As a place for exercising the body, the gym has a long history, stretching all the way back to the gymnasium of the Greeks and the palaestra of the Romans. Since the eighties, however, there has been a marked increase in the number of commercial gyms presenting themselves in new guises. Today, in gymnastics handbooks and among operators in the sector, the term "gym" is more and more often associated with that of fitness and in some cases even replaced by neologisms like "fitness center" or "fitness club." Of course, gyms reserved solely for competitive activities, such as boxing, the martial arts, or bodybuilding, still exist. But they are increasingly marginal with respect to the large number of gyms that find their common denominator in the idea of fitness. Fitness seems to be a concept shaped by the encounter of two important cultural codes of modernity: rationalization and asceticism on the one hand, the quest for authenticity and hedonism on the other. In the nineteenth century, the forms of gymnastics that developed in both Europe and the United States were designed to increase the utility of the body in an attempt to bolster public morals and mold better "citizens." Thus the gymnastics organized directly by the state or by philanthropic elites as a form of education was a reflection of the bio-political aims of national states, of their need to manage their own populations as an economic, political, and even military resource, by preparing individuals to take their place in the social order (DeFrance 1976; Bourdieu 1978; Vigarello 1978; Elias and Dunning 1986; Hargreaves 1986). This tendency reached its peak in the totalitarian regimes of the first half of the twentieth century, including the fascist one in Italy, which often turned to gymnastics to promote their ideologies. Following World War II the strong symbolic link that had been forged between gymnastics and nation put people off its more traditional forms, but also left wide gaps for the development of non-organized individualistic and health-oriented physical and recreational activities, such as jogging, that were gradually promoted by the emerging commercial gyms. Moreover, in many European countries, right from the early years of the twentieth century, forms of exercise free of political control had developed alongside the physical education and gymnastic displays organized directly by the state. Gyms were set up whose objective was not to improve public health, but to stimulate and exploit the desire of individuals to keep fit, have fun, and improve themselves. An early example of this is the appearance of gyms for bodybuilding, a practice popular among men whose objective was to achieve an aesthetic development of the
muscles through the use of weights and other equipment. Later on, in the seventies, the United States saw the birth of aerobics, a form of gymnastic activity carried out to the sound of music. Blending pop culture, dance, and physical education and initially reserved for women, its objective was to develop a slender and well-proportioned physical appearance. Thus recreational gymnastics were depoliticized. If recreational and sporting physical activities had previously been connected with social values like faith in progress or loyalty to a nation, personal motivations became the only factor. The legitimacy of physical-recreational and sporting practices has come to be founded directly on the needs and desires of the person who carries them out (Green 1986; Hargreaves 1986; Grover 1989), and this has gone hand in hand with the process of commercialization, which makes fitness subject to the law of demand and supply. Targeted at paying customers who can always decide they no longer have any need or desire of the gym, fitness is presented as an expression of the individual’s will. In other words, the significance of a more docile and useful body is rooted in the individual, as the sovereign and sacred entity from which originate desires and choices, and not as citizen, soldier, or worker. In this line, the fitness center has not only to be good for the body, but also to provide an opportunity for authentic expression of the individual, and above all a way of having fun, relaxing, taking your mind off things, being revitalized. The modern development of fitness centers has now left behind the physical education promoted by national states in the nineteenth century, as well as the popular gyms that emerged at the dawn of the twentieth to serve the needs of early forms of bodybuilding and, to a certain extent, even the aesthetic ambitions of the first devotees of aerobics. Today’s gyms have at least three distinctive characteristics (Sassatelli 2000). In the first place, they are increasingly truly integrated centers for physical exercise. One of their main traits, in fact, is the possibility they offer of training in now established techniques like aerobics and bodybuilding, of carrying out a gentler and more generic activity like stretching, of working out in company in unisex settings with circuit training or spinning, and of trying out ever new combinations of gymnastics and dance, yoga or martial arts, culminating in mixed techniques of sporting origin, such as kick boxing. Secondly, the reference to the variety of individual needs and the variety of exercise techniques available does not imply the absence of a minimum common denominator, which is embodied instead in the dual meaning of the term “fitness.” The term is in fact used both for training in the gym (“keeping fit”) and for the physical state that this training is intended to produce (“being fit, in shape”). Finally, the pleasantness of physical activity is presented as a fundamental aspect of fitness: rather than on exertion and physical effort, the accent is placed on pleasure and satisfaction. In the ever more numerous manuals or during workouts,
coaches, personal trainers, and fitness experts always stress that going to the gym is fun and enjoyable, a diversion where everyone can find his or her own way, a way that consists not just of exertion, but also of recreation, pleasure, amusement. Thus time spent in the gym is presented by trainers and perceived by enthusiasts as "time for yourself." The fitness center aims to be a place where you can be regenerated, improving your body without submitting to the requirements of competition or imposed goals, and even managing to have fun.

