

**“OUTSIDE OF OR BEYOND THE HUMAN”:
GUNTHER VON HAGENS’ ANATOMY EXHIBIT
“KÖRPERWELTEN—BODY WORLDS”
AS CONTEMPORARY FREAK SHOW**

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Visitors to “Körperwelten—Body Worlds,” a contemporary traveling anatomy exhibit, may expect to witness a spectacle that clearly recalls the disturbing traditions of the freak show. German anatomist Gunther von Hagens showcases preserved human corpses arranged in often bizarre and grotesque positions. The exhibit includes a running corpse whose muscles are partially detached so that they seem to flap in the wind. This corpse is joined by an upright skeleton that taps its own standing muscular shell on the shoulder from behind. Also on display is a pregnant woman whose womb has been cut open to display the fetus while she is stretched out and leisurely propped up on one elbow, as if casually resting on a couch. Highly controversial are also the corpse holding up his own skin and a male body with Dalí-like drawers in his torso. These largely intact bodies are joined by some that recall acts of mutilation. Among these is the corpse stretched beyond recognition, resembling a telescope. Likewise fragmented is the corpse that was completely taken apart to be suspended from the ceiling of a giant cube, thus forming a human wind chime. The exhibit is completed by a display of fetuses with disabilities: cuddled in black fabric, they “sit” on a round rotating structure with several levels. The structure revolves for the convenience of the visitor, and thus one may, in the tradition of the true freak show, shudder and marvel at von Hagens’ collection of monstrous anomalies and actively disfigured and disabled corpses (“Körperwelten: Die Faszination des Echten”).

“Körperwelten—Body Worlds” has been on display in several Asian and European countries since 1998, with exhibits in Austria, Belgium, Germany, Great Britain, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Switzerland, and, most recently, Taiwan. More than a passing

phenomenon, it has attracted over 14.5 million visitors (“Past Exhibitions”), and the anatomist claims that he will open a permanent exhibit in the United States in the near future (“News”). I argue that what makes millions flock to these exhibits is not von Hagens’ professed aim “to inform visitors and to open up the opportunity particularly to medical laymen to better understand their body and its functions” (“Aim of the Exhibition”). Neither does the exhibit serve to democratize anatomy, as often proclaimed by the anatomist (Jeffries 2). Rather than engendering the arguably needed democratization of anatomy and medicine, the exhibit in fact capitalizes on the sensationalist contrasting of what the discourse of disability studies has identified as normalcy and enfreakment (see Davis, Fiedler, Thomson). “Körperwelten—Body Worlds” effectively functions as a contemporary, updated, and postmodern form of the freak show.¹ The function of the exhibit, I argue, is twofold and presents a paradox. “Körperwelten—Body Worlds” promotes the normal and simultaneously presents the drastically different as a possible escape from normalcy, for this is likely the first freak show that invites its visitors to turn themselves into freaks in the future.

The exhibit displays non-normative bodies that have become dramatically different not because of illness or congenital disability, but through the processes of dissection and plastination. Invented by von Hagens, plastination is a sophisticated method of tissue preservation through which all fluids of an organ or a body are replaced by first acetone and later plastic. As a result the organ or body is preserved virtually eternally and looks more life-like than remains preserved using other methods (Hagens, “Der Plastinierte Mensch” 221-226). An organ or corpse preserved through plastination—called *das Plastinat*—can easily be displayed as a whole or cut into thin, translucent slices to represent certain layers. This revolutionary preservation process certainly offers valuable opportunities for those studying anatomy. What is less scientifically justifiable or even valuable is von Hagens’ preference for arranging the plastinated corpses not in natural and possibly educational ways, but in ways that effectively show the dead as freaks. A dead, mutilated body that will never decay is perhaps the most different body humans can encounter, and its difference is amplified by the bizarre way in which it is displayed.

Von Hagens’ dead bodies meet all the definitions of a freak as put forth by Leslie Fiedler. Fiedler defines the freak in *Freaks: Myths*

¹ This similarity has not escaped the press: recent British and American reviews of his exhibits have compared von Hagens to P. T. Barnum and his work to a “freak show” (Jeffries 2; Landler A4).

and *Images of the Secret Self* by stating that “the true Freak challenges the conventional boundaries . . . between reality and illusion, experience and fantasy, fact and myth” (24). The bodies on display in “Körperwelten—Body Worlds” obviously possess these transgressive qualities because they exist in a place between life and death, human and object, wholeness and fragmentation, health and illness, and integrity and decomposition. Owing to von Hagens’ invention, the dead body suddenly can hover perpetually in the non-place that exists between two absolutes, life and death.

