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Bodies Impolitic? Reading Cadavers

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The article considers Body Worlds, Bodies: The Exhibition, and other contemporary displays of plastinated cadavers as communicative museum "texts." It employs five hermeneutic frames through which these exhibitions might be viewed, and through which the museum objects might be transmogrified into meaningful content in a viewer's mind: specimens, education, profits, consent, and — intertwined with consent — dignity.

Death has always been a primeval and primary aspect of human culture, what Becker terms "the mainspring of human activity" (1973, p. xvii), but it has recently assumed a new manifestation. The dead themselves have gone on public display. *The New York Times* characterizes *Body Worlds, Bodies: The Exhibition,* and other shows featuring "plastinated" cadavers as "among the most popular attractions at American science and natural history museums" (Barboza, 2006).

What are these displays? What purposes do they serve? What accounts for their appeal? What, in sum, draws bodies to *Bodies,* this successful example of what A. Jones terms "technophenomenology" (1998, p. 235)*?* This article examines the exhibitions of plastinated cadavers as texts, potentially perceived in different contexts by different viewers. I suggest that visitors to the cadaver shows may construe them through five frames, and may do so singly, seriatim, or in combination.[1]

Literature Review

Contemporary cadaver displays have generated a rich literature. They have been analyzed from the perspectives of bioethics (Barilan, 2006; Burns, 2007; Dekkers, 2001), anthropology (N. Jones, 2007; Linke, 2005), sociology (Hirschauer, 2006; Vom Lehn, 2006; Walter, 2004a), medical education (Percival, 2005), law (Leiboff, 2005), history (Moore & Brown, 2004), and art (Kuppers, 2004; Van Dijck, 2001). Categories, of course, overlap; nonetheless, the displays have been surprisingly neglected in the communications field. Two exceptions are short but penetrating analyses by Spooner (2007), who argues that the exhibitions exemplify a revival of gothic styles and sensibilities, and by Kuppers (2007), who

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[1] From different angles, others have also noted that the exhibitions operate on multiple levels (Burns, 2007; N. Jones, 2007; Nijhuis, 2006).

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likens the *Body Worlds* figures to Borges' tale of a map as large as the kingdom it represents. This article seeks to fill the gap, examining the communicative aspects of the cadaver exhibitions.

The complexity of the viewer's interaction with museum or other exhibition displays is widely acknowledged (Durrans, 1992).[2] P. Jones observes, "[M]useums necessarily decontextualize and then recontextualize their contents, thereby radically altering the matrices through which meanings may be projected, discerned, constructed" (1992, p. 911). Meaning does not inhere in objects; it is constructed in the onlooker's mind (M. Jones, 2004). Aptly, Garoian borrows Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of "enfleshment" and notes, "The ontology of enfleshment occurs in the chiasm, the intersection where the viewer's subjective knowledge and experience intertwines with the objectified artifacts in the museum" (2001, p. 240). *Body Worlds* and the other exhibitions display cadavers whose flesh has been removed. "Enfleshment" occurs when viewers, with their varied preconceptions and perspectives, gaze upon the fleshless cadavers and construe them in particular ways. Bodies study bodies. In a sense, (onlooker) bodies create (object) bodies — and not necessarily in ways that the exhibitors intended.

History

Gunther von Hagens, who developed the plastination process, launched the first exhibition of preserved cadavers in 1997 (Kriz, 2007; von Hagens, 1982). According to von Hagens, *Body Worlds* and his other shows have attracted nearly 25 million visitors (*Body Worlds,* n.d.[b]). Competitors have arisen, most notably *Bodies: The Exhibition.* By one count, 11 exhibitors have displayed plastinated cadavers in the past few years (Working, 2005).

