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Performing Bodies: The Construction of the Unconstructed in Gunter von Hagens' Body Worlds

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Article

Performing Bodies: The Construction of the Unconstructed in Gunter von Hagens' Body Worlds

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This article argues Gunther von Hagens' "Body Worlds" exhibit is not what it purports to be, genuine bodies presented without interpretation that allow observers to better understand and marvel at the human body. Instead, the exhibit is very much an interpretation, performing a fantasy of the social ideal that male is the norm and female exists for its sexual and reproductive purposes.

In July of 2004, Gunther von Hagens' Body Worlds had its premier exhibit in the United States. Presenting actual preserved human and animal bodies in various poses and differing stages of dissection, this exhibit purports to present lay audiences with what only the medical profession had previously seen: the miracle of the human body and its complex operations. Made possible by "plastination," a process developed by von Hagens that preserves bodies at a cellular level, the donated corpses are able to exist indefinitely as they teach growing numbers of people about how our own bodies work.

What makes this display of anatomy so shocking and exciting to the crowds that visit it is that the bodies are proffered to be the "genuine": they appear to be the "real thing" rather than a mere medium, a model. The Body Worlds website encourages this view, stating: "a model is nothing more than an interpretation... All models look alike and are, essentially, simplified versions of the real thing. The authenticity of the specimens [in Body Worlds], however, is fascinating and enables the observer to experience the marvel of the real human body." Despite the exhibit's insistence on its authenticity, the bodies are very much a construction, and as this paper argues, a performance of the white male fantasy of normalcy.

Von Hagens began developing his method in the 1970s, supposedly getting his idea from seeing anatomy specimens in polymer blocks and thinking that the polymer should be inside rather than outside the body. This thought, combined with a visit to a butcher shop, began von Hagens' process of using rotary blade cutters, vacuums to extract air bubbles, and body parts infused with acetone to allow plastic to saturate the parts to create plastination (von Hagens).

In his exhibit's advanced examples, von Hagens presents these bodies sculpted into various positions, while the bodies are variously stripped of their skin, muscles, blood vessels, and organs. One such position is "The Chess Player," which presents a body, seated at a glass table before a chess board, one hand holding a chess piece. This hand is stripped of skin, so that audiences can see bones, veins, and fingernails. The eyes peering at this board, are wide open on a face that is also stripped of skin, except on the lips, so that viewers can see muscle, internal tissue, and bone of the face, but only the skin of the lips. The cranium of this body is removed, so the viewer can imagine seeing the visible brain working and the impulses for movement running along the neck, shoulders and arms, also stripped of skin. Other elements of the exhibit are body parts, devoid of their anatomical context. White tissue of obesity illustrates what the viewers' extra twenty pounds looks like beneath the surface of the skin. Plasticized uteri of women with fetuses in various stages of development demonstrate what life looks like before birth.

While in many ways this exhibit may seem shocking, it is legitimized by its apparent genuineness and its supposed contributions to the scientific world. The exhibit's website clearly identified the exhibit's aim: "to education the public about the inner workings of the human body and show the effects of poor health, good health and lifestyle choices." Responding to the question of why models are not sufficient, the web site responds

Real human bodies show the details of disease and anatomy that cannot be shown with models. They also allow us to understand how each body has its own unique features, even on the inside. Visitors are drawn to real specimens in a way that they are not to plastic models. One of the special features of museums and science centres is that they offer people a chance to see the real thing in a safe and informative environment.

Body Worlds' legitimation with its claims of scientific contributions are very similar to the nineteenth-century display of humans that Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues blurred the line between the unacceptable and the acceptable: between "morbid curiosity and scientific interest, chamber of horrors and medical exhibition, circus and zoological garden, theatre and living ethnographic display, scholarly lecture and dramatic monologue" (34).

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett discusses this blurring within her discussion of ways in which museums and heritage sites not only display, but do. Calling the choices that museums and sites make regarding what they display and label "the poetics of detachment," Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues fragments are made. While some fragments, appearing as "a slice of life lifted from the everyday world and inserted into the museum gallery," are constructed (thus the display constitutes the subject) (20), others create a context that transforms the grotesque into science (23).

