

Body Worlds: An Exhibit that Really Gets Under the Skin by Laura Lloyd-Braff

What do the *Mona Lisa* and the corpse of a 540-pound man dead due to a massive heart attack have in common? Interestingly enough, each has been displayed in a museum to be viewed as “art.” This appreciation for the aesthetic value of a dead body serves as the premise for *Body Worlds*, a traveling exhibition that displays authentic human corpses. *Body Worlds* is the brain child, so to speak, of Dr. Gunther von Hagens, who patented the method of plastination, which involves the removal of bodily fluids and replacing them with plastic. Von Hagens’ plastination technique allows models such as *The Skin Man* (figure 1), *The Chess Player* (figure 2), and *The Runner* (figure 3) to be displayed upright and frozen in action. The exhibition, first presented in Tokyo in 1995, has traveled across Europe and Asia before finally reaching North America in 2005.



figure 1: *The Skin Man*. figure 2: *The Chess Player*. figure 3: *The Runner*.

Body Worlds Images provided by [Gunther von Hagens' BODY WORLDS: The Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies](#).

The *Body Worlds* exhibit has ignited flames of controversy. Linda Chavez, Chairman of the Center for Equal Opportunity in Sterling, Virginia, believes that *Body Worlds* is an inappropriate exhibit for public display. In her opinion article, found at *Townhall.com* and entitled “Is This Really Art?” Chavez asserts that Gunther von Hagens gives a whole new meaning to the term “culture of death,” arguing that *Body Worlds* is distasteful and offensive, and should be banned. Linda Chavez fails to accept, however, that Gunther von Hagens’ exhibit is merely an artistic expression of the First Amendment rights to which all Americans are entitled. Because his exhibit does not directly impose upon the morals of the American taxpayers, *Body Worlds*, albeit controversial, is completely constitutional, and should therefore retain its right to reside in publicly funded museums.

Chavez argues that it is completely inappropriate to deem the *Body Worlds* exhibit “art.” She maintains that it is merely a “freak show,” attracting individuals with a “particularly ghoulish appetite.” Chavez’s argument has its merits. It would be naive to believe that an appreciation for human anatomy alone accounts for the seventeen million visitors that have attended *Body Worlds*. As Fiachra Gibbons, arts correspondent for *The Guardian*, points out, “It is the golden rule for cinema and circuses, and now the...world of museums has got the message—gore sells. The higher the body count the bigger the box office.” Ian Youngs seconds this assertion in a BBC news article, expressing that “one of the reasons [*Body Worlds*] has been so popular is that it feeds a morbid

fascination that most of us have lurking inside us.” Ultimately, many people attend *Body Worlds* simply to view something reminiscent of a Ripley’s Believe it or Not! exhibition.

Yet is it fair to dismiss the artistic value of an exhibit merely due to its viewers’ reasons for attending? Many who have attended *Body Worlds* believe that the exhibit is not only creative and innovative, but aesthetically pleasing. Critics also argue that von Hagens’ exhibit is not vastly different from other popular art exhibits of this past century: von Hagens based his *Runner*, whose muscles have been splayed out aerodynamically like a fan, on Italian futurist Boccioni’s *Prototypes of Movement in Space*. *The Open Drawer* model, where the body is pried open in chunks, is based on *Anthropomorphic Cupboard* by Dali; *The Skin Man*, with his skin draped over his arm is based on *Bartholomew* in the Sistine Chapel; *The Chess Player*, bent over the board, brain exposed in deep concentration, is based on a Cezanne (“Skinless Wonders”).

Moreover, when asked to define what great art is, most critics will agree that one of art’s main purposes is to elicit some sort of emotional response. Undeniably, *Body Worlds* elicits responses from millions of people worldwide, whether they are profoundly inspired, or deeply repulsed. By this standard, Gunther von Hagens’ *Body Worlds* clearly is art, and he is thus entitled to his own “product of human creativity” (“Fine Art”). The First Amendment guarantees everyone freedom of expression, so forbidding such expression simply because it is disagreeable is unconstitutional.

