

## EXHIBITION REVIEW

### **“BodyWorlds – The Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies”, Atlantic Gallery, London, 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2002 - 9<sup>th</sup> February 2003**

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#### **Background**

Professor Gunther von Hagens and his exhibition “BodyWorlds – The Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies” have evoked great controversy among both the medical profession and the wider public. The exhibition consists primarily of human remains (both individual internal organs and whole bodies) that have been dissected to various degrees and placed in a variety of poses. The soft tissue is preserved using a method von Hagens terms “plastination”, which initially replaces the water naturally present in the body with solvent, and then introduces various polymer compounds to preserve and add rigidity, thereby facilitating the modelling process. Much of the controversy surrounds these full-body plastinates and issues of human dignity and respect for the dead. Furthermore, the value of the exhibition has been called into question – is the purpose of the exhibition education or entertainment, art or anatomy, science or sensationalism?

For archaeologists, one of the few sectors of society that might handle the dead, this exhibition raises a number of issues. Within archaeological and museum circles, it is believed that the general public in much of Western society today are more sensitive to death and human remains, as we are generally less involved with the dead (Walker 2000). Hospitals and the funerary industry have taken over many of the duties involved in handling the recent dead. As a result, in many places, including Britain, it is standard procedure for excavations of human remains to be shielded from sight, and increasingly common for museums to place such material out of general view and provide advance warning of the display of human remains. Many codes of ethics within archaeology and allied fields such as museology and conservation make special mention of the unique nature of human remains and advise that their treatment be with tact, dignity and respect (American Association of Museums 2000; Museums Association 2002; The Society for Historical Archaeology 1993). Some even stipulate that such material should only be made available for legitimate research (International Council of Museums 1986 amended 2001; Museum Ethnographers Group 1994). In fact, collections of archaeological human remains are regularly under scrutiny for repatriation, restitution and reburial generally. It is within this context that the exhibition of BodyWorlds was considered. This review looks at the question of why dead bodies cause sensation and compares the positions of archaeologists and the general public on the issue of dealing with human remains.

**The Exhibition**

The title “BodyWorlds – The Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies” suggests that the content of the exhibition should be educational, presenting human anatomy. This is further reinforced by the emphasis von Hagens places upon his academic titles of ‘Honorary Professor of State Medical Academy, Bishkek, Kirgizia’ and ‘Guest Professor of Dalian Medical University’, which have been a subject of debate but which he fervently defends (Institut für Plastination 2002/2003a). In the small exhibition space on the ground floor, the visitor is gradually familiarised to plastination and the nature of the exhibition. The first case consists primarily of dry bone with basic anatomical descriptions. The second case contains a few plastinated articulated joints. These appear relatively fresh, the effect of plastination, but consist only of bone with small amounts of connective tissue (no muscle) and are visually quite interesting in contrast to the previous case. The third case contains a flayed plastinated articulated leg showing various surgical interventions including shiny metal knee and hip replacements, which draws attention away from the muscles and soft tissue, and is still presented like machinery, in a detached, anatomical way.

Visitors must then go up a staircase decorated with prints of Renaissance anatomical drawings, which also appear throughout the remainder of the exhibition. This seems to be a subtle way of legitimating and justifying the BodyWorlds exhibition by showing that the dissection and the display of dead bodies have a long and prestigious history in the development of scientific knowledge.

Upstairs the full-body plastinates are on display. One may have seen a recently dead person, a skeleton, mummified remains or even a body or body parts in an anatomy department or hospital, but nothing quite prepares the viewer for the bizarre manipulations of dead bodies on show; their nudity peeled away to reveal the internal workings of the body. Favourite display designs include showing a flayed body split down the middle with the internal organs held in the hands, or having a particular body divided into its various components so that muscles, nerves and bones can be displayed as three separate upright figures.

