

# **Dead Bodies: Objects of Adoration, of Art or What?**

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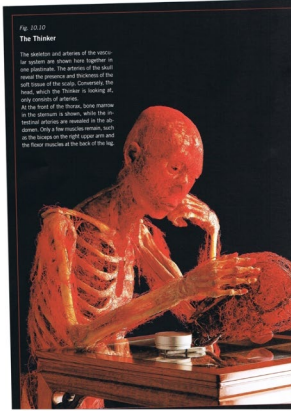
# Health, Culture and the Human Body

Epidemiology, Ethics and History of Medicine  
International and Interdisciplinary Conference, Mainz 17. – 19. September 2010

## **DEAD BODIES: OBJECTS OF ADORATION OR OBJECTS OF ART OR WHAT?** Hans-Martin Sass



1. The Power of Dead Bodies
2. The Communication with Dead Bodies
3. The Public Display of Dead Bodies
4. The Fascination with Dead Bodies
5. The Cultures of Health, Art, Vision



**'THE THINKER'**  
 Discover the mysteries under your skin.  
 Prof. Gunther von Hagens Body Worlds.  
 The Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies,  
 Singapore: Arts & Science Ple., 2003, p. 202

Skeleton and blood vessels of the skull and body.

The plastinated person looks at the blood vessels of a human brain.

**'WHAT IS IT TO BE A HUMAN?'**  
 (manuel Kant)

Is this Specimen for Medical Education or a Piece of Art or for Meditation?

## The Powers of Dead Bodies

1. The Eli'sha story
2. Mumia Vera
3. Canibalism
4. The Undead
5. Transplantation



Whole Body Plastinate  
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## The Eli'sha story

*So Eli'sha died and they buried him. Now bands of Moabites used to invade the land in the spring of the year. And as a man was being buried, a marauding band was seen and the man was cast into the grave of Eli'sha; and as soon as the man touched the bones of Eli'sha, he revived, and stood on his feet.'*

2. Kings, 13:20f

## Mumia Vera

From the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century medicinal powder of grounded down mummies was sold in Europe as a remedy against various illnesses, anti-aging and probably also for spiritual.

Drug company **Merck & Co.** in a 1924 catalogue charged 12 Goldmark for a kilo of Mumia Vera Aegyptiaca. A box from Merck with Mumia Vera content is in the Frankfurt Senckenberg Museum.

In magical medicine following Paracelsus, 'mumia' is a fine, subtle spiritual part innate into everyone' which by means of **'animalistic magnetism'** can be 'transplanted' unto others, i.g. via Mumia Vera.

Powder from grounded mummies was also used under the name 'Mummin' in oil painting as a brown color up to the midst of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Gessler-Loehr B(1995) Mumia vera aegyptiaca im Abendland, in: Wege zur Unsterblichkeit. Naturmuseum Senckenberg, Ausstellung 4, Loseblattmappe 8, Frankfurt: Senckenbergische Naturforschende Gesellschaft. – 5  
 Wikipedia: Mumia. - Wehite K (1990) Werkstoffe und Techniken der Malerei. Ravensberg: Maier, 4. Aufl.

## Canibalism

Gastronomic canibalism exercises ultimate power over dead people.

Eating the heart and testicles of an enemy additionally is a form of respect and reverence to his powers and primarily reserved for leaders.

Some Amazon tribes perform ritualistic canibalism by mixing the ashes of dead people with banana and other fruit for ritualistic eating.

Satanic canibalism drinks blood and eats tissue of the dead and alive for magic satanic purposes.

*Cannibalism is a cultural phenomenon of physical and spiritual power play and as such includes more than protein supply*

*Organ and tissue transplantation is another form of supporting life by consuming / using dead bodies, therefore consent and contract are required and strict regulation must be enforced.*

## Transplantation

Transplanting a heart from a [brain-]dead infant; the debate between RM Veatch and JLBernat:

*'Veatch claimed that restarting the hearts in recipient infants retroactively invalidated the death determination in the donor infants by showing that the donor's loss of cardiac functions was not irreversible. This analysis errs, however, in focusing on cardiac function. The donor infants were declared dead that had been without a heartbeat beyond the period in which autoresuscitation has been observed and because medical resuscitation was prohibited'*

Bernat J.L. (2010) The Debate over Death Determination in DCD. Hastings Center Report 40(3):3

Transplanting the cornea and other slow-metabolism tissue or bones from a whole-body dead person is similar to transplanting a heart from a brain-dead person.

