For 'Anyone Interested in Learning What Makes Us Human'

BY MARY CAPPELLO

> Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.
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> –Walter Benjamin

> The skin shields the equilibrium of an internal function from exogenous disruptions, but in its form, texture, coloring and scars, it preserves the marks of those disruptions...And through it a great deal is in fact revealed to the outside world about that inner state which it is supposed to protect...To be oneself is first of all to have a skin of one's own and, secondly, to use it as a space in which one can experience sensations.
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> —Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*

When my friend said, "I have always felt as if I have no skin," did she mean that she lived without armature or without outwardness? Without a median meant protectively to separate her from the outside world? Did she mean she felt exposed, raw, vulnerable, transparent? Touch makes us palpable; to be without skin is to be untouched and untouchable, unloved

Gunther Von Hagans

but alive. I had never seen nor hoped to see a human body without its skin; nor did I wish to be baffled by a scientific or artistic display of such that could reduce me to a silence or complacency toward violence and violation. *BodyWorlds* (one word), also known by its critics as "the traveling corpse show" or "the corpse art show," is a product of our present moment that does not replicate taxidermic practice but could be considered an extreme offshoot or relative, a kind of monstrous purgatory mate destined for hell. The "creator" of *BodyWorlds*, Gunther von Hagens, is an anatomist from Heidelberg, Germany, responsible for a newly minted preservation technique called "plastination," the end result of which is "a plastinate"—the once-living human preserved by a method that replaces bodily fluids and soluble fats with reactive resins and elastomers (silicon, rubber, and epoxy). The subjects von Hagens preserves, poses, and sculpts are humans rather than animals, and where taxidermists skin in order to, in many senses of the word, "recover" animal bodies, von Hagens in every case skins, and skins some more, with the effect of exposing areas of the human body that we don't usually see. The postures into which von Hagens sculpts dead bodies are as important to his practice as are "the mysteries of the human body" he claims to wish to reveal by removing the skin of those same bodies, and he is aware enough of the affinity of his work with aspects of Natural History to quote its scenarios in his exhibits.

The contemporary carnage exacted covertly by our despoiling of the environment and overtly by our war in Iraq would seem to contradict any sincere interest in peering into von Hagen's bodies for the sake of learning how to keep oneself and others alive, and it is a curious thing to consider how the dead and maimed bodies of American soldiers have been kept from our view while an exhibit of anonymous carcasses, shorn every which way, opened, sliced, and modeled for our viewing pleasure is available to us in our local science museums, and sponsored by Medical Insurance Companies (for example, Harvard Pilgrim Health Care).

Not *everyone* can attend a von Hagens exhibit—the entry tickets are expensive (at my local museum the cost of a ticket ranges from16 to 24 dollars), just as "plastination" is an extremely costly, and von Hagens reminds us, hugely labor and time-intensive undertaking; nevertheless, several million Americans have flocked to the show in the past few years. In the summer of 2004, dogged by too much protest and disapproval,

BodyWorlds, which had been well-received in Japan, left Germany for good and headed for points American and Canadian, where it has enjoyed its least controversial and most unquestioning reception. Not *everyone* can attend *BodyWorlds*, but the exhibits are meant as leveling devices in the sense that the bodies portrayed in them are de-individualized (in the service of art), and at the same time presented as a common denominator of human-ness. I can't recall feeling more like a member of the "horde" than I did huddled and bending to get a peak at a deformed spinal cord or sliced open testicle (and everyone so respectful not to hog a view of the display cases even though we were many persons thick).

I have used the word "carcass" to describe the bodies in von Hagens' *BodyWorlds*, but since 1750, the word "carcass" has only referred to the dead body of an animal, not to a human. A person could use the word as an expression of contempt for a fellow human, dead or alive, but generally the word "carcass" refers to a butcher shop scenario reserved for animals: the trunk of a slaughtered animal after removal of its head, limbs, and offal. Resonant with the term for the outer casing that contains a bomb, a carcass is an outer shell, semblance, or more evaluatively, "worthless remains." Why mustn't a human be designated a carcass?

We can't call humans carcasses because even after death a man must be understood as more-than-his-body, an essence, a soul. Humans must not be considered separable or shearable but intact and constitutive. The body can and will decay, but it must not be disassembled. Von Hagens, I think, would not like the designation "carcasses" to describe the specimens in his exhibit because he thinks he is infusing these bodies with life, the life of his artistic vision. Like a Hawthornesque Gothic villain, he fancies himself these bodies' re-creator. But *BodyWorlds* depicts man-as-carcass insofar as its bodies are evacuated of anything resembling the body's organic vitality, its life: its smell, scent, pungency, fluidity, its liquidity, its sweat, piss, shit, its fatigue, its pleasure, its pain, even its reliance on a complex interplay between the inner ear and gravity (I can't for the life of me determine what keeps Von Hagens' bodies *up*). In spite of the utterly reduced, depleted and flattened (like so much roadkill) nature of *BodyWorlds* bodies, the project protests against the idea of a human carcass to the extent that the plastinates are *anything but* the body's outer shell. If animals are merely skins (carcasses), now and forever soulless,

the human is his essence according to *BodyWorlds*, and not his skin: the human is his sometimes rotten, sometimes pristine, always invisible insides, now rendered vividly and for all to see by von Hagens.

"Corpse-art" isn't exactly true to this macabre 21st Century set of practices and subsequent exhibition even though the word "corpse" distinguishes itself from carcass by its application to humans alone. (We don't refer to the body of a dead animal as a corpse. Do we even consider animals to be embodied at all?) Von Hagens might be most self-consciously dealing with the body-as-"cadaver," in which case, he is remaking the body of a history of anatomy classes, both at the level of the "real" autopsied body, and the wax and papier mached body parts (which his technique is said to exceed) used for medical instruction. ("Would I be able to learn just as much from books or models of human anatomy?" is a question posed in the FAQ section of the *BodyWorlds*2 exhibit, and the answer is a sort of garbled, majority rules, ungrammatical response: "The experience in other cities has clearly demonstrated that exhibit visitors are drawn to real specimens in a way is [sic] different than how they might react to plastic models.") The word "cadaver"—another term reserved for dead human bodies alone—is etymologically attached to the verb "to fall"; indeed, if the dead are the fallen, von Hagens' plastinates are bodies newly raised up. *BodyWorlds* is a storehouse of idealized and aestheticized cadavers that serve more than anything else the image of the anatomist-artist's virtuosity and skill. Are the appallingly, exactingly eviscerated bodies meant as a commentary on the history of the anatomy class? I don't think so; but there *is* a great deal of didacticism, in the form of moralizing, as opposed to social commentary, attached to von Hagens' exhibits, and an enormous emphasis on texts—both quotations from philosophers, for example, that hang on the walls of the exhibit, and the bodies themselves as quotations of earlier artistic representations. In *BodyWorlds*, the dead human body, sans epidermis, is text-accompanied; textual; and equally significantly, posed.

