

Lifeworks

Körperwelten/Body Worlds

Aside from the mundane task of finding a parking spot in Munich on a Wednesday evening, *Körperwelten* (Body Worlds) is problematic. It's hard to know what to make of "The Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies" currently on display in the former velodrome of the Olympic Park.

I attended with my friend Martin, a German neurologist who was also driver and translator for the evening. We are both still young enough to remember those first medical school days spent behind the closed doors of the gross anatomy labs; nevertheless, we were curious (but skeptical) about an exhibition of real (dead) human bodies.

One specimen prominently displayed in the old velodrome sits astride a bicycle. Is the irony intentional or just co-

idental? No ordinary cyclist, this larger-than-life cadaver has undergone a significant makeover. Spacers have been inserted between the vertebrae. Limb bones are divided and elongated to create a human form that brings to mind an eight-foot-tall Über Armstrong hunched over the handlebars of a gigantic roadbike. Not quite Lance though, as *two* preserved but smallish leathery testes dangle over the bike's crossbar.

The Munich town council earlier this year tried (twice) to prevent the exhibition from opening, arguing disrespect for the human body and lack of artistic or educational merit. Professor Gunther von Hagens successfully defended his "democratization of anatomy" in court. He is a former University of Heidelberg anatomy professor. The Web site

(www.bodyworlds.com) also notes that he completed a doctorate in the Department of Anesthetics and Emergency Medicine in 1975. In the late 1970s he developed, then astutely patented, a process to preserve cadaver specimens in a durable and lifelike manner. This "plastination" technique replaces body fluids and fat with polymers such as silicone rubber, epoxy resins, and polyester. Since 1996 Hagens has been a visiting professor at the School of Medicine in Dalian, China, and Director of the Plastination Centre at the State Medical Academy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

In a full colour promotional brochure (available in four languages) for the exhibi-

tion, Professor Hagens states, or rather majestically intones, the philosophy and the aim of *Körperwelten*:

We are all mortal, death thus belongs to all of us. But the modern medical community has hidden death away in the hospitals Anatomical self-knowledge is essential in order to be able to assume responsibility for the well-being of your body. Never before have issues concerning our bodily existence and health been dealt with more authentically and successfully than in *Körperwelten*. The exhibition has become a worldwide success because it opens our hearts to ourselves.

The exhibition not only opened but has been extended by three months to Aug. 17, 2003. Given the subject matter at hand, the professor agreed to some enigmatic concessions at the request of the councillors. The Goalie and the Basketball Player were not to be displayed with their respective balls (Martin translated the accompanying sign for me: "Because of political dribbling, the basketball is not here.") The plastinated Horseman astride his plastinated steed could not be shown (no educational value there, according to Munich's town fathers and mothers). But the Cyclist and his cycle are judged inseparable, the Pole Vaulter remains suspended upside down on his pole, and the Teacher keeps a firm grip on his stick of chalk and lesson book. Even more disturbingly sensational is the spectacle of the plastinated Pregnant Woman immutably joined to her plastinated 32-week fetus. Meanwhile, post-modern Roy Rogers and Trigger were not removed from the exhibition, only coyly shielded from curious eyes in a spectacular wrap of gold foil.

What exactly is the good professor's anatomy lesson plan?

As I moved among the exhibits I listened to my telephone audioguide (in English). The explanations were basic, objective and impersonal anatomy notes: finger movements are controlled by muscles pulling on tendons inserted



Rider with horse. Exhibit from the Körperwelten / Body Worlds Exhibition, 2003. © Prof. Dr. Gunther von Hagens, Institut für Plastination, Heidelberg, Germany. www.bodyworlds.com

into bones; the heart is a muscular pump connected to a network of arteries and veins; notice the long sciatic nerve running the length of the lower limb, etc. The viewer is left to work out for himself why one dancing specimen sports a fedora in the style of Michael Jackson, another holds up his skin in his right hand like a pair of coveralls, or why most of the corpses appear to be relatively younger males rather than old women (the unofficial answer is that fewer missing body parts and bigger muscles make for better definition of the plastinated tissues).

I also wonder about the nature of the donors' consents before they were assigned their new postmortem identities. Who was the Goalkeeper before he signed on with Professor Hagens' team? Did he ever play soccer? Would the prospect of spending a very long time in goal matter to him? How did the Pregnant Woman die? Who applied the tattoo to the left ring finger of the man now spread out before the viewer in 5 transparent frontal sections? The absence of a personal history for each of these "immortal" specimens is troubling. We are asked to engage with these animate inanimates while remaining disconnected from their former humanity. Even as medical students we were provided with the age of our cadaver and the main cause of death. Any transient fascination with beefy quadriceps, mechanical aortic valve *in situ*, protruding tongue, or unblinking eyes soon gives way to a desire to know more about who these specimens were before they were plastinated.

It is estimated that a million people will make their way out to the Arena Munich and pay 6 to 12 Euros each (\$10–\$20) to get up close but not too personal with Gunther von Hagens' collection. Plastinating a corpse, we are informed, is a costly and time-consuming process. Since the professor's troupe first went on tour in Japan in 1996, over 11 million people have had a look, making it "the most successful touring exhibition worldwide."

Judging from the handwritten comments on display at the exit, a lot of people are happy enough to pay this price for



Cyclist. Exhibit from the *Körperwelten / Body Worlds* Exhibition, 2003. © Prof. Dr. Gunther von Hagens, Institut für Plastination, Heidelberg, Germany. www.bodyworlds.com

such an anatomy lesson. According to my translator's reading of selected comments, many viewers express gratitude to Hagens for the chance to look at a dead body. About as many also complain about not getting to see *das Pferd* (the horse). Some of us have an insatiable appetite for manufactured reality.

Plastination raises a number of ethical, aesthetic and even anatomical questions that are difficult to answer. Martin wondered if the exhibition would have nearly the mass appeal if the tissue best preserved through plastination were fat, rather than vessels or muscle. Stefan Ruzowitzky's *Anatomy*, a horror film based on the scenario of plastinating *live* human bodies has already hit the cinemas. After the sequels, then what? With the benefit of a few syringes of epoxy and silicone, could Mick and Keith's playing days be prolonged indefinitely? It is rumoured that the good professor may already have conferred immortality on them prior to their current Licks tour.

On the *Körperwelten* corporate Web site, comments by "VIPs" are posted.

Dustin Hoffman's note to the professor is instructive: "Thank you Gunther for this extraordinary exhibition & hope it's many many years before either of us wind up there." Is Hoffman saying he'd be reluctant to play the part of Famous Actor in the professor's anatomy theatre, but it's okay to view the plastinated corpse of an Anonymous Anatomist (who may have been a baker in his former life)? André Agassi exclaims: "What an incredible learning experience!" I wonder if he and the similarly enthusiastic Steffi are planning to make a postmortem appearance in *The Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies of Former Number One Male and Female Tennis Pros*? The exhibition could use a few more bulked and toned female cadavers. And there's definitely a need for a Doctor among all those high-profile athletes. Interested parties should check out "body donor" on the Web site.

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