Science, art or carnival sideshow?

The "Human Body Worlds" exhibit in Cologne

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The “Human Body Worlds” exhibit has been on display since February 12 at Cologne's Heumarkt market square, where it is scheduled to run until July 31. The exhibit was first presented in Japan, attracting more than two and half million visitors. Only after this success with the public—and the associated commercial success—was the exhibit then put on display in Germany. Two years ago, 800,000 people came to see “Human Body Worlds” in Mannheim. Later the exhibit was visited by 550,000 people in Vienna, and 600,000 in Basle, Switzerland. In terms of numbers of visitors, it is reportedly the largest exposition ever held in Austria.

As in its previous incarnations, the exhibit in Cologne was accompanied by a public debate on the merits or lack of merits of “Human Body Worlds”. In his exposition, anatomy Professor Gunther von Hagens has assembled more than 200 so-called plastinates, including 25 full-body plastinates, i.e., specially prepared human corpses.

Von Hagens developed a special technique for this in which human tissue fluid, i.e., fat and water, is completely replaced by synthetic materials. Depending on which kind of synthetic material is used (silicone rubber, epoxy resin or polyester), the prepared specimens are firm or flexible, transparent or opaque. In any case, they are durably preserved while retaining their natural surface structure. They “are in the identical condition they were in prior to preservation, all the way down to the microscopic level,” writes von Hagens. “Thus, even microscopic examinations can still be carried out.”

The anatomist receives permission for plastination from the subsequent display or study subjects while they are still alive. But to avoid any adverse reactions from next of kin who may also attend the exhibition, the full-body plastinates have been made anonymous. This is usually done by removing the facial skin. More than 1,400 people have already declared their willingness to donate their body “to the service of science”—and thus eternalise themselves.

Plastination is undoubtedly a trailblazing development in medicine, particularly for the training of physicians. Accordingly, there were no objections against the exhibit from the medical profession. However loud protests have been heard from the churches and organisations or individuals close to them. They made every effort to prevent the exhibit being held. The Catholic and Protestant churches both declared that the exhibit was not only a breach of ethical and moral values, but also flew in the face of Christian principles and even of natural law. Human dignity must be respected after death as well, they said.

The exhibition opponents eventually even got support from a legal expert. Ernst Benda, a former head of Germany's Supreme Court, considers the exposition to be not only ethically, but also legally questionable. According to Benda, who incidentally is also a former chairman of the German Protestant Church Congress, individuals do not have the right to dispose of their own bodies with the exception of organ donation and donations to the service of science!

The two churches are considering taking action against “Human Body Worlds” both in the law courts and with meetings and demonstrations. But in view of the absurd claims put forward by the churches, Professor von Hagens and his press office remain unconcerned about any possible attacks on the exhibition.

And, indeed, there can be no worldly objections to such an exhibit. It can provide interested members of the general public with a comprehensive understanding of the human body, the inner organs, nervous system, blood circulation—in short, of the entire human anatomy. This is a goal both physicians and artists have been pursuing or observing with fascination for centuries. The exhibit's publicity brochure, for instance, quotes Germany's most famous poet Johann Wolfgang Goethe with the words: “Anatomical dissection opens up the profundity of nature to us more than any other effort and observation.”

Unfortunately, the exhibition is not rooted in this tradition. The great possibilities of plastination for conveying the fascination of the human body are only hinted at in the exhibit, or indeed thwarted by various circumstances.

Von Hagens, who was born in 1945, is reported to have had a lively interest in the human body, particularly in corpses, since he was a child. He grew up in the former German Democratic Republic, and enrolled for medical studies there in 1965 at Jena University. He was imprisoned for two years in 1968 for a failed attempt to flee to the West. In August 1970 he was ransomed by the West German government, after which he continued his studies at Lübeck University. He started working in the anatomy and pathology institute of the University of Heidelberg in 1975. He has been working on the development of plastination for the past 23 years.

Von Hagens has completely dedicated his life to research on, and particularly the preservation of, the human body. He wishes—like any other scientist, one would imagine—to make his findings and developments available to the public, making the fascination of human anatomy comprehensible, or at least more comprehensible, to people with no medical training. Up to this point, the professor's project merits support, and his exhibition is largely able to contribute to this goal.

