Against a sanguine backdrop a skinless man stands tall. This is quite a feat considering he has been bisected down the center of his body, a foot for each side to stand on. Through the gap between his separated sides, his organs have been neatly shuffled to the left or right, providing a jigsaw view of the human abdominal cavity. Despite his exposure, the man is confident: he’s got one fist against each hip, as if inviting the viewer to peruse his innards. And why shouldn’t he be confident? He’s been gifted with a new lease on life. His fat has been melted away, his fluids replaced by silicon. As a display in *Bodies: The Exhibition*, he will never rot, ignominiously, in the ground; instead, medical students, children, and the curious can pay Premier Exhibitions for the privilege of staring into unseeing eyes, but whose? The process this nameless, skinless man has gone through is called “plastination,” an invention of German doctor Gunther von Hagens, who founded the *Body Worlds* exhibition, featuring preserved human and animal corpses (“Plastination”). In 2011, the then 66-year-old anatomist announced that he was dying. He requested that his body be plastinated after death and put on display.

Von Hagens’ life work is, to say the least, shrouded in controversy. Numerous allegations over ethical concerns, body sourcing, and violated social mores have dogged *Body Worlds* and its later rival, Premier Exhibition’s *Bodies: The Exhibition*. As concerns over exhibits featuring human remains still garner controversy after two decades, it’s important to note that this is not the first time these issues have been raised. In 1988, David J. Williams, a professor of medical illustration at Purdue University, wrote “The History of Eduard Pernkopf’s *Topographische Anatomie des Menschen*,” a work detailing the anatomical obsession of one Eduard Pernkopf, the head of Vienna University during WWII and a notorious Nazi. Williams was deeply interested in Pernkopf’s atlas of the human body, which is sometimes referred to
in English simply as *The Pernkopf Anatomy*. While he did not side-step Pernkopf’s Nazism in his paper, he did say that the *Anatomy* would “unfortunately, never be acknowledged by some as the masterpiece it truly is” (Williams).

These words would make Williams infamous. They would cost him relationships and damage his reputation. In 2002, journalist Michael Paterniti interviewed Williams for his essay, “The Most Dangerous Beauty.” Paterniti’s inquiry follows Professor Williams’s fear of his own impending mortality as he seeks redemption for his defense of a Nazi work as well as the work of Franz Batke, the last living contributor to the *Anatomy* and a former brownshirt whom Williams met in 1980. Paterniti also turns back to the original source, scrutinizing Pernkopf’s approach to his subjects, finding it worthy both of condemnation and sympathy.

It’s difficult to ascertain precisely where Paterniti stands on the issue, entrenched as he is in these narratives. As a journalist, he restrains his own opinions, yet he constantly calls for “understand[ing],” all the while knowing that what he’s asking for is huge: that we turn a blind eye to the development of plastination by perpetrators of a great atrocity (737). He approaches the beauty of the artwork in *The Pernkopf Anatomy* with vivid language. He grants equal favor to the Nazi atrocities committed in Vienna, and to the life stories of each of his main subjects. The connection seems damning because the artwork is inherently dehumanized. But Paterniti’s ecstatic descriptions of the drawings from the *Anatomy* are described with the same lush ardor. The use of words like “otherworldly” suggests that Paterniti sees in Pernkopf’s individual body parts a transcendance, a presence beyond mere flesh and blood, as if by becoming objects of art they had become something more than what they used to be in life (741). At ground level, the *Anatomy* is an atlas of the human body for functional use, but on the plane of the visual artists who created and endorsed it, it is an ambitious endeavor that marries scientific needs to the dizzying heights of fine art. The body becomes a beautiful object, and Paterniti seems aware of this. But, after death, is the body necessarily granted transcendence? A body preserved in art has lost its personhood; a pair of kidneys does not make a man. The elusive beauty that draws people to the *Anatomy* is the same one that draws them to the plastinated body that seemingly exists only on the other side of death. Virginia Woolf’s “The Death of the Moth” looks into the life and death of a trifling moth. She describes it as “pathetic” in life, but finds that in death it attains a quiet dignity and is “decently and uncomplainingly composed” (385, 386). Could a body part—a
kidney, the delicate sacs inside the lung—achieve a similar dignity after death?