The success of the fitness phenomenon should undoubtedly be set against the background of certain medium- to long-term tendencies that reflect a change in lifestyle and the relationship with the body. Firstly, the popularity of keeping fit is part of the progressive increase, over the last two decades, in the consumption of all the goods and services aimed at the maintenance, improvement, and transformation of the body, in Europe as well as the United States. Secondly, since the last war, and partly as a result of the increase in free time, a growing number of people in Italy and in Europe have begun to take part in sporting activities. But fitness and sports are not just synergetic: the growth of the demand for sports seems to have slackened over the course of the nineties, at least in Italy, whereas physical activity in general, and keeping fit in particular, seem on the contrary to have been growing strongly since this very period (Sassatelli 2000). And while there is still a marked difference between men and women so far as traditional sports are concerned, the level of male and female participation in physical-recreational activities is getting closer and closer: on a whole, keeping fit is a phenomenon that interests both sexes, as well as different generations, although the forms that it takes remain clearly differentiated (for example, courses of aerobics are still mainly attended by women, while weightlifting remains a typically male preserve). The reasons why people go in for sports have also changed, partly in relation to the overall aging of the population, which has resulted in a demand more oriented towards physical wellbeing and the maintenance of the functional capacity of the body than to competition. Care for the body and the search for psychophysical wellbeing are extremely important motivations for people taking part in sports who are over the age of thirty: in this case, sporting activity seems to take the form of an investment for the future and preference is often shown for activities that promise the maximum benefit in the shortest time possible (Sassatelli 2000 and 2003). For example, among all those who practice sports in Italy, over two-thirds emphasize its aspect of play and recreation, while more than half claim to do so partly or solely to keep fit and for therapeutic reasons.

Given these premises, fitness activities and the commercial gyms in which many of them take place seem destined to take on an ever more significant role in people’s free time. Perhaps partly for this reason, the phenomenon of fitness has attracted
contrasting diagnoses. The boom in keeping fit has been celebrated as a form of democratization of sports that has embraced segments of the population, such as women, traditionally excluded from the world of recreational sports; and it has been disparaged as the triumph of narcissistic consumption and a sign of the advance of post-modern hedonism. The success of Jane Fonda’s aerobics video, for example, has been interpreted by feminist thinkers as proof that women are still victims, even today, of a patriarchal system that obliges them to show excessive concern for their outward appearance (Dinnerstein and Weitz 1998). Other feminists have pointed out that the preoccupation with being overweight connected with aerobics is similar to the obsessions of women who suffer from eating disorders, that continual self-observation during exercises does not liberate women, but makes it harder for them to accept their own bodies, and that the growth of aerobics reinforces prescriptive standards of femininity and tends to segregate women’s sporting activities once again (Lloyd 1996; Maguire and Mansfield 1998). On the other hand, bodybuilding, as a competitive physical activity at the amateur as well as professional level, has been linked to the creation of sub-cultural circles where what is reproduced is a complex and in part subversive femininity, or a traditional, but often ambiguous, masculinity. Alan Klein’s work on Californian bodybuilders shows, on the one hand, that development of the muscles is associated with the typically male attempt to compensate for physical, cultural, or economic shortcomings, and on the other illustrates the economic, sexual, and personal contradictions of the bodybuilder and the incompleteness of his search for masculinity (Klein 1993; Gillett and White 1992). Whereas Maria Lowe’s ethnography presents us a panorama of the world of women bodybuilders and its contradictions. For example, through a deliberate expansion of their muscular mass, these women seem to challenge distinctions of gender, and yet in competition they find themselves having to demonstrate their femininity again through ornaments and hyper-feminine postures (Lowe 1998; St. Martin and Gavey 1996). These works draw our attention to important questions and yet, if we want to understand the mechanisms by which the practice of keeping fit becomes important for those who go in for it, it is necessary to move beyond too facile an equation between care of the body and superficiality or the manipulation of desires and really enter the world of the gym, exploring the organization of the environment and of the physical exercise. It is necessary to consider how this institution is able to respond to a multiplicity of complex and even conflicting demands.