Since long before plastination, of course, people have wanted to see dead bodies. They have sought to learn, to venerate, to gawk, to mock. From the 16th century to the 19th, many dissections took place in public. Some European "anatomy theatres" would charge admission and, testimony to the mix of education and entertainment, would feature a musical performance as well as a dissection (Ferrari, 1987). Bodies and body parts of saints and other eminences of the Catholic Church have been displayed since the second century (Rufus, 1999). The practice of displaying the corpses of esteemed royalty and heads of state dates back to Henry II in 1189 (Quigley, 1996). The train carrying the body of Abraham Lincoln stopped in many cities en route to Springfield, Illinois, so that grieving Americans could pay tribute (Laderman, 1996); the bodies of Ho Chi Minh, Mao, and most famously Lenin are still displayed (Quigley, 1996). The Paris Morgue was open to the public from dawn to dusk seven days a week between 1805 and 1907. Families, children included, came to look through a window at newly discovered, unidentified cadavers (Schwartz, 1998). For millennia, in addition, governments displayed bodies and body parts of the executed, as an element of the penalty (Quigley, 1996). This postmortem mortification could even come long after death: At the outset of the Restoration of the Stuart Dynasty in 1660, two years after Oliver Cromwell had died, his cadaver was disinterred and hanged. Afterward, his head was impaled on a spike atop Westminster Hall, where it remained for years (Abbott, 1991). Republican troops during the

[2] Though not all cadaver exhibitions are in literal museum spaces — *Bodies: The Exhibition* left the Tropicana Hotel and Casino for a 10-year contract with the Luxor Hotel and Casino — all of them seek to evoke the museum atmosphere of education and contemplation, so I will treat them as museums.

Spanish Civil War, similarly, disinterred and displayed the remains of nuns as a means of demoralizing the citizenry (Barley, 1997). The utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham believed that preserved cadavers, which he termed "auto-icons," could serve as statuary. Pursuant to his will, his cadaver is on display at University College, London (Richardson & Hurwitz, 1987). Finally, dime museums, sideshows, carnivals, and the like often displayed mummies, skeletons, and other human remains; some still do so (Adams, 2001; Mauriés, 2002; Poignant, 2004; Sappol, 2002).

Frame 1: Specimens

Walter (2004b) suggests two distinctions with regard to biological specimens: wet/dry and stable/unstable. Untreated cadavers are wet and unstable. They provoke, Quigley (1996, p. 15) notes, "a natural revulsion" and are unlikely to attract tour buses. Embalmers ordinarily shield us from the most unsettling views. The wet, unstable specimen for a time appears dry, stable, and lifelike. Geography plays a role as well: the corpse is transferred from the place where life ceased to a place where life never exists—a coffin in a funeral home. We see a well-dressed person lying down, eyes closed, hands clasped, hair clean and brushed. The sight conveys several messages: waiting (hands) for an important event (clothes, grooming), but at the same time sleeping (eyes, horizontal posture), in comfort (cushions, serene features).

Plastinated cadavers are likewise dry and stable, as liquid extracted from their tissue has been replaced with polymer.[3] Most plastinated figures lack clothing, skin, and hair. Moreover, they are sliced open to reveal, variously, muscles, organs, bones, arteries, and nerves. The bodies are as odorless and inoffensive as plastic. A plastinated cadaver is, in fact, 70% plastic (von Hagens, 2007). The faces are clean, dry, and symmetrical. Their expressions are thoughtful and composed (not decomposed), and their features indistinct and unidentifiable. This is a byproduct of plastination (Institute for Plastination, n.d.[a]). The plastinated figures have open eyes, albeit glass ones. In these respects, the specimens represent a mode of death that viewers accustomed to embalmed bodies have never seen. They are unfamiliar death-texts.[4] They are unfamiliar life-texts as well. For Foucault, "The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a disassociated Self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration" (qtd. in A. Jones, 1998, p. 12). These bodies bear no inscription of events, house no Self, and are no longer disintegrating.

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[3] The shows feature many body parts and systems alongside the full-figure cadavers. Here, I focus on the full bodies.

[4] The plastinated figures bear even less resemblance to the death-texts with which many museum-goers are familiar, mummies, which reveal nothing of the body beneath the shroud.

Gunther von Hagens and one of his plastinated figures.

Nearly all of the figures stand upright. The posture proved a source of contention at the outset. When von Hagens first agreed to display plastinated cadavers, at the National Science Museum in Tokyo, he and museum officials argued over whether the figures should be horizontal, as if on dissection tables, or vertical, as if alive. Von Hagens (2007, p. 34) finally prevailed: the display featured lifelike poses, what he terms "living anatomy." Moreover, von Hagens' and the other exhibitors' plastinated figures are not simply upright in the inert posture of hanging museum skeletons; they are *in media res* — digging with a shovel, conducting with a baton, dribbling a basketball, hurling a javelin, riding a horse. Moore and Brown write that such displays embody "a conception of personhood as willful agent, making choices that muscles, especially, translate into action" (2004, p. 11). Yet the resulting narratives are artificial. The chess player may never have played chess. The true narratives — most basically, name and cause of death — are nowhere to be found.

