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Dancing with Dr D: Ambiguities of Space and Context in Günther von Hagens's *Body Worlds* Exhibitions

ABSTRACT

Since its inception as a touring exhibition in 1996, Günther von Hagens's *Body Worlds* has travelled the globe many times over and has proven so successful with the public at large as to spawn multiple versions (including even a number of copycat 'fake' exhibitions), thus enabling it to be presented at more than one institution simultaneously. This has been accomplished in great part through the host institutions themselves, which now constitute a linked network of major public museums of science and industry, rather than, as before, temporary exhibition halls or even, in the case of London, a commercial art gallery.

This article will critically interrogate the deliberate slippages and uncertainties that operate between and within the viewing platforms created for presenting *Body Worlds* in the 'interspaces' of its exhibition format. A major focus of its attention will be on the ambiguities of spatial experience that have been created by the trans-Atlantic journey taken by the *Body Worlds* phenomenon as it has extended itself out of its origins in European temporary exhibition halls and into the more ostensibly solid and reputable public museum "contexts of its more recent American and Canadian" showings. The process of crossing the threshold of these museum spaces and moving into the darkened exhibition environment of *Body Worlds* requires the visitor to make a transition from the apparent stability and certainty of conventional museological space into an increasingly weird and disorienting side show environment that one progresses through before reaching the exhibition's climax in an increasingly bizarre and lurid series of spectacular body recompositions. In certain respects, this process reveals the uncertainties regarding the uses of spectacle and entertainment that are inherent within the museum itself. Yet the power of *Body Worlds* nonetheless also derives from the way that it plays upon our own anxieties regarding the thrill of the spectacle of nakedness, bodily decay, death and disease in public exhibition contexts.

Introduction

From exhibition hall to museum: *Body Worlds* in the new world

Since its inception as a touring exhibition in 1996, Gunther von Hagens's *Body Worlds* has traveled the globe many times over and has proven so successful with the public as to spawn multiple versions (including even a number of copycat exhibitions as shall be mentioned presently), thus enabling it to be exhibited at more than one institution simultaneously. The ongoing American and Canadian leg of this never-ending tour has conferred on the enterprise a certain degree of museological legitimacy that it has not hitherto been able to attain. This has been accomplished in great part through the host institutions themselves, which now constitute a linked network of major public museums of science and industry. So, for example, recent US host institutions have included the

Museum of Science in Boston, Telus World of Science in Vancouver, California ScienCenter, Los Angeles, the Field Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago, The Franklin Institute Science Museum, Philadelphia, The Houston Museum of Natural Science, the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, and the Science Museum of Minnesota, St Paul.¹

This scheduling attests to both the exhibition's great popular success and its power to engage audiences. The experience of one of the recent American institutions is characteristic. On 24 June 2010, the Denver Museum of Nature and Science announced its decision to extend the exhibition by a further month through to 15 August 2010. Explaining the decision, Dr Bridget Coughlin, the Museum's Vice President of Strategic Partnerships and Programs, and Curator of Human Health, noted: 'We are thrilled to announce the extension of *BODY WORLDS & The Story of the Heart*. It is a compelling experience that makes us appreciate the complexity and beauty of the human body. The topic of human health is very personal and appeals to a diverse audience, and we continue to be amazed by the impact this exhibition has on our visitors.'²

This strong institutional endorsement of *Body Worlds* is worlds removed from earlier responses to the exhibition, particularly when compared with its showings in Europe. When first exhibited in London in 2002, for example, the exhibition was dubbed a 'freak show' and Von Hagens was likened to 'Dr Frankenstein'.³ The exhibition raised such concern among certain sections of the viewing public as to create pressure groups protesting against the inclusion of the exhibition in the Atlantis Gallery, London in March 2002. A major contributing factor to the ongoing lack of European institutional support for *Body Worlds* — and significant point of distinction between European and American responses more generally — results from the German background of Von Hagens and the attendant associations that this has raised (more strongly in Europe, evidently, than in America) with continuing anxieties surrounding the legacies of Nazism, Eugenics and the Holocaust.⁴ As a result exhibitions in the UK and Europe have tended to be held almost without exception in trade or exhibition halls rather than in museums. A recent European venue, for example, is LPII, Ruimte voor stedelijke cultuur (Centre for Culture) in Rotterdam, which opened its *Body Worlds* exhibition on 23 September 2010. The LPII is an exhibition hall and events venue for hire. It hosts everything from fashion shows to