However, von Hagens sees himself as having developed not only plastination, but also what he calls “aesthetic anatomy”. True, he has ceased calling himself an artist in interviews, preferring to be regarded as an enlightener and inventor, as a scientist. But this has more to do evidently with publicity hype, because he nonetheless continually endeavours to elevate to the level of art not only his exhibition but also his own person (he appears in public in garb identical to that of the celebrated modern German artist Joseph Beuys).

For instance, two years ago he explained: “Full-body plastination, in

particular, is an intellectual and sculptural achievement in which one should envisage the outcome right from the start, just as an artist can already see the statue he intends to carve out of a block of stone." His reference to Goethe is also a means of associating himself and his work with art. In this field, however, von Hagens doesn't go beyond the level of cheap thrills.

The histories of medicine and aesthetics have been closely interconnected for centuries. Even today, the medical profession is sometimes referred to as an art. But, unfortunately, Professor von Hagens' approach to this interrelationship is far too superficial. Art, like science (including medicine), attempts to perceive and recognise the truth, to see what is intrinsic in life. But they do it in different ways.

Science attempts to solve the riddle of life, of human beings, by means of abstract models and terms addressed to human intellect, striving to raise people's consciousness about themselves. Art, on the other hand, strives to fathom life with the aid of sensations, passions, emotions, "using imagery in the form of living, sensory comprehension" (Alexander Voronsky).

So, when von Hagens cites Goethe's passionate interest in the human body, his actual point of reference is the great German writer's passion for the human body in all its subtleties and details. Aesthetics must be searched for and found in the human body itself. Insight into the human body and its anatomy provided Goethe and other artists with a greater understanding of human beings and their inner, functional lives. This insight flowed into Goethe's complete works; he elaborated it in his art, but with his own particular literary style and approach.

And what is von Hagens' conception of aesthetics? In what way does he let his fascination for human anatomy flow into his form of art with imagination, inventiveness and passion? And, for that matter, what exactly *is* his form of art? What, specifically, constitutes the artistic content of the work of this doctor from Heidelberg?

Plastination is primarily the work of a highly skilled craftsman. The sliced plastinates (humans cut into 3- to 8-centimetre thick slabs), for instance, are obtained by machine-sawing deep-frozen human corpses. They are then plastinated and arranged for the exhibit. In the case of other plastinates, the skin, a leg, an arm, the head, etc., have to be removed with professional skill. This is definitely work that requires an expert. But what is supposed to be artistic about it?

If anything, von Hagens' plastinates are reminiscent of the work of British artist Damien Hirst, who places sharks, other marine creatures, cows' heads and sliced pigs in formaldehyde, then arranges them. In Hirst's case this seems largely an expression of superficial trends in contemporary society—more gimmickry and marketing ploy than honest artistic effort.

But this tendency also dominates at the "Human Body Worlds" exhibition. There are plastinates called "The Fencer," "The Runner," "The Chess Player" and "The Lasso Thrower," named according to their poses. I am at a loss to understand why a prepared corpse is supposed to be aesthetic or artistic just because, for instance, a sword was put in its hand and it was positioned appropriately.

One plastinate is modelled on Salvador Dali's 1936/37 painting "Burning Giraffe". In the foreground of the painting there is a woman standing on stilts with drawers in her legs and torso. Dali was a surrealist. He was reworking dreams in this painting. The "Drawer Man" plastinate is modelled on this woman in Dali's painting. Parts of the body were accurately cut out of a stout male corpse. As a result, however, little can be seen of the anatomy—where is the aesthetic value?

My impression of another plastinate was similar: a man without skin, but carrying his skin over his arm (this is the figure shown on the posters advertising the exhibit). The size of the skin which is the largest human sensory organ, is obscured. Wouldn't it have been more elucidating to have spread it out in its entire size?

These plastinate arrangements have nothing to do with art. Von Hagens may well be a very good anatomist and highly skilled in the technique of corpse preservation, but an artist he is not. It is a pity he still acts as if he were an artist, because the "unarranged" full-body plastinates (a number of plastinates he simply placed in an upright position) and the plastinates of individual organs can provide insights that von Hagens' arrangements tend to obscure. The arrangements hinder the perception of the complexity, size and also vulnerability of the human body because the objects (which is what the plastinates are without von Hagens' installation) are then suffused with emotions.

