

Plastic Pornography

by Paul Backus

In a traveling exhibition marketed as a way to learn more about the human body, a skateboarder poses in the middle of a perfect hand plant, frozen in time. And because he has no skin, spectators can see how his muscles work as he balances on one arm while he keeps the board on top his feet. The muscles and skeleton are completely exposed and have been filled with a liquid plastic that keeps what's left of his body from decomposing in a process known as plastination. The procedure leaves the skater in a pristine, displayable condition. He is part of the *Body Worlds* exhibit, which is making millions of dollars showing plastinated bodies in packed, sold-out museums and science centers full of screaming kids and amused adults.

Body Worlds started touring in 1995. Gunther von Hagens, a skinny, pale German anatomist, is its founder. The 63-year-old doctor, whether he's wearing a three-piece suit or a lab coat, is never seen without his signature black fedora hat. He conjures up images of several characters from the strangest sides of science and subcultures at once. On the one hand, as he cuts open corpses, mixing and matching bodies and organs to assemble his creations, he's a sort of modern-day Frankenstein. But this macabre persona is offset by his early fusion of plastinated bodies and erotic celebrations, reminiscent of the weirdest imaginable decadent Weimar Republic-era cabaret shows. And as he smiles with his big blue eyes, showing off his latest plastinates, he demonstrates the giddiness of a schoolboy having a little too much fun with his plastic Human Body model. Von Hagens is a sort of Unholy Trinity, combining these three in his one personality. They all are linked by one common trait: Their obsessions are taken too far.

Not everyone is so enthusiastic about von Hagens' stab at playing God with decomposing bodies, though—the plastination industry has found itself in the spotlight lately as concern has grown over how companies are getting their bodies and how tasteful the whole endeavor is. The exhibits have even been compared to pornography in their objectification of the human body.

Initially, this comparison might seem like a stretch. After all, the skater is educational! He teaches us how our muscles work! But the educational value of the plastination exhibits was not always *Body Worlds'* primary focus. In the early days of this century, Gunther von Hagens, the German founder of *Body Worlds*, revelled in skinless sensuality and controversy. In July 2001, *Wired* magazine published the article, "Ick, It's the Plastinator." The article begins, "Nakedness never looked like this before." And it goes on to discuss von Hagens' plan to party in Berlin's annual Love Parade:

"He and a group of dancers will be riding on one of the Love Parade floats—and all will be painted with an air brush so that it looks like their vital organs are showing right through their skin." As von Hagens told *Wired* in broken English, "The Love Parade is all a body cult, and body enjoyment. In the meeting together of Body Worlds and Love Parade, here in Berlin, the modern body cult comes to a new horizon."

The plans for the parade came to fruition, and von Hagens' publicity—and criticism of his behavior and ideas—increased accordingly. *The London Independent* reported that by December 2001, "some 200 of Dr von Hagen's [*sic*] plastinated patients have been touring the world in a show called *Korperwelten* ("Bodyworld")...During their odourless progress, they have been seen by 6 million people and have, in the process, earned von Hagens pounds 45m." The article also quotes Berlin cleric Ernst Pulsfort on

von Hagens, saying the impresario was “playing Barbie-dolls with human bodies.” Other German anatomists wanted to have von Hagens “drummed out of the profession,” and physicians in Belgium were boycotting the show in Brussels. Questions about where the bodies were coming from started popping up. “The high incidence of healthy young bodies in *Korperwelten*,” the *Independent* reported, “has led detractors to hint that he has been cadaver-shopping in China and the ex-Soviet Union.”

In March 2002, a new von Hagens emerged in an interview with Stuart Jeffries of England’s *The Guardian*. Von Hagens giggled as he said, “It is an honour to cause this controversy.” However, he by now seemed to have decided that marketing *Body Worlds* as a celebration of erotic love was a little too controversial, at least in England. Gone was any discussion of a “body cult” reaching a “new horizon” or Love Parades with dancing cadavers.

“There are obviously aesthetic elements to what I am doing,” a more subdued von Hagens conceded. “But I am chiefly a scientist who wants to enlighten people.” Proudly, the self-proclaimed scientist goes on: “I plastinated my best friend recently. He was two years older than me.” One can only hope that von Hagens and his friend were on good terms before the doctor decided to plastinate him.

