

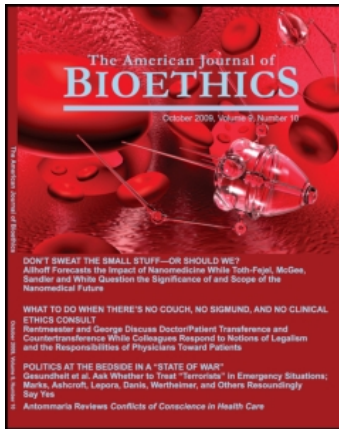
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### BODY WORLDS as Education and Humanism

Jane Maienschein<sup>a</sup>; Richard Creath<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Arizona State University,

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# BODY WORLDS as Education and Humanism

Jane Maienschein, Arizona State University  
Richard Creath, Arizona State University

Burns (2007) does a nice job of pointing to the range of issues most commonly raised about Gunther von Hagens's BODY WORLDS. The discussion of dignity raises many questions, and Burns takes care to introduce diverse points of view. It is in discussing the educational role of plastinated bodies that he makes problematic assumptions that lead him to erroneous interpretations and conclusions.

As Burns (2007) sees it, the display would not be justified if it were merely art or entertainment because such a use would violate our understanding of human dignity. If the overriding purpose is educational, and there are no alternatives, and as long as ethical guidelines are followed with respect to informed consent and dignity, however, then Burns would find it justified. As a result, much hinges on a fair assessment of the educational value.

In his consistent and laudable effort to be fair, Burns (2007) notes that there is little evidence either way about whether the exhibition's educational objectives have been achieved. That claim is surely literally true, and we rarely do a good job of articulating, measuring, or interpreting outcomes from educational programs. Yet the exhibition book includes two chapters reporting results of visits, all remarkably positive (Lantermann 2005; Whalley 2005). Surely, we cannot simply dismiss these reports and conclude, based on the purported lack of additional information, that those attending do not receive educational value.

Beyond this concern, Burns (2007) goes on to suggest that: 1) there are alternative ways to educate so that plastination is not justified; and 2) the exhibition's lessons are not needed by the general public. Both claims are seriously flawed. Moreover, in the process of making them, Burns shows an extremely narrow conception of what education can comprise.

Burns asserts that "there are alternative methods for educating the lay public (and especially students), and a genuine commitment to educate would take advantage of all means available" (2007, 12). He suggests in particular that x-rays, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and computed tomography (CT) scans, and endoscopes "allow us to see the insides of living human bodies" (12). Then, "given that we are concerned with the health of our bodies while alive, living models are more appropriate educational tools" (12). Undoubtedly, there are many aids to education; the question is what this shows.

It seems quite unfair to criticize a show for not doing everything. Why *should* von Hagens include images such as MRI and CT scans, especially when Burns (2007) makes no corresponding criticism of lectures and exhibits that omit plastinated bodies? Yes, MRI and CT scans do show something about the body, but they also have limitations. They are all much more removed from the actual material body and more highly interpreted than von Hagens's plastinated bodies. Any such scans would also have to be anonymized because even a willing living donor of MRI scans would have privacy interests and scans should not be any less protected than a body. Also, every scan involves some physical risk to the person scanned, and it would be inappropriate to use any but medically indicated scans. It is therefore not clear that such materials are any cheaper, more readily available, or less controversial, as Burns contends they are.

Burns's other alternative is to include stories by individual patients. Here his underlying assumptions become clear when he asks, "Why should this controversial show that displays donated bodies be required when we can learn about our fragility by talking with those who are ill or witnessing the deaths of others?" (2007, 12). (Whoever said that displays of donated bodies are *required* for education?) Burns may think that the point is to learn about human fragility but others will want, as we do, to learn about bodies and what they look like inside and how they work. Gunther von Hagens seems to share this goal and to be focused on educating us about structure and how our body parts are affected by lifestyle actions such as smoking or skateboarding. People's stories cannot tell us much of interest about the physical conditions of their internal organs. We want to learn about the body. It is not our only interest, but we have almost none in hearing reformed smokers sermonizing about their wicked ways or in listening to cancer victims warning us to eat more Brussels sprouts. No doubt such sermons have their place, but Burns is missing a central point of what kind of education this exhibition can give — namely about the structure and function of human material bodies. It seems simply false to claim, as Burns does, that "a living teacher is more effective in this context than a dead one" or that "a genuine commitment to educate would take advantage of all means available" (2007, 12).

