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BODY WORLDS: Choosing to Be Immortalized as an Educational Specimen
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There has been little discussion on the role and authority of such “ethics reviews,” and the responsibilities of ethics and other experts who participate in them. In the meantime von Hagens declares that: “All IFP documents relating to donated bodies have been scrutinized and approved by two ethics committees formed by the California Science Center in Los Angeles and the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, where BODY WORLDS exhibitions took place in 2005” (BODY WORLDS 2006, 2). In this way, the California Science Center ethics review became an approval authority, and a “bioethics precedent” for other North American science centers that assembled their own advisory committees in preparation for the exhibition. Instead of carrying out their own assessment of provenance and due process, many science centers only reviewed the work done for the Los Angeles exhibit. Some committee members reported that they did not feel they needed to do any more verification because they trusted the work their colleagues did for the Los Angeles exhibit. They thought that it was not necessary to “reinvent the wheel” because of their colleagues’ good reputation and because the lack of funding for such a process would have prevented it. This approach prevailed in spite of a key recommendation made by the California Science Center Advisory Committee that for future plastination exhibits: “... a special review has to verify that bodies and organs have been donated with full and informed consent of the donors. To exhibit human bodies or organs without free and informed consent is not acceptable” (BODY WORLDS 2005, 6).

Without a concern for responsibility and provenance there can be no meaningful assessment of the ethics of the educational and exhibitionary use of cadavers. It is the emphasis on donor consent, so prominently displayed in the exhibits without being grounded in conclusive and independent verification that violates respect for dignity. Moving forward we should pay greater attention to responsibility and provenance, and encourage a candid dialogue with the viewing public and the ethics community.

REFERENCES


BODY WORLDS: Choosing to Be Immortalized as an Educational Specimen

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Burns (2007) invokes both Kantian definitions and more modern conceptions of dignity, positing that the dignity of BODY WORLDS subjects is violated because they are presented anonymously. Burns raises an important point that questions the true motivations for BODY WORLDS and the need for balance between educational goals and...
the maintenance of human dignity. What must be recognized, however is that, when subjects of BODY WORLDS have freely chosen to be plasticized, acknowledgment of that choice honors their human dignity. Choice alone, however, cannot fully protect human dignity. Societal norms require that corpses be treated with respect and in a manner that protects their importance as symbols of human life. BODY WORLDS not only advances dignity by allowing individuals to choose their own post-mortem futures, but also displays its subjects in a respectful manner that recognizes their unique human identity.

Kant defines dignity as a universal and fundamental quality that exists within all humans by virtue of their right of self-determination based on human rationality and hence autonomy (Guyer 2000). Kant’s second formulation of the categorical imperative that flows from this premise is that, because humans have rationality, it is necessary to treat humanity as an end-in-itself and not merely as a means (Guyer 2000).

In the context of BODY WORLDS, honoring the choice to be plasticized does not violate human dignity. By acknowledging that choice, the ends of the individual are acknowledged and promoted, not those of the actor who is effectuating the subject’s wishes, Dr. Gunther von Hagens. In fact, to deny the choice of the individual would be to use the subject as a means to another’s end because denying the choice would promote the value judgment of another that the choice to be plasticized is an invalid one.

Unlike Kant’s definition, the more contemporary definition of dignity focuses on a notion that is more particularized and individualistic and is referred to as personal dignity. Personal dignity is a “dignity tied to personal goals and social circumstances” (Coventry 2006, 42; Pullman 2002, 76). It defines who we are and can be “enhanced or diminished depending upon a variety of circumstances” (Pullman 2002, 76). Inextricably tied to personal dignity is the capacity or freedom to choose. Thus, where individuals lack the capacity to choose, or their capacity to choose is frustrated by others, their dignity can be said to be violated (Pullman 2002). Respecting individuals’ choice is to respect their dignity.

The right of an individual to choose how to dispose of his or her body has been incorporated into the Uniform Anatomical Gift Act (UAGA), which has been adopted in some form by all 50 states (Bucklin 2002, 328). The UAGA unequivocally vests choice in the individual, rather than in the family or next of kin (Bucklin 2002, 330). But this right to choose is not absolute. Under the UAGA, a body or body part can be donated only for purposes of education, research, therapy, and transplantation.

These limitations on personal choice are grounded in the moral and cultural standards of our society. The human corpse has special significance as a symbol of our common humanity (Chadwick 1994, 62; Moore and Brown 2004b). It is also an embodiment of a particular human existence that was once imbued with a distinct identity (Chadwick 1994, 62). Because of its strong symbolic value, the human body is treated as more than an object. It is entitled to respect.

