

The Art (or not) of Gunther von Hagens

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San Francisco, California, 2006



Gunther von Hagens and his sculptures

In order to debate whether the work in question is art or anatomy, subject of art should be discussed first. Art is a philosophy. It is a way of seeing. It is sometimes a mastery of creation; bringing vision into veracity. Buddhists say art is a depiction tool inspired by Gods. It is the creation of beauty by human hands. It is a

display of our very personal understanding of the subject, a very personal view of the world. Art is defined in many ways and influenced by an enormous variety of factors. Philosophers, teachers, religious figures and even political leaders have always influenced art and art products thorough history to a great degree.

Patronage has played a part, morality, immorality, the prurient and perhaps lofty and majestic as well. Humour and secret signs, hidden and the naked, coded and the obvious, the irreverent and even the unkind are part of the human experience, and all have their place in art.

Religion and the social beliefs have caused art to be attacked and changed. To be modified and moulded within the norms of society, restrained and controlled as we all are. Artists have created throughout our history, even from the very beginning. Art is what separates us from the animals, but it joins us to them as well. But why have art and religion been so closely unified, the one so influenced by the other? Is it because they dwell in the realm of the imagination? Or are we linked by morality itself to the very best in us, as human beings. Or perhaps God speaks to us, and we see his words, written in some universal code, that somehow we all understand.

Many artists have used art to create biblical images; they have tried to motivate and interest people in religion, taking advantage of their paints and brushes. And we believe what we see after all and the brain works in a lot more complex way than just a vision; but believe this also, these images can be used for irreligious purposes with equal power.

If the artists' religion is irrelevant to the quality of his work, 'faithful' painters may not be any more successful in doing 'religious' art than non-believers. Why do artists picture what they do? What is the purpose of their work? Do they want to just picture what they understand of God's creation? Why do they paint angels on the walls of a church? Why is an angel's form considered to be artistic as soon as we look at it, whether it's in a church or in a book? Would a dead angel change our perspective from the one we have looking at the image of the lively, beautiful figure on the wall, staring at the ceiling? What role does my heart play in feeling, connecting and understanding an artistic subject?

One man, a scientist, would go beyond the limits and break the boundaries between art and anatomy, the living and the dead. He would have the courage to show his view of the ordinary and unattractive human body to the world. He is the German doctor, Gunther Von Hagens. The process he developed involves replacing natural body fluids with a plastic which both preserves the tissues and gives rigidity, enabling the corpse and organs to be displayed in any conceivable position. This process is quite remarkable. Transmutation, death and transfiguration

realized. It is not just music anymore. Instead of a bloody mess; a pile of fat, tissue, veins, brains, hair and blood, a thing of decay. The body becomes malleable, a thing of clay to be worked and kept alive, even in death. To be opened and inspected like a slow-motion film of life itself. Another World was hidden from view, God's own work and a product of 4 billion years of evolution.

Professor of anatomy, Gunther von Hagens, was born in 1945 in Poznan - now part of Poland - and grew up near Leipzig, in the former East Germany. He says his interest in the body dates back to when he was only six. A haemophiliac, he had cut his head and ended up spending six months in hospital. But it was seeing his first autopsy when he was seventeen, which he says absolutely fascinated him and that encouraged him to take up medicine. His exhibits have also had a positive result for attendees with many resolving to take more care of their own body after seeing the bodies on display. He began his medical studies at the University of Jena in 1965. In 1974, he received his license to practice medicine and moved to the University of Heidelberg, where he completed his doctorate in the Department of Anaesthetics and Emergency Medicine in 1975. He was a 32-year-old 'scientific employee' at Heidelberg when, he says, he

invented his 'plastination' technique one January evening in 1977, 'almost by accident'.

The purpose of this argument is to build on the following themes:

1. Nudity in Art
2. Prohibition
3. Re-creation in Art
4. The coincidence of Art and Sexuality

Just as Robert Mapplethorpe was concerned with joining the sexual and beautiful and crossing the divide between the two and rationalizing the two spheres of human experience. So these works represent a meeting point between creating the nude form and living beings, a link between what the artist strives for and what is real. The super-realistic sculpture of Duane Hanson, is a link to the work of Dr. von Hagens. This is fundamental, closing the rifts created between nature and humanity, undoing all the learned wrongs of past generations. It is a quest for freedom from conflict.

Many of the pieces assume postures similar to renaissance nudes. The outstretched arms, open palms and up-turned faces, and might therefore be considered artistic. But the possible configurations go beyond the bounds of Art, to the realm of reality. Organs may be

suspended by wires, or spread open to reveal everything to the curious. In this way it trumps art itself. He is in effect defying the human form.

The work of Leonardo da Vinci as an anatomist is certainly artistic and many would say that it was art. He and others were hampered by religious fanatics, who saw his work as immoral or worse. Scientific discovery has always suffered the ignorant. And the ignorant have rarely stayed quiet. Some typical criticisms are listed below. It is difficult to retain a balanced opinion of the work within a broader context as critics inevitably bring up politically charged issues, even when they haven't viewed the work at all. Some would say that it is pornographic because it shows the genitals and breasts. It is not pro-life as the foetuses are still inside the pregnant women. Pro-life advocates believe that it is wrong to kill a foetus in an abortion, but that it is okay to execute criminals or kill others in war. In this way they negate themselves as Christians through hypocrisy. Jesus refers to 'hypocrites' many times in the bible. Therefore this view is probably not a legitimate critique but rather a political statement.