Paterniti seems to suggest so given his vivid descriptions of the body parts in question, but his true judgments are not so simple. He also has a preoccupation with “sin” throughout the work, but refrains from openly judging all but the least defendable subjects in his narrative (746). In the case of David Williams, easily the most sympathetic voice in an essay where all other subjects are Nazis, one can apply what Paterniti chooses to include or exclude as clues to the author’s judgment. In this case, the most damning, personal, and raw moment is Paterniti’s portrayal of Williams’s hypocrisy. Though this professor of anatomical art can find anonymous, fragmented bodies beautiful beyond death, he has a far different reaction to the exhibited corpse of a close family member. Paterniti dedicates an entire passage to the apparent suicide of David Williams’s brother Greg, in a work where, under different circumstances, Greg would be but a minor character. The reaction that Williams has to his brother’s corpse (he finds it without beauty, a “lifeless slab”) is important to our understanding of his view of the other bodies after death (743). Greg dies alone in New York of an overdose. His brother comes to identify him. In a New York morgue, Williams finds Greg “in severe rigor mortis, with the back of his head resting on a wooden block, exactly like a cadaver in a gross-anatomy lab” (743). Despite Paterniti’s comparison of Greg’s body and a cadaver (the professor would have dealt with many cadavers over his career), Williams is so affected by his brother’s death that he actually “fell” into the arms of a nearby police officer (743). Yet he still finds the anonymous and dismembered bodies in *The Pernkopf Anatomy* beautiful. They do not touch him. It becomes evident over the course of his essay that he does not revere them the way he does his brother’s body—does not see them as human. Greg dies without the objectification of his body: instead, Williams retains Greg’s personhood in his memory. Paterniti describes Greg’s body just as explicitly as the “otherworldly vaginas” of *The Pernkopf Anatomy*, but instead of transcendental, ecstatic language, he focuses on the gross and vivid detail—the track marks on Greg’s arms (741). This work rests so heavily on the shoulders of Paterniti’s subjects that it’s amazing that Greg, a man we first meet in his teens, before his struggle with his sexual identity, before his suicide, is allowed, in death, to be human. Thanks to Paterniti’s description we see through the body to the man himself: messy, complex, intensely human, and deserving of dignity despite his darker moments.

Greg’s parents worry about his body after death, concerned that he won’t be buried with his family in a Catholic cemetery. This preoccupation defines
the struggle Greg’s family has with death and Greg’s individuality. Though Williams is a conflicted supporter of the Anatomy, the death of his brother Greg shadows his own research. Paterniti writes, “If his brother’s death left no mark on the greater world, the rest of those dark days in 1978 are part of David Williams’s personal history” (743). And yet in only two years Williams would meet Franz Batke in Germany during his first pilgrimage to learn the origins of The Pernkopf Anatomy. After this meeting, he would write the infamous, laudatory review of the book for an obscure journal. Then, as he faces losses to his reputation and in his personal life, he meets several times with a local rabbi who “tells him that his sin may be one of perspective” (746). The rabbi instructs him to imagine the grief of the Holocaust victims, or those who lost family members. For them, the book would not hold the aesthetic, transcendental value it has for Williams; instead, it would be a “dirty crime scene” (746). The fact that he could never make the connection between the fervor of his detractors and his own feelings after his brother’s death is baffling. Williams sees Greg’s dead body in a human light.

But understand that we are meeting Williams as he nears the end of his own life; in the face of his own mortality, he is changing. As of Paterniti’s writing in 2002, the professor has suffered three heart attacks. In the spring of that year, Williams would pack his bags to make another pilgrimage to consider again the origins of The Pernkopf Anatomy. His inner revelations were not expected to be the same as those he experienced on the journey that led him to write that original article in 1988. Years before, Williams’s mind had been preoccupied by beauty and transcendence; in 2002, he embarked on a search for sin. On this journey, he is met by former-Nazis-turned-professors, and the faint stain of decades-old atrocities.

