



PROJECT MUSE®

“Skinless Wonders”: Body Worlds and the Victorian Freak Show

Nadja Durbach

Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences, Volume 69,
Number 1, January 2014, pp. 38-67 (Article)

Published by Oxford University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jhm/summary/v069/69.1.durbach.html>

“Skinless Wonders”: *Body Worlds* and the Victorian Freak Show

NADJA DURBACH

Department of History, University of Utah, Carolyn Tanner Irish Humanities Building,
215 South Central Campus Drive, Room 310, Salt Lake City, Utah 84112.
Email: n.durbach@utah.edu

ABSTRACT. In 2002, Gunther von Hagens’s display of plastinated corpses opened in London. Although the public was fascinated by *Body Worlds*, the media largely castigated the exhibition by dismissing it as a resuscitated Victorian freak show. By using the freak show analogy, the British press expressed their moral objection to this type of bodily display. But *Body Worlds* and nineteenth-century displays of human anomalies were linked in more complex and telling ways as both attempted to be simultaneously entertaining and educational. This essay argues that these forms of corporeal exhibitionism are both examples of the dynamic relationship between the popular and professional cultures of the body that we often erroneously think of as separate and discrete. By reading *Body Worlds* against the Victorian freak show, I seek to generate a fuller understanding of the historical and enduring relationship between exhibitionary culture and the discourses of science, and thus to argue that the scientific and the spectacular have been, and clearly continue to be, symbiotic modes of generating bodily knowledge. **KEYWORDS:** *Body Worlds*, freak shows, Gunther von Hagens, spectacle.

IN 1862, a handbill advertised that an example of a “NEW AND UNPARALLELLED DISCOVERY in the ART OF EMBALMING, Whereby the Original Form and Almost the Natural Expression of Life are Retained” was now open to the

JOURNAL OF THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE AND ALLIED SCIENCES, Volume 69, Number 1

© The Author 2012. Published by Oxford University Press. All rights reserved.

For permissions, please e-mail: journals.permissions@oup.com

Advance Access publication on June 1, 2012

doi:10.1093/jhmas/jrs035

public.¹ The dead body on display at 191 Piccadilly, a gallery usually reserved for high art, was Julia Pastrana who five years earlier had exhibited herself in London as a hairy woman. Alive she was sometimes billed as “the Nondescript,” “the Gorilla Woman,” or the “Ugliest Woman in the World.” When she died in 1860, her body was preserved and re-exhibited to an even more fascinated public² (Figure 1).

Although the bodies of dead freaks were often displayed in the context of medical museums, it was rare for a human oddity who had already made the rounds alive to be exhibited commercially after death. Pastrana’s exhibitors thus reassured the public that there was nothing “death-like or in any way resembling an ancient Egyptian mummy” in the display. In fact, the advertisement continued, “the figure is perfectly natural and exceedingly life-like.” Publicity material claimed that “her skin is as fresh and her body is as plump, as if she were alive” and that the corpse was “without odour, stain, or the faintest evidence of corruption.” There is nothing, her exhibitors declared, “that can by any possibility offend the taste or disturb the sensibility of even the most fastidious lady.”³

The posthumous exhibition of Julia Pastrana created little controversy in its own day and has largely been forgotten by the general public. In contrast, in almost every city where it has appeared, *Body Worlds*, Gunther von Hagens’s display of preserved corpses, has stimulated heated public debate. Although the ubiquitousness of *Body Worlds* (to say nothing of its spin-offs and copy-cats), which has now appeared across Europe, Asia, and North America, has rendered it a “cross-cultural enterprise,” the anxieties it has

1. Handbill for Julia Pastrana, 1862, 191 Piccadilly, John Johnson Collection, Human Freaks Box 2, Oxford University, Oxford, England.

2. Janet Browne and Sharon Messenger, “Victorian Spectacle: Julia Pastrana, the Bearded and Hairy Female,” *Endeavour*, 2003, 27, 39–53; Rebecca Stern, “Our Bear Women, Ourselves: Affiliating with Julia Pastrana,” in *Victorian Freaks: The Social Context of Freakery in Britain*, ed. Marlene Tromp (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008), 200–33; Rosemarie Garland Thomson, “Narratives of Deviance and Delight: Staring at Julia Pastrana, ‘The Extraordinary Lady,’” in *Beyond the Binary: Reconstructing Identity in a Multicultural Context*, ed. Timothy B. Powell (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 81–104; Eva Åhrén, *Death, Modernity, and the Body: Sweden 1870–1940* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2009), 73–75.

3. Handbill for Julia Pastrana.



Fig. 1. Julia Pastrana, the embalmed “nondescript.” Reproduced courtesy of the Wellcome Library, London.

generated are nevertheless often culturally and regionally specific.⁴ In Germany, critics of the show have underscored the exhibition’s relationship to debates over the uses and abuses of vulnerable bodies

4. Alicita Rodriguez and Joseph Starr, “Introduction,” in *The Anatomy of Body Worlds*, ed. T. Christine Jespersen, Alicita Rodriguez, and Joseph Starr (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2009), 1–7, 2.

in the context of the Holocaust.⁵ In Britain, however, *Body Worlds* was widely condemned as a resuscitated Victorian freak show. Throughout its 2002–3 run, the print media castigated the London exhibition by comparing it to the displays of human oddities that were so central to nineteenth-century British popular culture. In this critique, the freak show functions as a shameful episode in the nation's past, the skeleton in the closet that *Body Worlds's* own human remains have forced back out into the open. British responses to the exhibition were thus shaped by this country's own complicated relationship not only to the history of anatomy, a subject that has been extensively discussed, but also to the history of displaying other types of spectacular bodies.⁶

This essay argues that the analogy between *Body Worlds* and the freak show, which has been endlessly and often uncritically reproduced by both the media and scholarship on the exhibit, holds not because this show is merely a voyeuristic, exploitative, and lurid exhibit of human bodies, as its critics have implied. Rather, the relationship between these displays is relevant precisely because both *Body Worlds* and nineteenth-century displays of human anomalies attempted to be simultaneously entertaining and educational. They are both examples of the dynamic relationship between the popular and professional cultures of the body that we often erroneously think of as separate and discrete. By reading *Body Worlds* against the Victorian freak show, I intend neither to celebrate nor condemn what von Hagens calls “event anatomy.”⁷ I seek instead to generate a fuller understanding of the historical and enduring relationship between exhibitionary culture and the discourses of science, and thus to argue that the scientific and the spectacular have been, and clearly continue to be, symbiotic modes of generating bodily knowl-

5. Peter M. McIsaac, “Gunther Von Hagens's *Body Worlds*: Exhibitionary Practice, German History, and Difference,” in *Museums and Difference*, ed. Daniel J. Sherman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 155–202; Alexandra Ludewig, “The Echo of German Horror Films,” in *The Anatomy of Body Worlds*, ed. Jespersen, Rodriguez, and Starr, 136–49.

6. Stephen Johnson, “The Persistence of Tradition in Anatomical Museums,” in *The Anatomy of Body Worlds*, ed. Jespersen, Rodriguez, and Starr, 68–85; Patricia Pierson, “The Amethyst Seal: Anatomy and Identity in Bentham and Von Hagens,” in *The Anatomy of Body Worlds*, ed. Jespersen, Rodriguez, and Starr, 94–104.

7. Joseph Starr, “The Plastinate's Narrative,” in *The Anatomy of Body Worlds*, ed. Jespersen, Rodriguez, and Starr, 8–15, 8.

edge.⁸ Although historians of anatomy have demonstrated that the spectacularization of medicine has a long history in Western culture, a history of the freak show makes the obverse more transparent. As I will argue, by the nineteenth century, freak shows were self-consciously engaging in a dialogue with the medical profession rather than constructing themselves as belonging to a wholly distinct corporeal domain. Placing *Body Worlds* in the context of the history of freakery thus helps both to clarify and to complicate the connections between popular and professional understandings of the modern body. But this reading also forces a reconsideration of what *Body Worlds* can tell us about the relationship between Self and Other, a discussion that has not been as clearly articulated by merely locating the exhibit within the history of anatomy.