Similarly, Claudio Minca and Tim Oaks explain how tourist locations are performed. Tourism relies not merely fixed physical environments, but on forms of embodied activity, of performance (ix). No tourist wants to see merely a strip of land; tourists want signs explaining what happened, images of others appreciating the space, relics that again reproduce the place to take home, performances that make present the symbolic space.

So too to the visitors to Body Worlds want to see more than a cadaver lying on a table; visitors want to see what the bodies can do. What they look like if you pull our organs of the body as if they are drawers in a bureau, if you flay muscles so that the bodies look like they are flying.

The creation of performing bodies is not surprising for someone like von Hagens who is no stranger to performance. Wearing in all public appearances a hat that replicates the anatomist's hat painted by Rembrandt, von Hagen continually performs himself as a classic figure (von Hagens), and a martyr at that. His self-promoted biographical work *Pushing the Limits*, clearly presented as a 60th Birthday present to the anatomist, develops a narrative on how von Hagens was ostracized by a mainstream medical society hostile to his genius and on how he was imprisoned because of his opposition to Communism in East Germany, yet the biography little focuses on the Communist society in which von Hagens received his initial support, China.

Within the exhibit, the bodies perform, and they perform that which von Hagens and his team choose to have people see. The team chooses the poses, which flesh will be seen and which will not, the genders of models illustrating various organs. Von Hagens and his team have also clearly made the decision to have the models do more than lie on an autopsy table; they perform, and their performances are strikingly similar to those of the models filmed by Eadweard Muybridge in the nascent period of cinema. When audiences would duck in panic at the cinematic images such as that of an oncoming train. As Muybridge had models play table tennis, von Hagens presents his dead bodies engaged in soccer games. Clearly von Hagens is a mediator in the exhibit, structuring both the models and the exhibit to present a particular message.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett illustrates ways in which performances create meaning. Charles Willson Peale, for example, created exhibits of plants and animals that “testified to the purposiveness and goodness of God’s creation” (27) while a Eugenics exhibit at the American Museum of Natural History in 1932 illustrated nature’s mistakes. Von Hagens’ exhibit too performs—and it performs a male fantasy of the normal.

To teach the public as models cannot, von Hagens relies almost exclusively on male bodies, using female bodies only to illustrate the female reproductive systems and infants within the uterus. Responding to criticisms of this bias, von Hagens’ website states that von Hagens

sees himself in the tradition of Renaissance anatomists, whose works 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.

As von Hagens performs as a subject of a Rembrandt painting, he reaffirms that the male is the norm, and it is superior. Women perform to function their sexual and reproductive duties, the norm. Women’s role is to perform sex in this pornographic display.

As we've argued elsewhere, the bodies perform because—according to von Hagens and his supporters—they continually probe for truth. And as is very clear, the bodies also perform for the viewers' entertainment. Most visitors to the exhibit recognize that the souvenir booths, audio tours, and baby carriages offered at the exhibits' entrances welcome people to a pleasurable visit. This is not a dull scientific lecture; this is fun. People can see what they have not seen before, maximum visibility of the body and all its workings!

Linda Williams' study of pornography discusses how pornography also seeks to inform and give pleasure. She argues that in providing maximum visibility, or what she terms the "frenzy of the visible," "cinematic hard core [that] present[s] itself as the unfaked, unstage mechanics of sexual action" that seeks to obtain what Foucault terms "scientia sexualis."

It is no accident that visual pornography has seen itself as contributing to sex research, sex education, and practical self-help guides, nor that the genre has consistently maintained certain clinical-documentary qualities at the expense of other forms of realism or artistry that might actually be more arousing [than hard core pornography]. (Williams 48.)

Like the bodies in pornography, von Hagens' performing bodies also allow viewers to obtain "measurable, confessable 'truths'" (Williams 34). Male bodies do provide this pleasure to the viewer, but the arrangement of the exhibit illustrates that male bodies exist primarily to play soccer or chess. Women, however, exist within the exhibit to perform sexuality.

Von Hagens' exhibit is a performance. Like other museum exhibits, it chooses what will be seen and how. Though it claims to be unmediated, it is very mediated. While this in itself is typical of most museum exhibits, what is troubling about *Body Worlds* is that its performance suggests the male is the norm because it is superior. Women are encompassed within the male, except when they are othered by sexuality and reproduction. Then the woman's body is performed to merely illustrate the sexual or the maternal.

Body Worlds perpetuates a male fantasy and argues for this fantasy's genuity.

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