## The Undead

Nearly all cultures are aware of the good or evil powers of the dead, who are called 'undead'; amulets, prayer, and good spirits protect against the evil undead and other evil spirits.

Good powers of the undead guide living people, such as undead masters of African Traditional Medicine guide their living disciples similarly the spirits of dead family members the living ones. Thus, it is important to treat one's parents and neighbors well during their lifetime so that they cannot hurt, rather protect and support.

Voodoo medicines and killings uses the spiritual powers of the undead as well; satanic rites spill or drink blood and/or tissue of people and animals.

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## Communication with Dead Bodies

1. Adoration and Mediation
2. Prayer and Meditation
3. Transsubstantiation
4. Plastination

Japanese visitor to a Tokyo Body Worlds exhibition, Discover the mysteries under your skin, Prof. Gunther von Hagens Body Worlds: The Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies. Singapore: Arts & Science Pte., 2003, p. 33



## Adoration and Mediation

Bodies or body parts of Saints are exhibited for reverence, adoration, mediation, and meditation.

Being close to dead bodies – or touching, if possible – brings the believer closer to God and into company with revered role models. They also might serve as mediators and advocates, thus making prayers for health and success in life more efficacious.

Hundreds of bodies or body parts are on public display in Roman Catholic or Orthodox Christian churches, also in Buddhist temples, under glass or enshrined in revered boxes.

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## Fascination and Transsubstantiation

- The natural 'fascination with the numinosum', i.e. deep emotional and spiritual fascinations and frightenings include dead bodies, described by scientists of religion and experienced by many of us.
- Skeletons, mummies, plastinated bodies and the 'body of Christ' each have their own and distinct flavor of spiritual, emotional, sensuous, magic, scaring, frightening, shocking or uplifting transforming power.
- It is empirically proven and described in cultural anthropology and comparative science of religion that dead bodies and body parts belong to our spiritualities and cultures.

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## Transsubstantiation of the Body of Christ

In the 'Holy Supper' sacrament ceremony, celebrated by Christians, bread and wine are consumed as the transubstantiated flesh and blood of Jesus, the Christ, - thus, they constitute the Christian community as the recreated and reincarnated Body of Christ.

Conservate circles in the Roman Catholic church are reluctant to let lay people have access to the wine/blood, fearing that it might be spilled.

After the ceremony, the priest carefully cleans the cup with water and consumes the water and leftovers of the bread in order to avoid the disrespectful discharge of the transubstantiated blood and flesh.

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## Dead bodies in Public – Curiosa I

1. Revering the head of John the Baptist: John, a cousin of Jesus who founded the Mandeans, a Gnostic sect, which still has thousands of followers in southern Irak. His head was found in Istanbul in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, then again in 452 and again in 850. Roman Catholic, Armenian and Orthodox churches have made February 24, the finding date, a high holiday and made him a Christian Saint.
2. Buddhism teaches the spiritual overcoming of the pains and sufferings of the wheel of karma and final relief from the struggle of life and bodily stress; Buddha was against worshiping relics. But rare relics of Buddha and his bodies in his former life are among the highest pieces of adoration and meditation in Buddhism.
3. The three wise men, also called the Three Holy Kings, who visited St. Mary and the baby Jesus in Bethlehem are enshrined on the altar of the Cologne Dome as Christian Saints and worshipped as mediators and advocates to God. We don't know who they were and who is in the coffins, but they definitely are not 'Christians'.