As serious as he tried to be, the new von Hagens could not resist what his British audience would most likely call a “bloody good time.” In September 2003, his Hamburg *Body Worlds*, located in the red light district, was offering free admission to cab drivers and prostitutes. The exhibition, set up in what had been an erotic art museum, included a display of a man with an erection, titled *Early Bird*. Von Hagens told one reporter that he

felt the display was “something every healthy man can relate to and it’s happened to all of us in the mornings and occasionally in the evenings.”

This edition of *Body Worlds* did little to help von Hagens convince Europe that he was a serious scientist of enlightenment. The German Catholic Church declared von Hagens’ Hamburg show “obscene.” Prostitutes coming in to admire the de-fleshed but still rock-hard penis—bad enough. But what really had the Church upset was the plastinate of a pregnant woman. Her body, including a very advanced fetus, was artistically dissected and flayed. She was posed like a swimsuit model, lying on her side with one arm propping up her upper body while her other hand rested on her smiling head as if caressing her missing hair. Skin, muscle and bone faded in and out of each other along her body like the shadings in an especially well-drawn sketch, and her stomach was cut open to show her sleeping baby and her placenta. The pregnant woman was the worst of several “truly horrific displays,” according to The Roman Catholic Archdiocese in Vancouver’s report three years later. The report explained that *Body Worlds* “runs counter to Roman Catholic theology and our belief in the dignity of the human body...This respect for God’s greatest creation is not only Catholic or Christian theology, but is held by Jewish, Muslim and other believers as well.”

By 2004, von Hagens no longer giggled at all this. He decided to pack his bags and head for America. When he brought his show to Los Angeles that year he made sure to focus on education rather than the “body cult.” The cabaret cadavers had disgusted even bohemian Europe, and he worried that they definitely would not cater to Protestant America’s more uptight, unsexy culture.

The American spirit of free enterprise did not suit von Hagens, however. He soon found himself competing with Premier Exhibitions, the established museum touring company that had provided *RMS Titanic*, a showcase of artifacts from the infamous ship's disastrous demise. Premier Exhibitions introduced a plastinated show called *BODIES...The Exhibition*, and has added two further franchises to its lineup: *Bodies Revealed* and *OUR BODY...The Universe Within*.

Body Worlds and Premier Exhibitions are now fierce competitors. Neither has a monopoly on the lucrative plastination industry. So they attack each other's morals, which isn't difficult. Von Hagens claims that his cadavers come from donors who gave permission to have their bodies put on display, while his rivals' do not. It looks like he's right about Premier Exhibitions, but Premier Exhibitions argues that he's not any better.

The *Body Worlds* website contains all sorts of compelling but inaccurate claims, including this one: "The BODY WORLDS exhibitions rely on the generosity of body donors; individuals who bequeathed that, upon their death, their bodies could be used for educational purposes in the exhibitions." Barely skipping a beat, the website goes on to explain, "*All of the full-body plastinated and the majority of the specimens are from these body donors; some specific specimens that show unusual conditions come from old anatomical collections and morphological institutes*" (emphasis mine). Arnie Geller, the CEO of Premier Exhibitions, is more than happy to explain what this actually means. "He says his full body specimens are all donors, but his organs may not be from donors. Listen closely to what he says," Geller told the New York Times in 2006.

The *Body Worlds* website even has the audacity to say, in response to an attack by the Bishop of Manchester, England that "the Catholic Church in Germany has followed

the work of Dr. von Hagens for more than two decades.” Never mind that the German Catholic church ultimately called *Body Worlds* “obscene!” Of course, Geller is right. If we look closely at what von Hagens says, he never claims that the Church in Germany is happy with him.

Fortunately, we don’t have to rely only on what von Hagens and Geller are saying, or not saying. On February 15, an episode of 20/20 offered some insight into where the bodies *really* come from. The show focused on Premier Exhibitions’ *Bodies...The Exhibition*. 20/20’s investigation starts when an American homeowner receives some misdirected packages from China, one of which contains a plastinated head. The head was supposed to go to Corcoran Laboratories, Inc., a Michigan-based company that sells plastinated specimens and is a supplier for Premier Exhibitions. It soon unfolded that Premier Exhibitions was getting bodies shipped by boat from China labeled “PLASTIC MODEL FOR MEDICAL TEACHING.”