In 2002, Gunther von Hagens, a German anatomist and inventor, brought his exhibition, *Body Worlds*, to London. *Body Worlds* is a display of real anatomized human corpses arranged in highly dramatic poses. The bodies are preserved through a process that von Hagens invented and patented called “plastination.” This process removes the waters and fats from bodily tissue and replaces them with a liquid polymer. The polymer saturates the tissue and preserves the body as a “plastinate” that will not decompose, apparently, for a period of at least a thousand years.⁹

The *Body Worlds* London show cost £10 to attend and attracted almost a million visitors during its ten-month run; in fact, it was twice held over to accommodate overwhelming public demand. But von Hagens’s own graphs of audience response suggest that London audiences were not entirely convinced by the show’s proclaimed didactic and moralistic message: they consistently rated its impact on their attitudes to health and fitness lower than spectators in other European and Japanese cities.¹⁰ In part this was because the educational message of the show was quickly overshadowed by accusations that the bodies on display had not been obtained through legal and

8. For an extended discussion of multiple contexts for this dynamic relationship, see Elizabeth Stephens, *Anatomy as Spectacle: Public Exhibitions of the Body from 1700 to the Present* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011).

9. Gunther von Hagens, *Donating Your Body for Plastination* (Heidelberg: Institute for Plastination, 2004), 11–12; Tony Walter, “Plastination for Display: A New Way to Dispose of the Dead,” *J. Roy. Anthro. Inst.*, 2004, 10, 603–27.

10. Von Hagens, *Donating Your Body for Plastination*, 20.

ethical channels but instead had come from prisons and other institutions in Siberia.¹¹ This charge had particular resonance in Britain in the wake of the Alder Hey scandal that had erupted in the late 1990s around the illegal harvesting of body parts from deceased children in state hospitals.¹²

Public reception of the London show, as the press frequently noted, was shaped by this recent national uproar around the uses and abuses of the dead body. But what also structured the audience's engagement with the plastinates was the media's condemnation of the exhibition as "a shameless Victorian freak show."¹³ The charge that *Body Worlds* was merely a twenty-first-century freak show seems to have been lodged first by the British art critic Waldemar Januszczak. He condemned it as a sign of "civilisational regression" precisely because of its alleged relationship to the Victorian exhibition of "human oddities." "The nearest comparison I can think of is with the freak shows that used to tour the backwaters of civilisation in the nineteenth century," he declared. "The ones in which the poor old elephant man was forced to appear. Or the bearded lady. Or the boy with two heads."¹⁴ All of the major British daily newspapers seized on this connection and repeated the analogy *ad nauseum*. Headlines for articles about, and reviews of, the exhibit repeatedly gestured to nineteenth-century displays of human anomalies such as "Dr. Death and His Travelling Freak Show" or "A Bit of a Freak Show, but Where's the Harm?"¹⁵ But they also obviously uncritically reproduced *Body Worlds's* sensational advertising that they themselves seemed to condemn precisely because of its

11. Nick Paton Walsh, "Pathologist Charged in Plastination Case," *Guardian*, October 17, 2002, 17; Clem Cecil, "Scientist 'Supplied Body Parts,'" *Times*, October 17, 2002, 20; Amelia Gentleman and Kate Conolly, "Siberians Fear for Exported Bodies," *Guardian*, April 12, 2001, 13; Luke Harding, "Body Blow," *Guardian*, January 23, 2004, 20; Ruth Levy Guyer, "Anatomy without Integrity," in *The Anatomy of Body Worlds*, ed. Jespersen, Rodriguez, and Starr, 202–10; Lucia Tanassi, "Twilife: The Art and Science of Consuming Death," in *The Anatomy of Body Worlds*, ed. Jespersen, Rodriguez, and Starr, 228–39.

12. Dalya Alberge, "Body Parts Show to Go Ahead Despite Protests," *Times*, March 21, 2002, 6.

13. Anon., "Exhibition Gets under the Skin," *Times*, March 23, 2002, 14.

14. Waldemar Januszczak, "It's a Wicked Joke but It Isn't Art," *Sunday Times*, March 24, 2002, 3G, 11.

15. "Dr. Death and His Travelling Freak Show," *Sunday Times*, March 24, 2002, in Clippings File HH (Body Worlds), Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, London, England; Simon Jenkins, "A Bit of a Freak Show, but Where's the Harm?," *Evening Standard*, November 21, 2002, 11.

link to this unsavory part of Britain's history. The text of these articles returned to this "hot-button" issue for dramatic effect: one reporter maintained that the plastinates were the "younger cousins of the things you used to be able to see in carnivals and freak shows."¹⁶ Another called it "a globetrotting flay and display carnival,"¹⁷ and yet another, a "cabaret of corpses."¹⁸

What did these journalists really mean when they attacked *Body Worlds* as "a freak show in the worst traditions of Victorian ghoulishness?"¹⁹ Anatomy has a long history bound up in public performance and display. Since the Renaissance, dissections have been performed in anatomy *theatres* that were in many cases open to the public and thus encouraged a degree of performativity that linked them to the playhouse.²⁰ As Anna Maerker has argued, the tensions between education and entertainment were ever present in anatomical displays.²¹ By the nineteenth century, popular anatomical museums had become a feature of the entertainment districts of British, European, and American cities.²² Some, like Reimer's anatomical museum in London's Leicester Square, included a gallery of ethnological models where statuettes of "the Aztec Lilliputians," a famous freak shows act, were also on display. Kahn's anatomical museum similarly featured a waxworks of a family of "Niam-Niams" (tailed men) and, at least for a limited time, a live "double-bodied boy." The London Anatomical Museum exhibited a model of Julia Pastrana that might even have predated the posthumous display of her taxidermied body.²³ Anatomical museums and freak shows were not always

16. Kevin Jackson, "Dr. Frankenstein, I Presume?," *Independent*, March 19, 2002, 1.

17. Anon., "Death and a Salesman," *Times*, November 21, 2002, 25.

18. Quoted in David R. Castillo, *Baroque Horrors: Roots of the Fantastic in the Age of Curiosities* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 2.

19. Robert Hardman, "Flayed Bodies, Lungs, Brains and Kidneys," *Daily Mail*, March 23, 2002, 27.

20. Kathryn A. Hoffmann, "The Theatrical Cadaver: Staging Death in the Seventeenth Century," *CESAR/Clark Symposium* (2008), available online at: www.cesar.org.uk/cesar2/conferences/conference_2008/hoffmann_08.html (accessed April 3, 2012); Michael Sappol, *Dream Anatomy* (Bethesda, Maryland: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006), 6, 67; Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995), 39–53.

21. Anna Maerker, *Model Experts: Wax Anatomies and Enlightenment in Florence and Vienna, 1775–1815* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 214.

22. Stephens, *Anatomy as Spectacle*, 53–86; Maritha Rene Burmeister, "Popular Anatomical Museums in Nineteenth-Century England" (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2000).

23. *Catalogue of J.W. Reimer's Gallery of All Nations and Anatomical Museum* (Leeds: Jackson and Asquith, 1853); Joseph Kahn, *The Heteradelph or Double-Bodied Boy, Introduced*

entirely distinct operations and were clearly part of the same “exhibitionary complex” that characterized the Victorian taste for spectacle in general, and the spectacularization of the human body in particular.²⁴

The overlap between anatomical exhibitions and live freak shows seems to have been relatively unproblematic for nineteenth-century audiences. The relationship between these types of human displays is, however, much more fraught and complicated today. This is in large part because anatomy—a dodgy science in the early nineteenth century associated with grave-robbing, murder, and the messy manual labor of dissection—had become an integral part of professional medicine by the turn of the twentieth century, while freak shows continue to occupy the moral and medical borderlands. What it might mean to describe *Body Worlds*, which bills itself as an “anatomical exhibition,” as “a modern-day equivalent of the Victorian freak show” thus requires unpacking.²⁵

In some respects, von Hagens’s plastinates have nothing at all to do with freaks: what makes someone a “freak of nature” is entirely about the body’s surface, its exterior appearance rather than what lies underneath the skin, which is the central concern of *Body Worlds*. But as Christian DuComb argues, because the plastinates are caught in a moment between death and decay, frozen in lifelike poses, they reproduce the liminality of the freak who is similarly trapped between categories such as male/female, human/animal, or others that trouble the normal/deviant binary.²⁶ By challenging these boundaries, von Hagens’s living dead, like freak show performers, unsettle the classificatory schema that structure society.²⁷

The unsettling nature of von Hagens’s plastinates has also inspired iterations of the same type of horror and disgust often generated by

to the Public at Kahn’s Museum (London: J. Gilbert, c.1860s); R. J. Jordan, *Catalogue of the London Anatomical Museum* (London: n.p., c. 1860s).

