Gunther von Hagens (1945- ) [1]

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Von Hagens was born Gunther Gerhard Liebchen in 1945, at the end of World War II, in Posen, Poland, which was then a part of Germany. Fleeing from political turmoil in the region, the Liebchen family spent six months traveling west and eventually settled in the East German town of Greiz. During his childhood von Hagens spent several months in the hospital from complications due to hemophilia [7], a blood clotting disorder, and he later said he left the hospital in awe of the body and of medicine. His interest was further piqued at the age of seventeen after he observed an autopsy.

Von Hagens immersed himself in topics that he found interesting. One such topic was Sputnik, the Soviet-launched satellite, for which von Hagens became a local expert at the age of twelve. His peers described Von Hagens as an outspoken student who often encouraged unorthodox thinking. He enrolled at the Medical School of Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, Germany in 1965. During his time at the university, von Hagens began to question communist ideas and decided to leave the German Democratic Republic. In 1969 he attempted to illegally cross the border, he was arrested, and he remained in prison for two years. After his release, he completed his studies at the University of Lübeck Medical School in Lübeck, Germany, and in 1974 he earned a license to practice medicine. At the university that he met his first wife, Cornelia von Hagens, with whom he had three children: Rurik, Bera, and Tona. He changed his own surname to von Hagens because of the teasing he endured for the name Liebchen, which means little darling in German, and he kept the von Hagens name when he and his wife later divorced.

In 1974, von Hagens interned at the Department of Anesthesiology and Emergency Medicine at Heidelberg University, but he later said that practicing medicine little interested him. Switching tracks, he became a research assistant at the Anatomical Institute [8] of the university. There, he saw organs preserved in plastic blocks and thought of putting the plastic in the organs themselves.

Over the next decade, von Hagens developed his plastination technique. To plastinate tissues, organs, and bodies, all of the fluids are first removed, followed by an injection of a resin material, which is then cured with light. The resin hardens into a durable plastic without damaging the tissues. Von Hagens' work, for which he has multiple patents, was lauded for its potential to increase the shelf life of medical school specimens. Von Hagens formed a company, Biodur Products, to distribute the tools and chemicals necessary to perform plastination. These products were sold to medical schools and scientific institutions so they could create their own specimens for educational purposes.

Supported by the positive reactions to his work, von Hagens and his second wife Angelina Whalley, whom he married in 1992, created a traveling exhibition titled Body Worlds [5]. Since the exhibition's Japanese debut in 1995, it has been restructured several times and has traveled in Asia, Europe, and North America. According to the New York Times, Body Worlds [5] has proven to be a most popular display. Von Hagens has stated that the ability to accurately visualize tissues because of plastination has increased his appreciation for the human body.

The prenatal development displays have also contributed to the field of embryology [6]. Plastination has given non-embryologists the opportunity to view embryonic and fetal development stage by stage with real examples. Many argue that those examples convey more information than do photos or descriptions. The same holds true for the Body Worlds [5] pregnancy [9] displays; it is not often that the public can see the inside of a pregnant woman's stomach, which some of the specimens in Body Worlds [5] enable.

In addition to Body Worlds [5], Von Hagens also founded the Institute for Plastination at Heidelberg University. In Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, he directed the State Medical Academy Plastination Research Center, and in China he started the company Von
Gunther von Hagens, inventor of plastination, created Body Worlds, a traveling exhibition that has made human anatomy accessible to public audiences. Von Hagens' work has been controversial, with critics arguing about the ethics of using human bodies for display. The exhibition has also been praised for its educational value, showing viewers diseased tissues and the intricacies of development.

Regardless of the specimens' origin, von Hagens' plastination technique has been used to educate the public and professionals about the human body. The exhibition has given millions of people the opportunity to learn about anatomy in a new and engaging way.