The figures also strike a contrast with the live bodies in performance or body art. Such art is oftentimes meant to discomfort the viewer. Many works feature blood, semen, or other bodily fluids. Not the plastinates: They are devoid of fluid and exhibited in such a way as to minimize the onlooker's distress. The irony is considerable — the life of performance art is typically more upsetting than the death of the cadaver exhibits. Performance art can extend beyond life, too. Consider Bob Flanagan's plans for a posthumous work, *The Viewing,* which would place a video camera in Flanagan's casket and a monitor in a gallery, where visitors could view the decay of his remains (A. Jones, 1998).

All in all, the plastinated figures, with their dry stability, look more like mannequins than cadavers. That raises the question: To the extent that the use of actual cadavers is controversial, why do the museums (and museum-like spaces) not use facsimiles? From the 16th through 19th centuries, when medical students vastly outnumbered the cadavers available for dissection, European artists collaborated with anatomists to produce wax replicas of extraordinary realism (Gonzalez-Crussi, 1995). A museum of anatomical wax models in Philadelphia attracted George Washington during a break from the Constitutional Convention (Sellers, 1976). The plastinate exhibitors advance various arguments for the superiority of actual cadavers. The Web sites of *Body Worlds* (n.d.[b]) and *Bodies: The Exhibition* (n.d.) maintain that models cannot convey how human bodies differ, a dubious proposition — an exhibition with twenty different plastinated figures could have twenty different wax figures instead. *Bodies: The Exhibition* (2006, p. 5) further argues that models "idealize the body" and thereby misrepresent it — again, a dubious proposition; abnormality as well as normality can be replicated in wax or other media.

The strongest argument is that, in the words of *Body Worlds,* "[v]isitors are drawn to real specimens in a way that plastic models cannot replicate" (n.d.[b]). During a von Hagens exhibition in 1997-1998, patrons were asked if "deceptively genuine plastic models and vivid computer images would have had a similar effect" on them. According to Lantermann, a majority, 53%, chose the answer "no, definitely not" (2007, p. 211). Museum patrons pay less attention to objects, including mummies, that they know to be fake (Wieczorkiewicz, 2005). Von Hagens echoes Walter Benjamin when he talks of "[t]he longing for the authentic in a time of practically unlimited reproducibility" (Biskup, 2005, p. 220). This particular longing, of course, owes something to the transgressive nature of the displays. The cadaver exhibitions provide the thrill of toying with humanity's ultimate fear, death, yet of doing so with death made family-friendly, denuded of its odors, excretions, and horrors (Spooner, 2007). Too much

authenticity — rotting flesh — would keep people away, and so would too little authenticity — mannequins. Like roller coasters with seatbelts, the specimens in cadaver exhibitions strike a balance.

Frame 2: Education

The shows frame themselves as educational and scientific. *Bodies: The Exhibition,* according to its sponsors, "was designed with . . . one important purpose in mind: education" (*Bodies: The Exhibition,* 2006, p. 5). Von Hagens says that *Body Worlds* seeks to "democratize anatomy" (Edgers, 2006) by revealing information previously monopolized by medical professionals. *Bodies* docents wear white coats, implying medical expertise. The result privileges science over, for example, art; museum docents typically wear blazers or other distinctive but non-medical garb.

Do the exhibitions succeed in their purported educational missions? In surveys of *Body Worlds* patrons between 1996 and 2006, 88% said that they had learned about the human body (Whalley, 2007). Of Americans who had visited one of the cadaver exhibitions, according to another study, roughly half said that the experience inspired them to adopt healthier habits (TNS Emnid, 2005). Vom Lehn (2006) studied *Body Worlds* visitors and found little of the clinical detachment that characterizes medical students. Instead, viewers identify with the bodies and point to knees, lungs, vertebrae, or other sites of pain or disease in themselves or relatives. The result is more personalized and probably more effective, educationally, than attending an anatomy lecture or reading a book.