The Boston Museum of Science Exhibit of *BodyWorlds* which I attended offers programs on "fitness" and "smoking cessation" alongside the exhibit, and the museum provides an hygienic rationale for the exhibit—presuming that it "encourages people to live healthier lives" and "make better lifestyle choices." The absurdity of the lesson is transparent

inside the exhibit's Gothic framework, reminding us of the unconvincing lessons attached both to early Gothic novels and their contemporary versions—the American Talk Show, or any text that is at heart voyeuristic, spectatorial, or whose content is taboo, but that needs to deny the exertion of those illegitimate pleasures by asserting a "lesson," edification, or some form of moral betterment as their motive. *BodyWorlds*' moralistic work is also meant as *memento mori*, but I'm not entirely sure of the logic of its lesson. "Remember man that thou are dust and unto dust thou shalt return" isn't its motto, but something more relatively hubristic. Which leads me to conclude that the exhibit as memento mori is something its museum curators ascribe to it but that really is impossible to apply to its displays, bent as they are on such profound removal of the body from its life as we know it that any point of identification is annulled. If a coalminer's blackened lung is placed alongside a smoker's blackened lung that is placed alongside a healthy white lung, what are we to conclude? There is no lesson here as far as I can tell, nor even a prescription for physical fitness, but a socially irresponsible juxtaposition whose main effect is to leave people wide-eyed before the detached organ that once literally inspired other human beings. If there is a lesson here, then such a lesson is grotesque: we identify in this case with an idealized human whose fitness will enable him to remain wholly a spectator of the eviscerated bodies of others. It's an aspiration to detachment rather than to ethics.

The quotations from philosophers hang on the walls of the *BodyWorlds*' display, and placards abound inside glass cases to identify the "parts" contained therein. No one's eyes were as steadfastly drawn to the texts as they were to the bodies, as far as I could tell, but two quotations, one from Seneca, and one from Kant, were hard to miss near the exhibit's opening. One quotation describes the release by death into tranquility, though you wonder how the plastinate could rest easy in its nongrave. Or perhaps the quotation is meant to act on us as an opiate so that we might move quietly, reverently, non-reactively, and properly passively through the exhibit. The other quotation asserts that man's self-consciousness is what raises him above other creatures.

With self-consciousness comes the ability to regard one's fellow man as an other. Is it animals, we wonder, or humans who have the greater capacity for indifference toward adjacent lifeforms? Animals, we

assume, for the most part lack humans' capacity for either a sense of self or for a subsequent self-regard. Animals never reach the famous Lacanian "mirror stage." I suppose it would have been ghoulish—in a late 17th century *vanitas* sort of way—if von Hagens had posted mirrors before the faces of spectators or before the "plastinates." On the other hand, to position mirrors in this way might encourage self-reflection, one of the finer capacities born of self-consciousness; instead, mirrors, emblems of our presumably superior self-consciousness, only enable a fuller view of the plastinated Other. Mirrors do appear in the exhibit, but only to help viewers to see any number of von Hagens' flayed bodies in the round, thus affording not a self-conscious, but a masterful, clinical view. Of course self-consciousness relies as much upon a capacity for self-regard as it does on the gaze of other humans, but plastinates fail to return our gaze, not merely because they *can't*, but because, quite apparently (though the exhibit doesn't explain this), eyes don't take to plastination very well. The eyes inside of von Hagens' bodies seem as though they must have been purchased from a taxidermic supply store. I'm not sure if the closing of a human subjects' eyes in death is a funerary practice the world over, but I imagine it serves a multiply protective purpose. Closing the eyes of the deceased, we can temporarily suspend our acknowledgment of their death by pretending they are merely sleeping. Keeping their eyes open makes them, who are beyond vulnerability, too terribly vulnerable. The sight of the eyes that have ceased to function is too total an assertion of the person who is both there, and there no longer. To close a dead person's eyes is to diffuse one's own gawking gaze—as if to say, because you can no longer return my gaze, I won't dare to capture you with mine.

Exhibit pamphlets describe von Hagens' subjects as sculpted into "lifelike poses," but the hand gestures (companionate to the eye as a seat of the personality) of von Hagens' puppets are especially inauthentic. Standing with one's palms facing upward does not quite suit a live human subject, and the models in *BodyWorlds* often stand in strange relation to their arms and hands, with the palms showing, or facing in directions that seem asymmetric to bodily stillness or bodily movement. It is here that the project of using dead bodies to produce clever quotations becomes clear, for I suspect that one of many, many representations that von Hagens is imitating (in a postmodern vein) with this "work" is the early 20th Cen-

tury "Transparent Man" that Jose van Dijck tells us about in his essay on the exhibit. Produced in Dresden in 1911, "Transparent Man" (later to be accompanied, like Eve as the afterthought to Adam, by "Transparent Woman"), consisted of a real skeleton stuffed with fake organs protected by celluloid. Used in Eugenics exhibits in the 1930s in Germany and the United States, replicas of "Transparent Man" and "Transparent Woman" were presented to Stalin as a birthday gift from East Germany following World War II. Meant to signify an impetus toward the perfectibility of man, "Transparent Man" stood with "arms outstretched, palms open, gaze directed upward." Von Hagens' palm-apparent figurines don't comment on "Transparent Man," or edify us by way of reference to it, but compete with it for semblance. Since von Hagens doesn't explicitly index the array of referents from within the History of Art, Western medicine, and Natural History, that he is quoting, his audience remains not edified but blithely ignorant, struck by something they think they and the world are seeing for the first time (the Circus comes to mind with the voice of its "never before seen," Greatest Show on Earth ticket-collector booming through a megaphone). The other option the exhibit leaves us with is to become closer to the "creator" (von Hagens) by testing our cultural literacy in a recognition of all that he quotes. Though our understanding or apprehension of a history of artifacts might be vastly different from his, the exhibit only allows for a mutual recognition, a kind of end stop at which we can sit at the same table with von Hagens and claim to know as much as he does or to have discovered the representational origins of his work. The joke truly is on us if we don't put each of the exhibit pamphlet's descriptors of what we're seeing in bold quotation marks: "Original." "Authentic." "Inspiring." (A triumvirate that seems to have undergone a no less accurate or illuminating rendition for the upcoming *BodyWorlds*2 headed for Chicago whose on-line advertisement for the event reads: "Original in vision. Authentic in Creation. Inspiring in its mission.")