However, the sight of the human foetus is no doubt shocking to some and fascinating

to others. This duality is probably an indication that the work is more art than science. Were they justly executed or murdered? Another feature of the political right is that they politicize death on a case-by-case basis. Dead Iraqis are not a problem, dead Americans hurt. No wonder the Muslims bury their dead immediately. The controversy surrounding the origin of the cadavers is probably again an unfair argument as all were donated bodies and in any case this doesn't enter into the discussion. But then again, it does severely affect how the work is viewed. It is not art because people had to die in order that these pieces could be made. This is a highly subjective comment and does not apply to all people at all. Death is, after all, inevitable. There is a further continuity in play here, another bridge to cross, from life and the living into the Land of the Dead.

The works cultivate prurient interest in seeing inside of the human body. Prurient is fun. Prurient is mischief but not rape or harm. Does this mean that we should allow the fat and the ugly to determine what we view with our own eyes? Why do we have to suffer them their perversions? The English anatomist John Bell criticized 'the subjection of true anatomical drawing to the capricious interference of the artist whose rule it has too often been to make

all beautiful and smooth, leaving no harshness'. Here he is correct; the bodies are presented in a kind manner that makes them look good rather than just hunks of meat. According to his view, the work is definitely art because the bodies are made to look beautiful and certainly contrast starkly with the 'dead meat' appearance of Bell's drawings. But this again is highly subjective, and leads us to consider whether it is possible to make the determination at all. Ugly is art also, even the work of Bell is art on some level, just as drawings it qualifies for an award.

The genitals and breasts should be covered as some may find the cadavers sexually attractive. Human sexuality extends beyond every limit. And art is not afraid to follow wherever it goes. The erotic and the beautiful have always made a powerful combination. But certain perversions appear to fall outside even the wide boundaries of art and in any case, we should not impose such considerations upon the artist. To do so would be to negate free expression, to censor. That would certainly remove the discomfort of facing strange and deviant works, but something of us is lost also. And we would never have the joy of realizing the disappearance of our deepest and darkest fears.

The bodies have been arranged in interesting ways and postures. They certainly have 'artistic' poses. And the bizarre arrangements of the detached muscles of The Runner or the suspended organs of other pieces have that elusive quality of a more abstract artistic spirit.

The human body did not evolve, it was created by God. Eve was created from Adam's rib. The snake tempted Eve and now we should cover our modesty. This comment may lie hidden in some criticism, but its influence in America can never be underestimated. Evolution and Creationism are another line in the Universe of human consideration, a continuum of thoughts ranging from religious dogma to enlightenment and back again, a superstring. This is because lines are curved and they have as many holes as points. The 30,000 generations of mankind are another, but to deny them all is brutal. It is a lie. And art stops at that point, and something more sinister takes over.

Children are harmed by seeing dead bodies on display. Death should come as a complete surprise to them and blood and guts must be hidden from them at all cost. They should live in ignorance so that they might become victims themselves and we, the knowing, shall have power over them. Many children on the video and on the

website testify about their interest in viewing the work. There is no fear in their voices, in fact everyone is subdued and awed in their response. I would now like to consider a few random comments as these kinds of things are sometimes emitted during a controversial argument. They have little relevance, but they are in some way related. Some of them are my own thoughts as provoked during this course, and therefore they do indeed provide a context, a backdrop if you will for my argument. These are some uniting items between the groups. And I must say that it has been hard to hear and read some closed arguments, when we are adrift in such huge issues and surrounded by the richness of life. Arguments that use Jesus, politics or religion in cold analysis are certainly false. They fall like dread on my ears and they make my blood run cold. I do not wish to engage such thoughts, so in a gesture of peace, I lay them before you, the reader, like tarot cards.

Jesus created food from bread and fish and wine from water, releasing the energy equivalent to a large nuclear bomb in the process. That is true; synthesis of matter from energy is similar to fusion in that energy is released in vast amounts. Jesus walked as a cadaver after he was raised from the dead. He too had a hole in his side where Thomas placed his hand to see

if he was really alive. People do not insert Bullwhips into themselves, ever. Jesus in a glass of urine looks somehow ancient and sad. The purpose of a human, the very reason they exist, is the same as all other organisms, to reproduce. The human is therefore, a fairly large, and complicated, reproductive machine. Robert Mapplethorpe's pictures of nature are stunningly good, but kind of boring as well. It's okay to crucify Christ, but not to degrade him by calling a beautiful picture of him bad because it was made using blood and piss which are created by the human body. We must be reverent in public when it comes to the military and Jesus otherwise we would be expressing a personal opinion which is wrong. Freedom of speech is controversial and it is best not to talk about it.

To be a neo-Nazi you must say the following things over and over:

1. Pro-life
2. Values
3. Christian
4. Family
5. Under attack
6. Homeland
7. National security

If people believe in different things then truth lies in controversy. If we cannot follow the Pope, President, or Jesus then

how will we know what to do? Driving an SUV is wrong but I don't own a Hybrid. A Muslim extremist stopped me on the street because I was wearing a skirt. Castro supporters are communists. Terrorists who support America's goals are not guilty. It is wrong to criticize the rich when there are so many poor in America. Nudity is a crime but I can shoot you in your home if I'm wearing a uniform. Why do they kill so many people at weddings? The air force drops them with bombs. The police shoot them with bullets.

In conclusion, I would offer that the work is art because it looks artistic and some of the pieces contain that elusive elemental tickling that comes with Art. The work is deliberate and expert, requiring many hours to produce. It is not accidental. Many people are prepared to pay good money to go and see it in exhibition.