Some evidence indicates that onlookers learn about death as well as life. *Body Worlds* surveyed patrons at its exhibition sites; between one-third and two-thirds said that the experience made them "[m]ore thoughtful about life and death" (Institute for Plastination, n.d.[a], p. 20). According to Hillebrands (2005), patrons come to understand death as a part of the natural cycle. Viewers pass through the shock of the displays' liminality, he argues, to arrive at a sort of Kubler-Ross final stage of acceptance:

> In viewing the plastinates we oscillate between the fascinated staring of our dominant analytical understanding, and our personal shock in the face of the suggestive borderline experience of the deceased body, which makes it clear that a true and fulfilled life can be achieved only if death is included in it. (p. 143)

Kriz (2007) advances a more ambitious argument. In his view, the exhibitions vanquish our unnatural and unhealthy fear of death, or at least our fear of the dead: visitors to the exhibition "had overcome the taboos that surround human corpses" (p. 6). This surely goes too far, given the dry and stable, mannequin-like nature of the plastinates. The exhibitions, in truth, downplay death. Von Hagens rejected the skin of one corpse as too pale and deathly (Rathgeb, 2005). A few specimens illustrate the consequences of unhealthy behavior (tobacco-blackened lung tissue, a cirrhotic liver), but almost none of the bodies or body parts indicates a cause of death.

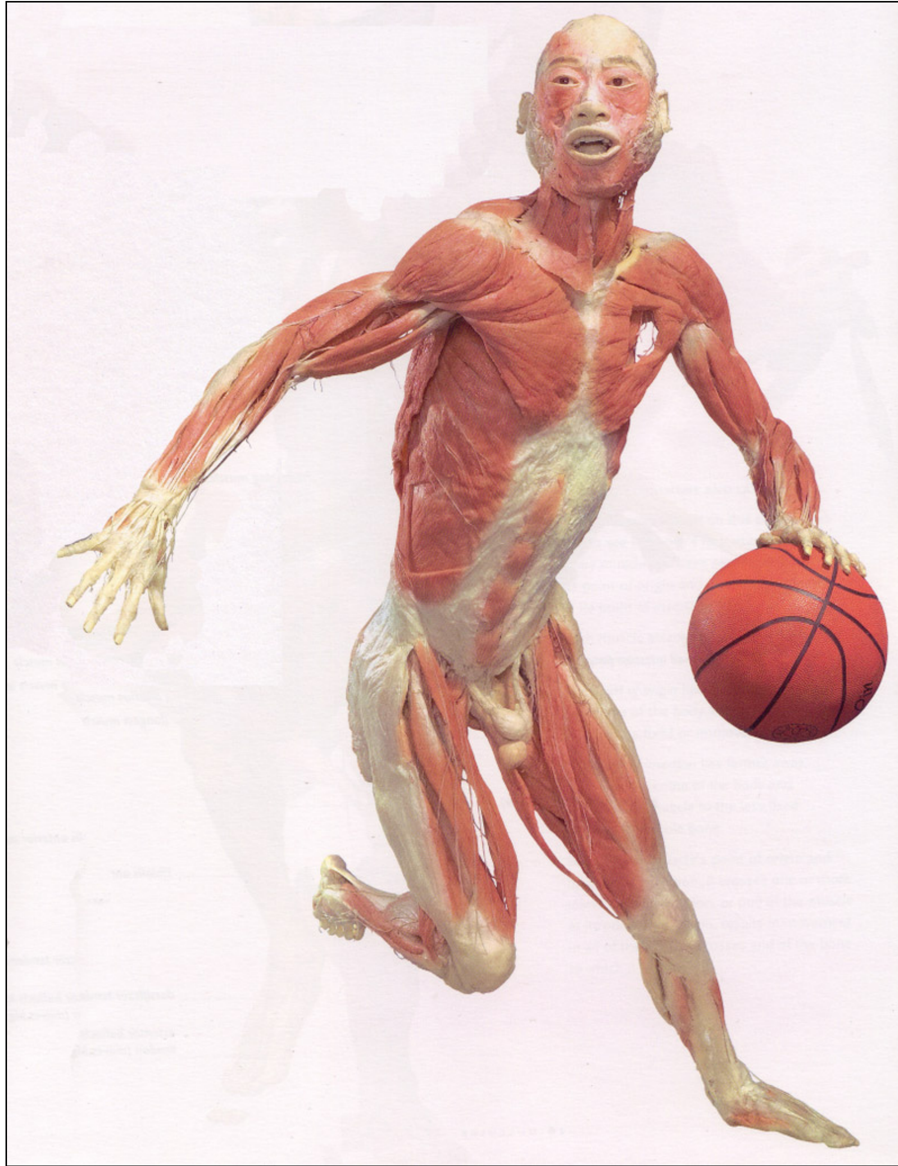
Von Hagens candidly acknowledges that education is not the sole appeal of his shows. Echoing Barnum, he asks, "What's wrong with sensationalism?" (Bohannon, 2003). The most *outré* of the exhibitors, he has talked of displaying a couple having sex; a man crucified; a new and improved human