Burns's second problematic assumption is related and equally false. He claims "the value of plastination for the

Address correspondence to Jane Maienschein, Philosophy Department, School of Life Sciences, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287-4501. E-mail: maienschein@asu.edu

general public is minimal, because the general public cannot appreciate the complexity of the human body in such detail" (2007, 12) Even worse, "Instead, the general humanist lessons most suited to the general public regarding human mortality, the need to care for our bodies, and the complexity of our bodies can be taught in many other ways" (12). Unfortunately, Burns again seriously misunderstands the value of such an exhibition of actual bodies. Humanist lessons are fine, but let us recognize the range of such lessons and how a detailed exhibit of the whole body in action can contribute.

Burns (2007) is seriously wrong here. Bioethics reflections have pushed medical care toward much greater patient autonomy in respecting individuals and their choices of how to treat their bodies. As a result, we must embrace not just opportunities but also the responsibility for providing all available information and understanding about the bodies involved. Would Burns really say that patients have autonomy and choice, but let us keep them ignorant? Why should patients not have access to as full a range of information as we can give them?

Now we are back to the question whether BODY WORLDS actually provides valuable information about the body, its structure and function. Burns (2007) has no doubts: it does. Therefore, his claim that valuable information is there, but that the general public does not need it is indefensible. We might be tempted to suggest that his attitude is patronizing and dismissive of the general public. Yet we suspect that he includes himself among those who do not need to know about detail and complexity of the body. He errs in assuming that the goal of BODY WORLDS is to teach simplistic humanistic lessons only. Instead, if we acknowledge that medical anatomical lessons are of value for everyone, then by Burns's own standards BODY WORLDS is an important and valuable educational exhibition.

That Burns (2007) cannot consider it so suggests that his conception of education is too narrow and even that his conception of what is humanistically worthwhile is too limited. Burns worries that von Hagens may have a profit motive and that he courts public sensation. He worries at even greater length that, because von Hagens signs his work (gasp: in hand) while the donors remain anonymous,

von Hagens shows more concern for his own individuality than that of his subjects. Perhaps. But none of this strips the exhibit of its educational value, nor does it strip the bodies exhibited of their human dignity or treat them merely as means. Indeed, whatever the mix of von Hagens's motives, the exhibit exalts the humanity and human worth of both these bodies and their viewers.

The whole human body, and not just its surface, is an object of astounding complexity and overwhelming beauty. Even if there were no other reasons, this would be enough to endow the human body with dignity and value. It is this wholeness, complexity and beauty that BODY WORLDS exalts. The whole human body in action, when skiing or skateboarding, is capable of coordinating its functions with exuberance and joy. BODY WORLDS conveys this exuberance and joy as no lung in formaldehyde and no MRI scan can do. Above all, we viewers are capable of understanding that complexity and beauty, at least in part, and we are capable of feeling that exuberance and joy and appreciating it in others. It is this capacity for knowledge and for sharing joy and sorrow with one another that makes us human.

These important humanistic lessons are not the only ones worth learning, and BODY WORLDS is not the only way to learn them. But refusing to see what this exhibit can so effectively convey, or refusing to feel the joy in being human that it can help us feel, is at best a narrow and narrowing humanism. There is no one road to education, and no one exhibit can fully liberate the human imagination. BODY WORLDS, however, is one liberating step. ■

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# The Tenuous World of Plastinates

**D. Gareth Jones, University of Otago**

**Maja I. Whitaker, University of Otago**

Gunther von Hagens stands in a long tradition of anatomy artists, and he has intentionally modeled himself after these.

His aim to "democratize anatomy" is allied with the ethos of the Renaissance anatomists and was upheld in the public

Address correspondence to D. Gareth Jones, Department of Anatomy and Structural Biology, University of Otago, P.O. Box 913, Dunedin, New Zealand. E-mail: gareth.jones@otago.ac.nz