Yet the constitutionality of *Body Worlds* becomes more questionable when people argue that *Body Worlds* is actually offensive, and that it asks people to compromise their morals. Chavez argues that *Body Worlds* “denigrates not only the human body, but life itself,” and that the often humorous, provocative, and unceremonious stances in which the models are placed strip the bodies of their dignity posthumously. Granted, some of the pieces, such as a reclining pregnant woman with stomach open to reveal an eight-month-old fetus, seriously push the bounds of taste (figure 4). Yet Gunther von Hagens maintains that his goal is not to shock or offend. Rather, von Hagens seeks to portray the models in the most informative and visually appealing fashion, thereby creating a form of, as he calls it, “edutainment” (“Naked”). Furthermore, the exhibitors isolated the most sensitive subjects, such as the displays of fetal development and fetal abnormalities, to a separate wing away from the main exhibition room. Many people who actually visit *Body Worlds* agree that the treatment of the deceased seems very respectful. As one anonymous viewer notes, “Anyone who thinks that von Hagens might be disrespectful in his attitude toward life is inaccurate” (qtd. in *Body Worlds*).



figure 4: “Reclining Woman” (1999), photo taken at the Body Worlds exhibition at the Minnesota Museum of Science, St. Paul, MN by [Suzanne Szucs](#), 2006.

Chavez, however, goes so far as to say that even the means by which the bodies were acquired pushes the boundaries of legality. She maintains that although the “poor souls” probably

signed “some release form” at “some point” before they died, the future models most likely had no idea their bodies were going to be “exploited for public shock value.” However, had Chavez thoroughly researched *Body Worlds*, she would have been aware that an information brochure published precisely for those interested in donating their bodies informs donors about the plastination technique, the history of body donation for plastination, information on the Institute for Plastination, how to become a body donor, what happens with the body at the Institute after death, and how the plastinates are used. Body donation for plastination purposes constitutes a declaration of will, which may be revoked at any time. Gunther von Hagens emphasizes that all his models knew what the commitment entailed when they signed the form.

It is undeniable that, when religion is considered, *Body Worlds* begins to push the boundaries of the First Amendment. Respect for the dead—not only their reputations but their mortal remains—is an ingrained feature of all three monotheistic religions, and most religious traditions forbid desecration of a body after death. Religious advocates around the world, such as Rabbi Dow Marmor in a panel discussion at the Ontario Center about *Body Worlds*, maintain that religious traditions require a “swift burial with dignity and care,” and that *Body Worlds* violates these traditions. They argue that since public tax money funds the museums in which the exhibition resides, *Body Worlds* becomes the speech of the very public it offends.

Yet few realize that almost daily, tax money supports programs that violate religious beliefs. For example, the Hindu religion espouses non-violence. Rather than fighting, Hindus prefer to live in harmony and avoid senseless killing. Still, 30% of each individual’s yearly tax money goes to military spending and the war in Iraq. Obviously, passing a law banning any kind of violence is impractical and foolish. The same premise stands for *Body Worlds*. No matter what the art exhibit is, it will always be controversial to someone—such a characteristic is inherent in the nature of art. Many argue that the government should focus on supporting more “mainstream” art that is acceptable to the majority of the public. Composing criteria for “acceptable art,” however, brings about dilemmas of its own; many may ultimately question whether any individual has the authority to impose rules upon artistic expression.

Granted, freedom of speech is limited and comes with boundaries. As Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes once proclaimed, “Freedom of speech does not allow one to yell ‘Fire’ in a crowded theater when there is not one” (qtd. in Briyan 3). Yet, while Chavez maintains that *Body Worlds* is dangerous to America’s culture, it is not physically dangerous in any way. Furthermore, *Body Worlds* does not compromise any other constitutional rights, such as freedom of religion. Thus, von Hagens is well within his legal rights to display this expression of freedom of speech. As art critic Brian Sewell says, the most practical form of censorship should be “refusal to attend.” The First Amendment is based on the premise that all Americans have the right to express themselves as they please and not be condemned for it. With this right, however, comes the responsibility to respect others who choose to do the same. Although Gunther von Hagens’ *Body Worlds* is controversial, it is legal within the bounds of the First Amendment. Thus, it deserves the respect that our United States Constitution guarantees all Americans.

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