Additionally, the *Plastinat* exceeds traditional definitions of the freak. Elisabeth Grosz includes the challenging of the boundaries between life and death when defining the living freak in “Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit”:

Freaks are those human beings who exist outside and in defiance of the structure of binary oppositions that govern our basic concepts and modes of self-definition. They occupy the impossible middle ground between the oppositions dividing [among other classes] the living and the dead (human skeleton). Freaks cross the borders that divide the subject from all ambiguities, interconnections, and reciprocal classifications, outside of or beyond the human. (57)

While “Körperwelten—Body Worlds” does not feature any living freaks, the exhibit actively explores the place that exists between death and decay, lively positions and dead bodies. This is underscored by von Hagens’ proclamation that the *Plastinat* is “erstart zwischen Sterben und Verwesung,” i.e., captured or frozen between death and decay (“Der Plastinierte Mensch” 211). The *Plastinat* challenges the boundaries of corporeal integrity by presenting itself as an intact body and yet as an already disintegrating entity. The *Plastinat* can therefore be termed an extraordinary freak.

Like its traditional, nineteenth-century predecessors, the freak show “Körperwelten—Body Worlds” has the paradoxical effect of promoting the normal. Rosemarie Garland Thomson writes in *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* about the nineteenth-century American freak show that “The freak simultaneously testified to the physical and ideological normalcy of the spectator and witnessed the implicit agreement assigning a coercive deviance to the spectacle” (62). Furthermore, in “Introduction: From Wonder to Error—A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity,” Thomson emphasizes that a “freak show’s cultural work is to make the physical particularity of the freak into a hypervisible text against which the viewer’s indistinguishable body fades into a seemingly neutral, tractable, and invulnerable instrument of autonomous will, suitable to the uniform abstract citizenry

democracy institutes" (10). Thomson's argument that the exhibition of the abnormal serves to reaffirm normality in the gazing masses certainly applies to "Körperwelten—Body Worlds." The exhibit in part serves to establish a feeling of normality in the gazing visitor who comes to behold the *Plastinat* captured in most unnatural positions and mutilated states. No matter how diverse the population of the visitors may be, no living human can resemble the *Plastinats*, and yet they are perceived as human. The exhibit homogenizes the mass of gazers; reassured of their own normalcy, in unity they stare, that is, they indulge in what Thomson has termed "the gaze intensified" (*Extraordinary Bodies* 26).

This claim is validated further when considering the role of von Hagen's corporeal fragmentation of the dead in relation to the psychological processes at work when envisioning one's own body as whole, complete, and unified. In *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body*, Lennard J. Davis explores Lacanian theories of the formation of the body image in conjunction with the different body, or the body with a disability. Davis argues about the concept of our own image that "we all—first and foremost—have fragmented bodies" (141), but that during the Lacanian mirror stage this fragmentation is repressed when in the mirror, "the child recognizes (actually misrecognizes) that unified image as his or her self. That identification is really the donning of an identity, an 'armor' against the chaotic or fragmented body" (139). When the so-called normal subject is then confronted with a different body, it "sees the repressed fragmented body; rather than seeing the object of desire, as controlled by the Other, the subject sees the true self of the fragmented body" (139). The abnormal thus disturbs the normal by threatening a reversal of the mirror stage and by recalling repressed notions of the chaotic and uncontrolled body.

Von Hagen's carousel of fetuses with disabilities certainly mocks the different while at the same time shocking the visitor's unified self image by displaying what is deemed abnormal. Additionally, the threat of the always already disintegrated body becomes reality through "Körperwelten—Body Worlds" in another regard, the gazing at the mutilated adult *Plastinats*. However, after the initial shock, the visitor is allowed to conclude about his or her own corporeal identity that he or she, as opposed to the Other on display, is in fact intact, unified, whole, healthy, and, above all, *normal*.