One really can't explain why a plastinated camel suddenly appears amid the human subjects in *BodyWorlds*2 unless one is somewhat versed in Natural History and thus recognizes a quoting of the famous taxidermied scene entitled *The Courier* from 1867 that featured a (wax) figure of an Arab man riding a taxidermied camel and being attacked by taxidermied lions. This is the only display that includes atmospheric accou-

trements—piles of sand and a diminutive plastic palm tree, thus signaling the man-made atmospheres or scenarios that are also part of a history of taxidermy. Thankfully, von Hagens doesn't place an Arab plastinate atop the camel to mimic the wax figure of the original. I can't tell why he does what he does with this scenario, except to see it as yet another attempt at flexing his anatomist's muscles, another attempt at exceeding his referent in the most solipsistic of ways. "Is that a 3-headed camel?!" my companion asked as we rounded a corner of a room. Not quite a "freak of nature," the camel that quotes "The Courier" wasn't originally de-formed until von Hagens cut its head "sagitally" with a cryogenic saw into three different slices of the same head, bent at different angles simultaneously.

Von Hagens enjoys producing cross-sectioned plastinates, as well as multiple versions of an originally unified man, e.g., a man and his skin which he slings over his arm like a coat, a man as his musculature and as his skeleton standing side by side. (In light of this penchant, I couldn't help but notice von Hagens' decision not to cross-section the penis of the otherwise thoroughly sliced "Skier.") Van Dijck suggests that we don't flinch when we are confronted by the cross-sectioned bodies in *BodyWorlds* because they are part of a familiar lexicon of MRI imaging, but I'm not convinced. MRI images are not as common as the daily news to us, nor can many of us claim MRI literacy. Surely an *image* of a cross-sectioned body part is different from a body *literally*, violently sliced, and in some cases sliced from head to toe and then separated to show the body in ten contiguous, totally upright slices. If we don't flinch—but I did flinch—maybe it's because our necks are numbed by rubber-necking. If we don't flinch, it's because we recognize with a coolly superior intellectual distance another one of von Hagens' quotations, this time of Futurist Art. "On account of the persisting of an image upon the retina, moving objects constantly multiply themselves; their form changes like rapid vibrations in their mad career. Thus a running horse has not four legs, but twenty, and their movements are triangular." Those are sentences that appear in a Futurist Manifesto of 1910 of which painter Giacamo Balla's "Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash" is often invoked as an emblem. It's a model and an aesthetic that von Hagens appears to be quoting with the multiplication enabled by his hairline slices, but without motion, rather with death and dead bodies, an ultimate stillness, to make the point. Von Hagens may be

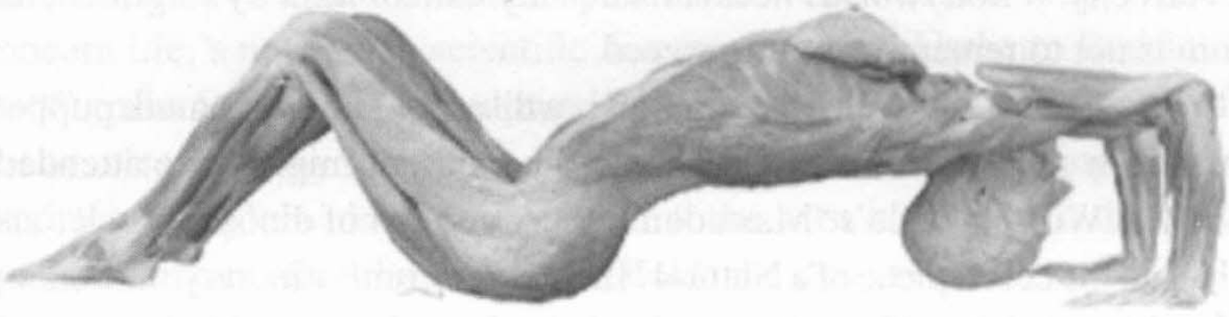
perversely quoting The Futurists who were interested in something they called "plastic dynamism." "Simultaneity is a lyrical exaltation, a plastic manifestation of a new absolute, speed; a new and marvelous spectacle, modern life; a new fever, scientific discovery," wrote Umberto Boccioni in "Futurist Painting and Sculpture," 1914. It would take an historian of art or of technology to explain how von Hagens is re-translating Futurists' "plasticity" in his plastinates, but at the least it's apparent that this quotation retains the plastic and withholds the dynamism.

Should we remember the Futurists' affinities with Fascism in order to assess von Hagens' exhibits and their current popularity? It's a direction that von Hagens distracts us from by quoting in his dress and self-representation another German artist very different from himself, Josef Beuys. It was one of the first things I noticed in my visit to the exhibit which opens with an enormous photograph of the face of von Hagens, his head capped by the fedora that was his countryman Beuys' trademark, and the connection has been made by so many commentators that von Hagens has been compelled to answer to it. He claims he's not borrowing from Beuys but mimicking the habit of Renaissance anatomists who never took off their hats and whose hat-clad presence at performances of dissection was an emblem of their bold iconoclasm. Not Beuys, no, von Hagens insists, Jeremy Bentham is the figure he aims to quote, Jeremy Bentham, the Age of Enlightenment philosopher and social reformer who in von Hagens' words believed that "corpses should not all of a sudden become useless things with death." What von Hagens has in mind to quote is Bentham's willing that his body be dissected for the purpose of education upon his death, and then preserved and propped into the attitude of an "Auto Icon" or image of the self viewable by posterity. Bentham's skeleton and amply hatted, facsimilied wax head (the preservation process didn't quite hold where his physiognomy was concerned) sit to this day in a position prescribed by him—the attitude he struck when he wrote and thought while alive—inside a glass cabinet at University College, London. Still, Josef Beuys remains the most familiar and recognizably quotable icon of von Hagens' self-display. Beuys of course was known for being a daring artist-in-public, but his was an art characterized by progressiveness, generosity, gentleness, and provocation, whereas von Hagens is risking being ousted from his country for a practice uncomfortably reminiscent of the