1. *Body Worlds*' US scheduling has included the Museum of Science in Boston, Massachusetts, Telus World of Science in Vancouver, California ScienCenter, Los Angeles (from mid-2004 to late-2006), the Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago (February – September, 2005, March – September 2011), The Franklin Institute Science Museum, Philadelphia (October 2005 – April 2006), The Science Museum of Minnesota, St Paul (May – December 2006), The Houston Museum of Natural Science (February – September 2006, and September 2008 – February 2009), the Denver Museum of Nature and Science (March – July 2006, and March – August 2010), the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry (October 2011 – March 2012). For more information see: *Body Worlds*, 2012:

http://www.bodyworlds.com/en/exhibitions/past_exhibitions.html; accessed 1 April 2012.

2. PR News Wire, United Media: *PRE News Wire*, 2012: <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/body-worlds-extends-run-in-denver-through-august-15-97061054.html>; accessed 12 April 2012.

3. 'World trade in bodies is linked to corpse art show', *The Observer*, 17 March 2002. See: *The Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/mar/17/paulharris.kateconnolly>; accessed 1 April 2012.

4. For an overview of the complexities arising from the German–European viewing context to *Body Worlds*, see: McIsaac, 2007.

contemporary design exhibits and so, of course, goes no way towards adding any public institutional legitimacy to the *Body Worlds* enterprise.

The US institutional emphasis on the exhibition's public health benefit, on the other hand, is extremely beneficial to the global public reception of *Body Worlds* since it helps offset the common criticisms otherwise leveled against it: namely that it indulges in sensationalism, maintains a fundamental lack of respect for the human dignity of the dead and has been, allegedly, occasionally unethical in its sourcing of cadavers (although this last charge has never been proven). This article proposes to address the many issues raised by *Body Worlds* from a slightly different angle than those highlighted in studies so far. It will consider the phenomenon not so much from the point of view of ethics and politics — at least not directly — warranted though their ongoing investigation certainly is.⁵ Rather, it proposes to touch on these issues in the context of an analysis of the experience of visiting the exhibition itself. The chapter will accordingly aim to dissect the exhibition, in effect, in order to reveal its hidden messages of space and context. In so doing, it will argue that the experience of viewing *Body Worlds* in exhibition is a distinctly unsettling one. For all its currently stated public benefit, there is an equally insistent thread running through it, I will argue, producing a counter narrative that repositions the displays in a highly ambiguous zone in the 'interspaces' between science and art, on the one hand, and between didacticism and luridly entertaining spectacle, on the other.

Dissecting the Display: Viewing *Body Worlds* in Chicago

We can chart this deliberately ambiguous progression in the transition of the visitor to the exhibition held at the Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago, from 4 February to 5 September 2005.⁶ As visitors approached the museum they were first greeted with a giant hoarding emblazoned with the provocative enticement: *Discover what you're made of*. The slogan cleverly suggested both the exhibition's educational benefit together with an almost challenging sub-textual insinuation that the experience of viewing *Body Worlds* would constitute a journey of unexpected discovery on the part of the visitor. The sense of contrast that this set up between the solidity of the sober museological frame and the more fluid overlay of the spectacular — even thrilling — exhibitionary context was further suggested by the effective design contrast established between the timeless neo-classical stability of the museum's entrance columns and the more organically spreading horizontal network of veins depicted on the billboard poster. This visual contrast implied an internal forest through which the visitor would travel on his or her experiential route within the exhibition.

The strategy was then continued inside the Museum as the visitor negotiated the transition from the vast and echoing perspectival clarity of the giant entrance hall through

5. For the ethical and political issues arising from *Body Worlds* and for the issues surrounding exhibitions of human remains in museums more generally see further Barilan, 2005; Alberti, Bienkowski, Chapman and Drew, 2007; and Brooks and Rumsey, 2007.

6. Information on the exhibition sequencing of the Chicago showing of *Body Worlds* can be found at: *Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago*, 2012: http://www.msichicago.org/scrapbook/scrapbook_exhibits/bodyworlds/index.html; accessed 1 April 2012.

to the deliberately darkened threshold of the special exhibits gallery set to the side. Here a strong sense of passing over from the clarity and legibility of the public space into a more shrouded and mysterious inner world of the body was heightened by a darkening of the lighting and the inclusion of another huge hoarding above the entrance showing a mysteriously framed back-view of one of Von Hagens's plastinates. The strongly directional emphasis of this entrance threshold coupled with the image being placed above visitors' heads as they passed into the exhibition suggested that they were about to become, in effect, explorers journeying inside the body — which they were to enter, as it were, through the orifice of the doorway directly beneath the giant plastinate.