24. Tony Bennett, “The Exhibitionary Complex,” *New Formations*, 1988, 4, 73–102; Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1978).

25. Steve Connor, “Body of Criticism Greets Artists’s Human Display,” *Independent* [foreign ed.], March 23, 2002, 9.

26. Christian DuComb, “The Politics of Fetal Display,” in *The Anatomy of Body Worlds*, ed. Jespersen, Rodriguez, and Starr, 176–88, 179.

27. Elizabeth Grosz, “Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit,” in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 55–66.

Victorian freaks. In anticipating his own reaction to the show, one journalist, in a literary performance of mock horror, maintained that his “tentative game plan” was to vomit, faint, run screaming from the hall, suffer a massive anxiety attack, or “feign [an] air of aloof, scholarly detachment, and then faint.”²⁸ Although in the end, he resorted to none of these “gambits,” another journalist claimed that *Body Worlds* is a “place where the living faint at the rate of one a day, blanch, and become very quiet and sometimes very upset.”²⁹ Even scholars who have analyzed the show for academic audiences have narrated their own “panicked” reaction to the anticipation of viewing the cadavers: “I felt dizzy; heart pounding in my chest and a sensation of nausea spreading throughout my body.”³⁰ These types of reactions to the *Body Worlds* experience reproduce the melodramatic engagement with bodily horror that has become so identified with the Victorian era. When the showman Tom Norman exhibited Joseph Merrick as “the Elephant Man” in 1884, he reported that spectators often resorted to these same histrionic practices: “there was always the gasp of horror and shock, and sometimes the hurried exit of one or more of the audience,” Norman recalled.³¹

It was not merely the shock of the corpse and the horror it engendered that rendered these plastinated bodies freakish, but the dramatic nature of the bodies themselves. Von Hagens’s first plastinates had been displayed “staring straight ahead, arms by their sides.” After reports from this original 1995 Tokyo show that the bodies looked “scary,” von Hagens decided to arrange them in “extravagant poses” to make them, ironically, more lifelike. Key to this transformation was to leave the eyebrows intact in order to give them “surprised, amused or determined expressions.” Argued von Hagens in a 2007 interview, “I took the fear out and put the humour in.”³² But by putting the humor in, he opened the door to

28. Jackson, “Dr. Frankenstein, I Presume?”

29. Stuart Jeffries, “The Naked and the Dead,” *Guardian*, March 19, 2002, 2.

30. Sebastian Abrahamsson, “Stillness-Re-Animated: Experiencing Body Worlds and the Work of Art,” in *Stillness in a Mobile World*, ed. David Bissell and Gillian Fuller (London: Routledge, 2011), 155–72, 163.

31. Tom Norman and George Barnum Norman, *The Penny Showman* (London: Privately Published, 1985), 103–4.

32. Jeremy Laurance, “Is He Merely the Sinister Creator of a Human Freakshow, or a Scientific Visionary Whose Spectacular Exhibitions Have Opened the Eyes of Millions?,” *Independent*, October 30, 2007, 2.

accusations that these were not scientific exhibits precisely because they did not reproduce the neutral pose and blank expression familiar to readers of anatomy textbooks. Instead of promoting sober reflection and intellectual engagement, like freaks, these posed plastinates provoked a combination of horrified and comic reactions in spectators, as humor and horror often work together as twin strategies to manage anxieties around uncomfortable bodies.³³ As Elizabeth Simon Ruchti has argued, the plastinates are both “a little silly and a little creepy.”³⁴

For some, it was not just the goofy poses—or for that matter the choice to exhibit deformed fetuses in glass bottles, evoking the “pickled punks” so central to sideshow culture—that undermined the exhibit’s intellectual pretensions and nudged it into the category of the carnivalesque. The corny names had a similar effect. “Naming figures the Chess Player and the Swordsman,” argued one reporter, “calls to mind the freak show spectacle of the Elephant Man and the Hottentot Venus.”³⁵ What this reporter gestured to was the ways in which freak shows constructed personae for the performers that explicitly structured how audiences were to interpret their nonnormative bodies.³⁶ Von Hagens, like freak show impresarios, named his displays in order to create identities for them that then encourage a particular reading of the plastinated body.³⁷ In both cases, despite claims to be exhibiting an “authentic” body, what was on display was in fact staged, posed, and narrated in ways that belie any attempt to suggest that in either case these were unmediated human specimens whose bodies were transparently legible.³⁸

33. Paul Semonin, “Monsters in the Marketplace: The Exhibition of Human Anomalies in Early Modern England,” in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, 61–81, 78; Nadja Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 4; Natalie Loveless, “Affecting Bodies,” in *The Anatomy of Body Worlds*, ed. Jespersen, Rodriguez, and Starr, 106–20, 111.

34. Elizabeth Simon Ruchti, “Corpse-Less: A Battle with Abjection,” in *The Anatomy of Body Worlds*, ed. Jespersen, Rodriguez, and Starr, 189–201, 198.

35. David Bibosa, “Trading Corpses,” *Morning Star*, April 2, 2002, 9.

36. Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 95–116.

37. Walter, “Plastination for Display: A New Way to Dispose of the Dead,” 606.

38. Uli Linke, “Touching the Corpse: The Unmaking of Memory in the Body Museum,” in *The Anatomy of Body Worlds*, ed. Jespersen, Rodriguez, and Starr, 150–65, 152–54; Tanassi, “Twilife: The Art and Science of Consuming Death,” 233; Jose Van Dijk, “Bodyworlds:

The physical environment of their display also shaped this reading of the plastinates as freakish. A journalist who attended the 2001–2 Brussels show that had been staged, provocatively, in an old abattoir, maintained that *Body Worlds* had a “theme-park atmosphere.”³⁹ When *Body Worlds* arrived in the United States in 2004, its marketing had significantly changed to cast the exhibition in unequivocally scientific terms. The location of the shows was crucial to this rebranding. Von Hagens thus contracted with reputable science museums such as the California Science Center (2004), Chicago’s Museum of Science and Industry (2005), and Philadelphia’s Franklin Institute (2005).⁴⁰ The 2002 London show, however, like the Brussels show it followed, was mounted in a nontraditional space: an old brewery in the East End that had recently been transformed into a venue for fashion shows and trade fairs. One journalist maintained that it was merely a “makeshift gallery,” suggesting that the very nature of this specific exhibition space made the show’s artistic claims questionable.⁴¹ When I visited the London exhibition, I was struck by the tawdriness of the physical space: the tags were falling off the walls, the paint was chipped, and an improvised café seemed decidedly out of place among the dead bodies. I attended the show near the very end of its run, when one might expect a bit of shabbiness, but others who went during its first weeks clearly had the same impression. One journalist maintained that it was the “dreadful exhibition design” that tainted the show, arguing that the “bodies themselves are not freakish.” If the show had been “dressed-up less like a cheapskate trade-fair, and more like [a] dusty path-lab” it might have avoided much of the controversy, he asserted.⁴² Another journalist noted that *Body Worlds* suffered from a lack of “attention to lighting and careful consideration of display.”⁴³ The trade journal, *Building Design*, also commented with obvious disdain about the “office lobby plants,” the “absurd” layout and the tacky “makeshift signs,” that read

The Art of Plastinated Cadavers,” *Configurations*, 2001, 9, 99–126; Stephens, *Anatomy as Spectacle: Public Exhibitions of the Body from 1700 to the Present*, 21.