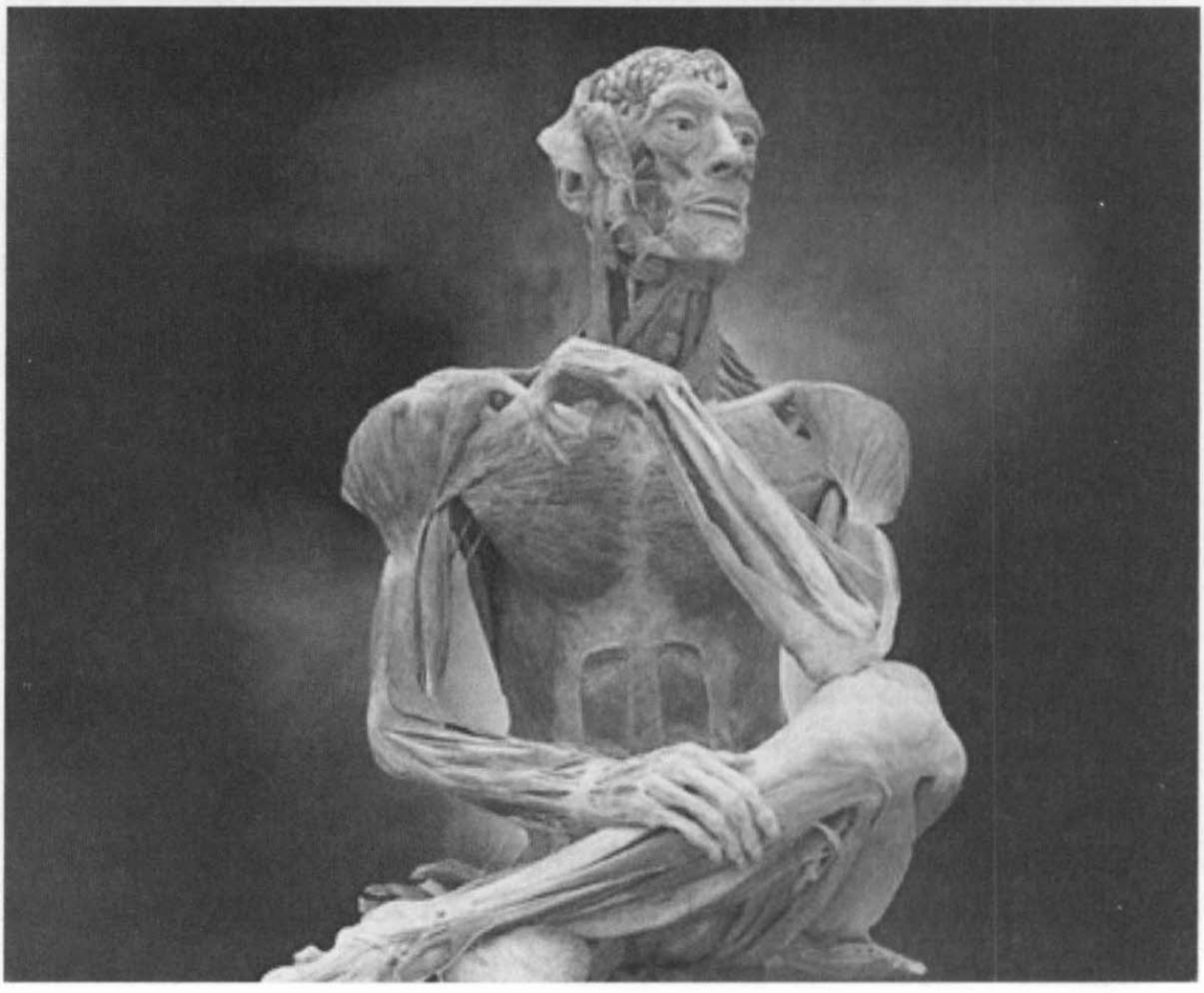
experiments on and post-mortem use of Jewish bodies in the Holocaust. Quoting Josef Beuys can go a long way in quelling any whiff of a history of atrocity. If *BodyWorlds* bears an uncanny aura of atrocity forgotten, its aim is not to remember but to exceed.

The exhibit's final quotation is a disarticulated behemoth puppet of a man reminiscent of the scale and marvel that might have attended Charles Willson Peale's "Mastadon" or any number of dinosaur skeletons that are the centerpiece of a Natural History museum's itinerary. The once-man has been sliced into ribbons that hang from the ceiling by string and dangle with the effect of his having been "blown up" in the senses both of having been grossly enlarged, and grotesquely fragmented. Entitled "Exploded Body," the plastinate at the same time elides any explicit reference to or resonance with the self- and other- exploded bodies that are the current order of the day. "Exploded Body" does not mean to reference but to transcend such realities. Just as the camel as Middle Eastern referent is arbitrary rather than direct at a moment when the Middle East is a centerpoint of world war, "Exploding Man" denies exploding men by offering in fact a pristine substitute for a real exploded body, that which we cannot bear to face or to see, by replacing exploded bodies with man-as-confetti, man-as-tickertape on von Hagens' parade. In light of the soundless "Exploded Man," no one is rocked, shaken or irreparably harmed, and a kind of victory is claimed. A victory for anatomy, for the Artist, or for art?

