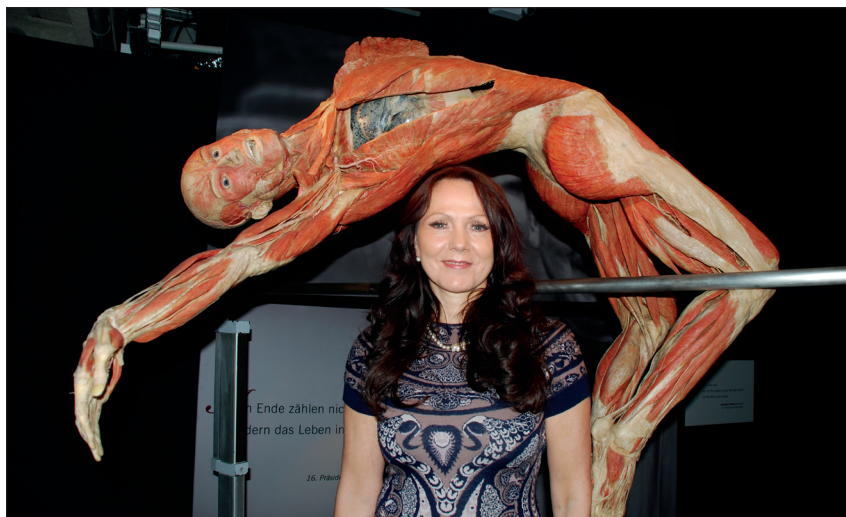


Flesh rendered ‘immortal’ – Body Worlds hits Cape Town



Dr Angelina Whally, Curator of Body Worlds with *The High Jumper* (2006).

Since the first controversial public showing in Manheim’s Museum for Technology and Labour 15 years ago, more than 13 000 people have signed up to donate their bodies for plastination, inspired by Body Worlds – dubbed the most successful touring exhibition ever (35 million viewers).

The taboo-breaking exhibition, in Africa for the first time at Cape Town’s Waterfront until February, gives the lay public an intimate and anatomically perfect view of the human body previously reserved only for the medical fraternity – whose educational demands birthed the technology.

Developed by Gunther von Hagen, a researcher at the Institute for Anatomy and Cellular Biology at Heidelberg University, who ‘stumbled by chance onto a neglected and fallow field of research’, the technology has ultimately provoked more awe and fascination than revulsion. Explaining the public’s reaction, his physician wife, Dr Angelina Whally, now the curator of Body Worlds since her husband’s degeneration with Parkinson’s disease, said it evoked ‘a deep and moving encounter with the inner-self’.

Suicide bids halted by ‘awed’ viewer

She cited a young Japanese woman so deeply touched by the various anatomical depictions that she was left determined not to attempt what could have been a fourth, and potentially successful, suicide attempt. ‘She said she realised now that she

has something wonderful in her life,’ said Whally.

Whally, who met her husband while he was leading a dissection class at medical school, said she had always hoped to care for one patient at a time, but the touring plastination exhibition allowed her ‘so much more’. ‘We’re able to show regular and diseased organs in direct comparison. Whatever lifestyle a person has led shows in their body. People realise that it’s worthwhile caring for – the “Cycle of Life” focusses on ageing and how the body develops. You realise that the fate of your body is in your own hands. It’s a great learning opportunity for anyone, on an emotional, physical and even philosophical level.’

Asked if their Institute of Plastination in Hamburg was the only one backing an ongoing world tour of plastinated humans (they also do animals, the largest so far being a giraffe), Whally said the Chinese had several ‘copy-cat’ exhibitions. ‘It’s fine in principle but unfortunately people confuse them with us – and they use unclaimed bodies, not voluntarily donated ones,’ she added. None of their plastinated specimens bore any resemblance to the donor, whose identity was jealously guarded out of respect for their families. Herself a body donor (as is her husband and his 96-year-old father), Whally explained that once the skin and hair are stripped away it is impossible to identify the dead person. Viewers were then able to have a ‘mirror-like’ experience.

Fierce criticism now muted

The exhibits drew fierce criticism when they first appeared in the mid-90s, from theologians, medical ethicists and many others whose central objection centered around the alleged abuse of the dead person’s dignity. However, Von Hagen argues that this is untenable, because the person contractually agreed to plastination after death and because plastination does not imply contempt for the dead. Above all, the corpse, as the impermanent remains of a deceased person, is already an object or a thing, and once plastinated becomes an object of scientific information.

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Whally told journalists in Cape Town that their first-ever exhibition outside Germany, in Japan, broke over two centuries of Japanese tradition forbidding the showing of bodies in public and helped break the global taboo. The USA had proved extremely helpful by insisting an independent ethicist go through their donation files before giving them the go-ahead.

Whally said the process of plastination (involving tanks, vacuum chambers, anatomical dissection and silicone infusion) took ‘about a year’ or 1 500 working hours per specimen, before the intricate art of ‘posing’ a body even began. Asked whether it would upset her to plastinate her husband or father-in-law (the oldest living donor) she said she would consider it ‘a labour of love’.

The youngest plastinated body belonged to a person in his early twenties who suffered from a malignant tumour and who ‘felt donation would allow him to still



Gunther von Hagen, the man who perfected plastination.

be present', she revealed. Male specimens were generally preferred because of their better musculature, while the reproductive organs of women were often missing (due to hysterectomy).

She said plastination had 'revolutionised' medical teaching and training and was especially valuable at some campuses where anatomy classes had been reduced or anatomical dissection discontinued while

surgeons were increasingly learning from 3D computer models.

'Would any of you want your car repaired by someone with only book knowledge?' she teased her audience. She said that with the exception of fetuses drawn from historical anatomical collections and a small number of organs from accredited hospital anatomy programmes, all of the specimens on display were from the

Institute for Plastination's body donation programme.

Chris Bateman

chrisb@hmpg.co.za

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