As opposed to the visitor's presumed normalcy, the *Plastinats* are assigned the status of ultimate disability. This state of disability is further underlined and framed by the fact that these corpses, even

if their return to life were fantasized by the visitor, would lack what the healthy and normal body owns.² Most of the *Plastinats* were skinned; a great number of them were cut up into thin slices that allow anatomists and other specialists to read the body like an image rendered by computer tomography. In essence, the corpses of “Körperwelten—Body Worlds” are not simply dead bodies. Their death has been twice secured and ensured through all the procedures that seem to recall killings, yet their death is also contradicted by the nature of their display. These corpses emerge as the ultimate dead who were absolutely disabled by von Hagens.

While the exhibit mostly features bodies that appear “normal” (i.e., they do not seem to have disabilities), it also showcases illnesses. In “Plastination: neue Körperpräparate,” von Hagens stresses the normative function of the abnormal plastinated body when he states that illnesses on display “führen uns unsere Verletzlichkeit vor Augen und erhöhen unser Gesundheitsbewußtsein” (71). That is, he explains that the plastinated bodies of donors with illnesses show the viewer his or her own vulnerability and that this in turn increases the viewer’s health consciousness. The different body on display thus serves as a background in front of which the visitor is supposed to renew his or her own vow to become and stay healthy and therefore normal. The *Verletzlichkeit*, the vulnerability of the body, becomes especially emphasized through the torture-like mutilation of the corpses.³

The actual display of organs altered by illness seems to gain only secondary status, but visitors may inspect both healthy and diseased organs. (What the visitor will, however, notice and remember first and foremost is the vulnerability of the normal body on the macroscopic level by looking at severed limbs and completely fragmented bodies.) In regard to the display of organs, Edmund L. Andrews points out that von Hagens argues that visitors “can inspect the damage to a lung or to a liver shriveled by alcohol poisoning” (A4), thus upholding the notion of the responsibility of the donor for the state of his or her body. The anatomist points out that through plastination, one recognizes medical conditions or abnormal organ developments more easily (Sheytt 55). The display and visibility of the abnormal is

² I want to suggest that this fantasy is invited and encouraged by the lively poses of the dead on display, especially the corpses engaged in athletic or intellectual activities like fencing, running, or playing chess (“Körperwelten: Die Faszination des Echten”).

³ For a discussion of the relationship between disability and perceived vulnerability see also Thomson (*Extraordinary Bodies* 106). For cultural assumptions about the body with a disability as “damaged,” see Davis (14).

hence deemed highly important. Through the *Plastinat*, the abnormal can be conquered, carefully displayed and read, and then checked against one's own state of health.

Furthermore, abnormality may be mocked in von Hagens' freak show. Corporeal difference, whether acquired or congenital, may be underlined by humor. This does not only happen in the case of the carousel of dead fetuses or the leisurely lounging pregnant woman. The exhibit also displays the body of a former smoker. The ribcage is opened up so that one may look at the black lungs. The smoker stands, holding one hand up in a relaxed pose, as if holding a cigarette while standing around carelessly, engaged in a conversation.

The readability of the body is a paramount goal of the exhibit. About the identity of the *Plastinats* Sheyft quotes von Hagens: "Jeder Körper hat seine Geheimnisse—Krankheiten, anatomische Besonderheiten, die sich nach und nach offenbaren" (55). He argues that each body has secrets about its health or difference. It appears to be von Hagens' vocation to reveal them and to point them out in opposition to the norm. Obviously, this statement may be understood as a way of inviting the exhibit's visitor to inquire into his or her own personal history and to determine to what extent his or her own body deviates from the medically established norm of the healthy and ordinary body. This ordinary and normal body remains unseen and invisible: it is not on display but looms large over the exhibit as an ideal that can be imagined but is not met by any of the *Plastinats*.⁴

The normative function of this exhibit also relates to von Hagens' attempts at completely controlling death and decay. While traditional freak shows mostly displayed living freaks, the display of dead animals or humans is by no means a new trend in freak shows. Edward L. Schwarzschild examines in "Death-Defying/Defining Spectacles: Charles Willson Peale as Early American Freak Showman" how Peale, who lived from 1741 to 1827, tried to establish a dominance over death by exhibiting the preserved cadavers of animals. This mission to "[display] a dramatic control over human mortality" resulted in his attempt "to both evoke and erase the effects of death" (82). He even tried to exhibit an embalmed child once (87).⁵ According to

⁴ For an analysis of the relationship between ideal and normal bodies and the conflation of the ideal with the normal see Davis (34-35).

