

# The wonder of the human body

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The question of how we perceive and value the human body is becoming an increasingly pertinent question to ponder and consider. An exhibition which generates as much acclaim as it does criticism in response to this question, Body Worlds, went on show at London's O2 arena from October 2008 to August 2009. The travelling exhibition explores the ageing process and exemplifies the technique of plastination in preserving human bodies and body parts in order to reveal the inner anatomical structures.

All the bodies used in the exhibition belonged to people who authorised the use of their bodies after their deaths for the educational benefit of both medical professionals and non-professionals. Plastination of the bodies involve an impregnational technique carried out in a vacuum where the body tissue is saturated with special plastics. Consequently, the body tissues gain an increased rigidity thus allowing them to be displayed upright and positioned in lifelike poses. The exhibition takes between 60 to 90 minutes to view and having viewed it one is hard pressed not to come away with a greater appreciation and wonder of the human body. However, as well as the educational benefit Body Worlds also helps to stimulate questions concerning how one views the human body.

## Human dignity

First, concerns have been expressed over the artistic representation of plastinated specimens which have now been recreated into 'whole body exhibits'. Does this violate human dignity? It is emphasised that each person who has had their dead body plastinated made the decision independently. Consequently, it could be said that agreeing to have their body plastinated is an expression of their personal dignity. But it is the wider ramifications of this decision which need to be carefully thought through. Considering dignity on this personal level fails to take into consideration the individual's role in humanity as a whole. On the individual level, a body donor may see their dignity as being preserved through plastination but at a wider social level, a plastinate could become part of a larger voyeuristic event which in turn violates human dignity. Whilst the educational benefits of Body Worlds are immense and bring the body 'to life' more than even the best anatomical text book, one can easily slip into forgetting that the bodies before you are not cleverly created plastic models but actual bodies.

In a world which seems dominated by the cult of celebrity and TV reality shows could the motive of furthering scientific knowledge of the body quickly be routed and perverted by voyeuristic tendencies? Does the act of putting corpses on display actually help to depersonalise human beings? They become objects to be processed in a pragmatic way and even openly described as 'whole body exhibits' rather than dead persons who have actually lived. Von Hagens has argued that the public have a 'right to view bodies'. This is true and in many respects the wonder of the human body and the insights which the contemporary natural sciences can afford us in order to enrich our understanding should be made available and accessible to all. However, taking this right to its extreme form whereby it becomes a right to reveal the human object at all costs, one could be in danger of quickly arriving at a far more unnatural place of prostituting the body.

## Facing death

Secondly, it goes without saying that what has probably fuelled peoples' interest in Body Worlds has been the controversy surrounding the use of dead bodies. As is the case when something is highly criticised and condemned it adds to the intrigue of the subject. The fact that we will all face death at some point in our lives causes Body Worlds to provide a window in to this fact of life outside of an overtly medical or scientific environment. But more than that, the exhibition helps to reframe anatomical information so that it can be accessed by non-clinical professionals. As you stand in front

of any of the many plastinates, a mirroring effect takes place?.this is me, too.

At this juncture, critics point to the fact that as people dream of immortality and omnipotence, plastination provides a means of circumventing the issue that our time on earth is limited and that there are limitations and boundaries to our lives. Should you decide to donate your body to plastination it provides a means by which an individual can maintain a presence here on earth. Indeed, in the future what is there to stop plastination becoming more common place with loved ones who have passed away being put on display in the family home or being passed on to future generations as a permanent memorial? Moreover, by regarding plastination as a form of art, it causes the whole human experiment to take on a whole new dimension. Far from displaying human flaws and limitations, when a human body is placed into the hands of an artist to be worked upon it can result in a work of perfection.

Yet far from trying to promote a notion of living forever, in my view Body Worlds actually helps to refocus our attention back on to the meaning of what it is to live embodied lives. The exhibit 'Phoenix' encapsulates the whole essence of the exhibition. A female plastinate holds her hands open releasing a phoenix into the air. This conveys two essential principles. First, there is a limit to our lives but secondly, knowing that we cannot live forever the next best thing is actually the creation of the next generation.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Body Worlds is certainly a different kind of exhibition. I am sure that for some it may not even stir up much reaction, such is the media saturated world in which we live in where not much surprises or offends us anymore. Aspects of the publicity and style of the Body Worlds exhibition has undoubtedly contributed to the whole enterprise being considered a circus and something more akin to a sixteenth century 'cabinet of curiosity'. Von Hagens' iconic anatomist's hat, which he never seems to appear without, causes a haunting air of mystery to surround the man, but from which he appears to draw strength of identity. As seen in Rembrandt's painting of the anatomist, Dr. Andreas Tulp, the habit of anatomy artists of the Renaissance was to wear a hat which was never taken off even during dissections, thereby demonstrating their independence from the social norms of their time. Body Worlds and von Hagens clearly do not represent a socially contrived and manufactured "product" that falls within the confines of social norms, of that there is no mistake.

Nonetheless, if these aspects are put to one side and the exhibition is viewed with an engaging and enquiring mind, Body Worlds provokes and challenges the way we consider and regard the human body. With the transhumanism school of thought growing in its prominence and proposing a better post-human future beyond skin as we know it, the question as to how we view the body and what makes us who we are is one that needs to be actively engaged in and discussed by all humans.