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GROTESQUE INSCRIPTIONS: LIBERAL OPTICS AND SPECTACLES OF THE DEAD

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ABSTRACT

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By

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Discussions of Body Worlds, the immensely popular exhibition of plasticized human cadavers, tend to circulate around the ethical questions raised by the staging of a spectacle that uses human bodies as the material for the creation of anatomical art. This essay, however, seeks to consider the site of the contemporary anatomical exhibit as kind of optic technology that reveals more about the desire to see than it reveals the "real" human body. As a technological production that functions in the same aesthetic mode as taxidermy, the plastinate object is a response to a desire to confront the dead body, a desire that is expressed across time in multiple historical moments. Taxidermy and plastination are both processes that partake of a violent politics of representation that comes at the expense of bodies deemed expendable to a neo-colonial, neo-liberal regime of knowledge production that is organizes and objectifies what Agamben calls "bare life," the organic material of bodies that is mobilized for the purposes of defining the political subject in a globalized marketplace. In this essay, I trace a history of such moments of representation, sites where cadavers were made available to the spectating public in a variety of forms in an effort to make the claim that the State, in all these cases, uses the dead body to manufacture a brand of spectatorship that becomes necessary to maintain a coherent, rational subjectivity.

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INTRODUCTION

Discussions, scholarly and otherwise, of Body Worlds, the immensely popular exhibition of plasticized human cadavers, tend to circulate around the ethical questions raised by the staging of a spectacle that uses human bodies as the material for the creation of anatomical art. The positions ranging between moral reprobation and fascination are well rehearsed: questions over whether the bodies used to fashion the anatomical sculptures were obtained legally have haunted the exhibition since its inception in 1995 and are largely responsible for a phenomenal (and highly profitable) continued interest in the exhibit.[1] The body objects that are displayed in Body Worlds are manufactured through a process von Hagens terms "plastination" in which the fats and water in human cadavers are replaced with silicone rubber.[2] While von Hagens insists that the bodies he uses to create what he terms "plastinates" are obtained from willing donors, many of them culled from the exhibition itself which features an option for visitors to donate their bodies after death to von Hagens' plastination institute, the fact remains that the majority of the bodies used in Body Worlds and numerous spin-off exhibits come from China. Among the 400 plastination laboratories in 40 countries that he operates, von Hagens owns the largest plastination lab in Dalian, a city in the PRC that now claims plastination as its most profitable industry.[3] Religious authorities have called the plastinate bodies "perverse"; in a frequently cited 2001 interview on NPR's *All Things Considered*, pastor

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[1] According to the Body Worlds web site, more than 28 million people have visited the exhibits, making them the "most successful traveling exhibitions of all time"(ttp://www.bodyworlds.com /en/exhibitions/past_exhibitions.html). With ticket prices ranging between twenty to thirty U.S. dollars, it is clear that Body Worlds has become a highly lucrative enterprise.

[2] For a detailed description of the plastination process, see the Body Worlds web site (http://www.bodyworlds. com/en/plastination/method_plastination.html).

[3] See David Barboza, "China Turns Out Mummified Bodies for Displays", *The New York Times*, Aug. 8, 2006. Premier Exhibitions, the company responsible for the 1990's mega-hit Titanic exhibits and now creator of a rival anatomical display "Bodies: The Exhibition", also operates a plastination lab in Dalian.

Ernest Pulzfurt charged von Hagens with "...playing with corpses like they are dolls...This has nothing to do with anatomy. It is Play- Doh, and he makes it out of dead human meat".[4] In a broadcast shortly thereafter, bioethicist Ruth Guyer claimed anatomical exhibitions are evidence that "we have forgotten our moral obligations to the dead".[5]

Despite the long history of public exhibitions of the anatomized body, including the public dissections by Vesalius in the anatomy theaters of the sixteenth century, many contemporary anatomists have sought to distance themselves from von Hagens' image and methods, claiming that while his dissections are "technically exquisite," the "circus element" of the exhibit, what von Hagens has called "edutainment," moves the aims of Body Worlds away from the pedagogical and into the realm of fetishistic displays of the grotesque or bizarre.[6] The plastinate object is as much an artistic production as it is a scientific model, a fact underscored by the typical sites of display for these anatomical exhibitions that include museums of science and technology as well as a former slaughterhouse and a former museum of erotic art.[7] In 2002, von Hagens performed the dissection of a cadaver in London for a live audience that was simultaneously broadcast on the BBC. Publicity materials for the event included the frontispiece for Vesalius' 1543 text *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*, a canonical image that depicts the famed anatomist dissecting a woman's corpse for a crowd of spectators in an imaginary anatomy theater, and von Hagens prefaced his dissection standing on a stage featuring a backdrop of the

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[4] National Public Radio, All Things Considered, 2001.
http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=5553329
[5] National Public Radio, "A Bioethicist Takes a Peek at 'Body Worlds', 2001.
[6] See Charleen M. Moore and C. MacKenzie Brown, "Gunther von Hagens and Body Worlds Part I: The Anatomist as Prosektor and Proplastiker," *The Anatomical Record* (Part B: New Anat.) 267B: 8-18, 2004.
[7] National Public Radio, *All Things Considered*, Aug. 10, 2006.

famed Rembrandt painting *Anatomy of Dr. Nicolas Tulp.*[8] Situating his performance in the context of two images that are highly significant in the histories of anatomy and art (modes of analysis and representation that are mutually constitutive), von Hagens self-consciously constructs his work as a continuation of multiple, intersecting histories of representation: anatomy, visual culture, and theatricality.

While historically, the practice of anatomy can be said to produce the body as an art object, many contemporary anatomists object to the sensational nature of von Hagens' displays and consider him to have more common with P.T. Barnum than with Vesalius. The sideshow elements of Body Worlds are hard to ignore: mysteriously cordoned off behind a black curtain labeled with a warning sign about the controversial nature of the material on display, the highly controversial plasticized corpse of a woman who died in the eighth month of her pregnancy lies posed on her side with her protruding belly sliced away to reveal the plasticized fetus inside of her. Considering that the plastinate body entitled "Reclining Pregnant Woman" is surrounded by a series of deformed fetuses suspended in jars, this section of the exhibit begins to more closely resemble a freak show than a lesson on human development in the womb, its purported aim. If the practice of anatomy can be considered a discipline that works at the intersection of art and science, the exhibition of anatomy, as a spectacle designed to draw a wide audience, becomes a site that reframes that historical intersection in the fetshization of the grotesque body.