Failure to give this respect can lead to legal liability. The law provides remedies for mutilation of corpses, grave robbing, disinterment, and damage to the reputation and character of the deceased (Hartman 2005, 21–22). These remedies compensate family members for the emotional suffering occasioned by demeaning the body’s value. Because it symbolizes personhood, the treatment of a corpse also affects society as a whole. Dehumanizing or debasing a corpse affects our shared sense of humanity and demonstrates a lack of respect for human life in general (Hartman 2005, 23).

The UAGA reflects the societal determination that using a body for education, research, therapy, or transplantation respects the identity and dignity of the human body. These acceptable uses can be contrasted with Burns’s examples of using human bodies as furniture, food, or entertainment (Burns 2007). Other examples of unacceptable uses of human bodies might include decorative uses of human remains for paintings, bowls or ornaments or using dead bodies for fertilizer (Lawrence 1998, 123). The uses incorporated into the UAGA differ from those that are unacceptable because they rely on the unique characteristics of the human body (Hartman 2005, 38). Using donated bodies for the purposes listed in the UAGA also advances human progress in a manner that exhibits our shared humanity.

In general, a human body is only used for education or research if the purpose is to learn something that is unique to being human. Similarly, human organs are used in transplantation and therapy because of their human characteristics. Donating a body for educational or research purposes advances dignity by allowing the donor to contribute to human knowledge even after death. Donating organs for transplantation can provide satisfaction to donors and enhance self esteem based on the knowledge that their bodies may restore functional ability and relieve human suffering (Burns 2007; Hartman 2005, 39).

By contrast, using a human body as an object of consumption or for purely commercial reasons violates social norms. If a corpse is used to make furniture, fertilizer or art objects, it loses its human function and identity. Using the corpse in these ways also teaches us nothing about the human body itself. Although these uses may have utilitarian value, they do not pay adequate tribute to the human body as the last reminder of personhood (Hartman 2005, 34). They make the dead more dead by depriving them of any human identity or mission (Moore and Brown 2004a, 9). Societal acceptance of these uses for human bodies might diminish the respectful treatment corpses are accorded as symbols of humanity and personal identity and result in human bodies being perceived as fungible commodities (Hartman 2005, 23 n.122).

There is no question that BODY WORLDS has educational value. The exhibit is designed to show the human anatomy of whole bodies, body systems, comparisons of healthy and diseased organs, and the use of medical
advances such as pacemakers and artificial hips and knees (Moore and Brown 2004a). The question that remains is whether the educational value of the exhibit is sufficient to meet the requirements of the UAGA or whether its entertainment aspect demeans human dignity and undermines its educational value.

BODY WORLDS displays the human body in a manner that fully comports with societal requirements as incorporated in the UAGA because it respects human identity and personhood. The interior self is revealed in an aesthetic presentation that exposes the individual features of real human cadavers (Moore and Brown 2004a). These exhibits also allow the donors to contribute to human dignity by providing the public with access to the intricate details of human anatomy. Unlike the unacceptable uses of the human body set forth previously, this exhibit pays tribute to the beauty and uniqueness of our human selves.

Burns believes that BODY WORLDS compromises human dignity because the plastinates lose their own identities and become creations of von Hagens. Gunther von Hagens poses the bodies, sometimes to enhance their educational value and sometimes for artistic reasons (Moore and Brown 2004b). He also signs his name to his works (Burns 2007, 9).

These acts do not destroy human dignity. On the contrary, the donors maintain their dignity by exercising their choice to become plastinates, a choice that some may find preferable to decay or cremation (Moore and Brown 2004b, 18). The choice to plastinate promotes the “critical interests” of the donor because choice allows the donor to determine the method of body disposition and how he or she will be remembered (Lewis 2002). Plastination also enables donors to continue the human mission of educating others, even after death (Moore and Brown 2004a). The fact that the donors were once living humans attracts and educates the public in a way that only real human cadavers could achieve (Moore and Brown 2004a).

Individuals should be allowed to freely choose plastination. Their plastinated bodies serve as a legacy that will memorialize them and reinforce the humanness that each possesses—a tribute to their uniquely human identity.

REFERENCES


A Visual Anthropological Approach to the “Edutainment” of BODY WORLDS

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The first of three questions Burns (2007) raises regarding maintaining the dignity of the subjects/objects of BODY WORLDS concerns the educational utility of Gunther von Hagens’ use of human cadavers. Burns writes that “if the teaching is inadequate, then the use of the bodies is not essentially educational but presumably serves some other end