Inside the exhibition itself the impression of an internal journey was heightened by a yet more darkened, immersive experience that made effective use of the flexible open-plan space of the museum's temporary exhibition hall in combination with the intense directional lighting commonly used for the temporary exhibition spaces of museums of this kind. These so called 'black box' exhibition spaces employ a dramatic darkened installation with batteries of directional lighting to provide focus and pathway orientation through a powerfully immersive experience.⁷ The Chicago *Body Worlds* installation, on the other hand, cleverly modified the prevailing expectations of this format by adding a strong design element drawing on the coordinating colour of mauve-red. This colour was used in a similar sense to that in which period and period-inspired gallery installations often employ variations on the colour red to suggest a contrasting visual aesthetic based on a richer and more emotional response to exhibits than is suggested by the more clinically neutral colour white found in the white cube exhibition environment. The technique was thus effective in this instance in softening the immersive black box effect of the exhibition space and making it feel more intimate and emotive. At the same time, of course, the mauve-red colour was also effective in evoking the coloration of bodily interiors while at the same time remaining just on the near side of tastefulness by sidestepping the more overt colour red with its more obvious and potentially distressing associations with blood.

A sense of flow and organicism was further suggested by another strong design feature used throughout the installation. Here one noted the repeated organic elements of undressed stones and gravel that served to set out the path of the visitor circulation route. These were interspersed, in turn, with a series of indoor plants. While these plants might at first sight have appeared a little unexpected, even bizarre in this context, they nonetheless had a very specific role to play in the rationale behind the exhibition. This is clarified by Von Hagens himself in his chapter within the catalogue that accompanies the exhibition.

Here Von Hagens comments on the exhibition's key objective in attempting to overcome the common response of what he calls the visitor's natural 'emotional revulsion' to cadavers on display. In discussing this he refers not only to a sense of potential revulsion experienced by the general public coming to his exhibitions, but also to the traditions of anatomical dissection in university training programs experienced by medical students

7. For the conventions of the black box installation environment, see: Toon, 2005.

learning anatomy. As Von Hagens explains, cadavers in dissection rooms — which represent the direct visual precedent for his displays — are always unappealing to students because they are experienced as ‘grim and gruesome corpses ... Bloated, discolored and surrounded by the caustic odor of formaldehyde, they are the unpleasant but necessary evil of practical anatomy.’⁸ In stressing this, Von Hagens was echoing the centuries-old theme of the oft-noted contrast between the educational benefit and significance of the public dissection and the ‘messy reality’ of its application with real corpses.⁹

Part of Von Hagens’s rationale for his exhibition design, then, is to recognise an emotional and educational value in placing the plastinates in a naturalised, garden setting: ‘One of the essential design principles of the *Körperwelten* exhibition [*Body Worlds* in English translation] has been based on the conviction that a lifelike and attractive setting — e.g. one enlivened with plants and objects from daily life, would facilitate dealing with human specimens ... Just as artists of the Renaissance placed their anatomical figures in lively landscapes adorned with plants and animals, I like to put the gestalt plastinates back into the living world from which they came.’¹⁰

It is debatable to what extent these design elements will be experienced by visitors as ‘naturalistic’ and ‘lifelike’ elements, as Von Hagens suggests. In fact, one could just as easily argue that while we may readily agree with Von Hagens that they are effective in helping to soften the exhibition and remove its associations with the harsh and sterile antiseptic environment of a dissection hall, their effect could just as easily be interpreted by the visitor as adding to the exhibition’s predominant mood of hyper-artificiality, wherein something that begins as a natural element ends up as an excessively attenuated artificial construct: exactly what happens, in fact, to the bodies on display.¹¹

Specimens or Sculptures? Medicine versus Art in the *Body Worlds* displays

A sense of a theatrically artificial and attenuated treatment of the bodies on display derives above all else from the strong emphasis that is evident throughout the exhibition on the transformative power of art. Although presented as medical/scientific exhibits, the effect in the exhibition itself runs in many respects counter to this given the over-riding emphasis throughout of the influence of art on the presentation of the displays. The very first didactic panel in the exhibition places a necessary acknowledgement of the importance of voluntary body donation alongside an illustration of Leonardo’s Vitruvian man. Elsewhere classical, Renaissance and Baroque artistic references are constantly juxtaposed with the exhibits. So, for example, one exhibit is placed next to a full-scale reproduction of Rembrandt’s *Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp*, while another places a plastinated skeleton next to an enlarged reproduction of a plate from Bernhard Albinus’s *Tabulae sceleti et musculorum corporis humani* of 1747.