The obvious question at this point: Is it accurate to label plastinated human remains this way? Geller answers 20/20, “Technically, it’s accurate, of course...They are plastic models, technically.”

That Geller is comfortable grouping his human plastinates in the same category with regular 100% plastic models is certainly disconcerting. But it gets worse. 20/20 visited the “laboratory” where Geller says all of Premier Exhibitions’ bodies come from—it’s actually a small, shoddy warehouse off a garbage-lined dirt road in Dalian, China. Eventually, the news team and its undercover cameras were escorted away by the onsite manager, who could only repeatedly insist that he didn’t know where the company got its bodies.

But someone else did. While in China, 20/20 met a man in the middle of the night with documents verifying his identity as someone who collects bodies to be sold on the black market. He produced four-year-old photographs of executed political prisoners, their fresh red blood staining the snow-covered ground. The prisoners' bodies are sold to companies all over China, including, the man said, to Premier Exhibitions' laboratory in Dalian. The man insisted he remain anonymous for fear of being arrested and ending up like his cadavers, which are worth around \$200 on the black market.

When 20/20 showed Geller the photographs, he said he was "absolutely appalled" at the pictures, and would take action if a clear link could be provided between the prisoners' bodies and Premier Exhibitions' suppliers. However, Premier Exhibitions has no information regarding what the people did before they ended up as plastinates—just the Chinese laboratory's word that the bodies weren't previously animated by the souls of executed political prisoners. This, of course, makes any kind of a link impossible to prove.

No matter where the bodies came from, Rabbi Lewis Feldstein gives 20/20 the religious Jewish community's view on plastinated exhibitions. "It's against respect for the life that was lived... It's entertainment. You're going to be entertained by looking at dead bodies. Can you learn something from it? Sure! There's lots of things I can learn from. Is it right to learn from that? I would say no."

Still, both Geller and von Hagens might have to start taking their burden of proof more seriously if they want to keep coming back to California. Fiona Ma, the California State Assembly Majority Whip and a woman of Chinese descent, is pushing hard to make sure that the plastinated bodies are from donors who have given their consent to be put on

display. Her website has a whole page dedicated to Assembly Bill 1519, “To prohibit the commercial profit and public display of human bodies or remains without the documented informed consent of the deceased or next-of-kin.” As Ma explains in a video on the web page, “We’re talking potentially about thousands of people who have been drained, pumped with plastic, chopped up like meat, and then served around the state for commercial purposes...As a Chinese American, I know that few people in China would voluntarily donate their organs or bodies due to the strong cultural and traditional preference of leaving their body intact for burial after death. So when I saw the exhibit in San Francisco and Sacramento, I knew something was wrong.”

I had a chance to visit *BODIES...The Exhibition* for myself while it was in San Diego’s University Town Center. The exhibit was made up of nine rooms, and each room had its own theme. Some displays were fairly tame. There would be a smoker’s lung next to a non-smoker’s lung to show how bad cigarettes are, or different sections of the human brain, or some isolated bone and joint structures. But these weren’t the displays that people were paying \$26.50 to see.

As I walked through the San Diego exhibition on its last day, I saw plastinated Asian-looking men playing football and basketball, carved up in standard plastinate fashion, with skin and muscle interwoven to artistically demonstrate the muscle systems. Museum signs explaining the muscles’ functions accompanied the athletes. The football player’s sign offered the moral for the whole thing: “It’s never too late to start exercising!”

“Wow, we really are aliens after all,” a spacey middle-aged hippie commented, while looking at someone’s nervous system in the next room. The nervous system, laid

out on a table, did look like an alien from a sci-fi film. The ropy, yellow-white tissue twisted into a stick figure with droopy, pencil-thin toes and fingers, leading up to a bare brain with bulging eyeballs.

