Dissection Spectacle

Beneath a copy of the 1632 Rembrandt painting *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicholas Tulp*, a notorious German doctor last month performed Britain's first public autopsy in 170 years. In front of a gaping audience of 400, Gunther von Hagens affirmed that a 72-year-old man, who the physician says consented to the procedure, had died of heart failure.

The scene outside the London art gallery where the autopsy took place on 20 November was so chaotic that only 33 of the audience members paid the $19 admission fee. The event—parts of which were broadcast on British television—generated plenty of disgust. "It wasn't science; it was a spectacle, a show," says a spokesperson for the British Medical Association.

Von Hagens, who gained notoriety in 1997 for a traveling exhibition that displays "plastinated" human bodies and body parts (*Science*, 29 March, p. 2359), has long advocated a return to public dissections. Beginning in Italy in the late 13th century and continuing until the mid-1800s in parts of Europe and the United States, public dissections morphed from a display of civic pride in local medical faculties into a popular form of entertainment. Such events later became taboo as critics decried ties between human bodies and money and as dissection became more of a science, according to Michael Sappol, a curator at the U.S. National Library of Medicine and author of *A Traffic of Dead Bodies*.

Old-fashioned show in London.

Nowadays in Britain, licenses are needed both for the location of the autopsy and the person performing it. Police are preparing a report for prosecutors, who will decide whether to charge Von Hagens.

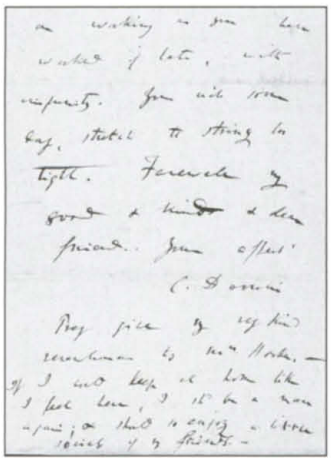
The doctor denies he did anything illegal, and indeed he hopes to convince more people to consent to autopsies, which have become rarer for financial and medical reasons. He's already planning a second public autopsy, this time in Germany.

Bovines munch while university burns.

Fiery Computer Crash

A humongous fire in a mathematics and computer center paralyzed communications and caused up to $50 million in damage at the University of Twente in the Netherlands on 20 November. Two days later, police arrested a 26-year-old university employee after he allegedly tried to set another academic building ablaze. Police say the man has confessed to the first fire but did not vouchsafe his motives. A university spokesperson says most of the files stored on the computers can probably be recovered from backups, but some scientists have lost "years of work" in paper files and other nonretrievable information.

Darwin's Letters Online



Last page of a letter Darwin wrote to Joseph Dalton Hooker on 15 October 1859, after completing *The Origin of Species*. Earlier in the letter, he writes: "You cannot think how refreshing it is to idle away whole day, & hardly ever think in the least about my confounded Book, which half killed me."

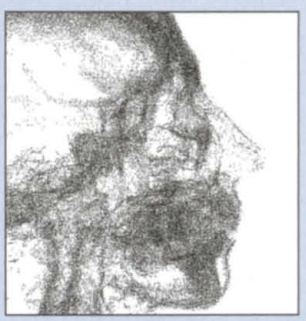
Charles Darwin was a prolific correspondent who exchanged letters with more than 2000 people, and nearly 15,000 letters written by or to him are known to still exist. Now the Cambridge University–based Darwin Correspondence Project has started putting every word online.

The project has spent close to 3 decades compiling and publishing the letters. So far, editors have finished 13 of 32 planned volumes—which span Darwin's life from his youth in the 1820s to his death in 1882. Fortunately for us, "following the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, people tended to keep his letters," says Alison Pearn, the project's senior research associate. Previously unknown letters still turn up at a rate of 60 or so a year, she adds. The project is expected to finish in 2025.

This month, with funding from the U.S. National Science Foundation, the British Arts and Humanities Research Board, and others, Pearn's group is starting to post the first seven volumes online, in a fully searchable format (www.lib.cam.ac.uk/Departments/Darwin).

Scholars will probably use the collection for "things we've not even conceived of yet," says Pearn, noting that recent research projects have used the letters to shed light on gibbon communication and for a study on the dynamics of scientific networks.

Follow the Dots



Stippled image of head.

New computer-imaging software developed at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana, uses a technique called stippling—like the pointillism of Impressionists—to render instant rotatable and zoomable images from 3D scans of body parts. Engineer David S. Ebert presented the work at a conference in Boston last month. "Points are very simple geometrically," he says. "It is a way to pull out the features of the data set or help you find problems more quickly."

CREDITS: (TOP TO BOTTOM) JAN WILLEM VELDHUIS/UNIVERSITY OF TWENTE; FERDAUS SHAMIM/CORBIS SYGMA; THE SYNDICS OF CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY; PURDUE UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF ELECTRICAL AND COMPUTER ENGINEERING