39. Jackson, “Dr. Frankenstein, I Presume?”

40. Loveless, “Affecting Bodies,” 110–14; Johnson, “The Persistence of Tradition in Anatomical Museums,” 81–83.

41. Alberge, “Body Parts Show to Go Ahead Despite Protests.”

42. Adrian Searle, “Getting under the Skin,” *Guardian*, March 23, 2002, 11.

43. Bibosa, “Trading Corpses.”

“Please do not touch the plastinations.” The whole show, it claimed, was marred by the “extreme bad taste” of the design aesthetic: it looked like “a trade show for dead people.”⁴⁴

If the show was attacked for its tacky aesthetic, von Hagens himself has been repeatedly charged with being an “unashamed showman.”⁴⁵ Critics and supporters alike noted his relationship to the “cheap showmen” or “charlatans” so central to our image of the Victorian era.⁴⁶ Argued an article in the *Guardian*, von Hagens is “a P.T. Barnum basking in the media hoopla of his British reception, aware that part of the appeal of *Body Worlds* is the same as that which drew our ancestors to public executions and freak shows.”⁴⁷ An article entitled, “Death and a Salesman” maintained that if he were not running this show, he would surely be doing something that equally smacked of “hucksterism” such as “selling fake perfumes on Oxford Street.”⁴⁸ In part these charges of showmanship were a response to the explicitly commercial nature of the show. At £10, tickets were relatively expensive and the London show included the obligatory gift shop for the purchase of t-shirts and key-rings as souvenirs of one’s *Body Worlds* “experience,” a practice that freak show performers also engaged in when they hawked photographs of themselves after the performance.⁴⁹ But these charges were so pervasive in part because of the ways in which von Hagens markets himself. His public presentation is purposefully arresting: a rake-like figure in a black fedora and leather jerkin, von Hagens is frequently compared not only to the fictional Dr. Frankenstein, but also to the striking figure of the German conceptual artist Joseph Beuys and to a Nazi doctor.⁵⁰ Von Hagens appears to cultivate controversy over his appearance and self-presentation. He proclaimed in a 2001 interview with a British journalist, “call me Mr. Plastinator,”

44. Anon., “Body Blow,” *Building Design*, April 12, 2002, 28.

45. Laurance, “Is He Merely the Sinister Creator of a Human Freakshow, or a Scientific Visionary Whose Spectacular Exhibitions Have Opened the Eyes of Millions?”

46. Bel Mooney, “Pornography of Death,” *Daily Mail*, November 22, 2002, 12.

47. Jeffries, “The Naked and the Dead.”

48. Anon., “Death and a Salesman.”

49. Christopher R. Smit, “A Collaborative Aesthetic: Levinas’s Idea of Responsibility and the Photographs of Charles Eisenmann and the Late Nineteenth-Century Freak-Performer,” in *Victorian Freaks: The Social Context of Freakery in Britain*, ed. Marlene Tromp (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008), 283–311.

50. Jackson, “Dr. Frankenstein, I Presume?”; Nigel Reynolds, “‘Doctor Frankenstein’ Defends Threatened Corpse Art Exhibition,” *Daily Telegraph*, March 20, 2002, 15.

and initially insisted, as did many nineteenth-century showman, on billing himself as “Professor” despite dubious claims to that title.⁵¹

Letters to the editor of the major dailies from proponents of the show similarly deployed the freak show analogy, arguing that *Body Worlds* is not in fact a “morbid freak show,” but rather “a scientific and educational exhibition” that has a “serious purpose.” It is not, insisted one letter, “a ‘carnival side-show’ but a life-enriching experience.”⁵² Other supporters maintained that although the public is often accused of “seeking voyeuristic thrills by gawking at freakish spectacles, this is not one of those occasions.” Scientists are not the only people, he continued, who “should have access to the internals of the body,” suggesting that the show provided an anatomical education.⁵³ A British body donor explicitly argued that he would like to become a plastinate so that his “body will generate an educational interest.”⁵⁴ Von Hagens’s proponents thus defended the show by drawing on the discourses of education and science, implying that these were diametrically opposed to those of entertainment and spectacle.

Similar debates about whether von Hagens was a showman or a scientist erupted over a public autopsy that he performed in November 2002 in a space adjacent to the *Body Worlds* show. The autopsy was open to anyone who could afford and obtain the £12 ticket and was televised on Channel Four for those who could not. It was the first public anatomical examination in Britain since Jeremy Bentham was dissected in 1832 in front of invited, but fee-paying, guests.⁵⁵ The press cast the controversy over the event once again as a debate between science and spectacle: was this a “Freak show or the cutting edge of education?” queried an article in the *Times*.⁵⁶ Von Hagens claimed that the autopsy was part and parcel of his platform of the

51. Kate Conolly, “Dead Body Zone Shocks Germans,” *Guardian*, February 10, 2001, 18; Anon., “Body Worlds Professor Fined,” *Independent*, March 3, 2004, 23.

52. Margaret Widdess and Richard Widdess, “Letter: This Is No Freak Show,” *Independent* [foreign ed.], March 15, 2002, 2.

53. Connor, “Body of Criticism Greets Artists’s Human Display.”

54. Maria Hilt, “Britons Sign up to Be Pickled in Plastic,” *Independent* [foreign ed.], August 11, 2002, 5.

55. Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection, and the Destitute* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 159. Bentham’s “Auto-Icon” remains on public display in a cabinet in University College London.

56. Adam Fresco, “Freak Show or the Cutting Edge of Education?,” *Times*, November 21, 2002, 7.

“democratisation of anatomy.”⁵⁷ Some audience members clearly agreed that the demonstration was in fact not only “interesting” but also “educational.” Von Hagens clearly has advanced technical skills in the preparation of anatomical specimens, evidenced by the meteoric growth of his production plant in China that makes plastinates not only for the shows but also for medical schools. Nevertheless, some spectators reported that von Hagens lacked the ability to truly inform the audience in an effective manner about the process involved in a postmortem. He mistakenly assumed that the interior of the body would be as legible to a nonmedical audience as it was to his trained eye without realizing that he needed to render it comprehensible through presentational and representational strategies that the lay public could easily process.⁵⁸ It was his assistant, Dr. John Lee, who took over the commentary at many points who really “saved the day,” argued a medical student. Von Hagens’s performance, she claimed, was “embarrass[ing].”⁵⁹

Many critics, however, charged that this autopsy was not merely disappointing in its educational content, but was merely a publicity stunt that in the end owed as much to the popular theatre as it did to the anatomical theatre, conveniently effacing the historical connections between the two. In the words of an editor for the *Guardian*, this autopsy was merely a “spectacle” and a “circus” that encouraged not reverence for the body, but rather only “gawping voyeurism.”⁶⁰ Dr. Michael Wilks, head of the British Medical Association’s ethics committee, maintained that it was “a show rather than a lecture.” It was “more of a sensational event,” he argued, “and I don’t think the limited educational aspect justified the degrading and disrespectful way in which it was done.”⁶¹ The Channel Four news presenter was there, maintained the *Times*, “as

57. Lesley Wright, “My Week: Gunther Von Hagens,” *Independent* [foreign ed.], November 23, 2002, 21.

58. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973); Eva Åhrén and Michael Sappol, “The Strange Space of the Body: Two Dialogues,” in *Strange Spaces: Explorations into Mediated Obscurity*, ed. Amanda Lagerkvist and André Jansson (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2009), 73–88; David Armstrong, *The Political Anatomy of the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1–6; Chris Philo, “The Birth of the Clinic: An Unknown Work of Medical Geography,” *Area*, 2000, 32, 11–19.

59. Fresco, “Freak Show or the Cutting Edge of Education?”

60. Anon., “Cutting Edge Dilemma,” *Guardian*, November 21, 2002, 23.

61. Fresco, “Freak Show or the Cutting Edge of Education?”

master of ceremonies to try to give this spectacle the patina of scientific endeavor rather than Barnum and Bailey hoopla.”⁶²

What commentators who have taken sides in this education/entertainment debate have failed to understand is that it has never been an either/or proposition. Even scholars who have brought important insight to the popular fascination with *Body Worlds* by drawing connections to displays of freakery have readily assumed that those who attended the freak show were *only* hungry for “the thrill of horror” generated by “grotesque” bodies, *rather than* “thirst[y] for knowledge.”⁶³ The relationship between spectacle and science, however, is, and always has been, much more complicated. *Body Worlds* is in dialogue with the Victorian freak show precisely because the plastinates encourage us to revisit the longstanding and complicated relationship between the culture of science and that of performance and display. In the process, they force a reconsideration of whose bodies should be the object of our gaze and the cultural politics of this kind of spectatorship.