Visitors to the exhibits describe an encounter that is a mixture of wonder,

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[8] For a description of the public dissection in the context of the anatomy and theater in England, see Hillary M. Nunn, *Staging Anatomies: Dissection and Spectacle in Early Stuart Tragedy* (Ashgate, 2005), 198-9. Von Hagens is also pictured in front of the Rembrandt painting on the Body Worlds web site. Von Hagens is known for wearing a black hat similar to the one worn by Tulp, the anatomist depicted in the painting. When asked about the hat, he has repeatedly cited the image as the referent for his self-fashioning.

fascination, and disappointment with the plastinate bodies. After admiring the technological innovation of the plastination process, an editorial in *The New York Times* proclaims that the strangest aspect of viewing the sculptures is the "utter absence of death," a characteristic that "blunts the visceral and emotional responses of the audience... [because] identity—familiarity—has been shed with the flesh".[9] The anatomical sculptures assume a variety of poses, from reproductions of classical art to representations of athletic prowess; "wearing" the glass eyes of a taxidermy object and lips and noses fashioned out of putty, the plastinates seem to be expressive, animated, frozen in a liminal space between life and death, or subject and object. The Body Worlds web site describes the anatomical sculpture as a thing that facilitates an encounter with the "individual interior face" of a human body that is "fragile in a mechanized world," a moment that acquaints visitors with the "anatomic beauty inside of them".[10] The imagery conjured by these statements is rich; the plastinate object envisioned by the exhibit offers the potential for immortality, the transcendence of the material, finite body figured by the ultimate technology of preservation, and promises an encounter with an aesthetic object that is both the self and the other in a kind of postmodern, ecstatic meditation on the cosmos represented by the body universal. Yet, the experience that visitors to the exhibit

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[9] See Verlyn Klinkenborg, "Editorial Observer; Some Thoughts on Seeing the Polymerized Remains of Human Cadavers," *The New York Times*, Apr. 6, 2005.

[10] Notably, other exhibits of plastinate cadavers such as Bodies...The Exhibition and Our Body The Universe Within deploy similar rhetoric in their mission statements. The publicity materials for Our Body The Universe Within claim that visitors will "connect on a very personal level with these human artifacts as they use them to better understand their own bodies" and Bodies...The Exhibition advertises that "you will leave with a greater understanding of your own physical makeup and with a deeper respect for the machine that gives you the power of life... the Exhibition will change the way you view yourself forever". All of these statements claim that the best way to appreciate the interior of one's own body is through the observation of the plastinate specimen, a body that is remarkable for its supposed authenticity and its ability to simultaneously be an object that is unique and representative of humanity. What is most interesting to me, for the purposes of this essay, is the claim that all of these exhibits make to facilitate transformative encounters. See the mission statements of the exhibits on their web sites at http:// www.bodyworlds.com, http://www.ourbodytheuniversewithin.com, and http://www.bodiestheexhibition.com.

describe is very different; according to spectators, Body Worlds offers an encounter with technology and the politics of representation rather than a philosophical or spiritual encounter with death.

One can trace a multitude of histories that inform Body Worlds and similar exhibits: the spectacle of public dissections in the early modern anatomy theater, the complex history of anatomy, a conjoined discourse of art and science, the history of the museum, an institution that is as much indebted to the freak show and the circus as it is to liberal notions of public education, and the display of various forms of bodily effigy, such as the wax figure, the mannequin, and the taxidermic object. This list of histories offers a number of compelling potential paths of exploration in tracing the genealogy of Body Worlds. One might be tempted to simply pick any of these historical threads and follow it in the hopes that it will lead to something resembling an explanation. I hesitate to embark on such an investigation though, because while such a project certainly has the potential to reveal a set of shared interests between historical modes of bodily display and visuality, it should come as no surprise to anyone to suggest that Body Worlds is yet another spectacle of the fragmented, the photographic, or the grotesque body, and as such, is a sensationalized experience that defines and naturalizes the potent fantasy of the "body universal".

Read another way, the list is also a *history of fascination* with the body exposed, marked as criminal, deformed, rendered grotesque, dismembered, and reified. Tracing the history of fascination is a somewhat different project than a history of display, although the two concepts are clearly intimately linked. The history of corporeal display always implicitly poses questions about "who": who is objectified in the regime of looking, who

gets sacrificed to the project of exposure that is under girded by the desire to 'see the real thing'? While these ethical questions should be asked and need to be asked, this essay seeks to pose another set of questions: why are spectators continually drawn to spectacles of the body turned object? What is the promise of such exhibits and why do visitors of Body Worlds express dissatisfaction in the anatomical sculpture? In other words, if the exhibit fails to facilitate a satisfying encounter with death, why does it fail? I do not wish to approach these questions through a psychoanalytic framework in order, for instance, to trace a history of a subconscious drive toward death. Rather, I want to consider Body Worlds as kind of optic technology that reveals more about the desire to see than it reveals the "real" human body. Plastination is a process of reification (literally and figuratively) that manufactures a particular way of seeing or a specific kind of spectatorial gaze of the bodily interior. As a technological production, the plastinate object is a response to a desire to confront the dead body, a desire that is expressed across time in multiple historical moments. If we could imagine that the glass eyes of the plastinate object returned our gaze, a fantasy that is already implicated in the taxidermic imaginary, what would a glass eye see?

Liberal Institutions and Bodily Objects

Donna Haraway defines the space of the museum as a "visual technology" drawing a compelling parallel between modes of representation and the machinic production of narratives.[11] Haraway describes the museum diorama, a display of taxidermy animal bodies, as "meaning-machines" that are "maps of power, arrested

[11] See Donna Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936." Social Text 11 (1984-1985): 20-64.

moments of social relations that in turn threaten to govern the living" (52). In her formulation, taxidermy becomes a pivotal part of a fantastical production of knowledge in which power, conceived of in this case as not only white and masculine, but also specifically American, is exercised over the natural world and temporality itself. I invoke Haraway because I am employing her conceptual framework of the museum as a site that deploys modes of representation like taxidermy and the tableau to naturalize particular configurations of power, namely that of the rational subject over an unruly world populated by savages, animals, and exotic objects. Her focus on the taxidermic body as well suggestively positions a hybrid figure at the intersection of artistic representation and the epistemes that inform the ways all bodies are produced. Historically, the museum became a prominent institution of middle class education in the context of nineteenth-century liberalism, transforming the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century cabinet of curiosities, collections of random objects valued for their status as strange or fanciful, into a methodologically organized space where the display of artifacts is designed to narrate an evolutionary history from primitive civilizations to an enlightened subjectivity. If the museum is a key pedagogical site that promotes a liberal humanist epistemology, what happens when exhibits of anatomy are displayed there? For the plastinate object to be understood as a mechanism that presumably facilitates a transformative encounter with the bodily interior, it must circulate within the framework of a larger visual technology that is the museum itself.