8. Von Hagens, 2004, p. 260.

9. Kemp and Warner, 2000, pp. 29–30.

10. Von Hagens, 2004, p. 266.

11. This reading of the ‘hyper-realism’ of Von Hagens’s plastinates is indebted to the insightful discussion of realism as applied to anatomical wax models that is developed by Jordanova, 1989, pp. 43–65.

This is a readily understandable approach and one moreover with a venerable tradition. Since the time of the first anatomical illustrations referenced by Von Hagens, artists of this kind have commonly arranged their bodies into artistically derived poses, particularly — from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries — those taken from famous classical statues. This was done in order to soften what would otherwise be experienced as the shock in the viewer's mind of the bodily recognition of seeing a fellow human dissected and displayed in such an unadorned and confronting manner.¹² The technique also proved helpful in lending images of this kind a sense of the ennobling and idealising associations attached to the original sources of the poses in the heightened environments of art.

Of the many historical instances of this that one might cite, a particularly interesting example is the so-called *Smugglerius*, a late-eighteenth-century *ecorché*, or musculature study, used in the teaching of the Royal Academy, London. The body cast used for the *Smugglerius* certainly had the potential to appear distastefully 'real' and unidealised to its early viewers in that it was taken from a casting of the body of an executed smuggler. Nonetheless, the figure successfully transcended these potentially disruptive associations by virtue of the fact that it was ennobled by being based on the pose of the famous Hellenistic sculpture, *The Dying Gaul*, now in the Capitoline Museum, Rome. It remained, therefore, much more readily susceptible to the training artist's study and transformation into art.¹³

Cast or modeled anatomical figures in historical anatomy museums were almost always posed in similarly allusive and ennobled positions. A particularly well-preserved example comes in the anatomical collections of the Museo Zoologico e Storia Naturale della Specola in Florence. This museum maintains an extraordinary collection of wax anatomical figures created under the patronage of the Medici and the Dukes of Lorraine from the late-seventeenth to early-nineteenth centuries by famous artisan schools of craftsmen gathered around the principal figures, Gaetano Zumbo (1656–1701) and Clemente Susini (1754–1814). These models provide directly relevant comparisons to Von Hagens in that they were also renowned during their own day for their extreme technical sophistication and elaborate artistry — having been painstakingly assembled out of wax in combination with hair, fabrics and other natural materials in order to create extraordinarily arresting figures that seem, on the one hand, amazingly realistic — in the sense of their accurately conveying complex bodily processes — and yet at the same time also hypertrophically unreal.¹⁴

The artful charge experienced in viewing these exhibits, however, is very different, I would argue, from that experienced in *Body Worlds*. Zumbo's and Susini's models have been painstakingly created out of wax of a purity and translucency that also carried important associations in its own time with votive sculptures, as traditionally placed in

12. For an overview of this tradition, see Petherbridge and Jordanova, 1999, and 'Waxing Eloquent: Anatomy and Style', in Kemp and Wallace, 2000, pp. 32–68.

13. Kemp and Wallace, 2000, pp. 83–87.

14. Lanza et al., 1979; Hilloowala et al., 1995.

proximity to the Florentine Madonna of the Santissima Annunziata or some other particularly efficacious miraculous image.¹⁵

By contrast, the *Body Worlds* exhibits are real corpses — as is well known — and yet at the same time also distinctly unreal in that they have been cut away and shaped into extraordinarily artificial poses. They have also, crucially as far as our response to them as exhibition visitors goes, been hardened into a durable form of touring exhibit that has the appearance of a rough, gristly and occasionally glistening type of plastic. This is clearly demonstrated by comparing the coloration and texturing of the *Body Worlds* plastinates with the clear white purity of a votive statue. At the same time, it also demonstrates the hyper artificiality of the *Body Worlds* plastinates on the level of the coloration of their musculature, which has been, in effect, dyed heavily in order to create a bright red coloration that is much brighter, in fact, than is present in actual bodies. And even if we were to be able to assess this by comparing the plastinates with the actual colour of flayed musculature, we would see that this musculature fades, in any event, immediately after death. This, accordingly, formed one of the traditionally recognized sources of educational advantage of anatomical models and illustrations over actual corpses since the brightly colored tones that they employed ‘somehow seemed truer to the colourful vitality that we expect to find within ourselves than the dull grey-brown confusion that dominates the appearance of an actual dissection of a corpse’.¹⁶