If we look at it with fresh eyes, the fitness gym is indeed an unusual place. Once you pass through the entrance, and the noise of the street is muffled, you find yourself in a separate and protected environment. Using a variety of different
architectural solutions, each gym defines its boundaries in its own way and characterizes its style and atmosphere. Despite their diversity, gyms are invariably constructed as specialized spaces, distinguished by appropriate marks of passage. In other words, they present themselves as relatively independent realities that exist, to some extent, in and of themselves; small separate worlds, functionally carved out of the broader social setting and linked to it by their own classifications. To understand what goes on inside the gym, therefore, we have to take seriously the local resources that it organizes (spaces, time, emotional codes, attitudes to relationship). In fitness gyms, the trainers ask individuals to concentrate on their own bodies during exercise and foster an attitude of courtesy that favors interaction without distracting them from the tasks that they have been officially set. Diligence in carrying out the exercises is also encouraged by the spatio-temporal management of the surroundings. The practices of the body are distributed in functionally differentiated areas within the fitness center: alongside areas for exercises, differing in relation to the activities that take place in them, there are changing rooms (where clients get ready for exercise and to return to external reality after the workout), saunas, massage rooms, and, in the bigger centers, swimming pools and other facilities for body care. The divisions of space are typically arranged in a particular temporal sequence within which physical exercise stands out as the central moment, a time that is designed to be completely useful, and whose quality is guaranteed by organized and relatively rigid margins. Above all, thanks to the continual efforts of the trainers (who stimulate, check, guide), the fitness gym combines individualism and universalism: it promises to treat everyone as individuals, to deal with them as part of an unbounded universe of clients, to deal with all needs, as individual needs. Individualism and universalism make it possible to handle large numbers of clients within a relatively small space, with effects of economy of scale. The mingling of these two institutional requirements is entrusted to the trainers, whose figure is universally recognized as fundamental: they are genuine mediators between the world of fitness and ordinary life, committed, although not always with success, to making it easier for the clients to get into the right spirit for training (Maguire 2002). The trainer, on the one hand, has to be able to present the physical activities as meaningful practices, and thus will tend to modulate procedures and significances on the basis of the individuality of those who take part, and on the other, has to promote and respect the openness of the service to the public. So, unless you can permit yourself a personal trainer (a professional figure in ever greater demand), the customization of the exercise always takes place within the framework of a structure that must at least attempt to preserve the perception of its universalistic character, continuing to handle a composite public simultaneously (Sassatelli
2000). When this does not happen or happens too little, the gym runs the risk of putting off new customers or of forming too obvious hierarchies among them, excluding and marginalizing less committed clients and, over time, inducing them to give up.

Going to the gym is certainly a voluntary act. However, once inside, people find themselves in an environment that, as it were, obliges them to exercise: a world with its own rules, designed to facilitate a relatively constant and exclusive concentration on the performance of the prescribed physical activities. Those who go to the gym to keep fit appreciate this environment because it “pushes” them to work out even when they don’t feel like it (Sassatelli 1999). The body ideals to which people who exercise aspire are important, but not sufficient, since very few of them seem capable of conjuring up the willpower to do gymnastics alone at home, while they know that, at the gym, they will be able to apply themselves to the task. It is the almost surreal neatness of the interaction that allows the clients to get involved in the performance of the chosen physical activity. In order to be engaging, the physical activity has to take them to a point where they can forget, at least in part, the identities they have outside and even their own aesthetic aspirations and frustrations: in a typical scene of exercise, the clients work out together, each focused on his or her own body; the bodies next to them become, to some degree, neutral and innocuous, useful and relevant only to the exercise. This occurs in the first place through a number of rules that lay down the way in which the participants should show their involvement in the action. Through a multitude of bodily signals (attitude, position, facial expression, glances) and with a few brief exchanges of words, the participants demonstrate concretely and continually that what they are doing is solely and exclusively training, and that only certain characteristics of their bodies should be taken into consideration. Applying themselves to performing the physical activity correctly, whether alone with equipment or working out in a group, also requires the participants to set aside their own and other people’s designs on the body. Anyone who keeps fit has to be able to learn to carry out exercises in the best way, independently of the performance of those around him or her or of the results that will be obtained. To be able to experience the physical exercise as a significant present, in other words, patrons have to learn to transform, at least temporarily, their own long-term motivations into the desire to apply themselves to the exercise.