Taxidermy, considered here both as a material and conceptual process of reanimating the dead, relies on a paradoxical relationship to the live body. Formalized as a scientific mode of preservation and classification of specimens by Linnaeus in the

eighteenth century, the logic of taxidermy requires that knowledge of the live body be obtained through the collection of a multitude of dead bodies.[12] For a figure to be taxidermic it must be fashioned out of real bodily material; the hybrid form that is created in the process of taxidermy however, is one that highlights the process of its own production, transforming "the real" body into an artificial production of one. As Pauline Wakeham compellingly argues in her book *Taxidermic Signs*, the collection and display of taxidermy bodies facilitates a colonial relationship to the natural world in which knowledge is always produced at the expense of the other. Born out of an Enlightenment episteme that assumed mastery through an empirical relationship to the world, the paired scientific practices of taxidermy and taxonomy required the natural philosopher to collect as many specimens as possible in an effort to exercise control over a vast empire, most of which "exotic" and strange. The taxidermic figure, then, is born out of a violent representational politics that is exercised on the bodies of the exotic other and is intimately linked to the rise of science as a discursive regime that exerted the power to define which forms of life were considered expendable to the needs of the empire.

While embalming is traditionally the process by which human cadavers are preserved, I would argue that plastination bears a closer relationship to taxidermy. The novelty of the plastinate figure lies in the fantasy that it appears to be frozen in space and time, photographically suspended in a singular moment that illustrates the human body's capacity for strength, flexibility, or resiliency. Like the body of the taxidermy animal, this pose renders the plastinate body perpetually available to the gaze of the spectator. The plastinate object becomes both the reanimation of a historically contextualized image, the

[12] For an excellent summary of the colonial history of taxidermy, see Pauline Wakeham's *Taxidermic Signs: Reconstructing Aboriginality* (U of Minnesota P, 2008).

anatomical illustration, and signifies a new method of bodily preservation that extends the utility of the body after death. Even more significantly, taxidermy and plastination are both processes that partake of a violent politics of representation that comes at the expense of bodies deemed expendable to a neo-colonial, neo-liberal regime of knowledge production that is organizes and objectifies what Agamben calls "bare life," the organic material of bodies that is mobilized for the purposes of defining the political subject in a globalized marketplace.

If one considers plastination to borrow the paradoxical logic of taxidermy, then it becomes impossible to consider the anatomical sculpture to be a "true" or "real" vision of the body. Certainly, as José van Dijck observes in her analysis of the exhibit, "the objects are manipulated with chemicals to such an extent that they can hardly be regarded as 'real' bodies" (109). To claim the plastinate an "authentic" body is in some sense to obfuscate the complex process through which a cadaver is fashioned into an art object. As a mode of corporeal production and re-presentation, the process of plastinating flesh seems to open up the ontological space in which it becomes difficult to distinguish between people and things and suggests the ways that the categories of human, animal, and object are always imbricated. A similar mode of corporeal production can be found in the practice of making human effigies. Wax figures, mannequins, and even puppets are unique objects. Designed to fascinate, impersonate and, in the case of wax figures, to stage an imaginary encounter between a spectator and a celebrity or historical icon, effigies rely on the fantasy that objects can impersonate "the real thing". Although spectators in the wax museum are captivated by the mannequins on display, what wax figures really showcase is the craftsmanship responsible for manufacturing a flawless

representation of real, living bodies. The anatomical exhibit, on the other hand, inverts the relationship between reality and artifice that is foundational to a spectacle of this kind because the sensationalism of the exhibit lies precisely in the fantasy that the plastinate *is* real, and not a simulation of real bodies. Where in the space of the wax museum, the spectator is asked to compare the real body of a celebrity or a historical figure to the wax figure, in the anatomical exhibit the spectator is asked to compare their own body to that of the plastinate on display.

It is important to note that the histories of wax museums and anatomical exhibits are deeply intertwined and further, that von Hagens' concept of "edutainment" is certainly not a twentieth-century invention, but is inherited from the shared conventions of display that inform both traditions. Nineteenth-century wax museums like Madame Tussaud's famed museum in London, recognized the potential of the grotesque to attract large crowds and typically offered displays of human dismemberment and deformity in a separate "Chamber of Horrors" to visitors, located downstairs and cordoned off from the more reputable display of iconic historical figures upstairs. As visitors descended into the recesses of the museum, they passed signs warning them of the violence they were about to witness, before entering a space designed to illicit repulsion and awe: wax exhibits depicting medical anomalies and fetuses suspended in jars were displayed alongside scenes of torture, decapitation, and body snatching, the infamous crime of stealing "fresh" corpses from graveyards to be sold to anatomical labs in need of a constant supply of cadavers that reached its heyday in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[13] Body snatching became just one of the stock images populating the downstairs space of

the wax museum that explicitly referenced the seedier elements of the history of anatomical study: vivisections of live criminals, bodies at various stages of dissection, and a collection of deformed or grotesque body parts were all common scenes in the Chamber of Horrors. Traveling wax cabinets, such as the popular Hartkopf's Wax Cabinet and Anatomical Museum that toured Europe in the early twentieth century, combined the conventions of anatomical exhibits and freak shows, offering a wax collection of diseased body parts, cross-sections of deformed or disfigured bodies, and fetuses, alongside wax renderings of conjoined twins, dwarves, albinos, and heads depicting racial typologies.[14]

In a study tracking the relationship between human effigies and the fashioning of bourgeois society in the nineteenth century, Mark B. Sandberg considers the upstairs/downstairs mode of display to be an integral part of the logic of the wax museum, an institution that is historically linked to spectacular, public displays of violence. As Sandberg notes, a young Marie Tussaud and her mentor Phillipe Curtius, were famously commissioned during the French Revolution by both revolutionaries and later the Jacobins to model death masks from heads either severed by the mob or the guillotine.[15] The original death masks, including the heads of Marie Antoinette and Louise XVI, are still on display in Madame Tussaud's museum in London and almost every wax museum contains what Sandberg calls an "obligatory reference to the French Revolution," either in the recurring figure of Marie Antoinette or in a scene of

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[13]The Anatomy Act of 1832, passed in Britain in response to the public outcry over the illegal trade in stolen bodies, expanded the number of cadavers that could be legally obtained from hospitals and poor. Prior to that time, no patient could donate their body to science.

[14] Sandberg, Mark B. *Living Pictures, Missing Persons: Mannequins, Museums, and Modernity* (Princeton UP, 2003), 23.

