Science & Technology

Death Rights

A postmortem legal expert visits the “Bodies” exhibit.

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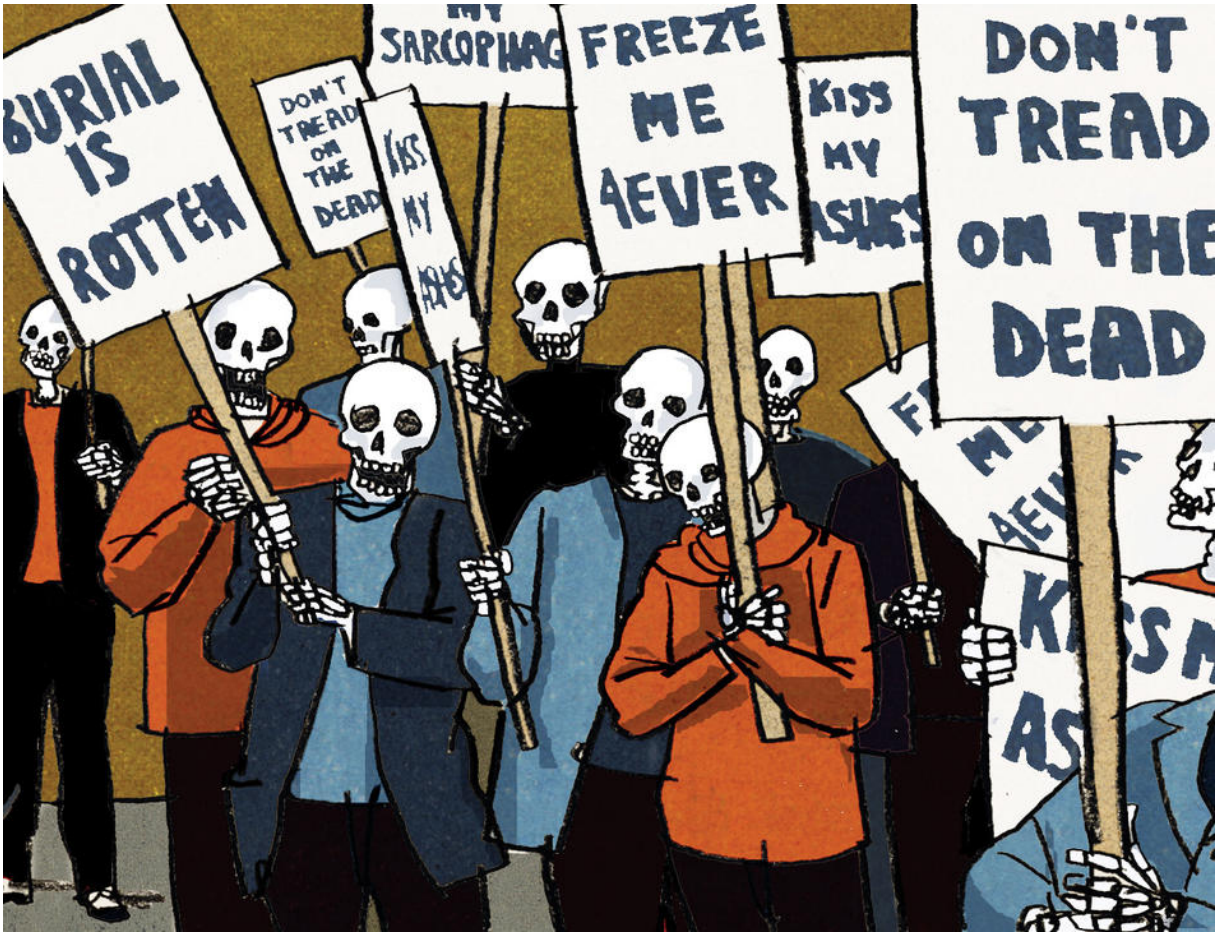

Daniel Zalkus

There are the death-curious, the death-fixated, and the death-obsessed. Then there is Norman Cantor.

On a rainy, dreary day last autumn, Cantor ’67LAW, a soft-spoken academic from Hoboken who for 25 years taught a seminar at the Rutgers School of Law called Death and Dying, took the ferry to Manhattan to visit *Bodies: The Exhibition* at the Exhibition Centre on Fulton Street. He wore a bright-blue windbreaker stitched with the seal of the Israel Tennis Center and kept it zipped up snugly over his retired professor’s paunch. He went into the old brick warehouse, got his senior discount, and entered the show with some misgivings.

Inside the dimly lit rooms of the gallery were about 20 human bodies in various stages of dissection, preserved through the technique of plastination, by which water and lipids are replaced with polymers and dyes. The finished product is both remarkably lifelike and strangely inhuman. Facial features are erased in the process, destroying individuality. The flayed bodies in Cantor’s midst were arranged in familiar poses: A male cadaver, strung with muscle and ligaments, carried a football in the yearbook style of a collegiate star; a cadaver and a skeleton faced each other, fingertips touching, like dancers in a pair spin; and a sinewy conductor raised his baton, doubtless for a performance of “Funeral March of a Marionette.” Elsewhere, discrete organs and bodily systems, extracted in all their intricacy and fineness, lay miraculously intact, accompanied by eye-popping facts on wall placards (the human body contains 60,000 miles of blood vessels!) that buttressed the semblance of an anatomy lesson.