Artists and scientists achieve mastery over their subjects and produce a relation to knowledge by means of order, an order that takes form in Natural History Museums of taxonomy. Animals in such an exhibit might be arranged by species, or by their place in a Linnaean hierarchy with "man" at the top and beast at the bottom. When wax figures of humans enter this same ordering system, they might be grouped by ethnographic type, region, or nation-state, or, anthropologically, on a timeline indicative of a theory of evolution. Von Hagens' ordering system is hard to discern except that body parts and full plastinates are grouped according to anatomical systems: the respiratory system, the nervous system, the reproductive system, etc. Though von Hagens' postmortem subjects are described as "fixed into lifelike poses" and "true to life form," they are not, as I have already noted, very life-like at all, and the poses are in many cases those



The Yoga Lady



Ponderer

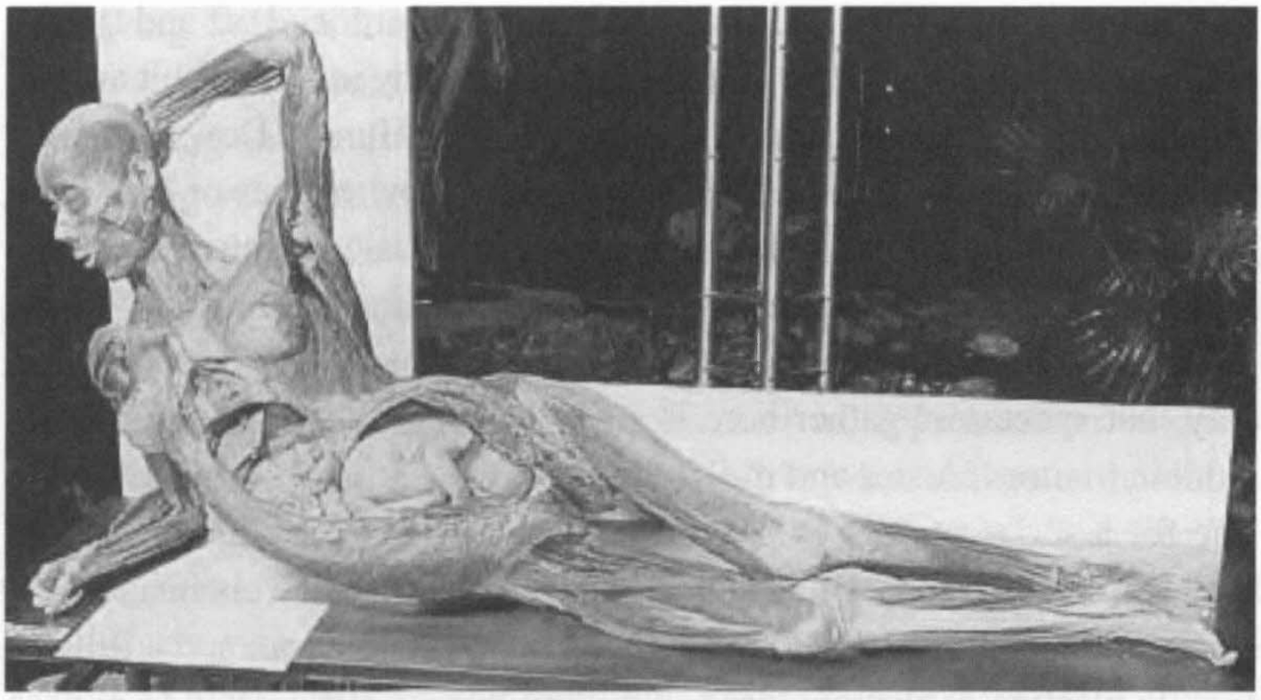
available from art rather than "life." Von Hagens names these poses and creates a strange mix of "types" such as "Man At Leisure," "The Ponderers," "The Yoga Lady," and "Drawer Man" (a figure with drawers etched into and protruding from its anatomy modeled on a work by Dali). One could conclude that the type who drives von Hagens' taxonomy of the post-human is fairly thoroughly bourgeois—for example, nowhere in the exhibit does von Hagens model a person at work, though there does seem a great interest a la Leni Riefenstahl in various forms of "athletic bodies" from soccer players to skiers and ice skaters. More interesting even than the absence of bodies-at-work is the absence of a body's biographical life. Unlike the taxidermist who reframes the animal in situ, in a facsimile of his original habitat, von Hagens' donors' bodies are removed from the life that took them to their death and cast in the plastinate stoniness of von Hagens' pose-of-choice.

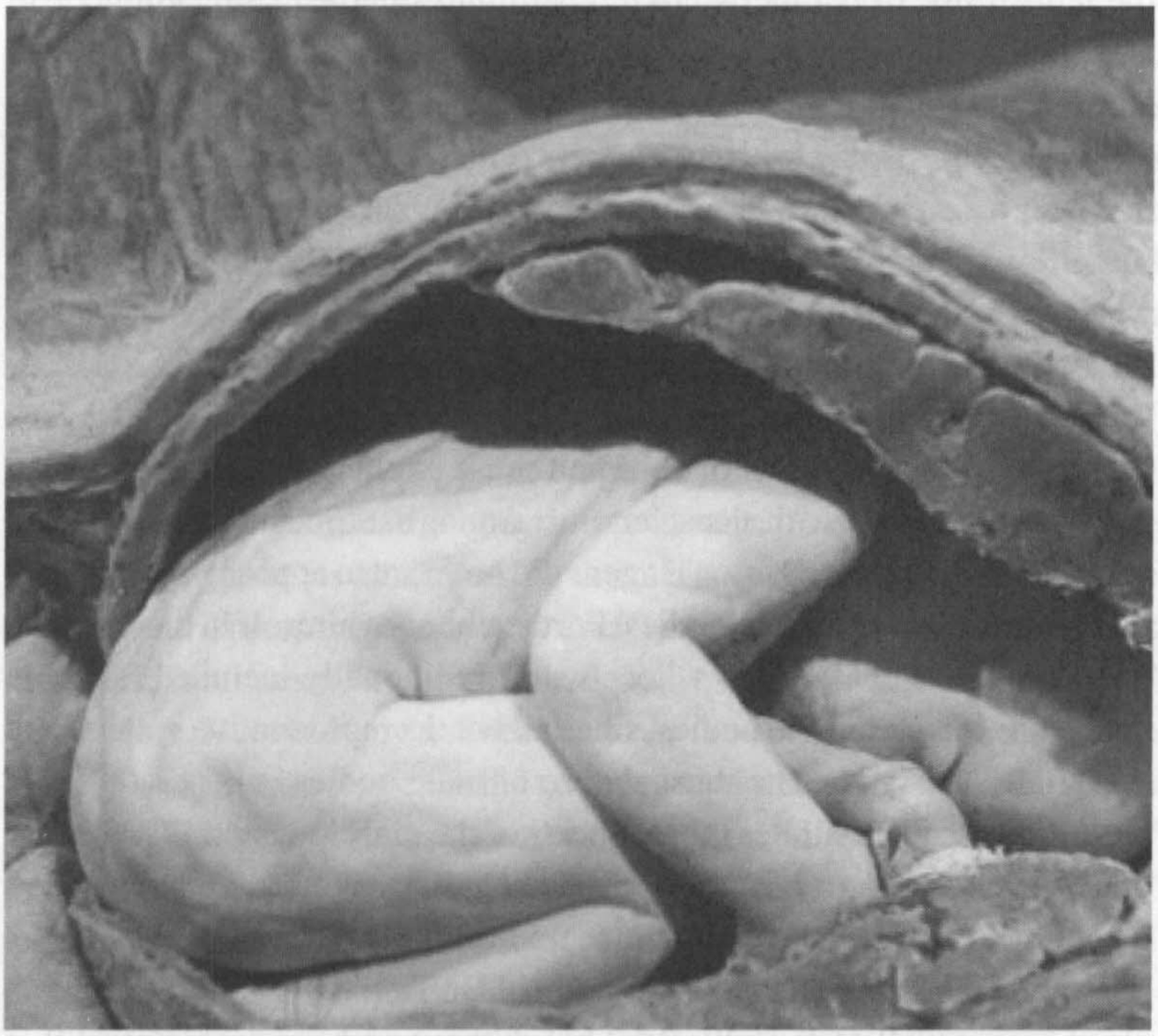
If we seek to know where does a particular body originate, what life course does it take, how does it die?, *BodyWorlds* will not tell us. Of an organ, we could ask, where did the part live? In what did it take part, partake of, of what was it a part? Again, *BodyWorlds* is mute. *BodyWorlds*' plastinates are bodies without histories, and literally devoid of habitus, the habits that house a body, its skin. If we look for answers under the Frequently Asked Questions section of the host Science Museum's website, we're met with a pudding of non-meaningful signifiers, a tautology that leaves us in the dark: "The donors' identities, ages and causes of death are not provided as the exhibition focuses on the nature of our bodies not on providing personal information."