with extra ribs, a spare heart, and reversible knees; and, by combining human and horse parts, a centaur (Moore & Brown, 2004; Ulaby, 2006; Working, 2005). Garoian (2001) calls for "rupturing the assumption that works of art are beyond reproach" (p. 236); analogously, von Hagens seeks to rupture the assumption that the human body is beyond reproach, much like the work of Orlan and other body artists. Indeed, von Hagens' consent form asks if the donor's body can be used not merely for an educational display, but for "an anatomical work of art" (Institute for Plastination, n.d.[b]). Yet it should be acknowledged that von Hagens is hardly the first to inject entertainment into the museum space. Museums increasingly feature interactive displays, costumed characters, blockbuster shows, and other forms of glitz, and they advertise energetically (Yorke & R. Jones, 1984). Barzun (2000) quotes a British curator: "Visitors tend to be conscious of the time they have available and are more likely to be concerned with whether the experience will be entertaining as well as educational" (p. 784). *Experience* is the key word. Curators stress that people can learn from books; the museum must offer something unique, an experience unavailable through other sources (Katriel, 1996).

The cadaver exhibitions plainly succeed. They offer something that a book — say, a collection of death-scene photographs by Weegee — could only imperfectly approximate. Their transgressive nature is intertwined with their sensationalism: literally, the emotional sensation produced in the onlooker, as opposed to any intellectual gratification. In this regard, the exhibitions educate, but they also stimulate the emotions. One could argue, indeed, that the sensationalism draws the crowds; education is a happy byproduct.

Frame 3: Profits

Visitors to the cadaver exhibitions cannot help but notice the price of admission: commonly over $20 for adults. The International Council of Museums defines a museum as "a non-profit, permanent institution" (2007, art. 3, sec. 1). By contrast, these exhibitions plainly are for-profit, by design and in effect. Von Hagens' exhibitions netted $40 million between 1999 and early 2006, though he devoted most of it to expanding his operations (Goldman, 2006). "[N]o one should earn a profit from body parts," a donation brochure from von Hagens' Institute for Plastination (n.d.[a], p. 20) proclaims — in the limited context, it turns out, of whether body donors ought to be compensated. The Society for American Archaeology (1986), which defends the display of human remains in museums, condemns "commercial exploitation of ancient human remains" as "abhorrent." Recent human remains, such as those in cadaver exhibitions, would seem to present an even stronger case. And not only archeologists frown on the commercial side of the cadaver exhibitions: In a 2005 survey sponsored by von Hagens' Institute for Plastination, nearly half of Americans, 46%, deemed it inappropriate for cadaver exhibitors to charge an entrance fee (TNS Emnid, 2005). Yet the immense profitability of the shows demonstrates that their for-profit nature is not off-putting for millions of people, or at least not sufficiently off-putting to keep them away.



***A basketball player from* Bodies: The Exhibition.**

At present, no non-profit alternative exists. No university or museum has mounted a display of full-body cadavers. Exhibitions of death do exist, however, and some of them approach the transgressivity of the cadaver exhibitions. In the name of education, the Mütter Museum in Philadelphia displays hundreds of skeletons and skulls, and the National Library of Medicine in Washington, D.C., displays preserved fetuses, some of them diseased and misshapen. Moreover, the Mütter Museum (n.d.[a])

currently charges $14 adult admission. Like most of the cadaver exhibitions, it features a gift shop, which offers such goods as a glow-in-the-dark skeleton (n.d.[b]) and, celebrating its display of the preserved remains of Siamese twins Chang and Eng, a shot glass with their photograph and the legend "Make mine a double" (n.d.[c]). With regard to putatively educational displays, the difference between for-profit and non-profit can be scant.