Body Worlds is of course both educational and entertaining and markets itself as “edutainment.”⁶⁴ According to its web site, the aim of *Body Worlds* is “health education.” But in order both to educate and to enlighten, von Hagens draws people to the exhibit through sensational advertising, hoping that once through the doors, audiences will absorb the didactic messages that he claims the plastinates embody. In a recent interview, von Hagens linked “sensationalism” to “curiosity” and maintained that it was curiosity that brought people into museums where, he implied, they could then be educated.⁶⁵ His publicity materials are thus deliberately arresting. The promotional pamphlet for the London show encouraged the public to come and see the “newest exhibits—some are mystical, some are sporting—they are all amazing, they all defy description!” This rhetoric unmistakably evokes the Victorian freak show, which also promised its audiences acts that were novel and indescribable. Drawing on the show world’s

62. Joe Joseph, “Nausea TV Offers Unwelcome View of Body Politics,” *Times*, November 21, 2002, 7.

63. Petra Kuppers, “Visions of Anatomy: Exhibitions and Dense Bodies,” *Differences*, 2004, 15, 123–56, 139; Pedro Ponce, “Illuminating the Soul: Panopticism and the Freak Show,” in *The Anatomy of Body Worlds*, ed. Jespersen, Rodriguez, and Starr, 86–93, 87.

64. Rosie Millard, “My Work Transforms People’s Attitudes to Their Bodies,” *Times*, June 4, 2005, 10.

65. Castillo, *Baroque Horrors: Roots of the Fantastic in the Age of Curiosities*, 2.

language of wonder and amazement, von Hagens's pamphlet included headings such as "Skinless Wonders" and "From Plastination to Fascination."⁶⁶

At times, von Hagens appears highly conscious of these choices and seems to reject the simplistic entertainment/education and science/spectacle binaries. He often seems in fact to understand where his show fits, not just in the history of anatomy, but in the broader history of the relationship between science and the sideshow. When Januszczak first attacked the exhibition during a press conference as "a nineteenth century freak show," von Hagens responded: "I love your question," though it was clearly much more of a tirade than a question.⁶⁷ Von Hagens quite astutely maintained that he is in fact presenting something much like a "circus": "Circuses are presentations which show something unusual—and I do the same," he declared, resisting the journalists' attempts to pigeon-hole the show as either "freak show or education."⁶⁸ Von Hagens thus admits that *Body Worlds* blends science and showmanship, offering the public a chance to engage with spectacular bodies while at the same providing knowledge about anatomy and physiology that was usually the preserve of the medical profession.

This combination of the scientific and the spectacular lay at the very heart of the Victorian freak show. Many of the newspapers whose reviews graced the promotional material for Julia Pastrana's posthumous exhibition focused on her display as a *scientific* wonder. *The Era*, a trade journal of the nineteenth-century entertainment industry, argued that this "remarkable Exhibition" would certainly become "one of the great sights of the forthcoming Season," precisely because it was interesting from a "scientific . . . point of view." Even the *Illustrated News of the World*, which specialized in the sensational, maintained that she was "the greatest triumph modern science has yet achieved of the exact life-like specimens of embalming."⁶⁹ Although the dead body of Julia Pastrana is fairly unique in the history of sideshow exhibition, the publicity generated around

66. "Body Worlds: The Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies" (London: 2002).

67. James Meek, "Show of Dissected Corpses Cuts Both Ways," *Guardian*, March 23, 2002, 11.

68. Millard, "My Work Transforms People's Attitudes to Their Bodies."

69. Quoted in Handbill for Julia Pastrana.

her display was typical of the Victorian freak show's marriage of science and showmanship.

Nineteenth-century displays of human oddities regularly used the language of science and medicine and often appealed to its emerging authority for their own ends. Freak show entrepreneurs reprinted the testimonials of doctors to support their own professional claims that their particular freaks of nature were both rare and genuine, rather than the gaffed bodies that disreputable showmen had on view.⁷⁰ When a family with hands and feet in the shape of crab claws arrived in London from Newfoundland in 1883, the handbill advertising the act proclaimed that they had "been examined by some of the most eminent Physicians of the day."⁷¹ Similarly, when a pair of conjoined twins appeared at the Adelaide Gallery, known as "the National Gallery of Practical Science," their handbill argued that these "remarkable Twins have been inspected by the following Members of the Medical Profession, Messrs. Biddle & Son, Edmonton; J. Wilkinson, Esq. MD Southgate, H.J. Wolstenholme, Esq. Tottenham; Lever, Esq MD of Guy's Hospital, and several other Gentlemen connected with the various Hospitals, who all agree in pronouncing them The Greatest Natural Curiosity of the Age!"⁷² Countless other freaks advertised that they had also been examined by medical professionals and certified to be authentic.

Some Victorian sideshow managers were deliberately vague about their medical contacts, speaking of "Medical Gentlemen" and "eminent Surgeons" without naming any names. But many drew on (or invented their own) experts with the appropriate credentials, such as Member of the Royal College of Surgeons (MRCS), Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians (FRCP), or Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons (FRCS). This suggests that they and their audiences were sensitive to the professional distinctions that separated the reliable, licensed practitioner, from the mere quack. Thus, many advertisements claimed that their freaks had been examined by the "medical faculty" at the most prestigious of London hospitals.

70. Heather McHold, "Diagnosing Difference: The Scientific, Medical, and Popular Engagement with Monstrosity in Victorian Britain" (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2002), 67, 75, 159.

71. "Montgomery Family," Evanion Collection, British Library, no. 1861.

72. "The Edmonton Twins," Playbills Folder (Miscellaneous): Adelaide Gallery, Guildhall Library, London.

Freak shows thus used the language and growing authority of professional medicine to promote their acts and to attract spectators. For this reason, having the certification of the medical faculty became an asset in the show world: a classified advertisement for “High-Class Prodigies” in *The Era* in 1899 declared that it “will always pay a fair price for all who have testimonials from Schools of Medicine.”⁷³

This blurring of the boundaries between the professional and the popular was also evident in the manner in which the show world borrowed from Victorian science’s own print culture. Lalloo, “the Double Bodied Hindoo Boy,” first exhibited himself and his parasitic twin in London in 1886. The leaflet sold at the show was structured as a medical case report and used technical language to describe the anatomical irregularity of the bodies. It provided exclusively medical explanations for his condition and gave an extremely detailed description, using sophisticated and specialized medical terminology, of the manner in which the bodies were united to each other.⁷⁴ When Joseph Merrick exhibited himself as “the Elephant Man” in the 1880s, he also sold a small souvenir pamphlet at his show. On the cover of this “autobiography” was an engraving of his deformed body. The image derived from an illustration (based on a clinical photograph) that had originally been produced to accompany Frederick Treves’s report on his case in the *Transactions of the Pathological Society of London*. Merrick and one of his managers manipulated the image to exaggerate Merrick’s “trunk,” a thick piece of skin that grew from his upper lip, and thus to enhance his persona as “the Elephant Man.”⁷⁵ In both of these cases, freaks and their managers deliberately used the textual and visual discourses and technologies of scientific medicine to promote their acts.

In the case of “the Elephant Man,” the freak show’s staging of deformity was so influential that it seems to have directly impacted medical interpretations of his condition. Professionals repeatedly diagnosed “the Elephant Man” as a case of elephantiasis, a parasitical

73. Anon., “High-Class Prodigies,” *The Era*, March 4, 1899, 29.

74. M. D. Fracis, “An Interesting Treatise on the Marvellous Indian Boy Lalloo Brought to This Country by M.D. Fracis” (Leicester: n.p., 1886). For more on Lalloo, see Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture*, 58–88.

75. Michael Howell and Peter Ford, *The True History of the Elephant Man* (London: Allison and Busby, 1983), 104.

disease that did not in fact match Merrick's puzzling disorder. Treves initially admitted Merrick to the hospital in 1886 as a case of elephantiasis.⁷⁶ This misdiagnosis was frequently repeated, even by those who knew his case intimately.⁷⁷ Because Merrick and his managers had chosen to market him as "the Elephant Man," his promotional material accentuated certain bodily traits: his souvenir pamphlet announced that his right hand was almost the size and shape of an "Elephant's fore-leg" and that his "thick lumpy, skin" was like "that of an Elephant."⁷⁸ His poster enhanced this description by depicting a "monster half-man half-elephant rampaging through the jungle."⁷⁹ "The Elephant Man" was thus a persona that Merrick and his managers carefully, and clearly effectively, crafted for their audience: even years later, Treves recalled the specific details of the illustrated banner in particular.⁸⁰ As I have argued elsewhere, the show world's successful marketing of Merrick as "the Elephant Man," despite the fact that his remarkable and unique body could have been interpreted in multiple other ways, inadvertently structured the medical profession's reading of Merrick as a case of elephantiasis. This diagnosis would have been highly unlikely, given the discrepancy between Merrick's symptoms and those of this parasitical disease, if the physicians analyzing his case were not so heavily influenced by the discourses of freakery.⁸¹

Nineteenth-century medical professionals were not only influenced by the show world's marketing of anomalous bodies; they also borrowed their techniques of performance and display. In Britain, as elsewhere in Europe, there exists a long history of scientific interest in curiosities of natural history. The emergence of museums and cabinets of curiosity in the early modern period institutionalized the display of natural wonders and in the process connected the culture of an emerging scientific profession to that of spectacular

76. London Hospital In-Patients Register, June 23–25, 1886, LH/M/1/14, The Royal London Hospital Museum and Archives, London, England.