A girl stood in front of one exhibit, vigorously taking notes for her college biology class. I told her that I thought the plastinates were interesting, but I couldn't overcome the sickening feeling that all these very Asian-looking "models" could very well be the bodies of executed political prisoners who never had the chance to write out a will, let alone give permission for their remains to entertain the global public and make Premier Exhibitions millions of dollars.

"Hmm. I never thought about that," the girl responded, and then went back to her note taking.

Then there was the fetus exhibit: an entire room dedicated to fetuses on display. On one table rested three fetuses with rare birth defects. The most grotesque had developed its organs on the outside of its body. At another darkly lit table, jars of fetuses in different stages of development glowed cool shades of blue and red. Their skeletal systems had been injected with a red dye so that viewers could better understand how fetal skeletons develop. If the German Catholic Church found *Body Worlds'* pregnant female plastinate offensive, one can only imagine how they'd feel about this.

"Our bodies are such miracles!" an old lady exclaimed at the end of the exhibition. Nobody seemed to think too much about the fact that they were looking at other people's real bodies, and no one seemed worried about where the cadavers had come from. It seems to be mostly scientists and professors who question the scientific and educational value of these displays.

For example, in the Winter 2007 edition of *The New Atlantis*, Thomas S. Hibbs, Distinguished Professor of Ethics and Culture at Baylor University, published his article “Dead Body Porn.”

“The question is whether [*Body Worlds*] has substantive educational value, or is merely feeding our inordinate taste for the macabre while masquerading as science education,” Hibbs writes. He describes one plastinate, the “Jumping Dancer,” who is posed to show off his dancing muscles. The Dancer is held in mid-air by his spinal column, which has been completely folded back 180 degrees to reach the ground.

It should go without saying that no active dancer looks like this. Yet the *Body Worlds* website claims, “Real human bodies show the details of disease and anatomy that cannot be shown with models...One of the special features of museums and science centres is that they offer people a chance to see the real thing in a safe and informative environment.” But it’s hard to see how the Jumping Dancer is simply showing the public the real thing. Hibbs even suggests that we could actually learn more, not less, from “sophisticated artificial models,” because the models could have “still active respiratory, digestive and cardiac systems.” Hibbs decides, ultimately, “One might equally claim that pornography can provide sex education, when what porn in fact does is to reduce sex to the manipulation of body parts stripped of any larger human significance...Indeed, what is on display is not the mystery of death, but the reduction of bodies to inert plasticized parts displayed for viewers—in short, a pornography of the dead human body.”

Is Hibbs going too far? After all, the plastinated bodies are obviously dead! In theory, the souls that once inhabited them no longer care how their bodies are exploited. But Christoph Reiners, a pastor at Peace Lutheran Church in Abbotsford, British

Columbia, explains why that shouldn't matter. He asks, "Remember when in 1993, warlords in Mogadishu, Somalia dragged the body of an American marine behind a jeep through the streets of Mogadishu? We were outraged and could not believe our eyes...Think about why we were outraged...After all, he was already dead." Reiners makes a connection between the plastinated displays and lampshades made from the skin of World War II victims that decorated homes in Nazi Germany, and asks, "When we turn human bodies into objects, don't we justify the objectification of human beings, the exploitation of any kind?"

The New York Times article that Geller was quoted in points out yet another alarming development in this whole mess. "With little government oversight, an abundance of cheap medical school labor and easy access to cadavers and organs—which appear to come mostly from China and Europe—at least 10 other Chinese body factories have opened in the last 10 years," the article says.

Ultimately, the plastinated exhibition industry began with an erotic twist, and the industry's mentality remains pornographic to this day. Pornography may show sex, but it objectifies its human participants. Certainly, no one has tried to defend pornography's educational value, but if they did, their position would be about as defensible as von Hagens'. Premier Exhibitions has gotten around body trafficking laws by actually labeling its cadavers as plastic objects. And as Fiona Ma argues on her web video, "We've made it a criminal offense to mutilate or violently or sexually abuse a corpse. And now in the twenty-first century we have exhibits that have turned into a multimillion-dollar industry at the expense of someone's son, father, daughter, or unborn

[child] who did not wish to be there. This is more than dead body trafficking. This is grave robbery and abuse.”