Frame 4: Consent

A fully informed viewer may consider the shows through the frame of consent—whether a cadaver was donated by the decedent, and, if not, how members of a decedent's culture ordinarily treat their dead. Davies (2006, p. 228) writes,

> [A]cts of disposal are usually carried out in the context of ritual activity that not only expresses a society's beliefs about the meaning of life and its ultimate destiny but also engages with complex issues of identity. The way the dead are disposed of thus reflects not only their previous status in life but also how they will continue to relate to the living after having left this world.

In the West, burial, cremation, and donation have long been the principal alternatives for disposing of human remains. Why not plastination? Von Hagens' *Body Worlds* relies on donors, mostly Germans, for its exhibited cadavers, and it can provide documentation of consent. For some donors, the incentive is immortality of a sort: leaving behind a "work," the body, that endures after death, potentially for centuries (Rathgeb, 2005). By contrast, *Bodies: The Exhibition* and other shows generally use Chinese cadavers and cannot prove consent (Working, 2005; ABC News, 2008; Barboza, 2006; Ulaby, 2006). In these shows, perhaps the not-quite-human plastinated figures are further dehumanized by racism. This would not be the only realm in which Americans gaze complacently at dead foreigners. Fishman (2001) finds that photographs of corpses in elite American newspapers are three times more likely to feature non-Americans than Americans.

The fact that the cadavers are Chinese ought to weigh in any culturally sensitive calculus. In many cases, Chinese believe that they must care for their ancestors, who are watching over them (Oxfeld, 2004; Rouse, 2005). For the annual festival called Ching Ming, according to *The Wall Street Journal*, millions of Chinese sweep the graves of relatives (Fowler, 2003). "[P]utting a body on indefinite display . . . condemns the soul to wander the netherworld with no chance to rest," Bettie Luke of Seattle told a reporter (Benedetti, 2006). From the perspective of Chinese religious beliefs, the deceased have metaphorically as well as literally lost face.

Unlike *Bodies: The Exhibition*, many museums strive to respect cultural norms. In dealing with human remains from foreign countries, for example, the Field Museum in Chicago has adopted a policy of deferring to "the cultural practice of the native peoples from those countries" (Boyd, 1999, p. 206). Yet most museums' skulls, skeletons, and mummies are displayed without knowledge of identity, and thus with no reason to presume consent. Indeed, exhibitors have at times disregarded the express wishes of the deceased. Before he died in 1783, the Irish giant Charles Byrne feared that scientists would take

control of his remains. He instructed that this corpse be placed in a lead coffin and sunk in the Thames. But the undertakers auctioned off the remains. The high bidder, surgeon John Hunter, boiled the flesh off and exhibited the skeleton. It remains on display in the Royal College of Surgeons' Hunterian Museum in London (Dreger, 2004; Shultz, 1992).

Which Chinese cadavers get plastinated by *Bodies: The Exhibition*? ABC News' *20/20* (2008) has aired evidence that the individuals are prisoners, perhaps executed, an allegation that others had published earlier (Benedetti, 2006; Doughton, 2006; Jacobs, 2005; Mohseni, 2006). Since then, Premier, the show's exhibiting company, has signed an agreement with the State of New York. Though the company does not admit liability, it must post these two announcements in the lobby of any New York show (Attorney General, 2008):

> (A) This exhibit displays human remains of Chinese citizens or residents which were originally received by the Chinese Bureau of Police. The Chinese Bureau of Police may receive bodies from Chinese prisons. Premier cannot independently verify that the human remains you are viewing are not those of persons who were incarcerated in Chinese prisons.
>
> (B) This exhibit displays full body cadavers as well as human body parts, organs, fetuses and embryos that come from cadavers of Chinese citizens or residents. With respect to the human parts, organs, fetuses and embryos you are viewing, Premier relies solely on the representations of its Chinese partners and cannot independently verify that they do not belong to persons executed while incarcerated in Chinese prisons. (p. 7)

Premier can verify that the full-body cadavers are not those of executed prisoners, but they may be those of non-executed prisoners; as for the body parts on display, the company cannot verify whether they came from Chinese prisoners "who were executed, tortured or subjected to other physical abuse" (Attorney General, 2008, p. 2). Counting all of its shows, Premier has more than 300 full cadavers and thousands of body parts (McPhee, 2008). Public exhibition of criminals makes the viewer complicit; onlookers become punishers, what MacDonald (2006) in another context calls "secondary executioners of the law." Perhaps visitors to *Bodies: The Exhibition* want to think of cadavers giving information — cadavers, that is, freely donated by fully informed individuals — but not of themselves taking information from individuals whose wishes were overruled.