[15] For a detailed history of Marie Tussaud and the formation of the Chamber of Horrors, see Pauline Chapman, *Madame Tussaud's Chamber of Horrors: Two hundred years of crime* (Constable, 1984).

decapitation by guillotine, because the concept of the wax museum itself "remained a veritable monument to death and decapitation" (22). In a particularly haunting moment, Curtius was commissioned to make a death mask at the graveside of a recent victim to the guillotine and literally rolled the severed head into a pool of hot wax he had poured onto the ground. Sandberg reads this historical anecdote as one that reveals the spectacular brand of corporeal violence that is imbricated in the representational practice of wax modeling. Clearly, only a head that has been removed from the body could be subjected to such treatment. As he observes, "...the sacrifice of life for the sake of display, finds in this early account a most macabre realization" (48).

What interests me here is not only the link between spectacles of the grotesque in the downstairs space of wax museum and in the anatomical exhibit, but the indexical relationship between the cadaver and the wax figure that is embedded in both the practice of modeling wax figurines and in the definition of the wax museum itself. The death mask is one step removed from the traumatized body from which it is created in this scenario, highlighting the conjoined history of the cadaver and the wax figurine. As a process of representation, wax modeling does not seem terribly removed from the colonial logic that gives birth to other preparations of the body such as taxidermy and plastination. While Tussaud's exhibitions always cite the violence of revolutionary France, her Chamber of Horrors display gained its popularity in England in the early part of the nineteenth century, a phenomenon that could be attributed to the way that the upstairs/downstairs conventions of display bolstered a colonial epistemology.[16] Both wax

[16] Pauline Chapman writes that Madame Tussaud's display of wax figures competed with several other exhibits in London, including Mrs. Salmon's Wax Works on Fleet Street and Mrs. Bullock's 'Beautiful Cabinet of Wax Figures'. Tussaud's wax display gained popularity due solely to her main attraction, the "death heads" and the horrific narrative that accompanied them. According to Chapman, it was Tussaud's

modeling and taxidermy rely on a method of collecting and preserving a multitude of individual specimens valued for their uniqueness and at the same time, for their contribution to a vision of the "total" human body. As modes of representation, both processes are invested in the transfiguration of a "real" body, contextualized in a historical moment, into an object body that is considered timeless and rendered perpetually available to the gaze of the spectator. Each mode has undergone a transformation from a disreputable practice that glorified a grotesque aesthetic for the entertainment of the masses, to a distinctly middle class form of education as they have been incorporated into the moralistic "edutainment" of the modern museum.

The spectacle of the dead body that is celebrated in the downstairs mode of display exceeds efforts to contain it; Sandberg writes, "the affinity of the mannequin itself to the dead body haunts the wax museum as an institution and has forever linked it, even if only subconsciously, to the macabre" (23). The fragmented body on display haunts, to use Sandberg's provocative term, the pristine bodies of historical icons and celebrities that are exhibited in the upstairs space, and like all displays of deformed or monstrous bodies, works to normalize the supposedly "unmarked" or whole body upstairs. The upstairs/downstairs convention of wax museums can also be considered as indicative of the violent politics of representation that becomes necessary to uphold a liberal humanist teleological narrative of history. The galleries upstairs at the contemporary Madame Tussaud's wax museum in London are populated by members of the British royal family, world leaders, pop stars, Hollywood and Bollywood celebrities, professional athletes, and celebrated historical figures like Albert Einstein or Neil

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recognition of the public interest in the dead body and their artifacts, such as the bloodstained shirt of Henry IV that made her display remarkable (22-3).

Armstrong, a collection of cultural icons of beauty, athletic prowess, celebrity, and wealth. The exhibits are meant to be interactive, staging fantasy scenarios such as "Premier Night" or "A-List Party," where visitors can "mingle" with movie stars on the red carpet or at a Hollywood insider cocktail party, posing for pictures with their favorite icon. The historical narrative that is realized through the display of the iconic body relies on the downstairs presence of the criminal, obscene, or grotesque one (the bodily "remains" and the inheritance of the violence of the mob and the State that is realized at the historical inception of the wax museum). The fragmented body that is housed downstairs becomes necessary in this logical schema to normalize the iconic body upstairs and to naturalize a narrative of historical progress and development. In Said's famous formulation, liberal humanism is an epistemology where knowledge is produced at the expense of the othered body; the upstairs/downstairs conventions of display physically manifests the power dynamic inscribed on the "savage" or deviant body and highlights the violence inherent in representations of the body "universal".

Many commentators have remarked that the plastinate body sculptures that von Hagens creates in Body Worlds seem strange precisely because they resemble wax figures, a statement that becomes even more curious when we consider the historical relationship between cadavers and wax models, or Sandberg's claim that the macabre figure of the corpse always "haunts" wax mannequins. There is a difference, however, between the exhibition of so called "real" bodies and wax ones: namely, the audience's desire to confront the dead. While the body in pain and the cadaver are both spectacles available in the Chamber of Horrors, visitors can safely view such violence precisely because it is recognized as a simulation of "the real thing," a tableau that is meant to

approximate an encounter with the gruesome corpse that most likely will never be experienced in real time and space. The sensational element that draws such an extraordinary number of visitors to Body Worlds and similar anatomical exhibitions is presumably the desire to confront the real dead body, albeit one that is sanitized and available for viewing in the public, socially sanctioned space of the museum.

While many visitors to Body Worlds regard the exhibit as a novelty, publicly displaying cadavers is certainly not a contemporary phenomenon. The sixteenth-and seventeenth-century practice of publicly dissecting the bodies of criminals in what were called "anatomy theaters" was a spectacle that drew a wide audience, composed of not only physicians and students of anatomy, but also from the wealthy elite of Europe. Anatomy theaters staged explorations of the body in a historical moment before the advent of a "disinterested" science, as Jonathan Sawday notes in his book on the Renaissance culture of dissection, *The Body Emblazoned.* Functioning in a direct relationship to the State, the focus of Early Modern public dissection was on the criminal body, a figure considered both disposable and deserving of public condemnation through bodily denigration. Sawday writes that the dissections performed in public anatomy theaters can best be understood as "ritualistic expressions of often contradictory layers of meaning, rather than scientific investigations in any modern sense"; the triumverate that composed the staged anatomical spectacle included "the felon, the executioner, [and] the anatomist... the technologists of the medico-criminal jurisdiction over the body," all of whom collaborated to uncover a paradoxical vision of a body that was both universal and at the same time capable of revealing the roots of criminality (Sawday 63).