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## Dead bodies in Public – Curiosa II

- The 'holy shroud' (heiliger Rock) in Trier and the 'burial veil' (Grabtuch) of Jesus in Torino have been substitutes for Jesus' body, who is said to have risen from the grave, but a baby tooth of Jesus is a revered relic.
- Empirical studies suggest that Voodoo magic works effectively in many believers, it is mostly an evil spiritual power, but often supported by dead body powers.
- Former enemies of mummified bodies have broken the mummy's noses so that they cannot breathe in the air life guiding them to the new life and are destined for death.
- Buddhist relics: The display and revering of relics of Buddha, some from his former lives, and of other saints is not supported by the teachings of Buddha.
- Master Plastinator von Hagens is said to create a plastinated sex act group for an Erotic Museum.

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## On Display: Saints, Mummies, Plastinates

- Displayed bodies of **Saints** may bring the believer closer to God and may serve as intercessors and supporters.
- Egyptian **Mummies** are on their way to the other life, some with detailed road maps and manuals.
- Plastinates** have also been called pieces of art, created by gifted artists.



Fig. 21: Egyptian mummy, Vatican Museum, Rome.

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Singapore: Arts & Science Pte, 2003, p. 19

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## Disturbing the Peace of the Dead

Dead bodies in Christian churches: Informed Consent might be presumed, but given different personal and theological cultures never should be taken for granted.

Egyptian Mummies: Exhibiting and exploring Egyptian mummies in the Louvre, the British Museum and elsewhere, is a most severe disrespect and violation of human and civil rights, a crime against humanity, and might deprive mummies on their way to the other world of the expected eternal life.

Plastination: Informed and detailed consent and contract based on individual personal visions and decisions are in force.

Disturbing the peace of the dead and the degrading treatment of corpses is a criminal offense in Germany and elsewhere, but never has been enforced in regard to public displays of corpses or body parts in Christian churches or of mummies in famous museums.

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### 'THE RUNNER'

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Plastinated voluntary muscles by  
Gunter von Hagens;  
Unique Forms in Space by Umberto  
Bocchini 1913

One Piece of Art + One Dead Body?  
or  
Two Pieces of Art?

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## 'LIVING ANATOMY'

'As a student I always found it difficult to follow the advice of our anatomy professor and associate the pleasant bodies on display at the swimming pool with the utilitarian study of surface anatomy. The difference between the stiff corpse lying on the dissecting table and the interplay of muscles in swimming, running and sitting people was just too great.'

Gunther von Hagens: Anatomy and Plastination, in: Discover the mysteries under your skin Prof. Gunther von Hagens Body Worlds. The Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies, Singapore: Arts & Science Pte, 2003, p. 33

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## Plastination I

In 2004 I submitted a Report on accusations of immoral and illegal actions by the Heidelberg Institute of Plastination (IfP) to a local Ethics Advisory Committee in Los Angeles, the first place where a Body Worlds exhibition took place in the USA; the committee included senior theologians of the Roman Catholic, the Episcopal, and the Jewish faith. After my report on inspecting over 200 body donation forms and associated death certificates in the Heidelberg headquarters of IfP, they approved the exhibition 'for the medical enlightenment and appreciation of the people'.

In 2004 the IfP had 5900 legally binding and executed donations forms; today they have far over 20000 forms. In Germany there are more body donations than the anatomy institutes at medical can handle; in Essen e.g. more than 800 potential donors have executed forms but only 12 bodies are needed every year by the sector department.

The donation forms of the IfP were the most detailed and informative I have ever seen when compared to organ donation forms and body donation forms for anatomical institutes; they gave the donors the option to express detailed reasons for donating.

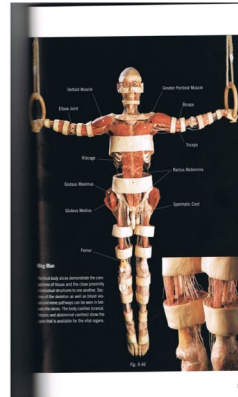
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## Plastination II

Questions, donor could choose to answer on the formal Donation Form with YES or NO, included: 'Organ donation for transplants is compatible with body donation for Plastination. It takes priority over Plastination, but the body can still be used for Plastination once organs have been removed'. - 'I agree that my plastinated body may be used for the medical enlightenment of laypeople and, to this end, exhibited in public (e.g. in a museum).' - 'Plastinated specimens, especially whole-body plastinates, are occasionally interpreted as anatomical works of art. I agree that my body can be used for an anatomical work of art.'