A significant number of these full-body plastinates are displayed in sports poses with such titles as ‘The Swimmer’ and ‘The Cyclist.’ For example, the flayed body of ‘The Pole-vaulter’ is inverted at the top of a pole as if in flight (and in full view of the refreshments seating area), with his articulated internal organs located further down the pole at approximately eye-level – the actual purpose of this arrangement is unclear. The same could be said for ‘The Goal-keeper’, who is jumping diagonally through the air, arms outstretched, with a football touching his lower hand and his articulated internal organs in his upper hand. Whether these individuals were actually athletes in the sports they now represent, and had physical attributes of interest that reflected their activities in life, was not mentioned. One was left to assume there was no such connection, and these displays only served to demonstrate the potential of plastination as a technique.

Furthermore, several of the full-body plastinates appear to be based on works of art. The ‘Posed Plastination with Skin’, is a flayed man holding the entirety of his body skin up in his right hand as if hanging up a coat. This figure was used extensively in

the exhibition's marketing, and clearly imitates a 1556 work of Juan de Valverde, a print of which was present in the exhibition. Other plastinates, such as 'The Open Drawer' and 'The Runner' have been likened to Dali and Boccioni works, respectively (Kroegel 2001). Throughout his exhibition and on his website, von Hagens attempts to associate himself with the Renaissance and the tradition of the humanists. He considers himself an anatomist/artist, however rather than basing art on anatomy, he is using actual human anatomy to create 'art', which seems to miss the mark.

Many viewers reacted to these exhibitions on a bodily level, perhaps because of the incongruent use of dead bodies contorted into active positions, or even due to the proliferation of soft tissue and lack of any physical barrier, including glass cases, to the dead. While the mind may ponder how to react, many people's bodily rejection of the spectacle was felt immediately, and ranged from nausea to headaches and cold chills, as testified in the comment books and experienced by the authors. However, some people also felt that the rather plastic look of the bodies, and the closeness to which one could get to the plastinates, actually lessened the effect of their realness – one became desensitised by the sheer volume and overwhelming nature of the exhibit. Neither response seems optimal.

Anatomical diagrams labelled with muscles and bones accompanied many of the full-body plastinates. However, much of the labelling was inconsistent, with proper anatomical terms mixed with common terms, such as "thigh bone" and "tibia" on the same diagram, to mention but one example. Surely using the term "femur" instead of "thigh bone" would be more appropriate in this context. It was difficult to excuse errors of this nature considering this was meant to be an "anatomical exhibition", which seems to support much of the criticism from the medical establishment. Displays of severe deformities, and diseases on dismembered organs and on full-bodied babies often lacked adequate labelling and explanations. Had such been provided one might have considered at least some of these displays to have an educational purpose, however, as this was not the case, one was left to wonder whether one had entered some Victorian freak show or circus.

The exhibition of full-body plastinates is pervaded by von Hagen's morbid sense of humour. The following cases stand out in particular. The rotating 'Winged Man', so called because his peeled back cheeks and drawn out arm muscles resemble wings, wears a white hat which, we are told "adds to the eccentric posture and further narrows the gap between life and death". The 'Memorial to Donors' is another tongue-in-cheek display showing a kneeling skeleton apparently in the act of prayer, and clasping a heart organ between the palms of his hands. 'The Mythical Plastinate' is flayed, with his muscles sticking out from his body, he holds his lungs in his hands, and his face skin has been peeled back and made to stick up like a peaked cap. He is wearing glasses to magnify his eyeballs, and he is suspended from the ceiling to slowly rotate. The text for this plastinate reads "Fairy tales and mythical creatures belong to our cultural heritage. They create a world of fantasy and humour making our mortality easier to accept". There was nothing educational about this specimen that was not seen in the other, less fantastic, exhibits. While von Hagens clearly finds such things entertaining, it appears to lack a minimum of sensitivity to impose

his view on the general public. Quite frankly, if someone had been found doing this to a human body in one's shed rather than at a university as a "Professor", there is little doubt that a police investigation would follow.