For example, I stood for a very long time in front of the plastinate of a five-month-pregnant woman that had been positioned upright without any particular pose, quite fascinated by the sight of it. The woman's stomach had been cut open, and the foetus, uterus, lungs (she was a smoker), and so on, were plain to see.

Another woman, however—also five to six months pregnant—had been positioned "artistically." She was lying on a long sheet of steel, in a rather lascivious position with her head resting lightly on her arm. She gives the impression of lying on a bed or couch in expectation of her lover. Her pose made her seem very real. And that made me think of her fate. A woman who died in the sixth month of pregnancy. Why? How? Where is her lover or husband, the father of the foetus one can see due to her stomach having been opened up? This plastinate evoked not so much fascination as repulsion.

Here, and in other plastinates, the obvious intention is to give the observers a touch of horror for their money, employing the same voyeuristic effects carnival showmen have used in their curiosity and "freak" shows for centuries. The fact that the exhibit is being held in a tent on the Heumarkt market square in Cologne's old town centre (not far from the cathedral) merely adds to this impression. The display of misshapen, unborn children preserved in jars from older pathological collections also exploits the effect of the macabre.

Von Hagens addresses this effect more or less explicitly. In a documentary film about him, we see his first visit to the anatomical theatre of Padua University in Italy. The wax models on display there are regarded as the best and most extensive anatomy collection in the world. This collection dates back to the great anatomist Andreas Vesal (1514-64).

The professor from Heidelberg is fascinated by these models created by renowned artists. This, says von Hagens, is all that is needed for training physicians. When the documentary filmmaker asks him why, in that case, he makes plastinates, all von Hagens can think of in reply is: "I just asked myself the same question." But then he adds—presumably to soothe his inquisitive conscience: "The general public needs the real thing."

On the "Human Body Worlds" web site, von Hagens writes: "Leonardo da Vinci and Andreas Vesal, the two outstanding anatomical artists of the Renaissance, were the first to discover that the beauty of the body's exterior is based on the astounding functional structures of the body's interior. Neither illustrations nor models can convey the individual beauty of these structures to us, for the source of truth is in the originals."

One would think the exhibit in Padua should have set him right on that count. He himself was fascinated by the models created by da Vinci, Vesal and other artists, and declared that they could be used to train physicians. Why then should non-physicians demand and require more? Anyway, they probably wouldn't be able to recognise the difference between "the real thing" and a model, because in actual fact the plastinates are *not* originals. Through von Hagens and his work they have become anonymous objects. Infused with synthetic material and positioned in poses or cut into thin slices, they resemble precision models. In fact real dead people smell, rot and decay. The plastinates don't smell—except of plastic. They don't rot or decay. At most, they get a bit dusty. The only effect knowing that this is "the real thing" has on a non-professional is to send shivers up and down his or her spine.

As such, Gunther von Hagens' full-body plastinates offer very little in

the way of providing clarification and enlightenment with respect to death—despite all his claims to the contrary. (The jet-black plastinated smoker's lung is much more impressive and educational in this regard.) A letter to an editor included in a advertising flyer for the exhibition is totally incorrect in this respect. It states: “Thus, he [von Hagens] gives us an insight into what is left of our bodies after death.” In fact the plastinates have little in common with the process of bodily disintegration after death.

What becomes clear is von Hagens' attitude to the prevailing *zeitgeist*. In an interview he says: “When people submit themselves in the next generation as body donors for plastination, they transform the human body into a cultural asset ...”, creating something that will “remain beyond death”.

It may well be that some of the body donors want to transform themselves into a cultural asset—and thus become immortal. Whether this is due to the lack of other cultural assets these people can leave to posterity is a moot point. In creating culture of this type, all that counts anymore is *whether* it can be done—no matter how—but not *what* is done. Form and effect are in complete supremacy over content. After all, anyone can donate his or her body.

At any rate, one thing is certain: von Hagens is equally as skilled at marketing himself as he is in preserving corpses. Lured by his interviews, the media hoopla and the “scariness” of his exhibit, hundreds of thousands of people will undoubtedly come to the show in Cologne. This will not only add to von Hagens' fame, but also bring in a tidy sum for the sponsors of the event. With an admission price hardly suitable for broad enlightenment, namely 22 marks for working adults and 16 marks for school and university students (no price reduction for the unemployed or social welfare recipients), the proceeds should be substantial.