The anatomist himself was a figure of central importance in the staging of public dissections. Acting as a guide into the unknown, the *terra incognito* that is the body, he assumed a role as intermediary between the spectating public and the bodily-subject, and assumed the privileged gaze of empiricism necessary to colonize corporeal space, mapping the body like the sixteenth century explorers who charted the unknown regions of the globe (23-5). According to Sawday, anatomy in the early modern period emerged as one discourse of discovery in the context of many such discourses; the body, conceived of in mythic proportions as unknown, uncivilized space, provided one more "object of colonial enterprise," a site where "the alien and savage 'other' could be located within the minute and hidden pores contained beyond the body-surface" (95). In this context, public dissections can be considered a process that tamed the savage body, resignifying the deviant corpse as a microcosm of a divine universe, a portrait of the self and of humanity at large.

Although the anatomy theater was an ephemeral, performative event, it was also a site of tremendous image production. The Vesalian 'muscle-men', a series of woodcuts featuring flayed corpses wandering in pastoral landscapes, appeared in the canonical 1543 text *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* and set the conventions for anatomical images that proceeded them. Often pictured pulling their own skin aside to reveal the interior structures of their bodies, the muscle men are impossible subjects: willing participants in their own anatomization, they exist in a liminal space between alive and dead. The classic anatomical image can be read as a fantastic and violent mode of representation that suggests that the practice of anatomy is one of animating the dead corpse. Clearly, anatomical exhibits actively encourage visitors to read the plastinate body as the classical

illustration realized through technological innovation. The plastinate objects are often placed in front of silkscreen images of the Vesalian woodcuts and numerous anatomical images pervade the exhibition site and materials, a move that seeks to normalize the display of cadavers by historically contextualizing the practice within the history of anatomical science. We have seen how the plastinate body sculpture cites the taxidermic object and the wax figure, both in its politics of representation and the conventions of its display. By rhetorically situating itself in the context of the images that comprise the history of anatomy in the popular imagination, Body Worlds also channels the paradoxical logic of the anatomy theater, claiming that the plastinate cadavers are both unique and representative of the "body of man," and by promising an encounter with the other and with the self.

One can certainly read the anatomy exhibit as the most recent manifestation of a particular gaze established in the Early Modern culture of "natural philosophy" in multiple ways. In a postmodern rewriting of an Early Modern moment, von Hagens assumes the place of Vesalius and the localized economy of criminal bodies that supplied the anatomy theaters is transformed into a proliferation of cadavers exchanged in a transnational marketplace to manufacture plastinates that stock multiple exhibits displayed in multiple sites throughout the "developed" world. While Body Worlds and other anatomical exhibits make claims about the body that draw on an Early Modern paradigm, what interests me most is the way that they appropriate and repeat the image production of an early moment in studies of anatomy. It is not simply that the plastinate body sculptures take the place of the Vesalian muscle men or that von Hagens assumes the role of Vesalius, for while these images and personas are certainly repetitions, they

are repetitions with a difference, imitations or citations that play with the very concept of an "original". The imitations of iconographic anatomical images become not just a kind of mimicry of the images that they refer to, but instead comprise an effort to realize a desire that could not be realized in a moment before the technological innovation of plastination. If the desire to see the interior and to confront the dead has always been with us as Body Worlds claims, than the narrative that the exhibit spins is that *this* incarnation of the anatomical object, the plastinate specimen, will provide the means through which a transcendent encounter with the dead body can finally take place.

As a central figure of the exhibit, von Hagens himself appropriates and plays with his image, often encouraging public perceptions of him as a reincarnation of Vesalius by staging photographic portraits with his plastinate sculptures that are highly reminiscent of the iconic portrait of the classic anatomist holding the dissected arm of a cadaver.[17] Von Hagens also appropriates the image of the anatomist featured in Rembrandt's famous painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp*, attributing what is perceived as his eccentric propensity to wear a black, wide brimmed hat to this iconic image of the seventeenth century Dutch anatomist. Interestingly, von Hagens always cites the Rembrandt *image* when asked about his hat, rarely referencing Nicholas Tulp's career or his contributions to the study of anatomy, a tendency that suggests that he is consciously engaged in a process of re-representation, as opposed to engaged in something like an homage. Von Hagens' self-fashioning becomes one more instance of image production just as the anatomical exhibit becomes one more site of representation, rather than a novelty or a paradigm shift in the study of the body. Using the early modern anatomy theater as a

[17] Portraits of von Hagens posing in front of numerous plastinates are included throughout the Body Worlds website. See http://www.bodyworlds.com/en/gunther_von_hagens/life_in_science.html.

frame, Body Worlds can be read as yet another iteration of a violent representational politics exercised upon expendable bodies.

The nineteenth century that saw the rise of the museum as an institution of liberal education for a burgeoning middle class, also proclaimed the dead body a site worth seeing, with all the casually voyeuristic overtones suggested by such a phrase. The city morgue of Paris, an attraction that drew a massive spectating public to see the unclaimed cadavers of the poor or indigent theatrically propped up behind large glass windows strikingly similar to those installed in the department store (another invention of the nineteenth century), provides a particularly fascinating example[18]. Visual culture historian Vanessa Schwartz makes the compelling claim in her book *Spectacular Realities*, that the displays at the Parisian morgue successfully transformed an urban public prone to violence into a public of spectators with an insatiable appetite for a "spectacle of the real" in which the figure of the corpse plays a pivotal role (48). For liberal humanists like Matthew Arnold, the violence of the mob posed a constant threat to rational governance; Schwartz notes that Paris, haunted by the memory of revolutionary mob violence, used the displays at the morgue to satiate the appetites of the 'common man' for an encounter with death.

The cadavers on display at the morgue were unclaimed bodies, often fished out of the Seine or found abandoned in some disreputable corner of Paris, and never collected from the city by a family member to be buried. The morgue began to reveal

[18] For a detailed account of the vision of the "spectacular reality" offered by the city morgue in nineteenth century Paris, see Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1998). Schwartz claims that the city morgue drew over a million visitors per year, according to an article in the French newspaper *L'Eclair* that ran on August 29, 1892.

unclaimed bodies presumably to identify them; French citizens were entreated to visit the display windows at the morgue as part of their "civic duty". Schwartz describes the sensational elements that moved the display of cadavers at the city morgue firmly into theatrical territory. A wooden barrier covered the windows of the morgue that faced the street so that the public had to enter the building to view the bodies. Once inside, spectators faced large glass windows covered by green velvet curtains that were drawn to the side to display cadavers that were dressed and propped up on wooden tables, a convention that Schwartz characterizes as closely resembling the peep show (57-9).