Another point of contention within this exhibition is the foetal room. In the third exhibition space is a small room containing embryos at several different stages of development, a number of babies exhibiting various birth defects and a woman who was eight months pregnant. There is very little signage warning of the contents of this room, and in fact one could carry on with the remainder of the exhibition without passing through it, but this is not mentioned anywhere. Although there may be educational value in seeing how embryos develop, it is also a very emotional subject, as witnessed by a number of visitors in the comment books at the end. In particular, women who had miscarried or otherwise lost babies in the past were sometimes very upset by this part of the exhibition, as explicitly mentioned in a comment book by one visitor, who also happened to be a nurse. There was also an element of the risqué involved in the display of the pregnant woman that seemed inappropriate, particularly considering the heightened sense of tragedy evoked by this display. The woman was posed as a reclining nude (yet more artistic license), with her body cavity and womb sliced open to display the foetus inside. The only surface skin tissue remaining on the flayed body was on the lips and the nipples – adding an overtly sexual element to the display that distinctly lacked taste.

Towards the end of the exhibition, the text refers to the plastinates as a "novel teaching aid" that is "easily correlated with radiological imaging". This particularly holds true for the cross-sectioned individuals preserved in hard plastic. It is interesting that it should become novel to dissect and view the interior of real human bodies in an era where such activities are undertaken less and less by the medical profession, *and* after the creation and widespread application of CAT-scanning, which was considered revolutionary because it allowed the imaging of soft tissue inside living humans unintrusively! It would appear we have regressed.

Von Hagens seems to have an insatiable appetite for plastinating bodies, finding ever more (bizarre) postures in which to display them to show off the mastery of his technique. For one of his current projects, he is seeking a terminally ill patient who will be used to create a 'super-human' plastinate to explore the possibilities of genetic engineering in a television documentary. He intends to incorporate various improvements on the current human model *à la* von Hagens such as backward-bending knees, a back-up heart (using a heart from another plastinate) and a retractable penis (Institut für Plastination 2002/2003a).

Information for body donation to Prof. von Hagen's Institute for Plastination is also presented at the exhibition (donation packs were available at the exhibition shop at a cost of £2.00 or free on-line at <http://www.bodyworlds.co.uk>). While it appears to be with the intention of addressing the issue of consent from the individuals used in the exhibition, particularly pertinent as the scandal involving the use of bodies from Siberia that were obtained without consent came to light during the London showing (BBC 2002), however no actual information is on display about why or in what context the donors made their decision. In addition, the vagueness of wording in the

documents does not inform donors of exactly what will be done with their bodies. By signing up to anonymity, donors have not only their personal details but also their reasons for choosing plastination withheld from viewers. In effect, whether they realise it or not, donors thereby give von Hagens the freedom to strip their bodies of any notion of personhood so that they become objectified and treated as any other inanimate object (Buxton 2002). The view put across in the exhibition is thus that the body is nothing more than an object after death. There is no exploration of the relations between the body, life and spirituality throughout the exhibition, which implicitly perpetuates an objective, mechanical view of the body and a Cartesian notion that body and soul are separate. Von Hagens takes full advantage of this objectification of the plastinated individuals, who are subsumed into a manifestation of his own fancy.

BodyWorlds offers donors the option of halting the decomposition of their bodies after death and transforming them into unique plastinate displays, and at the same time becoming an expression of postmodern values. A review of the brief statements by body donors in the donor pack reveals a number of reasons including the desire to put their body to educational use (both medics and laypersons), a wish to be preserved for posterity and not wanting to burden descendants with a burial. It is questionable whether the first two reasons are fulfilled.

### **Concluding Discussion**

BodyWorlds courted widespread controversy throughout its showing in London. Even before it opened The Department of Health looked into whether it was possible legally to ban it, and the exhibition received clearance from the government only four days before its scheduled opening (Institut für Plastination 2002/2003a). Religious groups and people affected by the scandal of the Alder Hey Hospital in Liverpool (where deceased children's organs were removed without familial consent) protested at the opening. This did nothing to deter von Hagens, and in fact BodyWorlds thrived on the publicity this created, which he used to lure people to the exhibition in its final weeks, announcing with typical sarcasm that London's most controversial immigrants would soon be deported.