The *Bodies'* Web site for its New York City exhibition includes the required caveats. The exhibition's main Web site does not. Instead, it features a somewhat disingenuous explanation of the cadavers' origins:

> All of the bodies were obtained through the Dalian Medical University Plastination Laboratories in the People's Republic of China. Asia possesses the largest and most highly competent group of dissectors in the world, and they are highly skilled in preparing the bodies for educational and scientific purposes. Currently, human

A football player from **Bodies: The Exhibition***.*

> specimens in medical schools in China, the United States and other countries throughout the world are donated or unidentified bodies. (*Bodies: The Exhibition,* n.d.)

Human specimens in medical schools, of course, are not at issue. The issue is the provenance of the specimens in *Bodies: The Exhibition*. In this account, the role of the Chinese Bureau of Police goes unmentioned, and the mastery of Chinese dissectors is thrown in as a distracter.

In the Institute for Plastination survey of 2005, two-thirds of Americans agreed that "[s]pecimens should only be used when donors explicitly consent to public display"; 22% deemed consent by next of kin sufficient; and just 11% said that consent was not essential so long as the exhibition is educational (TNS Emnid, 2005). The same survey found that 43% of Americans opposed the use of executed Chinese prisoners for anatomical displays under any circumstances; the remainder said that consent, either by the executed individual or by next of kin, would suffice (TNS Emnid, 2005).

Frame 5: Dignity[5]

"The specimens in this exhibition have been treated with the dignity and respect they so richly deserve," says a sign near the end of *Bodies: The Exhibition.* But *Bodies* medical director Roy Glover, when asked if he would want his parents plastinated and displayed, declined to express a view. "That would be up to them to decide," he said (Lebrecht, n.d.) — acknowledging, if inadvertently, the importance of consent.

Lack of consent raises several issues concerning human dignity, which may be on the mind of a visitor to *Bodies: The Exhibition*. Being stripped naked and forced to stand in public would humiliate most people. Not all of them would be equally horrified to contemplate the public nakedness of their cadavers, but many would be. The cadaver exhibits show the onlooker genitalia, breasts, buttocks — covered and private during life — as well as bones, nerves, and organs that the deceased never saw. The viewer knows the body better than its erstwhile owner did.

In some instances, a person suffers during life by contemplating what will become of his or her corpse. Word of the desecration of Mussolini's corpse drove Hitler to order that his body be destroyed after his suicide (Fest, 2004). The treatment of a cadaver can also upset family members. Stalin essentially appropriated Lenin's body and placed it on public exhibition, to the dismay of Lenin's family (Tumarkin, 1983). Next-of-kin often yearn for remains — as proof of death, as a memento of the life, as a means of "closure." Hence the herculean effort to retrieve human remains from Ground Zero in New York City (Abramovitch, 2005). As noted, this may be especially true for many Chinese, who believe that they retain a relationship to the deceased, a relationship that requires them to ensure that the remains are treated respectfully. Here, the issue is not the suffering of the dead, but the suffering of the living: those contemplating the future treatment of their own remains and those contemplating the remains of relatives or loved ones.

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[5] Burns (2007) also emphasizes dignity, but he takes his analysis in a different direction.

What of plastination by consent? The deceased does not suffer; the person's wishes will be heeded, as he or she anticipates. Some relatives may object, but then some relatives may object to cremation. Nevertheless, consent need not be dispositive. In the West, the law does not allow, for example, cannibalism or necrophilia, even if that is the wish of the deceased. These are cultural taboos. If corpses are simply a useful medium, Wetz (2007) asks, why not skull soup bowls?[6] Spooner (2007) suggests that there is something literally dehumanizing in the transformation of an identifiable cadaver into a nameless, fleshless bicyclist.