Learning to observe exercising bodies with discretion, i.e. in relation to the carrying out of the exercises, and succeeding in emphasizing the dedication, i.e. showing that the results and the performance are less important than your own efforts, are both fundamental attitudes during physical activity. These are approaches that are all the more important the more the training is presented and justified as an
instrumental activity, and thus potentially devoid of intrinsic significance, capable only of offering a deferred gratification linked to the attainment of a better body. Fitness is, in this sense, very different from the majority of contemporary sporting activities, whether individual or team. The majority of such activities—even those as different from one another as marathon running, soccer, or synchronized swimming—are not presented as efforts to get somewhere, but as practices worth doing for their own sake, or at any rate organized on the basis of their own exclusively internal logic, at least in formal terms. While producing effects on the body, these practices are intended to endow the individual with highly specific capacities to be unleashed in their full power on certain occasions that have value primarily within the world of sports. The possibilities for transformation of the body connected with sports training are subordinated to the style of the execution, the athletic act, the exceptional performance. In fact, contemporary sporting activities typically take their inspiration from athleticism, a sporting style that has been shaped over the course of modernity (in contrast to the styles of the festival and of war; Garrigou 1987) and thus finds its justification internally, in the satisfaction that the participants derive from their own performances or in the attainment of a specialized skill that is unrelated to any other social code (Bourdieu 1978; Guttmann 1978; Heikkala 1993). The athlete exercises with the contest in view, and the organization of the training provides for the daily exercise to gradually draw closer to the ideal to be presented to the public. Improvements of the body are therefore subordinate to the performance of a specific exercise. In fitness training, on the other hand, neither the sequence of movements nor the individual movements are important in themselves because, repeated ad infinitum, they are going to have to be reproduced and performed on a specific occasion. Keeping fit, in fact, aims to develop in-built qualities that go beyond the perfect execution of the exercises. The style and the performance, however important, have an exclusively instrumental value. The possibility of molding your own body dominates the exercise. This plastic possibility is no longer the means to a further end; it has become, instead, an end in itself. In the eyes of many practitioners, it is precisely this emphasis on the transformation of the body that makes keeping fit superior to athletic sports: the latter appear not as good for the body, they would not serve, in the same way, to revitalize it and may tend to be too competitive instead of spurring individuals to focus solely on themselves, on testing their own limits in a controlled way, as keeping fit claims to do (Sassatelli 2000). Numerous fitness manuals recommend avoiding contests with other patrons of the gym as there is going to be no prize for anyone who becomes tall and slim before the others. Callan Pinckney (1990), a famous American coach, invites the people who want to follow her programs not to “make the mistake of thinking that all
others are ‘perfect’ and you are not. Work with what you’ve got. There’s always the possibility of improving.” Notwithstanding these warnings, the people who follow fitness programs—from the most expert to beginners, from enthusiasts to those on the fringes—have no doubts about describing working out at the gym as a way of improving their bodies. While they are constantly evolving, there are in effect certain body ideals characteristic of fitness that perform a dominant function in the world of gyms (Markula 1995; Sassatelli 2003). Experts, trainers, and those who keep fit on a regular basis end up defining as “normal” a particular body ideal that places the notion of “form” and the “fit body” at the center. The notion of “form” hinges on the idea of energy, along with other factors such as strength, endurance, agility, flexibility, vascular capacity, stamina, and so on. Form embraces a set of aspirations relating to the body as an instrument to be used in daily life. As depth, being in shape is contrasted to the surface of forms, which should be toned well defined in order to underlie the functionality, energy, and strength of the in-shape body. Forms in form, therefore, which in turn seem to be a mark of health, understood as youth, capacity, and performance. So someone who keeps fit has to recognize that satisfactory forms are not attained without the achievement of good form and that form is the best sign of good health. Only a body in form really incarnates fitness. The evolution of the notion of fitness itself leads in this direction. While, as Roberta Park explains (1994, 61–62), “the Victorians thought of fitness in terms of biological adaptability, and from this idea are derived a number of racial, sexual, and other differences” to the extent that “athletes were often portrayed as biologically superior males . . . today fitness is often linked to muscularity, the shape of the body, and/or the ability to perform an exercise session of 30 minutes.” Fitness indissolubly links a very precise ideal of the body with the physical activities that are intended to attain it: in the discourse of experts and in the declarations of regular clients, rationalized movement of the muscles and muscular efficiency are superimposed, as are muscular efficiency and greater physical fitness. A fit body is the product of well-organized physical activity. During this activity, the body is seen as an instrument to be used rather than a source of value to be preserved, and is worked on at the level of forces rather than at the level of signs. The product of this work corresponds, in turn, to an instrumental vision of the body, in other words, to the idea that the body should be kept active as a reserve of energy to be exploited in daily life. Thus, the dual instrumentality of fitness—the instrumentality of the bodywork that is carried out in the gym and the instrumentality of the body that is produced in this way—becomes a hegemonic value. So fitness finds aesthetic expression in a model of tonicity, firmness, and definition of shape that alludes to muscular energy. If fat is ugly, it is primarily because it is of no use: it is not docile and functional like muscle, but the most evident sign of how undisciplined your
body is. In this sense, functionality and aesthetics seem to coincide: the aesthetics of functionality in which fitness is rooted require the body to be not fat, but strong, obedient, and agile, an androgynous and youth-oriented ideal that wants muscles to be developed, hard, and elongated rather than swollen and bulging (Sassatelli 2000).