Von Hagens and others have hailed BodyWorlds as bringing about "the democratisation of anatomy" (Institut für Plastination 2002/2003a), and attendance of the exhibition has clearly demonstrated that the public has an interest in learning more about the body and its internal workings. The effects of alcohol and smoking on the liver and lungs must certainly have impressed some people to take better care of their bodies, however, others may equally have left the exhibition somewhat disturbed. The respectful display of two plastinated bodies with good labelling, perhaps accompanied by some replicas, would have been more than adequate for educational purposes. The insensitive and sensationalist manner of von Hagens' BodyWorlds exhibition does not treat either the dead or the living with the appropriate dignity and respect.

It is perhaps the tricky issue of consent that is the crux of the problem. By obtaining the legal consent of donors, von Hagens feels relieved of any further responsibility towards the sensibilities of the donors, their families or the viewing public, as he has

permission to do what he wants with these bodies. Furthermore, having consent seems to place him in the unique position of being able to be both artist and anatomist, and to wilfully cross lines that the majority of either the art world, or those in academic circles, would not even approach. This is further reinforced, as the public seems to feel his activities are legitimised because he has consent, and he makes an issue of this at both the beginning and the end of his exhibition by displaying the donor forms.

Exhibitions including archaeological human remains must have a clear intent and educational purpose; superfluous artistry involving the remains themselves would not be tolerated either within the museums profession or (it is believed) from the public. Although there is always some element of entertainment in good educational exhibitions, it must be controlled and serve only as a means but not an end. Surely there would be public outcry if The British Museum or Natural History Museum provided human skeletons to display in the window of Planet Hollywood on Leicester Square for Halloween, but it was reported that there were few complaints when 'The Basketball Player' was exhibited as such (Institut für Plastination 2002/2003a). The successful exhibition of human remains within professional guidelines is indeed possible, as demonstrated by the London Bodies exhibition at the Museum of London, where strict guidelines and objectives set parameters within which the exhibition and publicity were carried out (Ganiaris 2001). There is no doubt that the methods used to create BodyWorlds could be used in an educational capacity, but in light of the overdone, commercial nature of the enterprise, it is unclear if this is the primary intent of von Hagens. As members of a profession where the handling of human remains has been carefully considered and is subject to ethical codes, it is his motivation and intentions rather than the fact that he has consent that concerns us.

It seems ironic in an age where academia and museums are operating under increasingly considered and conservative policies as a response to public opinion regarding the excavation and curatorship of human remains, that an exhibition such as that designed by von Hagens should be travelling the major cities of the world attracting over 11 million viewers since 1996, as claimed in the BodyWorlds website (Institut für Plastination 2002/2003b). Rather than being governed by moral codes of practice, such as those that guide archaeology and museology in the handling of human remains, von Hagens (loosely) adheres merely to legal codes, and clearly enjoys pushing the limits of these, as evidenced by his performance of the first public autopsy since the 1830s in London, and talks of taking the show to a West End theatre (Anon. 2003). In fact, one could argue that the impossibility for archaeologists to obtain permission from the individuals they may excavate and handle is exactly why we must create and adhere to codes of ethics. Rather than using consent to justify our activities, it is our *intent* that requires justification and guidance. As we often work on public lands or our finds end up in public institutions, their handling has to conform to a conservative view of what is appropriate to maintain public support for our activities.

However, von Hagens has no such concerns. As a self-governing commercial enterprise he can do as he pleases, so long as he acts within legal bounds. But is this really enough when it comes to the public display of human remains? Should pri-

vately run exhibitions of human remains be governed by the same guidelines as public institutions? Does it really matter what drives private exhibitions when large sub-groups of the public support it and claim to be educated by it? Who, if anyone, should decide what is appropriate for the public to see in private exhibitions? Due to the variety of perceptions and values of sub-groups of the public, should the most conservative view or more of a majority view be used as guidelines for exhibitions, if such viewpoints can be identified? If, for argument's sake, we accept that BodyWorlds is a response to the lack of access the public has to human remains, and that a substantial sub-group of the public wants more access, how should public institutions respond? If they don't respond in some way, will more unregulated, and possibly more radical, private exhibitions result? Is this really in the interests of the public, and who is to say? Although BodyWorlds is no longer in London, and legisla-

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