When a large group is dehumanized, atrocity is not long in following. But Lawrence Weschler’s collection of essays Vermeer in Bosnia shows how the individual may subvert the traditional dehumanization through art or action. Acting can break the cycle of rhetoric and violence associated with the loss of humanity. Weschler’s work opens, like Paterniti’s, in the confusion that follows great atrocity. Weschler is sitting on the Yugoslav War Crimes Tribunal in the Netherlands, with the trial of Serbian war criminal Dusko Tadic underway. Despite the intensity of the trial, he finds his answer to centuries of conflict and blood feud not in the courtroom, but in an art museum. Weschler undergoes Paterniti’s transfiguration in reverse: his work deals with the transcendence of a mere art object into a human being! He examines the situation in the Balkans through the lens of Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer. Vermeer could take trite and hackneyed tropes and create a transcendent
work of humanity. Weschler cites Edward Snow, author of *Study of Vermeer*, who argues that Vermeer’s work celebrates autonomy, and thus individual humans. Specifically, Snow sees sexuality in Vermeer’s female subjects, but rather than depicting the subject with an objectifying gaze, Vermeer portrays his women as autonomous and individual, and above all, as human.

Weschler argues that by going beyond genre, Vermeer imbued his subjects with personal worth. The humanization of the subject became the focus of Vermeer’s artistic transcendence. With this in mind, Weschler asks a jurist at the tribunal if ethnic violence can ever stop in the Balkans. The jurist replies yes, if “specific individuals bear the major share of the responsibility” for the violence, “and it is they, not the group as a whole, that need to be held to account” (784). Weschler’s interpretation of Vermeer and his artistic focus on the individual, when applied to the human body, sheds a new light on Paterniti’s discussion of transcendence. Weschler lets us ask: what if these anatomical works were no longer subject to our gaze? Just as Vermeer’s subjects were freed from the male gaze, can the subjects of *The Pernkopf Anatomy* be recognized as individuals? It isn’t easy to see an anonymous spinal cord, a pair of lungs, as the human they once belonged to.

But Williams cannot revive his brother Greg. He cannot raise the dead, but he certainly continues to see his dead brother’s corpse as human. So too did the Jewish critics regard the other cadavers as “brethren” and considered their exhibition a desecration. Some thought they came from concentration camps, though an investigation found that untrue. Even though Jews as “subjects” did arouse sympathy, it would still be shortsighted to think of *The Pernkopf Anatomy* as concerning only one group. Some may have been thrown from the roof of the university, while others may have been petty criminals. Before their deaths, it’s hard to fathom any of them consenting to what would be done to their bodies. This problem persists, no matter who they were. To ethically confront the controversy surrounding the *Anatomy*, one must avoid thinking of the human form only in an artistic sense. One must never forget the human.

Weschler sat as Tadic stood accused and then convicted of torture, and of overseeing torture and rape. As of 2008, Tadic has been released. The controversy surrounding Pernkopf’s *Anatomy*, too, continues on in other forms: using the technique of body plastination, *Bodies: The Exhibition* is still open in three cities, New York included, despite concerns from the government and mainstream media about body sourcing. Most of the corpses on display in that exhibition come from China, where there is no cultural tradition or legal procedure for the donation of bodies. Instead, executed prisoners are the pri-
mary source of organ transplants and anatomy specimens. Out of China’s prisoners, hundreds of thousands are believed to be political prisoners or prisoners of conscience. So who were the murderers, who the oppressed? Without a skin as evidence, it almost becomes impossible to know. For Paterniti, the transformation from human into commodity is the transfiguration of fragmented body parts into art. However, the literal commodification of the body flouts any aesthetic aim: plastinated bodies can be purchased on Chinese websites, and thirty-five dollars can buy entrance to the whole exhibition of plastinated people. It is important, now, when lines between the body and commodity remain blurred, that we follow Vermeer’s example, and turn this process back on itself. The next time you see the advertisement with that sanguine man, take a moment to consider who he was, rather than what he has become, and wonder what could have happened to his name, and his skin.

WORKS CITED