77. D. G. Halsted, *Doctor in the Nineties* (London: Christopher Johnson, 1959), 40.

78. Anon., "Life and Adventures of Joseph Carey Merrick" (Leicester: H&A Cockshaw, c. 1885).

79. Norman and Norman, *The Penny Showman*, 103.

80. Frederick Treves, *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences* (London: Cassell and Company, 1923), 1.

81. Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture*, 33–57.

entertainment.⁸² In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these collections and catalogues of anomalous animals, plants, and minerals expanded to include human monstrosities, both whole and in parts.⁸³ The surgeon and anatomist John Hunter had gone to great lengths to acquire the skeletons of two well-known freak performers, Caroline Crachami, “the Sicilian Fairy,” and Charles Byrne, “the Irish Giant,” for his extensive private collection of medical curiosities, which he bequeathed to the Royal College of Surgeons. Even the eminent Victorian surgeon John Bland Sutton maintained that this prestigious collection was “little better than a freak-museum,” thus collapsing any distinction between the scientific display of human wonders and their consumption by a curious public.⁸⁴ This sentiment was echoed by Maurice Davies of the Museums Association of Britain who acknowledged in a 2003 interview about *Body Worlds* that the “gulf between the freak and the great museums of the land has never been as wide as they would like to have us believe.”⁸⁵

Despite amassing their own collections, scientists studying bodily anomalies continued to rely heavily on the freak show as a source of raw material.⁸⁶ In his 1893 textbook on skin diseases, H. Radcliffe Crocker, a distinguished British dermatologist, described not only “the Elephant Man,” but also other acts he had personally seen at Barnum’s circus and at the Westminster Aquarium, a popular venue for novelties of all varieties.⁸⁷ An 1898 article in the *Guyoscope*, a medical *Punch*, satirized this scientific obsession with sideshow acts by describing the efforts of “a senior physician on the staff of the leading London Hospital,” who attended Barnum’s show in order to

82. Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York City: Zone, 1998).

83. Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture*, 4; John H. Appleby, “Human Curiosities and the Royal Society, 1699–1751,” *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, 1996, 50, 13–27; Samuel J. M. M. Alberti, *Morbid Curiosities: Medical Museums in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Åhrén, *Death, Modernity, and the Body*, 67.

84. John Bland Sutton, *The Story of a Surgeon* (London: Methuen, 1930), 8.

85. Fiachra Gibbons, “Galleries Tap Rich Vein of Public’s Lust for Blood,” *Guardian*, January 9, 2003, 5.

86. Lisa Kochanek, “Reframing the Freak: From Sideshow to Science,” *Victorian Periodicals Rev.*, 1997, 30, 227–43.

87. H. Radcliffe Crocker, *Diseases of the Skin* (London: H.K. Lewis, 1893), 407, 410, 590.

“inspect the freaks in the scientific interest.”⁸⁸ The naturalist, Frank Buckland, although admittedly more curious, and much more adventurous than most Victorian scientists, proudly declared: “I always go into caravan exhibitions at fairs, &c.”⁸⁹ That the “Elephant Man’s” manager had rented a show shop right across the street from the London Hospital was thus no coincidence, for he also sought to capitalize on professional medicine’s need for “specimens.”

Once medical and scientific professionals had located these specimens, they too frequently put them on display. Members of both the Ethnological and Anthropological Societies frequently exhibited foreign performers as examples of the “races of mankind” at their professional gatherings.⁹⁰ Both Frederick Treves and John Bland Sutton exhibited freak show performers at meetings of the Pathological Society of London, having first collected them from their commercial exhibition venues. Treves in fact invited a variety of nonmedical personnel to see “the Elephant Man” during his sojourn at the London Hospital, despite claims that the hospital was protecting Merrick from “the gaze of the curious.”⁹¹ According to Treves, Merrick had a “constant succession of visitors. Everybody wanted to see him. He must have been visited by almost every lady of note in the social world.”⁹² These visitors included William Gladstone, the Princess of Wales, as well as “half the celebrities in London.” Bland Sutton reported that “it became a cult among the personal friends of the Princess to visit the Elephant-Man in the London Hospital.”⁹³ By opening the doors of what the staff of the hospital apparently called “the Elephant House,” to elite visitors, Treves not only advanced his professional status (eventually becoming surgeon to King Edward VII) but in the process acquired social capital.⁹⁴ Who then “really exploited poor Joseph?” asked Merrick’s

88. Anon., “Shows We Have Sampled,” *Guyoscope*, November 1898, 43–45. Thanks to Sam Alberti for this reference.

89. Francis T. Buckland, *Curiosities of Natural History*, 4th Series ed. (London: Macmillan, 1905), 55.

90. Sadiyah Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade: Exhibitions, Empire, and Anthropology in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

91. Francis Carr-Gomm, “The Elephant Man,” *Times*, January 5, 1887, 10.

92. Treves, *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*, 22.

93. Anon., “Death of the Elephant Man,” *Br. Med. J.*, 1890, 1529, 916–17, 917; Sutton, *The Story of a Surgeon*, 140; Anon., “The Elephant Man,” *Illustrated Leicester Chronicle*, December 27, 1930, 3.

94. Wilfred Grenfell, *A Labrador Doctor* (London: Hodder and Staughton, 1929), 60.

London manager, Tom Norman. For, while “the eminent surgeon” received “the publicity and the praise,” Norman insisted that Treves was “also a Showman, but on a rather higher social scale.”⁹⁵

Unlike Treves who never acknowledged his own complicity in Merrick’s exhibition, and thus in exhibitionary culture more generally, Bland Sutton proudly announced that his “anatomical demonstrations got the name of Bland-Sutton’s entertainments.”⁹⁶ As Bernard Lightman has argued, this blending of edification and entertainment was common in the scientific lectures of the period, which often included demonstrations of experimental practices. Scientific lectures, whether delivered in established institutions or the “pop-up” exhibition spaces that dotted the urban landscape in the nineteenth century, were part of a new marketplace where scientists, in order to compete for the attention of an easily distracted public, borrowed heavily from the oratorical styles and performance cultures associated with the entertainment industry.⁹⁷ This overlap between professional and more popular modes of presentation is evident amongst medical scientists, as Bland Sutton’s comments make clear, even when their audience was limited to students and colleagues and not the general show-going public.

Helen MacDonald has argued that a close examination of nineteenth-century medical records reveals “performative moments in dissecting that are extraneous to the learning and practice of anatomical science,” a point made crystal clear by the wealth of staged humorous photographs taken by nineteenth-century American medical students of their anatomical specimens.⁹⁸ One of Frederick Treves’s own medical students further underscored this point when he fondly recalled Treves’s “racy descriptions of the more abstruse parts of the human body. He often had us in fits of laughter, which is more than most teachers of anatomy today manage to do, I fancy.”⁹⁹ When von Hagens attempted to defend himself against the charges that the

95. Norman and Norman, *The Penny Showman*, 109–10.

96. Sutton, *The Story of a Surgeon*, 40.

97. Bernard Lightman, “Lecturing in the Spatial Economy of Science,” in *Science in the Marketplace*, ed. Aileen Fyfe and Bernard Lightman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 97–134.

98. Helen MacDonald, *Human Remains: Dissection and Its Histories* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 9; John Harley Warner and James M. Edmonson, *Dissection: Photographs of a Rite of Passage in American Medicine, 1880–1930* (New York: Blast Books, 2009).