The morgue capitalized on newspaper "true crime" narratives, particularly those that featured gruesome or macabre deaths. One of the most popular displays was that of a dismembered corpse that was sent to the morgue by authorities in two packages. As the public followed the story in the newspaper, the cadaver of the young woman was pieced together and exhibited in the windows of the morgue for weeks; at its height, the spectacle drew between ten and twenty thousand people a day.[19] After the head of the corpse began to decay, a replacement head was modeled in wax, an event that only served to increase the popularity of the exhibit. For Schwartz, this incident becomes a pivotal moment because spectators were coming to "see two spectacles in one," the cadaver of a murder victim and the uncanny vision of a wax head that when combined, signaled that "reality as a spectacle was transformed into realist spectacle" (73). Once again, the wax figure and the corpse become conjoined (in a bizarre collage, in this case), highlighting the intersecting histories of the uncanny body in displays of the dead.

[19] Schwartz cites this statistic from a November 26, 1876 edition of the popular crime journal *L'Audience.*

Schwartz notes that the display of unclaimed corpses in the city morgue coincided with the increasing medicalization of death and the desacrilization of the cadaver that was a part of that process, a narrative that continues into the contemporary site of the anatomical exhibition where the plastinate is celebrated as a positivist vision of technological innovation. The observation that in both cases, the moment when medical discourse proclaims itself as integral to "modern" history or "progress" is paired with an increased interest in viewing the real dead body is suggestive. A teleological history that privileges a modern, rational subject advances on the "found," unclaimed corpse in both instances, and gains currency through the appearance of novelty and sensationalism designed to attract a massive, spectating public. In this historical moment, encountering the dead body was not promoted by appealing to the public's curiosity, but instead by appealing to their sense of civic duty. It is the collective encounter with the dead body that defines the citizen in this case, provocatively linking a State-sanctioned definition of the "proper" subject to the act of observing a corpse.

If Schwartz is right that the morgue staged what she terms a "spectacle of the real" in order to provide the city with a means of channeling what was perceived as the propensity of the masses to violence toward spectatorship, I would amend her claim slightly to note that the spectacle of the real required, in this case, the presence of a dead body. The Parisian morgue reveals a moment when the State recognizes the remainder in the equation that produces a rational subject, for the desire to see the corpse (one that was in fact subject to decay and not plasticized) betrays an irrational wish for another kind of subjectivity, one that can be glimpsed in the experience of awe before a fascinating object. What is the expectation of the encounter with the dead body that makes spectacles

of the dead resurface throughout history so persistently and command such attention from the a spectating public? Why would the city of Paris not only sanction but promote a collective viewing of the dead body?

Mystical Encounters with Presencing Things

It seems clear that "edutainment" for a public of spectators is not an invention of the twentieth century, nor is the act of publicly displaying corpses in a variety of representational modes a novelty. The culture of natural history or science museums combines recreation with the moralizing educational practices that rose to prominence in the nineteenth century, constructing an atavistic narrative of history that relies on the exhibition of the dead through their artifacts or effigies. Sandberg's suggestion that the corpse haunts the creation and display of wax bodies can be effectively expanded here to a claim that the spectral figure of the cadaver haunts the concept of the natural history museum itself. As an archive of the dead that is constructed solely through objects, the museum functions as an interactive, theatrical space that endows objects with the capacity to retain the aura of human contact, to in fact *presence*, in Heidegger's use of that term, functioning as replacements for the dead human subjects among whom they circulated. I will return to Heidegger's notion of the presencing of things in a moment, but first I want to pose the question that is implicit in the process of tracing the histories of the anatomy theater, the wax museum, and the city morgue. Why do people desire to confront the dead body? What does the encounter with the corpse promise for the spectator?

It is not enough simply to conclude that humans continue to be drawn to spectacles of the strange or the bizarre. To argue that witnessing the dead is a desire that we can see repeated in history in order to advance a larger claim that "desire" constitutes an intrinsic or essential part of human nature, is to reproduce a problematic logic that undergirds notions of a universal "mankind" and invoke "desire" as a site that exists outside of history or discourse to which we have access. Instead, I want to consider the ways that the desire for a particular kind of vision is a social construct, one that is always framed within a set of historical and political contexts. In this case, the desire to see the dead, grotesque body should be understood in relationship to the economies imperatives of empire that gave rise to the liberal notion of "rational man" and defined proper subjects in contradistinction to the savage, foreign world and the bodies that inhabited it.

The historical moments that I have traced thus far are all instances in which the production of knowledge is linked to the display of cadavers considered expendable by the State by virtue of their status as criminal or unwanted. I want to consider the historical moments that I have identified in this essay to be iterations of a liberal optics, iterations that collectively have the potential to expose the interior of the body of liberal discourse and the logic that works to perpetuate the mechanical operations of that body of knowledge. Liberalism, as an episteme that privileges reason and a narrative of historical progress from savage violence to enlightened subjecthood, relies on the body of the other, a body that is put to the service of an authoritarian discourse. Liberal optics, therefore, as a mode of representation, needs the dead body to manufacture a brand of spectatorship that becomes necessary to maintain a coherent, rational subjectivity. The traffic in human bodies that is so often invoked as the primary ethical problem of anatomical exhibitions

such as Body Worlds must be understood then, not as a derivation from a system of "proper" medical or scientific uses of cadavers, but as a necessary to the construction of scientific discourses of the body specifically and of liberal discourse in general.

Further, liberal notions of the rational subject are constructed in contrast to the figure of the irrational, illiterate, or nonsensical. If the site of the museum is designed to produce and foster a rational subject, a concern that becomes particularly prominent in the nineteenth century, that site also incorporates and allows for the inherently irrational elements of liberal discourse: spectacle, the object of wonder, and magic. The fact that spectacles of the body have a tendency to attract massive crowds attests to the appeal of such exhibits and forces us to recognize the power of not only the novel or bizarre, but of the lifelike object (in the case of human effigies) or the corpse to promise an encounter of wonder or awe. While the experience that the encounter with the dead body actually delivers falls short of magical, the allure of the exhibit continues to resonate with the spectating public.

In his philosophical meditations on death, George Bataille articulates a connection between the spectacle of death and a state of ecstasy that can help illuminate the potential of the encounter that is staged in the anatomical exhibit and other displays of the dead. In *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, Bataille mourns what he characterizes as the "discontinuous" state of humanity in which humans beings "suffer from a shared nostalgia for a 'primal continuity,'" advancing the notion that the collective "contemplation of death" in a ritual sacrifice of "spectacular killing" provides a means of returning to what he conceives of as an ancient continuity (15, 82). While observing the dead body does not quite satisfy the requirements for what he calls a "spectacular

killing," what is significant here is the way that Bataille imagines the "collective contemplation of death" to facilitate a return to moment that is decidedly pre-historic or outside of the progressive temporality of history. To determine what this moment looks like for Bataille, we must turn to an earlier work, *Inner Experience*, in which he invokes the language and practices of Christian mysticism as part of a strategic grappling with what he considers to be an oppressive relationship to a teleological historical model.

