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Controversy Surrounding the BODIES Exhibit

The 'BODIES' Exhibit, and those like it, have received both acceptance and controversy everywhere they have appeared. Many have found the exhibits to be taboo in showing the body openly in ways it should not. However, others find that the exhibits offer a unique educational viewpoint exploring the human body in ways not normally possible. A further viewpoint questions the legality of the exhibits themselves since all the bodies were obtained from China, without consent of the individuals. Overall, acceptance seems to be the final status of the exhibits when they finish their tours.

Exhibits displaying the human body by way of plastination have been around since 1998. The first, titled the Human Body Worlds was originally designed and exhibited by Dr. Gunther von Hagens, and contained over 200 plastinated body-parts and 25 complete bodies. Gunther von Hagens developed the plastination technique used to create entirely accurate body parts for display and study in mid-1990's. He considers himself an artist in displaying the human body in various poses, such as 'The Runner,' 'The Chessplayer' and 'The Lasso Thrower' (Henning 13-18).

The actual technique of plastination is a rather simple, though it is a very lengthy procedure. The body is first dissected to the point it is to be displayed. Then it is soaked in a path of acetone and other chemicals to remove all the water and air from the body tissue. This step alone takes 8-12 weeks. Next the deperated body is bathed

in a special silicone-polymer that takes the place of the bodies cells. This process is accurate down to the molecular level, which facilitates scientific study. The body is then finally posed as seen fit, and sprayed with a silicone hardener to seal and preserve the body in its current state (Henning 16).

The success of von Hagens' exhibit was immense and widespread. Initially held in Japan, there was a reported two and a half million visitors. Later appearing in four cities in Europe, it found another 1,950,000 visitors, and over a million more in Austria. The success of his exhibits sparked interest of mainstream U.S. exhibition groups, and they collectively targeted science venues, which von Hagens had neglected. Born from this was the 'The Universe Within' exhibit by Premier Exhibitions in 2004, and later the current 'BODIES... the Exhibition,' also by Premier Exhibitions, and is currently viewable in eleven cities in the United States and Europe (Bergeron, Bodies' Exhibit Can't..).

Over the years these exhibits have collected, and continue to collect much negative criticism. In the exhibits by von Hagen, the major criticism was of his so-called artistic views of the human body.

I stood for a very long time in front of the plastinate of a five-month-pregnant woman that had been positioned upright without any particular pose, quite fascinated by the sight of it. ... Another woman, however—also five to six months pregnant—had been positioned 'artistically.' She was lying on a long sheet of steel, in a rather lascivious position with her head resting lightly on her arm. ... This plastinate evoked not so much fascination as repulsion (Henning 25).

Critics found the un-arranged bodies more fascinating because of a heightened educational glimpse into the human body, that did not focus on real-life connotations.

However, as the exhibits progressed to the United States, the issues became more varied and more common. The initial criticism being that of the dehumanization of human beings. "People come with a small amount of apprehension, because they know they are going to be seeing real bodies ... but they become so engaged in learning, they forget what they're looking at" (Roy Glover, *All laid bare*). The critics say that these human bodies, sliced up and displayed, do not pay any respect to the dead; rather they do the opposite (MacCormack). It has been argued that if a man were to preserve the body of his spouse for 'psychological comfort' just as the exhibits are for education, we would find them abhorrently inappropriate.

Further critics question the educational value of the exhibit over monetary gain. Premier Exhibitions reported a quarterly evaluation of \$463,000,000 (Catz). They charge between \$20-25 per head to view the exhibit (Ginsburg). Their overall cost, beyond advertising and building space, primarily consists of the \$25 million dollar cost in renting the bodies from a Chinese university for the duration of 5 years (Ginsburg). Elaine Catz, former employee of the Carnegie Science Center and quit in protest of the BODIES Exhibit, asks what this exhibit really teaches. She believes that this is showing children that when you die, it's OK to slice you open and show off your body. Educational or not, BODIES is not medical research, and Premier Exhibitions is not a scientific organization.

The rights to obtaining and using the bodies in the first place has been consistently brought into question, and consistently dismissed with a lackluster excuse from the

exhibitors. According to Premier Exhibits all the bodies were obtained legally from a university in China. However that very university, located in the city of Dalian, has been repeatedly targeted as a harvesting point for the thriving illegal organ trade in China. The trade is primarily composed of executed prisoners (Henning 6). They've claimed that all the bodies used in the exhibit are 'unidentified' or 'unclaimed' cadavers, though they don't advertise the fact that none of these bodies were obtained with consent, because unidentified people cannot give consent for their bodies to be used as so-called educational objects. If I were to die, I would expect to be buried, or cremated, or at least in some way have my remains to be put to rest in a dignified manner. These bodies from China get no such respect. At the very least, the exhibits by von Hagens used registered donated bodies that he processed himself, not rented and unidentified Chinese citizens. While Premier Exhibits says that none of the bodies used in the exhibit came from executed Chinese prisoners, they cannot deny that the Dalian university does not process prisoners' bodies. There is no proof that these bodies are not those of executed prisoners now being used for illegitimate money making (Catz).

Not all the reviews of the BODIES Exhibit are negative however, many are toting it's educational value and comprehensive view of the workings of the human body (Doughton). Many teachers and professors have acclaimed that this exhibit is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to observe the human body and see how fragile we really are.

Even those who support the exhibits however, still have issues with some aspects of the exhibit. The most prevalent is that the bodies used were not those with given consent. Supporters maintain that Premier Exhibits should have sought out proper

consensual donors for their exhibits. As much as the ethics come into question, curiosity seems to win over in the end.

The overall consensus seems relatively obvious though, with over two billion cumulative visitors worldwide for the three total exhibitions (Ginsburg). Of protesters, there are only around one and a half thousand, though those are only those who have spoken out against it (Catz). No one knows how many haven't commented on their opinions of the exhibits, but I think I can safely say that the BODIES Exhibit, The Universe Within, and Body Works have all been accepted worldwide as educational, and possibly artistic, exhibits.

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