death at bay. If so, they would surely jog, do calisthenics or take classes in modern dance. What is at stake is a *decision to be a man* (more of a man than one thinks one is); more precisely, it is about *modeling* oneself as a man.¹⁶

At base, the same-sex comparative relation on which many ideals of physical fitness rely is akin to the ineluctable homoeroticism that shadows self-regard. Hawk Swanson's trajectory from her body double to bodybuilding reminds us that pursuits of fitness are not just acts of self-objectification and self-realization—they are also inescapably potential homoerotic acts in which one posits oneself as one's own gendered object of desire. *Online Comments'* self-recursive exertions elaborate how exercise is a distilled site of the slippery relations between self-admiration and same-sex desire—relations pertinent to us all, fit or not.



Figure 6. Amber Hawk Swanson, *Dig A Hole You Can Stand In: Dig Seven* (from *the Fit Project*), 2010, Still from Digital Video (7 minutes, 30 seconds), Edition of Ten. Copyright Amber Hawk Swanson, 2013

Hawk Swanson's CrossFit performances replay the negative determinations of self-objectification, creating her as the defiant self-imposed target of others' gazes and opinions (even those of defenders). In contrast to this mode, Hawk Swanson has developed an alternative set of fitness performances within the *Fit* series that, in their simplicity and humility, offer a positive and reparative alternative for her activation of gender as a site of self-realization.¹⁷

Since 2010 Hawk Swanson has been digging holes for time in a subseries of performances titled *Dig a Hole You Can Stand In*. In doing this, she has been repeatedly enacting one of the many practical fitness exercises her grandfather assigned to her father when he turned eight years old. These exercises, such as the "dig a chest-deep hole for yourself," were intended to make Hawk Swanson's father "fit" as a man, and Hawk Swanson performs this training on herself, adopting these man-making activities and earnestly improving her ability to do them. These are often performed for the camera as she tackles various types of sites, from a sandy beach to a park green to a forest to a city alley.

Unlike the above-mentioned CrossFit performances, Hawk Swanson remains largely silent in the series. Whereas the CrossFit performances intentionally interweave the text of the comments with the viewer's fascination and fatigue at the spectacle of endurance exercise, the digging videos are boring to watch. Indeed, they require endurance. They have no real climax or conclusion. Hawk

Swanson digs the hole until something in the world stops her: striking water near the shoreline or hitting hard shale. Endings are abrupt and decidedly unremarkable. These works in *Fit* must be seen as the counterpart to the spectacular display of gendered self-objectification and self-punishment of the CrossFit performances, and the digging of holes becomes a far more internalized experience for Hawk Swanson. As viewers, we are blocked out.

The key to these performances is their family lineage. In each of their repetitions, Hawk Swanson performs an identification with her father. Her grandfather gave him these tasks to prepare him for adulthood and make him strong and capable. The “man” they create has nothing to do with sex or even masculinity so much as the more abstract and important traits such as readiness, responsibility, and capability. That digging a hole would be a “practical” fitness activity speaks directly to the life-saving importance of such holes during wartime, where the foxhole provided the only cover from gunfire.

Hawk Swanson’s adoption of these activities seizes on the fact that these “man-making” tasks can be performed by anyone and that their effect will not be the aesthetic goals of most exercise but the practical goals of fitness and readiness. She unhinges these aims from gender and turns them into practices of self-realization. That is, she does not just identify with her father’s coming-into-manhood. She also identifies with his state of malleability and potentiality that these activities seek to nurture. Whereas the CrossFit performances (and the *Amber Doll Project*) both opened up the messy realities of what one is for others and for oneself, the digging performances are rituals of self-determination. The former were about axes of same-sex and same-gender comparison and identification, whereas the dig performances are willfully cross-gender exercises.

