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Body Ethics, Body Aesthetics

By Anita Allen

The Philadelphia Franklin Institute has gotten off easy being host to Gunther von Hagens' "Body Worlds." With barely a hint of ethical controversy, the most visited exhibit in the esteemed science museum's history has been in town since last fall. More than 200,000 people have paid \$25 each to be awed, educated and amused.

Ethical concerns raised by Body Worlds deserve greater attention. Notwithstanding the vaunted educational benefits, turning corpses into art and entertainment feels like moral madness to me.

Body Worlds features dynamically posed and meticulously dissected cadavers, dubbed "plastinates" by von Hagens, a German medical-specimens supplier and occasional professor. In a once-patented preservation process, the anatomist impregnates real brains, muscles and guts with fluid plastics like silicon rubber and epoxy to halt natural decay. Teams of dissectors and plastinators work with von Hagens at his plant in Dalian, China.

Von Hagens could have remained an obscure medical-specimens vendor. But he had artistic conceits and learned that posed corpses attract mass audiences. So, a baroquely filleted cadaver sports a silly hat. Another, expanded to the size of the Jolly Green Giant, pedals a super-size bicycle. Others clutch suits of skin, brains or viscera.

At the Franklin Institute, a dissected horse and rider, gymnasts, a basketball player, an archer, a teacher, and a contemplative chess player have been on view. Dramatic lighting, classical allusions, and philosophical musings on the walls make the ghoulish grand.

But should anyone be in the business of dissecting and posing preserved dead people? According to Steven Snyder, vice president for exhibitions and programs, the institute consulted "about 20" ethics experts before opening Body Worlds, including bioethicists, physicians, Catholics, an Episcopalian and a rabbi. Snyder reports that the ethics review "seemed like a good idea" required by "due diligence" to ascertain whether the exhibit would be "appropriate in the context of Philadelphia."

But the ethics board, as Snyder concedes, was convened only after the institute had already decided to hold the show. Two board meetings were held, but many of the advisers approved by telephone, never seeing a plastinate or meeting in committee.

And, really, only an in-person visit will do. Until I experienced firsthand the ways in which the exhibit's dissected cadavers are posed and arranged, I did not appreciate the ethical implications of Body Worlds' body language.

Now in the final weeks of its Philadelphia sojourn, Body Worlds has produced as little public ethical protest in the City of Brotherly Love as it did when held in museums in Los Angeles and Chicago. "Bodies: The Exhibition," a competing exhibit at New York City's South Street Seaport, is another story. Nationally publicized outcries from human-rights groups and the Chinese American community followed reports that

Sui Hongjin, von Hagens' former partner, may have used deceased Chinese prisoners and unclaimed corpses.

Such opportunism by an exhibitor would violate notions of justice and informed consent we hold dear. Before medical care, participation in research, or donating their corpses, individuals are supposed to be told of the purposes, costs and benefits. Once informed, they may elect to consent, free of deception, duress or coercion.

Facing questions, von Hagens assures American host museums that the anonymous donors of his "plastinates" gave their informed consent and that he has documents on file in China to prove it. But clearly von Hagens did not obtain informed consent from all of his exhibits.

Children's bodies are included in von Hagens' show. The notion of "informed consent" does not extend to youngsters incapable of independent judgment. And how could an adult give consent "on behalf of" a living child? An exhibit called "The Family" consists of a man, woman and child. These individuals were never a family in real life. So where did the child come from, and who consented on its behalf?

I doubt that some of von Hagens' donors would have consented to being posed as he has posed them. We see, reclining like a sexpot, the cadaver of a pregnant woman who apparently agreed to plastination a month before her due date. Would she have approved her pose, and does it matter to "informed" consent?

Bad enough that the Franklin Institute chose - on the advice of its ethics board - to conceal the pregnant cadaver behind a "sensitivity" curtain like pornography at a video rental store. But the institute also decided she should share her dark curtain of shame with two walls of deformed fetuses and newborns. Von Hagens says he obtained his tiny specimens from "historic pre-1920s collections" and that they were freshly plastinated after long lives in jars of alcohol or formalin. Franklin Institute officials do not know whether they are products of abortions, or whether the mothers consented to their exhibition.

It is surprising that an American public embraces von Hagens' plastination project. Cadaver shows require the kind of things condemned, often by religion, as disrespect, desecration, or defilement of the dead.

We are better known for resisting utilitarian treatment of corpses. We hate the cruel Nazi-era scientists who conducted "beneficial" experiments on the living and dead. Ambivalent about depersonalizing corpses, some U.S. medical schools hold memorial services for the donated cadavers anatomy students must dissect.

Cavalier or unusual treatment of corpses makes us uneasy. All over the country, communities become alarmed if urban construction projects upset forgotten cemeteries. New Orleans' residents invested mightily in reintering the dead displaced by Hurricane Katrina. Decades after war's end, the federal government would not give up on recovering the minimal remains of Americans who died in Vietnam. Sept. 11 victims' families remain upset that tiny bits of tissue and DNA from their loved ones lay unconsecrated among ordinary debris in a Fresh Kills, Staten Island, garbage dump.

Why isn't the public more troubled? Evidently, millions agree with the Franklin Institute: The financial, educational and scientific benefits outweigh any costs.

I don't agree. Nor, however, can I draw a precise line between bad taste and bad ethics, or, for that matter, between commerce and science, education and entertainment, art and kitsch.

That difficulty might recommend silence over a public fuss. But I am going to speak my mind anyway: The dead are dead, but the finality of death is no argument for flouting or abandoning deeply felt values.

ONLINE EXTRA

For information about the Body Worlds exhibition at the Franklin Institute, go to <http://go.philly.com/body>.

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