99. Halsted, *Doctor in the Nineties*, 29.

televised autopsy was more of a show than a science lesson, he thus situated himself in a much longer history by asserting that, “every good teacher is an entertainer, and all lectures contain show elements to secure the audience’s attention.”¹⁰⁰

Scientific publications were also inextricably linked to the show world. In his 1902 manual on antenatal pathology, the British obstetrician J. W. Ballantyne repeatedly drew on examples from the freak show: in his discussion of congenital hypertrichosis (the superabundance of hair), he mentions the Sacred Hairy Family of Burma, Krao the Missing Link, Julia Pastrana, and the Kostroma people, all popular sideshow attractions.¹⁰¹ Medical textbooks and encyclopedias also frequently used images of freak show performers as illustrations of particular congenital anomalies, often erasing their frames and thus effacing the commercial origins of these illustrations.¹⁰² Even the *Lancet*—which by the late nineteenth century had firmly established itself as a leading serious medical journal—regularly published case reports on freak exhibitions, accompanying the description of the fantastic body on display with a medical diagnosis.¹⁰³ In 1898, the *Lancet* claimed to have received many letters from the public asking for a medical explanation for the freaks currently on view at the Barnum and Bailey Circus, suggesting that the public did not necessarily see the medical profession as divorced from the world of entertainment.¹⁰⁴ Instead, by offering tangible, even touchable, examples, freak shows mediated between lay and professional understandings of the origins of what even the scientific community continued to label “monsters.”

Dr. Colin Stolkin, senior lecturer in anatomy at King’s College, London, has similarly proclaimed that *Body Worlds* is “a bridge between the public and the medical profession.”¹⁰⁵ Like the freak show, and indeed like many anatomical museums that predate this

100. Wright, “My Week: Gunther Von Hagens.”

101. J. W. Ballantyne, *Manual of Antenatal Pathology and Hygiene: The Foetus* (Edinburgh: William Green and Sons, 1902), 3, 322–24.

102. George M. Gould and Walter L. Pyle, *Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine* (London: Rebman Publishing, 1897); Barton Cook Hirst and George Piersol, *Human Monstrosities* (Philadelphia: Lea Brothers and Company, 1891).

103. Anon., “A Living Centaur,” *Lancet*, 1900, 3987, 250–51; John H. Salter, “The Skeleton Man,” *Lancet*, 1873, 2626, 903.

104. Anon., “Physical Curiosities,” *Lancet*, 1898, 3885, 451.

105. Hilt, “Britons Sign up to Be Pickled in Plastic.”

exhibition, *Body Worlds* has argued for its important role in democratizing access to the body.¹⁰⁶ The stated intention of *Body Worlds* is to provide the public with access to what has previously been privileged knowledge: a glimpse into the interior of their own bodies. “I want,” von Hagens has said, “to bring anatomy to the masses.”¹⁰⁷ The time is over, he argued, “when the medics can insist on exclusive knowledge about vital medical procedures.”¹⁰⁸ Some have found this message convincing and appealing. According to the *Evening Standard*, *Body Worlds*, like the freak show, was “part of London’s rich pageant,” that opened up the mysteries of science to the public: “Even if there was an element of freak show to von Hagens,” it argued, “so what?”¹⁰⁹

Those who have attempted to answer this “so what” question head on have done so by invoking the ethics of freakery. In drawing parallels between *Body Worlds* and the carnival culture of the nineteenth-century critics were loudly announcing their moral objections to the show. Nineteenth-century anatomical exhibitions had often been condemned as pornographic. Those who attacked *Body Worlds* as “morally abhorrent,”¹¹⁰ however, were rarely concerned about public nudity. Instead critics like the feminist scholar Germaine Greer condemned this “necropolitan circus” as a “lineal descendant of the freak show,”¹¹¹ because they both encouraged the public to objectify the bodies of nonconsenting others who were assumed to be powerless to return the gaze in any meaningful way.¹¹² Argued an article in the *Times*: *Body Worlds* is a “freak show” rather than “educational” because it “exposes dead people to public gaze” and thus is a “violation” of their bodies.¹¹³ *Body Worlds*

106. Maerker, *Model Experts: Wax Anatomies and Enlightenment in Florence and Vienna, 1775–1815*, 118–48; Alberti, *Morbid Curiosities: Medical Museums in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 167.

107. Bibosa, “Trading Corpses.”

108. Richard Price, “A Degrading and Disrespectful Stunt,” *Daily Mail*, November 21, 2002.

109. Jenkins, “A Bit of a Freak Show, but Where’s the Harm?”

110. Hilt, “Britons Sign up to Be Pickled in Plastic.”

111. Germaine Greer, “I Would No More Go to an Exhibition of Dead Bodies than I Would Eat a Live One,” *Guardian*, February 25, 2008, 28.

112. Ponce, “Illuminating the Soul: Panopticism and the Freak Show,” 86–93; Rosie Millard, “His Show Is Not Educational,” *Times*, June 4, 2005, 11; Ara Osterweil and David Baumflek, “Emergent Bodies: Human, All Too Human, Posthuman,” in *The Anatomy of Body Worlds*, ed. Jespersen, Rodriguez, and Starr, 240–62, 252–57.

113. Millard, “His Show Is Not Educational.”

evoked the freak show then because the press and the public shared an assumption that Victorian freaks had little to no control over their bodily display and like von Hagens's plastinates were commodified both by exploitative showmen and by voyeuristic "punters."¹¹⁴ The freak show analogy could not have been effectively mobilized in relationship to *Body Worlds* if these moralizing assumptions about the nature of Victorian displays of human anomalies were not so pervasive in twenty-first-century British culture.

These charges of exploitation and objectification misrepresent the nature of the Victorian freak show. In fact, freak show performers were often free agents who chose to exhibit themselves and profited off their public display. They made rational economic and social choices in a cultural climate that offered relatively few options for individuals with nonnormative bodies whose ability to labor and thus to support themselves was severely compromised.¹¹⁵ But the widespread and often knee-jerk condemnation of both the freak show and this "cabaret of corpses" as voyeuristic is not merely historically inaccurate. It sidesteps the significant shift that *Body Worlds* represents in terms of whose bodies are now morally acceptable to exhibit.

Body Worlds complicates the nature of who and what has become the object of the gaze. The *Sunday Times* reported shortly after the show had opened that people went to see the exhibition for the "same reason that schmucks went to see the Elephant Man: horrific misfortune of others boosts unconfident egos."¹¹⁶ But the literature that surrounds the plastinates encourages identification with the bodies on display rather than disavowal. This is, as one reporter maintained, a "close encounter with the dead flesh of our own kind."¹¹⁷ *Body Worlds*, unlike the freak show, does not promote the construction of one's own identity in relationship to the Other, but rather appears to provide access to bodies that are intended to stand in for the Self. The objections lodged at the freak show are inevitably about the

114. Ibid.

115. Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*; Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture*.

116. Anon., "Dr. Death and His Travelling Freak Show."

117. Jackson, "Dr. Frankenstein, I Presume?." For a discussion on identification with anatomical displays, see Åhrén and Sappol, "The Strange Space of the Body." On the body as both Self and Other, see also Katharine Young, *Presence in the Flesh* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

propriety of looking at difference, of interrogating, judging, and evaluating the bodies of those who are outside the norm. The same cannot be said of *Body Worlds* as these bodies are intended to substitute for one's own. The politics of staring in this case therefore has very little to do with the objectification of an Other as it did in the case of both the living and dead Julia Pastrana.¹¹⁸ *Body Worlds* is nothing if not a self-indulgent experience, given that it offers us "the chance to gawp, unfettered, at the wonder of what we are."¹¹⁹

Von Hagens asserts that his exhibition and his public autopsy provided visitors an opportunity not just to "become acquainted with the mysterious nature of their inner bodies," but served as a vehicle for "encountering your inner self."¹²⁰ He argues that *Body Worlds* makes it possible to "tour your own body."¹²¹ This is not just about coming face to face with our own physicality, being granted access to the "innermost corridors of the human body," as one visitor maintained.¹²² *Body Worlds* promised a much more profound reckoning with selfhood. For as many who reported on or attended the show noted, "we are fascinated by the body" because we are made not only of flesh and blood but something "extra that makes us all wonder what flesh and blood are about."¹²³ In this formulation, the body is both a "container for the essence that is us," and "intrinsic to selfhood."¹²⁴ Notes von Hagens, "the specimens are difficult to look at" precisely because "we have fears about our own integrity . . . we have feelings about ourselves."¹²⁵

Without flesh, and without the fat attached to flesh, these plastinates all look svelte, muscular, and healthy unlike the models of bodies suffering from venereal diseases and spermatorrhea that often

118. Thomson, "Narratives of Deviance and Delight."

119. Melanie Reid, "Not Gory, Not Scary, Just Fascinating," *Times*, October 24, 2008, 34.

120. Meek, "Show of Dissected Corpses Cuts Both Ways"; Wright, "My Week: Gunther Von Hagens."

121. Anon., "Body Worlds: The Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies."

122. Max Sacker, "Letter: Give Death a Chance," *Independent* [foreign ed.], March 28, 2002, 2.

123. Rachel Campbell-Johnston, "You've Got to Admire His Guts," *Times*, March 22, 2002, 2.

124. Jane Shilling, "I Don't Much Fancy Being Cut up, Even If the Professor Would Have Me," *Times*, November 18, 2002, 3.