Each performance requires nothing (but a shovel). They are removal pieces, and as such hark back to early moments of conceptual art and institutional critique in which removal or erasure were ways to address larger contexts and refuse the emphasis on the commodifiable object.¹⁸ A removal piece can be done anywhere there is something, and Hawk Swanson displays this variability in the different landscapes she tirelessly penetrates. Every repeated instance of her timed hole-digging brings her closer to her fitness goal. It is not as simple as Hawk Swanson wanting to become a man and performing these exercises. Instead, she enacts these performances to identify with the will to become, to transform. Ironically, she achieves this “becoming a man” through creating a hole, a gap, a lack—inverting the easy equation of the male subject with plenitude. To be frank, her performances of becoming her grandfather’s ideals for her father revolve



Figure 7. Amber Hawk Swanson, *Dig A Hole You Can Stand In: Dig Eight* (from the *Fit Project*), 2010, Still from Digital Video (24 minutes, 26 seconds), Edition of Ten. Copyright Amber Hawk Swanson, 2013



Figure 8. Amber Hawk Swanson, *Dig A Hole You Can Stand In: Hole*, 2010, Archival Pigment Print 21 inches × 14 inches (on 24 inch × 17 inch Paper), Edition of Ten (10) and Two (2) Artist's Proof. Copyright Amber Hawk Swanson, 2013

around the empty space she puts at the center of her performances. The holes bring her closer to her inherited, familial masculine ideal.

These repetitions—like the work of exercise—are intentionally futile. After she has finished, she refills the hole (off camera) and leaves the landscape marked but not fundamentally altered. The acts of doing are what is important, along with the ways in which they each individually accrue to transform her body and her self. In this regard, the digging performances mark a significant departure from both *Online Comments* and the *Amber Doll Project*. Those series involved the presentation of Hawk Swanson's body as objectified image or commented-on text. While Hawk Swanson is present in the video documentation of the digging performances, there is a resistance to the kinds of voyeuristic spectacle central to the other performances' navigations of objectification. By contrast, the removals of *Dig a Hole You Can Stand In* offer the body not as commodified object but as process of self-determination. It is grueling work in which she is engaged, but she has chosen to do it for herself.

Exercise can turn bad, become an addiction, or fuel self-denigration just as easily as it can exhilarate, spur self-confidence, and improve quality of life. These two sides are often indistinguishable and mutually reinforcing. Hawk Swanson turned to exercise performances as a way to exaggerate and to explore such complexities in which the self becomes both the object of punishment and the agent of self-realization. The works themselves play out these contradictions as she ventriloquizes her antagonists and defies them with her self-determination. The *Fit* subseries of hole-digging performances step to one side of this paradox by enacting Hawk Swanson's queer identification, in which she steps into her father's shoes as the potentiality her grandfather saw in him. Such a step is the outgrowth of her identification with and love for Amber Doll in which same-sex desire became both alienating and empowering as a way to understand herself as both agent and object.

Most broadly, Hawk Swanson's work dramatizes the persistent cultural narratives that treat women and their bodies as objects of desire and consumption. From her own literal self-objectification in the form of a self-portrait bodily surrogate to her self-reflexive pursuit of extreme exercise, Hawk Swanson's work plays out questions of inescapable same-sex desire, self-objectification, and gender identification. She positions homoeroticism and autoeroticism as foundations from which normative assumptions about women's desire in relation to their bodies can be resisted, and she dramatizes exercise as a spectacle of self-love and self-punishment. Her work troubles the ways in which exercise is held up both as an

obligation for women in order to achieve desirable bodies and, at the same time, as a potential site of admonishment for women who perform it too well or for reasons other than reproducing those normative ideals.