'People often ask us, with a degree of admiration and respect, what prompts people to donate their bodies for Plastination. We would therefore like to know your own personal reasons and motivations (please, check all that apply): X - I would like to donate my body to serve a good cause; X - I am fascinated by the thought of being preserved forever for posterity. - X - I find the thought of conventional funerals, i.e. being cremated or buried, unpleasant. - X - As there is no need for burial service with Plastination, my relatives will not have to worry about tending my grave. - X - I have no relatives to tend my grave once I'm gone. - X - I wish to save the costs of a funeral. - X - I am excited about the potential of Plastination. - X - I am fascinated by the Body Worlds exhibitions.'

Most Forms were executed after donors had seen an exhibition. 20



### THE RING MAN'

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'The thick body slices demonstrate the compactness of tissue and the close proximity of individual structures to one another. .. The body cavities show the space that is available for the vital organs'

Public Anatomy Education or a  
Degrading Abuse of a Dead Body ?

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## Plastination III

A question, which struck me most in 2004, is missing in the more recent forms:

'When whole body plastinates are exhibited in public, people are always amazed, and slightly dubious about the realism of the specimens. On various occasions, people have expressed a wish to be able to touch the specimens. I agree that laypeople be allowed to touch my plastinated body; ... yes; ... no.'

**Why do people want to be touched when dead?** Did they not get enough touching during their lifetime; do they want to continue to be hugged and snuggled with; would there be a kind of immortality related to touching and hugging by the living?

What is the difference between 'Immortality' and being 'Preserved for Posterity'?

The IFF did not implement these wishes by a majority of donors when putting a sign 'do not touch' onto all exhibits.

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## Plastination IV

In 2004, I recommended a simple and easy exit poll to share fascinating light on some of [1] the more philosophical and religious issues surrounding mortality, [2] human craving for being involved, been seen, been around, been touched, [3] science as art. My questions included: Age - Sex: M/F. - Is plastination a method to achieve a sort of 'immortality'? Y/N. - Would you consider plastination for yourself? - If yes, for afterlife existence? - to support education? - I want to be seen and to be around, - I want to be touched, - I don't like traditional funerals, - to save money, - Would you have preferred more scientific information? If yes, on plastination methods, - on human biology, - on health promotion, - Would you have liked background music? If yes, classical music, - spirituals, - disco hitlist, - other? - Does plastination contribute to education in science? - Is plastination also a new form of art?'

I am not aware that my recommendation was followed in later exhibitions. I also recommended that the wealth of information stored in the thousands of donation form regarding our contemporary visions on death, immortality, satisfaction and goals in life be analyzed with empirical social science tools and made public for personal, cultural and religious reflection and discourse. The new list in the Donation Forms is only in part based on recommendation I made in 2004 to the local Ethics Advisory Committee in Los Angeles.

According Kant, the three 'regulative ideas' - God, Freedom, Immortality - one way or the other guide our visions, values, and actions, including issues of personal immortality, personal choice, and relationship between science and art, - the contemporary relevance of which could be researched by using existing Body Donation forms. 19



### 'RECLINING WOMAN IN THE 8TH MONTH OF PREGNANCY'

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'The foetus can be seen in the opened uterus as well as the placenta, which has been cut through at the front wall of the uterus.'

Medical Education  
Or Scandalous Art  
Or Sickening Exhibition  
of 2 Dead Persons?

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## Thomas Aquinas on dead body relics

1. We do not adore, I will not say the relics of the martyrs, but either the sun or the moon or even the angels, but we honor the martyr's relics, so that thereby we give honor to Him whose martyrs they are. Consequently, by honoring the martyr's relics we do not fall into the error of the gentiles, who gave the worship to dead men.
2. We worship that insensible body, not for its own sake, but for the sake of the soul, which once was united thereto, and now enjoys God.
3. The dead body of a saint is not identical with that which the saint had during life, on account of the difference of form, vs. the soul; but it is the same by identity of matter, which is destined to be reunited to its form.