The stridently bright colours of the *Body Worlds* plastinates contrast markedly, in this respect, from the considerably more muted tones of plastinated bodies exhibited in many of the copycat exhibitions. A case in point is the *Amazing Bodies* exhibition held at Melbourne’s Docklands in 2010.¹⁷ The *Amazing Bodies* plastinates make an interesting comparison with the *Body Worlds* plastinates in that they manifest the sense of gristle and a slightly glistening surface that is also found in the *Body Worlds* plastinates. At the same time, though, they also appear much more subdued in their flesh tones, and thus closer one presumes to actual flesh. If the *Amazing Bodies* plastinates were to be viewed as analogous to paintings, then, they could be readily likened to the ruddy brown, earth tones of Courbet’s pictures. If, on the other hand, a colour analogue were to be sought for Von Hagens’s plastinates, then it would surely reside in the hyper-refinement and artificiality of the strident coloring found in Mannerist paintings, such as those by Jacopo Pontormo, Rosso Fiorentino or Jacopo Salivati, whose attenuated forms and artificial poses the plastinates also closely resemble. It appears, therefore, that Van Hagens has judged correctly in his decision to match the palette of his plastinated corpses to the vivid vitality of Mannerist paintings rather than to the muddy tones of Courbet’s realism.

15. For the important historical association between Italian anatomical wax displays and the traditions of votive sculpture, see Hilloowala et al., 1995, pp. 45–47.

16. Kemp and Wallace, 2000, p. 59.

17. For information on this exhibition, see: *Amazing Bodies*, 2012: <http://www.amazingbodies.com.au/>; accessed 1 April 2012.

The scientist as artist and the exhibition as art survey

The overriding sense of a luridly artistic artificiality present throughout the *Body Worlds* exhibition at Chicago was heightened by the elaborately attenuated and often bizarre poses into which many of the plastinates were formed. This is particularly so for those plastinates that were grouped towards the culminating conclusion of the exhibition. One plastinate from this section in particular seemed to suggest a key for the artistic reading of the exhibition in general. This was a figure whose muscles were spread out from his body but who then had the humanising touch added of a fedora hat placed on top of his head.

Two fundamental points can be made on the basis of this deliberately bizarre and confronting juxtaposition.

The first is to note that the unsettling effect that this plastinate created is a far cry from the more straight forwardly didactic presentations found in other exhibitions mounted by Von Hagens's organisation and its derivatives. This is particularly evident if we compare *Body Worlds* with the very different emphasis found in the more recently developed exhibition of animal anatomy that has been running concurrently to the human anatomy exhibitions for the past couple of years. The first major exhibition of animal anatomy was the *Kopperwelten: Die Anatomie der Tiere* exhibition held initially at the Neunkirchen Zoo in 2009. It received 120,000 visitors in three months, and then travelled to other venues in Germany and beyond.¹⁸ When viewing the exhibition interiors developed for these shows, it is striking to note the absence of the Renaissance/Baroque artistic prototypes that are so prominent in the presentational strategies of the human *Body Worlds* exhibitions.¹⁹ This has the effect, almost paradoxically, of making the animal *Body Worlds* exhibitions appear much more overtly didactic and educational in emphasis than the human anatomy *Body Worlds* exhibitions, which appear positively lurid by comparison. Animals — it seems — are more heavily bound down by the terrestrial world of nature — whereas humans exist at a higher and also more mysterious and arcane world of artfulness.

The second fundamental point arising from the fedora-wearing plastinate is the specificity of the iconography of the hat worn by this exhibit. This hat, in fact, is a clear and double-coded reference both to Von Hagens as well as to the contemporary artist, Joseph Beuys, that Von Hagens has often been compared to in the past.

As the impresario of his own creations, Von Hagens has maintained an undeviating personal iconography that is based, above all else, on his adoption of the motif of the black hat — a hat which he is never seen without — even, apparently, while undertaking dissections (at least as long as the cameras are present). Von Hagens presents this as a

18. *Body Worlds of Animals*, <http://www.bodyworldsofanimals.com/en/experience.html>; accessed 1 April 2012. The schedule was Herzogenriedpark Mannheim (Mannheim Botanical Gardens with a mini zoo), 2 July – 31 August 2010.