In an often cited passage from *Inner Experience*, Bataille famously describes his practice of meditating on a photographic image of the dead body of Chinese torture victim, executed by the process of *lingchi*, or the death of a thousand cuts. He writes:

> ...I would gaze at the photographic image—or sometimes the memory which I have of it—of a Chinese man who must have been tortured in my lifetime. Of this torture, I had had in the past a series of successive representations In the end the patient writhed, his chest flayed, arms and legs cut off at the elbows and at the knees. His hair standing on end, hideous, haggard, striped with blood, beautiful as a wasp.
>
> I write "beautiful"!... something escapes me, flees from me, fear robs me of myself and, as if I had wanted to stare at the sun, my eyes rebel (119-20).

Bataille's description of his repeated encounter with the flayed corpse, both in the photograph and his memory, decontexualizes the specificity of the image, rendering the Chinese subject of the photograph a representation of a body that is both the other and the self. He professes that his return to this image of spectacular violence and death "robs me of myself" and affects a kind of temporary blindness akin to staring at the sun. His compulsion to continue to stare at the corpse is both illicit and transformative because the excessive and grotesque nature of the image that he describes has the capacity to dissolve the self.

Bataille's critics, most notably Sartre, castigated him for denying history and

deploying obfuscatory, mystical rhetoric to explain intrinsic desires or to locate a "true" site outside of history from which to speak.[20] To deny the validity of Bataille's project entirely, however, ignores what is remarkable about his thought experiments. Bataille does not simply see the photographic image and return to it unintentionally in memory. Instead, his meditation on the image is intentional, systematic, and reflective, signaling his desire for an epistemic transformation that he believed could be attained by training his gaze upon an object of wonder, namely the mutilated, Chinese corpse. In his study of the relationship between the Chinese body in pain and Western conceptions of modernity, Eric Hayot characterizes Bataille's relationship to the photograph to be one of strategic misreading in which he removes the image from its "relation to the political or historical facts of state-sponsored violence... [and] elevates the victim into a theological figure for a world beyond subjectivity a world without self-protection or even selves at all" (226). In his attempt to deny the photographic status of the image, Bataille betrays a "violent disregard for the difference between a picture of something and the thing itself," and in so doing, rhetorically constructs a radical continuity, to use Bataille's term, between the subject and an object, which significantly in this case, is a corpse (228). Hayot suggests that the image that Bataille cites becomes legendary precisely through its association with the prominent French philosopher; while the image was originally reproduced as part of a postcard series that was circulated in both China and France in the early twentieth century, the photograph is mentioned throughout Bataille's work and was finally printed in his 1961 text *Tears of Eros*, a fact that makes Bataille himself integrally connected to the reproduction and continued circulation of the image (219-221). By appropriating and

[20] For a detailed reading of Sartre's critique of Bataille, see Amy Hollywood's book *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002), 25-88.

incorporating the image into his own work, Bataille lifts it from the political specificity of its production and circulation and invests it with another purpose that denies not only its cultural and political context but also its very status as a photographic object.

Bataille denies the ontological status of the photograph as an object in an effort to confront the "real" dead body that the image signifies implying that for him, the corpse is an object of wonder and not the photographic body. It is worth noting, however, that the particular corpse that Bataille imbues with the potential to transform his gaze could only arrive in the form of the photographic image that arrests and records a singular moment in history. The photographic body is inherently an objectified one; further, as Hayot observes, the image was proliferated and circulated as a specific kind of commodity, the postcard, intended for the gaze of the tourist or outsider. If the original body that is the subject of the photograph was clearly marked criminal and executed in a particularly spectacular form of state-sanctioned violence, the reproduced and circulated photographic image of that body is also firmly rooted in a national discourse about Chinese cruelty. In this instance, Bataille's transcendent figure of death is a thoroughly reified body that continues to circulate as a commodity within academic discourse.

Bataille's interest in repeatedly engaging with the image of the corpse suggests that for him, ways of seeing are intimately linked with ways of knowing. In her book *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History*, Amy Hollywood reads Bataille's meditation on the flayed corpse of an executed man as a traumatic response to the pervasive violence of World War II. She writes that his proclivity to return to the site of the photographic image coincides with another incidence of traumatic repetition that is similarly rooted in his fascination with mysticism. In the

opening passage of his text *Guilty*, the first of three volumes that comprise the *Aetheological Summa*, Bataille describes the difficulty he has reading and writing in the context of wartime violence. In the midst of his confusion, he is drawn to the work of the thirteenth century mystic, Angela of Foligno, specifically her *Book of Visions*, in which she describes reaching a state of ecstatic anguish after meditating on an imagined image of pieces of Christ's flesh that were driven into the wood of the cross during his crucifixion. Hollywood writes that Bataille's response to Foligno's text is to copy it out, word for word, in an attempt to replicate her dissolution into "nothingness," a site of irrational, ecstatic transcendence before a "divine object" (70). She understands his practice of meditation on the image of the flayed body as a reinterpretation of the relationship between the mystic and an object of wonder, linking the commodified image of the dead body to a definition of what constitutes a magical object.

Hollywood reads Bataille's fascination with the mystical as a response to the violence of history, rather than an escape from it. While the photographic image of the corpse that bears the marks of an almost unthinkable pain in is transformed in some sense to a universal body for Bataille, it is always described as a specifically Chinese body, a fact that Hayot also underscores in his interpretation of Bataille's deliberate "misreading". For Hollywood, Bataille's meditations are a "traumatic response to the ethical call of the other, those suffering violently throughout Europe and the world" (57). His interest in the practices of Christian mystics reflects his desire, in her reading, to demarcate a site of "alternative community building" that invests epistemologies that lie outside of the liberal framework, like magic or spirituality, with the power to create radical unity with the other through the dissolution of the self (62). If the purpose of

liberal humanism is to fashion subjects, perhaps we could consider Bataille's investment in the dead body, not purely as an image but as a magical object, to be an attempt to reject occupying a legible position as a subject of the State, particularly in a historical moment when to be a subject meant to accept a role as complicit in the mass violence of wartime France.