Written on its surface as well as enshrined in its depths, the energy of the fit body becomes not just an instrument, but also a precious sign of the individual's value. If, as Foucault argues, in the age of rationalized movement “a well-disciplined body forms the operational context of the slightest gesture” and “the only truly important ceremony is exercise” (Foucault 1975, Eng. trans. 1979, 152 and 137), a body which has visibly incorporated exercise can re-acquire ceremonial properties. A fit body says something about the individual: it suggests a strong and vital person, a person who wants to show that he is master of himself and that to do so he harnesses primarily his own “authentic” capacities, earning himself improvements and changes “naturally,” through his own work. Thus the instrumentality of form and the naturalness of fitness training fall within a broader framework of meanings. Presented as a corrective for the sedentary and stressful life of the metropolis, keeping fit is indicated as a way of bringing body and mind into equilibrium, linked to a decisive possibility of “authenticity.” However, the exclusive care of the body and the attention to its needs, both promised by the gym, do not turn the body into an end. While there are limits to the pursuit of a reflexive body project, even among those who attribute importance to the harmony of mind and body, the gym appears to be aimed to obtain greater control of the body, by finding out, for example, how much stamina you have in order to be able to get the maximum out of it (Sassatelli 2000; White et al. 1995; Crossley 2005). In the gym, as in other contemporary settings for body care, giving space to the body means not so much overcoming the dualism of body and self as accepting new ways of looking after it that can increase its energy and capacity. The discourses that experts and clients come up with in order to assign meaning to the gym fit, in fact, into a long-term process that has seen a slow transformation of practices of physical recreation. At the beginning of the last century the practices of recreation and care of the body found expression in physical activities of restraint, such as hydrotherapy, and thus remained within a puritan logic of negative control of the body. Since then, however, a positive approach to the body has gained ground, one that implies producing energy rather than holding it back, stimulating the body rather than inhibiting it. As George Vigarello (1978) has shown, along with the conception of the body as a point of contact between the unconscious that it expresses and the external demands that repress it, techniques have emerged that are designed to help people rediscover the body in all its aspects.
From this perspective, the body/self dualism is not just a bad habit of Western thinking. Rather, it is a productive cultural mechanism: it produces discourses and practices of transcendence that, in a circular fashion, stress its ongoing relevance. It is precisely the conception of a separation and an opposition between self/mind and body that makes possible the continual attribution of extraordinary value to those specialized spaces that, like the gym, propose themselves as a possible means of putting them back together again. The body/self dualism is also productive of a certain type of subject. To be sure, people don’t philosophize in the gym. The disciplinary techniques are applied to the body as a physical datum. Yet the ultimate significance of the gym has shifted from the body to the self. The notion of the body as a docile instrument of the subject in the world emphasizes the idea of the self. Training in the gym—stresses expert discourse—serves not just to improve the figure, but also to acquire confidence and trust in yourself. In this view, the individual is no longer at the mercy of a hostile environment. He no longer dumps his dissatisfactions on the body, but becomes an efficient administrator of his own resources, which he manages in a rational way. The very idea of a self that cannot be reduced to the roles that the individual plays in social life, and cannot even be simply derived by subtraction from these, but is the authentic core of the person, is evoked by the image of the body as a pure, ordinary, and general instrument. The more the body is conceived as a universal means, as pure and not yet targeted utility, the more it alludes to a self that is not contained in the roles and the requirements of everyday life, but that governs them, governing itself through the body.

Bibliographical References


*Our translation from the Italian version.*