19. A quick time walk through virtual exhibition of the Neunkirchen showing of the exhibition has been created, see: *Body Worlds of Animals*, <http://www.bodyworldsofanimals.com/en/experience.html>; accessed 1 April 2012.

means of linking himself with the great non-conformist individualists of the past (as Von Hagens himself notes, these include Dr Tulp, Joseph Beuys, Jeremy Bentham and Michelangelo, who supposedly did not even take off his hat during an audience with the Pope).²⁰ The presence of the hat on the plastinate in the *Body Worlds* exhibition is thus intended to function as a kind of marginal self-portrait in the *Body Worlds* exhibition as a whole. It is equivalent, in this respect, to the self-portraits made by artists wishing to insert themselves as marginal onlookers witnessing miracles, martyrdoms or some other religious scene in Renaissance altarpieces.

At the same time, though, the hat also sets up an almost unavoidable visual association with the German contemporary artist Joseph Beuys. This is an association that has been noted by a number of commentators — particularly those from Germany and Europe and it is one that Von Hagens is keen to highlight himself. Von Hagens notes of this association, for example, that, just as Beuys ‘strove to win the approval of the lay audience and eventually found the approval of the intellectuals, I courted the favor of my anatomy colleagues in vain and instead found the goodwill of the masses.’²¹ Both Beuys and Von Hagens are thus presented as equally misunderstood artists who were initially spurned by their intended audience before being recognised by their true public.

The increasingly spectacular — not to say bizarre — strangely posed full body plastinates come to take over the latter stages of the exhibition. In fact, if the Chicago exhibition had a rhythm, one might say that it was that of a heart-beat that began relatively smoothly and regularly as the exhibition commenced with a relatively clear didacticism but that then became much more rapid and irregular as the visitor moved into an increasingly open space populated by the most bizarre and spectacularly arranged plastinates.

The early exhibits in particular did help to illustrate certain fundamental principles of anatomy — particularly via the use of plastinated limbs and other partial body exhibits that could be understood more readily in an abstract anatomical sense. These sectional plastinates were used to illustrate such principles as the circulatory system, the respiratory system and so on. When the visitor progressed to the full-length body plastinates that populated the latter stages of the exhibition, however, any clear sense of the public educational component of the exhibition became increasingly lost in the shock effect of the bizarrely posed figures. These included the so-called Fragmented Plastinate, that is designed ostensibly to illustrate the “compactness of bodily interiors”, but that is experienced in the flesh like nothing so much as a giant Surrealist body sculpture reminiscent of the compartmentalised body images of Dali, Magritte and others. Another particularly challenging plastinate of this kind is the so-called “Cyclist” — a figure whose limbs appear to have been grotesquely elongated so that he is double life sized. The medical reasoning behind this last anatomical distortion is ‘to give sufficient viewing space to understand the relationship between our organs’.²² It is extremely debatable, however, that the majority of visitors to the *Body Worlds* exhibition would be encouraged

20. Von Hagens, 2004, p. 273. See further: Günter Von Hagens, ‘The Anatomist’s Hat’, *Koerperwelten*, 2012: http://www.koerperwelten.newmedia-net.de/en/gunther_von_hagens/anatomist_hat.html; accessed 20 April 2012.

21. Von Hagens, 2004, p. 273.

22. Von Hagens, 2004, p. 165.

to read the exhibit in these terms. Rather, he or she would have responded to this or any of the other distorted plastinates on the basis of their appearing as bizarre and willfully distorted visual creations — as strange and arresting works of art, in other words.