Cadavers are *sui generis.* MacDonald (2006, p. 3) writes, "The human body, whole or in parts, is never just an object like any other . . ." For Wieczorkiewicz (2005, p. 51), "Human remains have a special significance in all societies. Where such remains have been displaced to become part of museum narratives, the situation is not morally neutral." The British *Medical Times and Gazette* discussed the issue in 1866 in the context of bodysnatching (Desecration of London graveyards, 1866): "Why should we trouble ourselves about the digging up of dead bodies, it may be asked? . . . [W]e believe that people who are brutal to the dead will be so to the living likewise." During the 18th and 19th centuries, the discovery that remains of the newly dead were being stolen from their graves and sold to medical schools provoked numerous riots (Sappol, 2002).

Do the cadaver exhibitions constitute brutal, undignified treatment of the dead? (Whatever the answer may be, it applies to some non-profit museums and educational institutions, too.) Some scholars consider consent to be the overriding factor. Others draw Jesuitical distinctions; Burns (2007), for example, believes that human dignity is abridged in *Body Worlds* by, among other things, the prevalence of von Hagens' name. Others flatly condemn the shows as violations of human rights (Allen, 2007; Guyer, 2007); still others praise them as unique educational opportunities (Myser, 2007). As for laypeople, a 2005 survey of Americans — most of whom had not attended a cadaver show — found that 38% of respondents believed the exhibitions infringe human dignity (TNS Emnid, 2005). These opinions varied by age: 53% of people aged 60 and over objected on moral grounds, compared to just a fifth of people under 30 (TNS Emnid, 2005). By contrast, just 6% of *Body Worlds* patrons believed that the show infringed human dignity (Institute for Plastination, n.d.[a], p. 21). Similarly, Lantermann (2007) surveyed *Body Worlds* patrons in Germany before they saw the show; he found that just 11% anticipated a negative or disturbing experience, and many of them probably anticipated physical rather than moral revulsion. These findings suggest that people with moral qualms tend to avoid the exhibitions altogether.

Conclusion

Bataille and Michelson remark, "We must realize that the [museum] halls and . . . objects are but the container, whose content is formed by the visitors" (1986, p. 24). This article has considered five

[6] Wetz goes on to articulate a distinction: use of a cadaver cannot be deemed violative of human dignity so long as it continues to resemble a human. "Conversely, to transform bodies or parts of bodies into bowls or clothes stands would mean totally alienating the dead bodies, because they would then no longer appear to be anything human" (p. 251). Wetz would presumably veto von Hagens' plan to create a centaur.

frames through which these corporeal exhibitions might be viewed, and through which the museum objects might be transformed into meaningful content in a viewer's mind: specimens; education; profits; consent; and, intertwined with consent, dignity. People come to see the specimens, which exhibit as much plasticity as humanity. Whether education or sensationalism draws them, patrons do appear to learn. Regardless of whether they approve of the for-profit nature of the exhibitions, they cannot help but note the high ticket prices, yet the shows can be difficult to distinguish from some death-related displays and novelties for sale in non-profit museums.

Consent and dignity are more complicated. *Body Worlds* emphasizes that its cadavers are obtained from donors; consent is a selling point. *Bodies: The Exhibition* in New York must acknowledge that the bodies and body parts have come from Chinese prisoners, some of whom may have been executed — a strong signal that consent is lacking. But its shows outside New York need not post that notice. Most patrons of *Bodies* outside New York probably believe that the cadavers are "donated or unidentified," as the show's Web site misleadingly suggests (n.d.[b]).

Such assumptions merit further study; the fully informed onlooker hypothesized in this article may be rare. The locus of the exhibitions warrants study, too. Many are in science museums, which are considered respectable, trustworthy institutions in contemporary society (Davis, 2004). Others are elsewhere. *Bodies: The Exhibition* in Las Vegas has begun a ten-year run at the Luxor Hotel and Casino on the Las Vegas Strip, a street known for entertainment rather than enlightenment. Do patrons approach the exhibitions differently in the different locales? A Goffmanesque study would also be rewarding, examining how patrons position themselves relative to the cadavers, compared, perhaps, to how they position themselves relative to their fellow patrons. Finally, the dominance of male plastinates invites an analysis of the sexual and sexist elements of the exhibitions.

Some deem the cadaver exhibitions a fundamental affront to human dignity. As noted, research suggests that those people are, by and large, staying away from the shows. Moral opposition appears to be rare, given the all-but-nonexistent protests. Of the frames through which patrons view the cadaver shows, the deprivation of human dignity may be the most rarely used.

A chess player from* Body Worlds*.

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