Where do the bodies come from, where and how are they manufactured? That's another crucial question to do with *BodyWorlds*' origins that is erased, and one that in its most direct and ethical form has sparked (too little) controversy, especially in the United States. More than one law suit and numerous journalistic accounts in Germany and Great Britain draw connections between von Hagens' plastination practice and disappeared bodies in China and Russia, in particular with the bodies of Chinese political prisoners, the victims of executions, or the bodies of abjected Russians, homeless, imprisoned, or mentally ill. It appears we'll never know the identities of all of von Hagens' plastinates, in part or in whole. In spite of the California Science Center's pre-exhibit investigation

into the ethical questions raised by a density of claims and disclaimers, to use NPR journalist Neda Ulaby's words, "no clear paper trail from a deceased donor to a finished plastinate" has ever been established. More than one commentator notes that since leaving Germany, von Hagens has taken up residence in Dalien, China, where he employs over 200 people at his Institute of Plastination, in a town not far from several prison camps. Plastinates are not wholly anonymous, however, as "post-mortal" humans (a new coinage) because the whole-body posers are in every case accompanied by a silvery grey placard that sports von Hagens' signature in cursive much like the signature that appears in the corner of a work of art. I have no way of knowing if von Hagens has carved his initials into some unseen part of a plastinate, but if an identity 'lives on' in *BodyWorlds*' bodies it is his. So attached, in fact, are the plastinates to von Hagens' identity that he is currently seeking to copyright the bodies in his shows so that other copy-cat companies interested in this high-profit industry won't be able to display their wares.

If a plastinate is a human body posed as the a-cultural product of nothing except for von Hagens' process of plastination, if a plastinate is humanness denuded and de-individualized, if a plastinate is provocatively unreadable for its class, race, or region (recall that the lungs of all men happily share the space of the same vitrine), it is not a figure in the end without gender: gender cannot be shucked off or flayed, gender still inheres and adheres to *BodyWorlds* in the most retrograde of ways, in freakishly Christianized ways. According to *BodyWorlds*, human babies are immaculately conceived by orgasm-less females. Though the exhibit has pretenses to a perfectly idealized gender symmetry, such is not the exhibit's end result. A special room exists in the exhibit at the Boston Science Museum that visitors are told they may or may not *choose* to enter ("Visitors may choose whether or not to enter this room of the exhibit"). But do I have to be told that I may or may not choose? Did I not exert a choice in entering any and all parts of the exhibit? Is the rhetoric of choice as it applies to abortion rights working in some illegible way here? If I choose to enter this part of the exhibit, am I "choosing life" or "choosing death"? *BodyWorlds*2 in Boston offers what I imagine to be a strictly American version of the exhibit, one in which I am assured in true democratic fashion that I am being given a choice, and one in which





Pregnant Woman and Fetus from *BodyWorlds2*

fetuses, sentimentalized and ritualized, must be cordoned off and treated as "human" in ways that no other post-human body in the exhibit area is. This part of the exhibit, titled "The Wonders of Human Development," features a red, rippled, polyester curtain set off by touches of black and shrouded in nondescript, piped in instrumental music (I remember flutes) set to low volume, until it dawns on you that you have temporarily exited the Science Museum and entered a Funeral Parlor. The difference in the way that spectators gather here is striking. Where in other parts of the exhibit, visitors cluster and mill, here they file neatly to form a receiving line for a series of fetuses posed atop swaths of black billowing cloth: their eyes are sweetly shut, their bodies nestled like jewels inside their separate boxes. Embryos, too, bob in an aqueous solution, and a full life female plastinate, also enclosed in a glass box, is eviscerated to expose the fetus inside of her uterus. (All other figures in the exhibit enjoy plein aire and are multiply touched by museum goers in spite of numerous "Do Not Touch" signs). The male member of the species is everywhere absent in this sacred display with its reverence for "women and children," but in a later pair of vitrines that announce the Human Reproductive System, placards explain the physiology of orgasm for the male with no reference whatsoever to orgasm in the female, with a specimen penis but no specimen clitoris, only the uterus and ovaries. Asked of his earlier exhibits, "why are there not more female plastinates in the exhibit?" von Hagens presumably supplied a set of common sense explanations, transparent in their misogyny even to the least feminist among us: "Sensitive to perceived community concerns, Dr. von Hagens did not want to appear voyeuristic in revealing too many female bodies. Further, he sees himself in the tradition of Renaissance anatomists, whose work traditionally included far more masculine than feminine bodies, since all but the reproductive systems are essentially the same. The musculature of male bodies is generally more pronounced and illustrates more aspects of the muscle system. The organs on display came primarily from the female body donors." One wonders what other elements of Renaissance tradition von Hagens still abides? A copy of Rembrandt's "Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp" earns an authoritative place on the wall of *BodyWorlds*2 but without an historical context that would explain that the body in the painting is that of an executed criminal for whom anatomical dissection was part of his punishment, punishment

for having stolen a coat.