In fact, the *Body Worlds* publication itself recognises this fundamental ambiguity within the evidently contradictory ways that the *Body Worlds* exhibits can be interpreted by viewers. Von Hagens directly addresses this when he notes: ‘Experience at exhibitions has shown that the aesthetic aspects of posed specimens make such an impression that visitors consider a number of these to be works of art. There is no dispelling that conclusion either, because “art is in the eye of the beholder”.’²³ He then follows this with the yet more deliberately ambiguous argument that, to the contrary and despite visitor responses: ‘No anatomical works of art have been created; they become works of art through the judgment of the visitors to the exhibition.’ Here, Von Hagens is arguing that, in effect, plastinates can function as both scientific objects of education and artistic creations simultaneously. While he maintains that he and his Institute have created the plastinates for purely medical purpose as scientific exhibits, he nonetheless concedes that they are able to subsequently ‘become works of art’ in the minds of visitors to the exhibitions. His attempt to disavow responsibility for creating this impression in the minds of visitors, however, on the basis, supposedly, that “art is in the eye of the beholder” must be judged to be weak and unconvincing. It flies in the face of the repeated emphases of the artistic dimension of the *Body Worlds* plastinates that is evident throughout the exhibition, as previously noted, and as highlighted consistently throughout the *Body Worlds* catalogue as well. In fact, the *Body Worlds* catalogue frequently draws analogies between the plastinates and art, even to the extent of including a full page illustration of one of the plastinates posed alongside Umberto Boccioni’s Futurist sculpture: *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913).²⁴

There is thus a sense in which *Body Worlds* operates concurrently as both an earnestly didactic public science lesson as well as an unusually extreme and challenging art installation (an ‘atrocities exhibition’, no less) presided over by the resident genius of the shaman-performance artist. In this sense, the repeated references to Renaissance and Baroque artistic prototypes act as a kind of smoke screen enabling Von Hagens to insert more modern references to the shock value of modern and contemporary art at the latter stages of the exhibition while remaining under the cover of an earlier and more august rational and scientific tradition of art and anatomy. Or perhaps we should rather say that the exhibition functions as a kind of giant and uncanny art history survey staged with bodies — starting from the relative idealisation and stability of the Renaissance and ending with the deliberately provocatively fragmented and exploded figures of the modern and contemporary periods. Von Hagens has begun the exhibition in the spirit of fearless scientific and artistic enquiry, like the Renaissance artists he so admires, but he ends it more in the spirit of the Chapman brothers after all.

23. For this and the following quotation see: Von Hagens, 2004, p. 31.

24. Von Hagens, 2004, p. 286.

Such associations almost inevitably lead one's mind when viewing the latter stages of the exhibition to a series of increasingly disruptive associations. On the one hand, one cannot but be struck after viewing all these sliced and diced bodies by the obvious associations that they create with cuts of meat displayed in butchers' shops. We are all, in this sense, reducible, it seems, to a series of finely sliced prosciutto pieces stacked from end to end.

At the same time, the mind almost inevitably plays out further images taken from popular culture of the sinister caricature image of the mad doctor/artist who uses body parts as part of some sick ritual of adornment and display. This figure — so rich and frequently drawn on in the annals of visual culture — stretches beyond Frankenstein to the frustrated sculptor character of Christopher Price in *The House of Wax* (1953) through to the recent Showtime TV series, *Dexter*, and yet more explicitly in 2003's *Anatomie* starring the popular German actress Franka Potente, which based its entire plot around an expression of the German anxiety about the possibility of there being a submerged crypto-Nazi dimension to the *Body Worlds* enterprise. Von Hagens's extensive profile in popular culture as a quasi-celebrity in his own right certainly adds to these associations, associations which he, in any event, would seem to welcome since, as he puts it 'Hollywood has earned a fortune by blending anatomy with body snatching and playing with ambivalent, gruesome feeling. What can be better than to ... put me into this tradition?'²⁵

The power of *Body Worlds*, I would argue, derives, therefore, from the way that it combines a stated educational emphasis with a deliberately submerged play upon our own deeper anxieties regarding the thrill of the spectacle of nakedness, bodily decay, death and art in public exhibition contexts. Uncertainty and ambivalence are thus intrinsic to the way *Body Worlds* plays upon the intensely private and unresolved viewing associations that are raised by the material in the public space of the exhibition environment — an uncertainty, as we have noted, between public and private and between didacticism and spectacle. This uncertainty is mapped out in our transition from the relative clarity and stability of the exhibition's beginning to the beautifully crafted, yet distinctly unsettling and even atrocious human body exhibits that have overtaken the exhibition's narrative by the time it reaches the end. We began the exhibition with a reasonably clear sense of educational purpose and our own independent agency as viewers relative to the organisation of the exhibition rationale. By the end, however, we have been ensnared in something far more personal and labyrinthine in its associative power. We began by walking a relatively clear path illuminated by the spirit of scientific inquiry. By the end, however, we have strayed into the shadows and find that we have been dancing with Dr D all along.

25. Von Hagens, 2004, p. 219.

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