Summa Theologia, 3, Q 25  
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Life before Life – Life after Life

**Individual Immortality or Reincarnation or Neither ?**

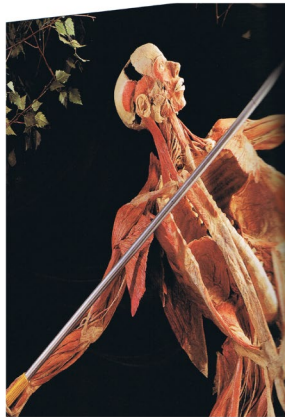
Fritz Jahr, the father of Bioethics who coined the term in 1927, presents the following narrative:

*A fetus feels happy, warm and free in the womb, then comes the catastrophe of birth, pain, despair, angst, suffering, helplessness, coldness, the end !! ; but then there is life, rich in love, growing and developing, independence, freedoms and rights, unexpected forms of happiness, culture, compassion and community, - the fetus could never had imagined -; then again at the end of life pain, suffering, helplessness, coldness – the end !! -, or not end, rather the beginning of something unimaginable to us as the freedoms of born people would be to unborns.*

Jahr F (1938) Drei Abschnitte des Lebens nach 2. Korinther.  
Nach dem Gesetz und Zeugnis, Zeitschrift des Bibelbundes 38:182-188

Jahr's answer is the same, we are getting from Kant's analysis, that **immortality can neither be proved nor disproved**. Therefore, the undead, the spirits and demons and dead and transfigured bodies have always been a part of human life, vision, and culture in many forms, associated with our lust and struggle for life and living.

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**'JAVELIN THROWER'**

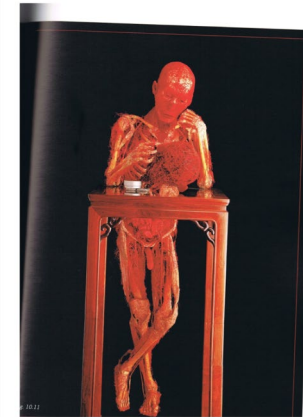
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'Both sides of the thoracic and abdominal walls have been opened out like doors. All organs have been removed.'

**Compare Michelangelo's 'David'**

**to von Hagens' 'Javelin Thrower' !**

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**Immanuel Kant:**

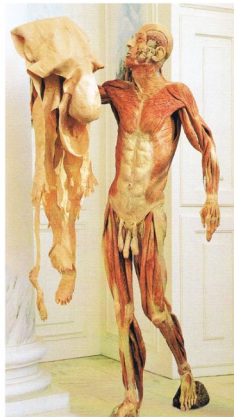
What can I know?

What shall I do?

What may I hope ?

**What is it to be a human ?**

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Good Bye !  
Remember me!  
Think about it!

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**Muscle Man walking with a Skeleton and a Kid**



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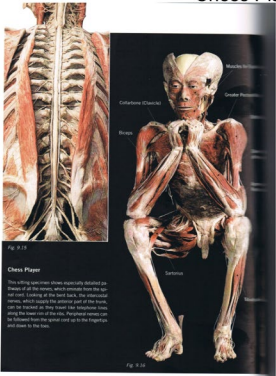
**Riding Horse with Rider**



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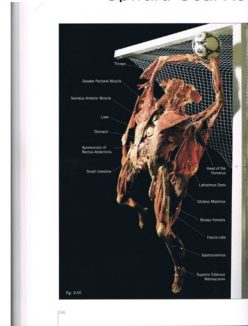
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### Chess Player



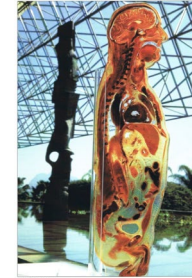
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### Upward Goal Keeper – Der Torwart



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### Transparent Body Slice - Another Form of Plastination



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 Singapore: Arts & Science Pte, 2003, p. 234

### Have a Healthy Body Workout after a 5-day Conference!



Fig. 37. Whole-body plastinates. Displaying these specimens in realistic, life-like poses carries on the tradition begun by the founding fathers of anatomy.

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### Dead Bodies: Objects of Adoration, of Art or What?

Interaction with dead human bodies and spirits

has always been and will be essential in human cultures,

and in the care for health and life,

fascinating and tremending.

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