⁵ Another precedent for the display of dead freaks was the exhibition of Julia Pastrana's body: after the woman (who was part of a freak show because of her excess facial and body hair) died in childbirth in 1860, her husband/manager had her body and the body of the stillborn infant embalmed. He then continued to exhibit both bodies and also loaned them to museums (Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies* 77).

Schwarzschild, Peale also “presents himself in complete control” whenever broaching the subject of death and its effects (84). In the case of von Hagens’ exhibit, the message of this show is that the normal, represented by the anatomist, is fully in control of the extraordinary and different, the plastinated corpse.

Aside from preserving something previously very vulnerable to disintegration and decay, von Hagens also dominates the body by taking it apart and rearranging it in unusual ways. Much like his present-day colleague von Hagens, “Peale was concerned with preserving death in such a way that he could make of it a controlled spectacle, something he could aestheticize and from which he could distance himself” (93). Von Hagens points out that the aestheticism he uses to create his plastinats serves to avert the visitor’s potential fear of looking at the corpses (Reimer 12). Thus, his aestheticizing work controls and norms the *Plastinat* as well as the behavior of the visitor.

The normative function of the *Plastinat* has been contextualized in a historical framework by Uli Linke in *German Bodies: Race and Representation After Hitler*. Linke makes the following argument in her explanation of the book’s frontispiece, the plastinated man holding his own skin:

Plastinated preservation remakes the corpse, a German body, into an aesthetic object: With his flesh restored and made immortal, the new man stands transfixed, focused on himself. A set of motifs, which typify the figuration of this corpse—white skin, the muscled body, the heroic pose—reveal a return to an uncanny fascination with fascist masculinity. (Information on Frontispiece)

The anatomist therefore performs a double move of norming. The exhibit is strongly rooted in the freak show’s tradition of defining and reinforcing the normal by exhibiting the abnormal. At the same time, the displayed abnormal bodies speak of normalcy to the visitor by becoming aestheticized embodiments of what Linke calls the “fascist”—and hence highly normative—body. The abnormal thus norms both directly and indirectly.

The most innovative aspect of von Hagens’ freak show is that it transcends previous limits of such shows by marketing itself as an arena of wish fulfillment: unlike other freak shows, this exhibit allows the visitor to transgress and to move from normalcy to enfreakment. Thomson points out that this may have been a fantasy of freak show visitors in the past: “although the anarchic body of the domesticated freak reassured audiences of their commonality, at the same time the extraordinary body symbolized a potential for individual freedom

denied by cultural pressures toward standardization” (*Extraordinary Bodies* 68). Thomson also asserts: “Bound together by their purchased assurance that they are not freaks, the fascinated onlookers perhaps longed in some sense to be extraordinary marvels instead of mundane, even banal, demerits in a confusing cultural moment” (“Introduction” 10). “Körperwelten—Body Worlds” fulfills a similar purpose by taking the nineteenth-century freak show one step further: not only does the exhibit arouse fantasies of extraordinary individuality; this time, the visitor can, in the end, *become* the freak by signing up for body donation and posthumous plastination. Enfreakment suddenly becomes a promise to the visitor who is presumably perceived as normal. This may have been a subconscious motivation for the close to 6,000 prospective donors who have already committed their bodies to von Hagens’ future plastination projects (Marcus A8).

The exhibit plays with the fear of corporeal fragmentation but manages to make it seem attractive. As explained above, Davis underlines that the moment of viewing the different body poses a threat to the self. In the case of “Körperwelten—Body Worlds,” this may very well be a motivation that moves visitors to donate their bodies. It can be argued that the exhibit lures donors through the promise of fragmentation. Body donation, plastination, and fragmentation become acts of liberation. The prospective donor holds control over the unified body image in life. However, in death, the donor will permit the “repressed double—the fragmented body” to take control (Davis 140). After all, almost all of the corpses on display are heavily mutilated, skinned, expanded, stretched, sliced open, taken apart. To sign up for this kind of treatment after death means to indulge in the forbidden fantasy of fragmentation after a life of closely monitored normalcy and unification. Von Hagens himself wishes to be plastinated after his death (Scheytt, Singh).⁶ This appears to be individualism at its fullest.