Bataille's description of his experiments with the practices of Christian mysticism in order to reach a state of transcendence articulates something akin to the desire for spiritual communion with the human body that is promised in the rhetoric of Body Worlds and similar exhibits. According to the Body Worlds website, the mission of the exhibitions is to reacquaint visitors with the "naturalness of their bodies" and the "anatomical beauty inside of them"; von Hagens claims that plastinate bodies are superior to models because "the authenticity of the specimens...is fascinating and enables the observer to experience the marvel of the real human body" and what is termed throughout the exhibit as the individual "interior face" of the plastinates (Body Worlds). Von Hagens presumes that the plastinate body, an art object that is fashioned primarily out of Chinese bodies, facilitates an encounter with the self rather than with the other. While the plastinate body derives its "authenticity" from its specificity, the Chineseness of that figure is effaced in a rhetorical move to render the object an individual example of the "real human" or the so-called body of man. The racial specificity of the bodies on display haunts the exhibit in the form of a continued campaign of bad publicity, constituting the Chinese cadaver as a spectral figure that is always present at the site of the exhibit and in the ethical debate that continues to surface with each subsequent manifestation of the plastinate cadaver.

One could consider the exhibit to be a perversely literal realization of Bataille's desire to see beyond the photograph and to commune with the flayed corpse of a Chinese man. While this reading seems reductive, it does not seem untenable to claim that Bataille's meditations are but one of the many historical moments the exhibit cites. A particularly interesting connective thread might be to consider the ways that both Bataille and von Hagens employ mimicry as a means of altering their relationship to history and temporality. Bataille's impulse to copy the words of the mystic Angela of Foligno reveals the necessity of repetition to his methodology of reinterpreting a mystical relationship to time and space. Von Hagens' plastinates, on the other hand, are reproductions of early modern anatomical illustrations meant to provide an opportunity for the spectator to "marvel" at the "real human body". José van Dijck considers the plastinates to be "*imitations of representations*, executed in modified organic material... the 'real' body plastinate imitates a piece of art—Vesalius's drawing—object and representation seem to fuse in the sculpted body" (114-115). For her, the anatomical sculptures are part of a process of image making that is evacuated of meaning, part of a flurry of postmodern representations that celebrate the means of their own production. I would add that the plastinate figure not only highlights von Hagens' technological innovation, but that its repackaging of the "original" image from which it derives is what normalizes its mode of production and endows it with value as a commodity in a global market.

While the plastinate object, then, falls short of the promise of Bataille's mystical communion with the figure of the corpse, rhetorically it functions similarly as an object of wonder. Visitors are meant to "marvel" at the spectacle of reality that the exhibit offers, both of the real human body and the technological innovation responsible for

reclaiming the cadaver from the forces of decomposition and rendering the body an object available for contemplation. Museums invest objects with the capacity to represent or stand in for history, reassigning their use value and defining them as artifacts. What happens to the artifact, or representative object, though, when it is fashioned out of human material? If there is a slippage between the ontological positions of human and object, Heidegger's conception of "the thing" may serve to illuminate this space. Heidegger imagines that things can bridge the distance between humans and the phenomenological world, a distance he attributes to the rise of science and the Kantian figure of Enlightened Man. For him, the objects that compose the "everydayness" of Being (part of the fundamental ontology of Da-sein that he elaborates in *Being and Time*) are productions of the totalizing logic of the technologies of the modern world: his references to these productions range from the radio to film to the atomic bomb. While the technology of film, for instance, seems to erase the distance between spectator and image, Heidegger suggests that this effect should more accurately be described as creating a "uniformity in which everything is neither far nor near" becoming part of an "unearthly" distancelessness (166). His interest in demarcating an ontological category of things comes out of a desire to breach the distanceless quality of modern living and return to a moment of responding and recalling, rather than explaining, to perceive nearness in the material world (181).

Heidegger's language becomes increasingly obfuscatory as he proceeds through his argument because his conceptualization of "the thing" rests on his notion that it lies beyond the explanatory function of language and can only responded to or encountered. Like Bataille's turn toward the language and practices of the mystic, Heidegger wants to

locate a site of wonder that can not be subordinated to a reasonable language, but instead requires a lexicon that could be considered inventive or nonsensical. For him, things seem to have an essential nature, a quality that allows them to "stand forth" or to "presence" (168, 174). To elucidate this claim, he interprets the qualities of a relatively ordinary object, the jug, as performative. The jug performs a kind of work, standing on its own and presenting itself as a container to be filled and poured out. While the object is man-made, Heidegger argues that "the vessel's thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the void that it holds" and further, that "the jug's jug-character consists in the poured gift of the pouring out" (169, 172). To be considered a thing, the object must have a usefulness that is performed in a singular moment; the jug always presents the possibility of pouring and waits to fulfill its purpose in the world. Things are best understood in Heidegger as a site of congruence, a space where the "the fourfold" elements, earth, sky, mortals, and divinities, merge (174). Here, the thing occupies a sacred, mysterious location, existing as always-already part of the fourfold. "Thingness" is an ontological category that is inexplicable, yet recognizable as part of an event—the offering of the gift.

The type of encounter that Heidegger's performative thing facilitates is what most interests me, particularly in the context of the museum, where objects are removed from their ordinary purpose and defined as either exemplary specimens of a category of objects or as stand-ins for people or civilizations that are worthy of examination. The plastinate object is a reiteration, a repetition, of an image that as a taxidermic figure is meant to arrest time; placed in the space of the museum, objects and bodies are endowed with a magical or spiritual quality that can engage with the spectator. The disappointment

visitors express upon confronting the plastinate body, however, should not be dismissed as a sign that the display fails to facilitate an encounter that is potentially available. The anatomical exhibit, like all spectacles of the dead, fails because the magical experience that is associated with the dead body is a fantasy created by the very liberal discourse that constructs and privileges a certain kind of live body. Visitors to Body Worlds do not find a version of the presencing thing that the exhibit promises, but instead are confronted with the eerie distancelessness of the body turned object that Heidegger describes as symptomatic of the modern subject's relationship to the world. As such, the transcendent encounter with the dead is an empty fantasy at the center of liberalism that can never be realized.

If the epistemology that produces proper liberal subjects is precisely what creates the irrational, savage body that lies outside the bounds of the State, the empirical relationship to objects privileged by liberal discourse requires the production of a contrasting kind of knowledge, a site of nonsense, magic, and mysticism. Recourse to the opaque language of religious mysticism may provide a site of potential resistance to an oppressive relationship to history or inscription for Bataille and Heidegger. For contemporary iterations of anatomical spectacles, however, such language merely provides a rhetorical cover for a mode of representation that recycles cadavers to produce a commodity that is marketed as novel, educational, and at the same time, magical. The desire to confront the dead remains in this instance, one more iteration of an optics that does not reveal the "truth" of the interior, but instead, works to illuminate the empty center of liberal fantasies of the body, a plastinate mannequin with glass eyes that

promises to meet our gaze with the vision of the seer, yet in reality, always confronts us in its blindness.

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