125. Jeffries, "The Naked and the Dead," 2; Tony Walter, "Body Worlds: Clinical Detachment and Anatomical Awe," *Soc. Health Ill.* 2004, 26, 464-88, 481.

took centre-stage in nineteenth-century anatomical displays.¹²⁶ Reproducing many of the tropes of anatomical illustrations dating back to the Renaissance that have aestheticized and sometimes even eroticized the écorché, von Hagens's bodies appear as idealized, and thus substitute, versions of a perfect self.¹²⁷ A British donor, inspired to become a "Skinless Wonder" after attending the exhibition, noted that plastination was "arguably the most effective, if extreme, way to acquire a perfectly flat tummy without venturing near a gym." Having witnessed the autopsy, he later re-encountered that "flabby grey corpse" as a "remarkably transformed" plastinate who had become "a muscular, slim, youthful figure, pointing ecstatically skyward as if challenging his maker to improve on the enviable reincarnation achieved by von Hagens."¹²⁸ Von Hagens has referred to his "Plastinarium"—where the process of plastination takes place—as his "post-mortem beauty-shop." Here, as one reporter has noted, "lumpy corpses of dough-like flesh are transformed into action heroes reaching for the stars."¹²⁹ At the end of the exhibition, von Hagens provides information for potential body donors, suggesting to the audience that you too could be preserved forever in an ideal form of plastinated perfection and drawing a direct relationship between the spectator and the bodies on display. This has encouraged some to read von Hagens as a cult leader. He is "like Jesus with his disciples," argued one journalist, a "guru figure" or "lord and master," who offers his body donors "a new kind of immortality" through joining his "plastination club."¹³⁰

126. Stephens, *Anatomy as Spectacle*, 53–86; Michael Sappol, *A Traffic of Dead Bodies: Anatomy and Embodied Social Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 294–98.

127. For a pictorial history of these bodily representations, see Sappol, *Dream Anatomy*; Andrew Patrizio and Dawn Kemp, eds., *Anatomy Acts: How We Come to Know Ourselves* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2006).

128. Robert Ashton, "Life after Death: My Future as a Skinless Wonder," *Independent on Sunday*, July 6, 2003, available from LexisNexis Academic: <http://www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/Inacademic> (accessed August 9, 2005).

129. Laurance, "Is He Merely the Sinister Creator of a Human Freakshow, or a Scientific Visionary Whose Spectacular Exhibitions Have Opened the Eyes of Millions?"

130. Caroline Roux, "Real Lives," *Guardian*, August 8, 2002, 6; Jeffries, "The Naked and the Dead," Dijck, "Bodyworlds: The Art of Plastinated Cadavers," 121; Stefan Hirschauer, "Animated Corpses: Communicating with Post Mortals in an Anatomical Exhibition," *Body Soc.*, 2006, 12, 25–52, 35.

If many read *Body Worlds* as a freak show, for others it thus clearly operates as the obverse: the epitome of “auto-voyeurism.”¹³¹ The juxtaposition of these disparate approaches to the exhibit demands that we consider the implications and effects of looking at others versus looking at ourselves. Despite a decline in the freak show in the middle of the twentieth century, freakery is alive and well today. It most clearly rears its head in the spate of television networks that endlessly broadcast aberrant bodies straight into our homes. In the United Kingdom, this desire for the pleasurable shock of alterity has resulted in the series “My Shocking Story.” This program has featured segments on “the Treeman,” “the Human Spider Sisters,” and “Octoboy,” all of whom, had they been born 150 years earlier, would likely have been stars of the Victorian freak show. “My Shocking Story” aired on the Discovery Channel, a network that clearly continues to capitalize on the enduring relationship between education and entertainment. In the United States, TLC similarly casts its preoccupation with “Little People” and multiple births as a form of public education as its acronym stands for The Learning Channel. It is easy to condemn this latest form of freakery as the ultimate in objectification as the medium of television allows us to gaze at these nonnormative bodies through a one-way screen without ever having to be seen ourselves. And it is this kind of voyeurism that so frequently troubles opponents of *Body Worlds*. But it is evident that as a culture, we continue to seek some form of engagement with bodies that defy the norm, otherwise these programs would not be so plentiful. Instead of denying this as immoral and antisocial, it would be more profitable to acknowledge and seek to understand these desires. As a variety of different kinds of social scientists have demonstrated, the process of categorization is a key way that humans reckon with their place in nature and establish social relations. It is not the act of noticing difference that is inherently problematic; it is rather that some taxonomies are harmful because they are deliberately intended to produce social inequalities.¹³²

If critics of *Body Worlds* have perhaps overstated the dangers of the exhibition by deploying the freak show analogy, its proponents

131. Hirschauer, “Animated Corpses: Communicating with Post Mortals in an Anatomical Exhibition,” 39.

132. Nick Haslam, “Editor’s Introduction,” *Soc. Res.*, 1998, 65, 219–20, 219.

champion their literal navel-gazing as if it were not only unproblematic, but the route to social harmony. A visitor to the London exhibition maintained, “Under the shell of our skins, our bodies are all so similar, regardless of colour of skin!”¹³³ The British actor David Harewood, having seen the 2002 London show, took this point to its cultural conclusion, commenting: “Why fight wars? What is the point of racism? We are all the same!”¹³⁴ In the early twenty-first century, this narrative that de-emphasizes the significance of physical otherness is widespread, appearing in some unlikely places. For example, in his best-selling book, provocatively entitled *Mutants*, Armand Marie Leroi explains the processes of normal embryonic development by studying mutation. His conclusion is not, however, that the normal and abnormal exist in a binary relationship but rather that “we are all mutants,” even if some of us are “more mutant than others.”¹³⁵ This statement clearly attempts to downplay real and significant human difference, substituting a reading of the human condition that disingenuously locates us all as outsiders, which cannot be either statistically true or culturally accurate.

These narratives of sameness can be as problematic as the othering implicit in freakery. If we are so much in awe of the self and so comforted by the notion of similitude, we may fail to successfully manage difference within the context of our social practices. We might all be similar beneath the skin, but we must interact with and engage each other as embodied, and thus varied, humans. Challenging hierarchies of difference—such as sexism, racism, ableism, or ageism—in fact requires seeing and acknowledging, rather than negating the fact, that we do not actually appear the same, that bodies do come in many different wrappings that shape our lived experience. This is the first step not to dismantling the Self/Other binary, which as much as we might wish otherwise, is a fundamental way that humans make sense of our world, but to celebrating not only ourselves, but others as skinned, rather than skinless, wonders.

133. Walter, “Body Worlds: Clinical Detachment and Anatomical Awe,” 482.

134. Starr, “The Plastinate’s Narrative,” 9.

135. Armand Marie Leroi, *Mutants: On Genetic Variety and the Human Body* (New York: Viking, 2003), 19.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Iwan Rhys Morus, Sharrona Pearl, and the participants in the 2009 *Performing Science* conference for encouraging me to write this paper. The detailed comments of two anonymous referees for this journal helped to make this a much stronger article and I am very grateful to them and to Margaret Humphreys for this feedback. Thanks are due as always to my husband Ben for helping me to think through these issues and to my son Miles whose own curiosity about the exhibition of the dead has been enormously fruitful for my work.

FUNDING

None.