Plastination, as practiced by von Hagens, is not merely an aggression directed against one’s own body but also an aggressive act against other prospective visitors. If the donor chooses posthumous fragmentation, she or he can exploit the fact that seeing corporeal fragmentation, as explained by Davis, threatens the starrer’s self image. Thomson calls the different body a perceived “visual assault”

⁶ Von Hagens has previously declared that he wants to be cut up into thin slices while wearing his trademark black hat and then be donated to various anatomical institutes around the world (Scheytt 55). More recently he has been quoted as saying that as a *Plastinat*, he wants “to be shown dissecting his own father,” an option he has supposedly discussed with his father (Singh 468).

on the normal (*Extraordinary Bodies* 26). If one were to become fragmented, this would surely be a great source of power and control over the self image of others. One could perhaps even reverse the power that lies in the objectifying gaze and stare by posing a threat to the starrer's image of his or her unified self.

Perhaps equally tempting is the assertion of the donor's (sometimes altered) individuality through "Körperwelten—Body Worlds." About the individuality of the *Plastinats* the anatomist himself states that it remains "lebensnah erhalten" i.e., it is preserved close to life ("Plastination: neue Körperpräparate" 67). Not quite so elaborate as former freak show directors, yet also curious, the anatomist seems to be interested in the narrative of the *Plastinat* or its donor. Thomson discusses the life narrative of the freak, stating that "[t]hese souvenir narratives embellished the freak's exotic history, endorsed the exhibit's veracity, and described the freak's physical condition from a scientific or medical perspective" (*Extraordinary Bodies* 61). Von Hagens maintains that because plastination fully exposes the dead body to the visitor of the exhibit, each donor should receive a "neue, aber auch charakteristische Identität," i.e., a new yet characteristic identity ("Plastination: neue Körperpräparate" 71). He seems to propose that each *Plastinat*'s identity be reinvented on (and thus reduced to) the basis of its anatomical and corporeal characteristics.

In von Hagens's world of bodies, identity becomes synonymous with the form and characteristics of the body. The pregnant woman with her opened womb will always be just that. The corpse with the black lungs will always be the smoker, nothing more, and his pose underscores this. While I do not wish to argue that von Hagens is not correct when he points out that each *Plastinat* is anatomically different from the next, an approach that focuses on corporeality as the sole marker of identity is nevertheless highly reductionist. Davis has written about the introduction of fingerprinting that "the person enters in an identical relationship with the body, the body forms the identity" (31), and the same process, I argue, is at work in von Hagens' exhibits. Sheytt points out that the anatomist gives the donors he does not personally know names: one is called "Ballerina" due to the shapely feet, another one "Herkules" because of its muscles (55). In this way, von Hagens continues the practices of past freak shows. As Thomson writes, "On the freak show stage, a single, highlighted characteristic circumscribed and reduced the inherent human complexity" of the displayed person (*Extraordinary Bodies* 61). In von Hagens' anatomical exhibits identity becomes synonymous with corporeality, and the exhibit is a reductionist narrative of the life and corporeal particularities of the donors.

The question of identity is, however, not only posed by the anatomist himself. While they want to remain anonymous after their deaths, many prospective donors would also welcome clarifying information about the *Plastinats* concerning age, cause of death, or even profession to better understand the objects on display (Eberhardt 1). This also relates to the life narrative of the freak so essential to the traditional freak show. One's existence—even in death—must be explained, justified, and made understandable.

In essence, it seems to be precisely this often hidden particularity of the body donor that can be revealed through von Hagens' process of plastination. It is possible that this adventure of the exposure of the personal anatomical difference is one component of the exhibit's immense power to attract prospective donors. The donor's desire to be unique is satisfied by the obvious state of difference his or her plastinated body will be assigned when it assumes a highly unusual shape or pose, resisting the hegemony of both corporeal wholeness (demanded of the living) and complete disintegration (expected of the dead). Instead of the traditionally cited equality, death suddenly promises difference, individuality, and resistance to cultural expectations.

It becomes obvious that "Körperwelten—Body Worlds" emerges as a paradox: it is a normative promise of individuality. Its normative effect becomes apparent through its indirect reinforcement of homogeneity through the display of the socially forbidden, the absolute otherness. At the same time, it strives for aesthetic appeal, establishing a new norm of beauty for the dead. Its promise of difference is reflected in its power to recruit prospective body donors who wish to become what the normalizing societal values deem impossible: the absolute individual who becomes the extraordinary dead body with an outrageous individuality through plastination. The plastinated body is at once the most normal and the most drastically different body that exists. "Körperwelten—Body Worlds" thus presents a complex narrative of seduction to *become* the Other, far superseding the aims of any nineteenth-century freak show.

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