"Who should see the *BodyWorlds* exhibit?" the exhibits' accompanying on-line FAQ litany asks, and it answers, "Anyone interested in learning what makes us human." Is what makes us human a social psychology that has us turning toward death rather than, like the animal, away from it? Is what makes us human that we want a view of ourselves that will always prove impossible? That we wish to see *all* even though human vision, and especially at the level of an apprehension of one's anatomy in its totality, is always eclipsed? Is what makes us human a fundamental self-estrangement that cannot be overcome? *BodyWorlds*' answer to the initial question of "who" with its answer "anyone" and "human" or "anyone human" denies how little of the human is available at these exhibits. "What have we here?" might be a better question. "What will the spectator see at a *BodyWorlds* exhibit? What is this stuff?"

In *BodyWorlds* world there are no remains, but only afterthoughts; or the only remnant is a form of human debris (carcasses) fashioned into art. If *BodyWorlds*, like medicine's Gross Anatomy with which it hopes to be aligned, fails to teach us that the body is a psychic projection, a product of social forces, an environmentally dependent entity, in short a situated subject; if it denies that a body is a complex willingness, a motility with an ability to imagine, then what is it teaching us about the human and what is it treating in the name of human care?

Evanescent. Ephemeral. Fragile.

Unlike plastic, the body is not durable. We do not endure. The body eventuates in its own breaking down if it doesn't fall prey to violence or accident. This is the reality that *BodyWorlds* actively denies or wishes to forget; it mimes a vacuum-packed post-mortem entity that can "last" 2000 years. But the body neither lives nor dies in a vacuum. It is heir to oxygen that sustains it in its living and speeds its decay at death. The rooms of *BodyWorlds*, unfit for humans, are without air. I learn nothing here of human inspiration, expiration, suspiration, or perspiration. *BodyWorlds*' bodies are stripped and sealed; as such, they are the projected surfaces of some other body's horror of itself, their creator's fear.

What happens when a body inhales or breathes life into? Show me a body breathing on or into, onto a mirror, or into a season, onto a polish or into an atmosphere, onto a wound or into a reed, onto another,

next breath, or into a flame, into the breath of another, or onto a consciousness. Breathe in, breathe out, breathe on. To expire means to breathe out and to die, but how do we know that we breathe out rather than in at the last? To suspire is to breathe long and deeply. To sigh. Do animals or only humans sigh? Pair "a movement through" with "breath" and come up with the word "perspire": to give off a salty moisture through the pores of the skin.

Skin. There is none in *BodyWorlds* (except for a strangely present breast and talcumed seeming nipple). Scaly, bruised, and goosebumped. Encrusted, ruddy, torn. Smooth, pimpled, wrinkled. Coral. Olive. Vermillion. Rose. Clammy, pale, tanned. Burnt, and blistered. Mauve. Eggplant. Teagreen. Flushed. Pocked. Lined, creased. Thick or thin. Our skin, we say, occasionally crawls, but skin is also something we can never quite as successfully as a turtle crawl inside of, never as convincingly as a mystic leave behind. Some smokers say they smoke to create a screen around themselves. Carapace. Integument. Inadequate to the touch.

A medium of attachment.

An envelope originally created by the sounds of one human directed toward another—the infant's caretaker—and only later experienced as a container of being.

A sheath over a webwork.

A sheet with microscopic holes.

A porosity.

An organ not simply a cloak.

Von Hagens dispenses with his human subject's skin, he removes it to get at something he considers more important. What does it mean to remove, to disappear, the skin beyond a literal dis-mantling?

Consider what the body must submit to, forces that buffet and buttress it, destroy and undermine it as well as enable it to function, consider what von Hagens subjects the body to. What is the fantasy that fuels our submission to his instruments, his desire to intervene? What is the fantasy that fuels our submission to his work?

Who is that body at home in or at odds with the world? Whose body is that child's body in the photograph painting pinecones as a Christmas pastime at a kitchen table, a mop of curls falling into her eyes, dexterity immanent, fingers curled, intent of angle, learning to craft? She's you,

she's me, I want to say, many years younger. She's my essence, I like to believe, the identity that inheres, the trace of a mark of recognition, but a photograph of the same person in profile, many years later, applying paint to a walnut interior now in the name of tradition, taking care to apply small things, bits of ephemera and sparkles inside a tiny cabinet, seems somehow utterly foreign and unrelated to the earlier girl. She resembles me but is no longer me. She was vitally, vividly, but is no more. In this way, we each live a thousand lives and die a thousand deaths in one lifetime. In this way, we are all many bodies in our lifetimes, just as we are ourselves and our mother's and father's bodies. How do I know it is my body in which I reside? I am after all the environment's body—see that child that was me chasing the mosquito-spraying DDT truck on a hot summer's day. Consider the slow-growing cancer, or was it just the beginnings of endometriosis, sewn that day onto differently patterned genetic blueprints, waiting to flower and change our lives forever. The mind forgets what the body remembers. I'm not this body but a shed body, a body cyclically depleted or renewed. And what body will that be, the body I will die in. What body will I be when I die?

For now, I'm an accumulation of gestures toward the possibility of a body. A body of ideas, moods, feasts, feats, and lurings. I'm the missed step of a body, and the lost body. I'm the leapyear body of platelets mingled and types. The limit that reaches. I'm the house, the temple, the emitting and omitting body, the permissible and promiscuous body. I'm your body, the thought of you in me, fingers and tongue, the smell of you. The relay of bodies that any of us is cannot be studied or preserved, but language takes us close to it. In a poem we can glimpse a trace or layer of memory; in the worlds that humans create in words, being-as-palimpsest is given a viable, readable form.