What is useful about Hawk Swanson's exercise performances is the way that they address queer themes that disrupt expectations about what is appropriate and proper in relation to our own bodies, for ourselves and for others. She practices fitness incorrectly, willfully, as a way to call attention to how it condenses an entire spectrum of attitudes about gender, self-love, normative bodies, and objectification. This queer fitness aims not to achieve a normative ideal but to confront the ways in which it is exercised.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Nicole Pasulka, "An Interview with Amber Hawk Swanson," *Diet Newsletter* (Miami: Diet Gallery, June 2008); Daria Brit Shapiro, "Pleased to Meet Me," *Map Magazine* 5 (June 2008): 70–71; and an unpublished 2008 interview with Lori Waxman, all available at www.amberhawkswanson.com.
2. For a discussion of Hawk Swanson's earlier work and its relation to aspects of the *Amber Doll Project*, see Anna Watkins Fisher, "Like a Girl's Name: The Adolescent Drag of Amber Hawk Swanson, Kate Gilmore, and Ann Liv Young," *TDR: The Drama Review* 56, no. 1 (2012): 48–76.
3. The *Amber Doll Project* is immense, with many distinct subseries of work, and in this article I examine only a small part of it to explain its generation of online comments that are the basis of Hawk Swanson's subsequent exercise performances. I do not discuss the second half of Amber Doll's history or its generation of Hawk Swanson's complex response in the subsequent *Amber Doll > TILIKUM* (2011). This thirty-six-hour video work was recently broadcast by Souvenirs from Earth, the European video-art cable television station, in both France and Germany on April 26 and 27, 2012, in addition to being shown at the Palais de Tokyo, in Paris.
4. A useful comparison to the duration of Hawk Swanson's projects would be such year-long or multiyearlong performances of Tehching Hsieh and of Linda Montano. See, for instance, Linda Montano, *Art in Everyday Life* (Los Angeles: Station Hill, 1981); and Adrian Heathfield, *Out of Now: The Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).
5. The relationship of narcissism to homosexuality was, of course, a recurring topic in the history of sexological and psychoanalytic literatures. A compelling historical and theoretical assessment of this issue can be found in Whitney Davis, *Queer Beauty: Sexuality and Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Freud and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 187–241.

6. My thinking about self-objectification has been informed by Jennifer Doyle, "The Effect of Intimacy: Tracey Emin's Bad Sex," in *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 97–120.
7. Such inevitable same-sex attachments and their frequent denial have been understood by many to be constitutive elements of selfhood, more broadly. Judith Butler has similarly discussed how heteronormative gender identities can result from a disavowal of the possibility of same-sex attachments. The refusal to acknowledge the loss (or even the existence) of this now-denied homosexuality becomes incorporated as a sort of "heterosexual melancholy, the melancholy by which a masculine gender is formed from the refusal to grieve the masculine as a possibility of love." She continues, "What is most apparently performed as gender is the sign and symptom of a pervasive disavowal" (Judith Butler, "Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification," in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997], 146–47).
8. I examine the larger question of statues' immotility and further discuss Hawk Swanson's abandonment performances in David Getsy, "Acts of Stillness: Statues, Performativity, and Passive Resistance," *Criticism* 56, no.1 (forthcoming).
9. Amber Hawk Swanson, interview by author, Chicago, IL, April 10, 2012.
10. Kelly McClure, "When Amber Met Amber: An Artist's Complicated Relationship with Her Look-Alike Sex Doll," *Chicago Reader*, August 3, 2007. Even though it has been frequently cited, Hawk Swanson does not consider this article to be an adequate account of her work. The article and its comments were taken down from the *Reader* website (some time after Hawk Swanson had archived the comments) and has recently been reposted without the earlier comment threads.
11. Hawk Swanson, interview by author.
12. Hawk Swanson, interview by author.
13. See, for instance, Stephanie Cooperman, "Getting Fit Even If It Kills You," *New York Times*, December 22, 2005; and Roy M. Wallack, "A Workout That's Fast, Furious, and Not for the Faint of Heart," *Los Angeles Times*, April 10, 2006.
14. Curated by Jeffry Cudlin. See www.arlingtonartscenter.org/aac-exhibition-she-got-game. The same performance has sometimes been titled *CF+Online Comments*.
15. A crucial precedent is Eleanor Antin's iconic feminist work, *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972). More recently, the durational and body-transforming work of Heather Cassils is also directly relevant to Hawk Swanson's engagement with self-realization. For discussion of Cassils's 2012 *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* (which takes Antin's work as source), see Megan Hoetger, "Re-performance: History as an Experience to Be Had," *X-TRA* 15, no. 1 (2012); and Heather Cassils, "A Traditional Sculpture," *Huffington Post* blog, October 4, 2011, www.huffingtonpost.com/heather/a-traditional-sculpture_b_983384.html.

16. Henning Bech, *When Men Meet: Homosexuality and Modernity*, trans. T. Mesquit and T. Davies, rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 50.
17. On reparative practices, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123–51.
18. Here I am thinking of the works not just of such artists as Lawrence Weiner and Michael Asher but also of Ana Mendieta, all of whom offer ironic intertexts to Hawk Swanson's *Dig a Hole You Can Stand In*.