“Opponents of these types of exhibitions claim that they’re voyeuristic and disrespectful, and that it’s offensive to exploit human remains in that way,” Cantor said as his eye wandered over a skull veiled by a net of red blood vessels. “The bodies at this exhibition are even more controversial, because most, if not all of them, come from China, and the suspicion is that many of these people were executed Chinese prisoners. The exhibitors say they obtained the bodies legally, according to Chinese law. The problem is that China wasn’t really giving the prisoners’ families a chance to object to the sale of the bodies, and the exhibitors admit that they cannot show explicit consent by the decedents.”

In his new book, *After We Die: The Life and Times of the Human Cadaver*, Cantor conducts a legal and historical examination of the disposition and treatment of the human corpse that leaves no stone unturned. Among entries on premortem planning, body snatching, medical dissection, autopsies, disposal methods (including green burials), and legal protections for the human carcass, Cantor devotes several pages to the mother of all cadaver spectacles, *Body Worlds*, created by the German

anatomist Gunther von Hagens, who invented plastination in the 1970s and, like an artist, signs his works. Cantor deems the provenance of von Hagens's cadavers "more kosher" than those at *Bodies*. "It does trouble me a little bit," he said, pausing before a glass case containing a central nervous system, which resembled a large fishbone, "to think of the origins of these pieces."

But Cantor is no moralist. He doesn't object to such exhibitions, with their whiff of acetone and sideshow sleaze, so long as the decedents gave their permission. His attitude is pretty much "die and let live." In *After We Di*e, he cites an American poet who wanted his skin to be used to bind his own writings, and a man in the Galilee who wished for his body to be left in the wilderness and eaten. In both cases, the courts ruled that these methods were inherently disrespectful toward human remains. Cantor isn't so sure. "I don't think it would necessarily be a desecration of human remains if you incorporated them into a book, a pair of shoes, or a work of art," he said. "If you wanted to wear a lock of someone's hair in a locket, why not a piece of finger?"

Cantor's interest in such matters can be traced back to 1973, when his stepbrother, a criminal attorney who had a chronic illness, passed away at age 39, leaving instructions for a New Orleans-style funeral. The widow was to wear white, and a Dixieland jazz band was to lead the procession from the funeral home in Trenton. (The family reluctantly complied.) Thirty years and many Death and Dying seminars later, Cantor read about Ted Williams, whose children were in a legal scuffle over whether baseball's last .400 hitter should, according to his conflicting desires, be cryogenically frozen or cremated and scattered over the Florida Keys. Cantor wondered: Even if Williams's wish to be resurrected were undisputed, would the responsible parties be bound to implement it if they found cryonics abhorrent? (Williams's remains are currently being stored in pots of liquid nitrogen at a cryonics facility in Scottsdale, Arizona.) Could a corpse, in short, have legal rights?

The answer, of course, is yes — you can't, for instance, rob a grave, or wantonly mistreat a body — but when it comes to the more whimsical aspirations of the departed, Cantor feels the courts are too restrictive. Which isn't to say he's laissez-faire. "There are limits of decency and good taste," he said, walking past what looked like a nice rack of lamb from Lobel's. "In 2009, von Hagens had a display in Germany in which two corpses were copulating. To me, that was beyond the pale. People objected strenuously, and in his next exhibition he did not use copulating

corpses.”

Cantor skimmed other curiosities: a gallstone-afflicted gallbladder like a closed oyster, a slab of marble-textured lung, and the pinkish sea coral of a bronchial tree. He then paused at a skeleton with two titanium hip prosthetics. This reminded Cantor of his own hip implants — “I’ve been meaning to ask my doctor about that hip recall” — and of his years wearing down his cartilage on the hard tennis courts in Israel, where he lives half the year.

It also raised the question of Cantor’s own postmortem dreams. Since he has no children and expects no visitors, he dismissed a traditional burial as a waste of space and decent wood. “I’m leaning toward cremation,” he said, as if considering a color for his office. As described in *After We Die*, the cremation process takes two to four hours, and would leave about seven pounds of matter, minus his titanium bolts. His “cremains,” as they are known in the business, would be entrusted to his life partner, an Israeli woman who is averse to cremation (according to Cantor, there is one crematorium in Israel), but who has agreed to honor his wishes.

As for what he’d like done with his ashes, Cantor was undecided. There were really so many options. He mentioned a woman who sought to comply with her husband’s wishes by sprinkling his ashes in the sand trap of a beloved golf course (the management refused), though when it was suggested to Cantor that he do something similar on his favorite tennis court, he shook his head. Ashwise, his tastes lay on this side of the foul line. Still, he wouldn’t begrudge others the prerogative. “I would be willing to urge someone to do it in secret,” he said, “if that were truly the wish of the deceased.”

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