I remember now the face of a bald boy in a ward. It was 1968 and the local hospital was looking for people with the rare A negative Rh factor blood type so that the boy, suffering from leukemia, could have a blood transfusion. My mother had this blood type—in fact, they warned her not to conceive because of the risks of matching an Rh negative type with my father's positive O. (Presumably we, my two brothers and I, exited the womb ok; we didn't need to be emptied and then filled with new blood as the doctors in that era warned, but I used to joke with my

mother that maybe we were really monsters.) My mother donated her blood to the boy, and led me to understand that this was nothing, and led me to understand that we are each other's blood, that one person can give her blood to another. But I couldn't stop thinking of the boy's disorder attacking my mother's blood—that my mother's blood could die in one body and live in another.

What is the ontic status of a plastinate but a piecemeal remainder? *BodyWorlds* treats bodies as mere matter, pliable dough, lifeless stuff. It has no interest in the end in that which "what makes us human."

Let us take account of *BodyWorlds*: the exhibits have grossed over 200 million dollars contributed by the more than 20 million people who have flocked to them in England, Germany, North America, Korea, and Japan. There's no public accounting of where the money goes. At least 200 Americans have donated their bodies to von Hagens' Institute of Plastination in the past few years. *BodyWorlds* becomes curioser and curioser the more often we open its door, the more avenues we turn in the labyrinth of bizarre details it yields. In 2003, an exhibit took place in Hamburg's Red Light district. Prostitutes and taxi drivers were granted free admission to the exhibit housed in an erotic art museum and featuring "Early Bird," a plastinate with an erection. In 1983, the Catholic Church asked von Hagens to plastinate the heel bone of St. Hildegard of Bingen, a beatified eleventh century mystic revered in Germany. Von Hagens has offered to plastinate Pope John Paul II. At the California Science Center in Los Angeles, two women stole one of *BodyWorlds*' plastinated fetuses. The fetus has yet to be recovered. *BodyWorlds*' recent donor questionnaires ask if potential donors would "consent to their body parts being mixed with an animal's to create a mythological creature?" Or whether they would agree to be "transformed into an act of love with a woman or a man?" Von Hagens hopes in time to create "Futurehuman," a plastinate who will sport improvements to the flawed human mechanism like two hearts, extra ribs, and knees that bend backwards. Von Hagens has dressed as a plastinate in a parade, and sent his pregnant woman plastinate on a bus around a town in Germany by way of advertising a *BodyWorlds* event. Von Hagens and *BodyWorlds* figure in the recent James Bond blockbuster film, *Casino Royale*, with von Hagens claiming an affinity with the secret agent who represented adventure at all costs to him when he was imprisoned for his

political beliefs as a young man in Eastern Germany. In *Casino Royale*, *BodyWorlds* provides the setting for the "archetypal battle of good and evil." Von Hagens suffers from hemophilia, and spent a good deal of time as a child in hospital wards. Von Hagens claims he didn't know his father was an officer in the SS, who possibly sent numerous Poles to their deaths, but both father and son agreed that Mr. Liebchen should resign from his post as head of a plastination factory that von Hagens had hoped to open in Poland. Von Hagens took his first wife's last name because he was tired of being called "little darling." A paternal legacy doesn't factor into his account. Gunther von Hagens' motto is "live and let live."

A most astonishing feature of *BodyWorlds*2 (the Boston version, at least) is that it opens me to opportunity, free gifts, and a well-earned prize. If I participate in "The *BodyWorlds*2 Health Challenge" that runs concurrent with the exhibit, I can receive two VIP tickets to the exhibit (assuming, even if I've already seen it, I might wish to revisit it as its special guest), and a *BodyWorlds*2 Gift Bag, a T-shirt, poster, DVD, "and more!" I'll receive a Hot Tub Spa treatment, and a one year membership to something called "Fitcorp" (not to be confused with "Fitcorpse"). *BodyWorlds*2 tempts me to cast my vote for its most appalling or disturbing sight, but I find myself identifying two as tied for first prize in the horrific and haunting category: these are the body that has no head but stops at a tongue perched on a post (its larynx and digestive system), and the torso encased in a vitrine that I could look down upon from a position far removed from it. The two halves (because it was also shorn in two as it lay, like heaves of an appallingly grey iceberg under glass) were missing everything that made them meaningful, and it didn't seem right that I should regard them at all. (I had once seen an acupuncturist who could tell who I was from my tongue. I had seen too many women shorn of their limbs and head, reduced to their torso. I never forgot how on September 11th, a human torso was happened upon on a New York street). *BodyWorlds*2 poses baffling questions: Is it art (I see a signature) or science (I get to glimpse a body's interior)? Is it edifying or sobering? Is it an icebox without the chill? Is it a butcher's art gallery of meat and gristle? Why must donor anonymity be maintained? *BodyWorlds*2 puts me in touch with beauty and awe: because I was mesmerized by the beauty of the extracted arteries of an arm, the arm as an arterial webwork

painted red, a fractal among fractals that comprise a bodily system, and I did marvel to see the three tiny bones that nest inside the ear, like bits of carefully hewn seashell, that govern hearing. *BodyWorlds*2 taught me lessons: both the brain and the testes can be compared to walnuts. *BodyWorlds*2 denies the body, yes, because if I need to use a restroom, I'm forced to leave the exhibit, and cannot gain re-entry without the purchase of another ticket. *BodyWorlds*2 offered me a choice that I now offer you: if given the opportunity to stick your hand into the hole of a transparent box inside of which sits a plastinated brain, would you or would you not reach in to touch or lift the brain, would you use your left hand or right hand, and why?

*BodyWorlds*2 offered me the opportunity to sit on benches on the sideline and watch the living as though they were the exhibit. But, oh, I moved with them too, moved silently, like an unfeeling mourner, furtive, and hungry-seeming.

Notes

My thinking on *BodyWorlds* is concurrent with some of the observations in a number of critical commentaries including Neda Ulaby's investigative journalism for National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*, August 19, 2006; Russell Working, "Shock Value," for *The Chicago Tribune*, 7/31/2005; Megan Stern, "Shiny, Happy People: 'Body Worlds' and The Commodification of Health," *Radical Philosophy*, March/April 2004; Linda Schulte-Sasse, "Advise and Consent: On the Americanization of *BodyWorlds*," *BioSocieties* (December 2006), 1, 369-384; "Body Language," Philoillogica, Blog entry at http://philoillogica.typepad.com/philoillogica/main/index.html; Jose van Dijck, "*BodyWorlds*: The Art of Plastinated Cadavers," *Configurations*, 2001, 9: 99-126; and Petra Kupers, "Visions of Anatomy: Exhibitions and Dense Bodies," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 15.3 (2004): 123-156.