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BODIES ON DISPLAY:  
*BODIES: THE EXHIBITION*

The MOSI (Museum of Science and Industry) in Tampa is hosting an exhibit called "Bodies: The Exhibition"<sup>1</sup> from August 2005-February 2006. The exhibit shows real bodies in various poses (to emphasize muscle and skeleton movement), cut and rendered in many ways to reveal every imaginable aspect of human physiology. The bodies are preserved using a polymer preservation process that hardens the bodies, retaining color and form to a minute level.

My interest in the exhibit is less in the stated purpose than in the underlying narratives and representations of the body, and the physical act of moving through an exhibit on bodies. My review will cut between the current debate between those who see the scientific value in the exhibition, and those whose objections are primarily moral ones. I believe that the presentation itself is worth questioning—the kind of exhibition it is, the assumptions made, the narratives assumed.

**The Scientific Gaze: Bodies as natural vs. cultural objects**

The narrative through the exhibit was relentlessly scientific, especially intended to educate the public about the body. The reason for looking at the bodies, continually reinforced by caption cards, was educational. However, that narrative was contained in the captions. One could imagine exactly the same display of bodies, with other caption cards. I joked with my companion that one could make the show vastly different by taking away all the textual narrative and replacing it with a sign at the beginning that said, "This is what happens to those who oppose us." We then would have a chamber of horrors, showing the bodies as object lessons for social surveillance and order. One visitor commented in the

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<sup>1</sup> For the exhibition site, go to: <<http://bodiestheexhibition.com/>>. There is also another touring exhibit by Premier Exhibitions called Bodies Revealed, at <<http://bodiesrevealed.com/>>. For the MOSI site, see <<http://www.mosi.org/bodiestheexhibition.html>>.

response books at the end that it reminded him of concentration camps, suggesting that the narrative contained in the exhibits was much more ambiguous than that in the accompanying text, and a different set of captions could have given a completely different narrative to the event.<sup>2</sup>

This narrative was clearly understood by those who came to see the exhibit. The talk around the displays was mostly scientific. Medical professionals and students had a chance to show their friends and family the extent of their knowledge. In many cases, people almost touched the bodies, most were not behind glass. The bodies seemed to ask for a tactile response, despite the signs that prohibited touching them. Many people related the bodies to health issues they had had themselves. Often people looked eagerly for the organ that had caused them problems. For example, my companion, a diabetic, was especially interested in finding the pancreas, her particular offending organ.

One would be hard pressed to find hints that these bodies were part of culture in any way. The exhibition tried to excise every reference to the bodies as having had social relations or having been engaged in cultural production. The feet, for instance, were not particularly abraded, calloused or deformed, which might indicate that shoes had been worn. Ears had little evidence of piercing, hands gave little or no evidence of occupation, what skin we saw gave no evidence of localized tanning, which might have suggested clothing. It was even difficult to tell the age of most of the bodies, as the skin was usually not present. Hair was almost completely absent except for occasionally some short nose or ear hairs, and notably, some pubic hair in the women, but not the men. There was no way of telling whether the hair was black or grey, or whether anything had ever been done to it. These bodies were de-textualized and naturalized, except in one respect – often faces were left, and they were usually unmistakably Chinese. For a largely white audience, these bodies could be de-personalized, rendered as subjects. I wonder, though, how this would be received in China. Or, how it would be received in Tampa if the subjects had been white and therefore some of them may have looked like someone a visitor might have known or black and thus bringing up the violence that blacks have endured at the hands of whites, and more specifically, at the hands of science.

There was only one place where culture was explicitly referenced, and that was with a single tattoo. It was not on any of the bodies, but had been cut off and stretched, away from any context. It was tucked away in the last room of the exhibit, beside a body which was likely not its source, and more significantly in a room that had an exploded cross-section of an entire body, the way an MRI

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, to some extent this is true in any exhibition. An art exhibit could have an entirely different narrative structure if the cards read "This is what we spent on these paintings". In the case of the bodies, though, there is not the deep history of a mode of interpretation in the way there is in an art gallery. We bring to the bodies our experiences of exhibitions of other sorts, which allows us to narrate it.

might take visual “slices” of a body. So, the tattoo did not raise the question of culture in any way. And yet, inescapably these bodies were engaged in culture that had implications on the bodies themselves, and on the people who they were and are. Calling them “bodies” allows us to abstract them from culture, but in fact they never lose that significance.

There were books at the end of the exhibition, in which people could write their comments. The vast majority were very positive about the exhibit. Some referred to the controversy over the exhibition – some people had objected because the exhibition did not, in their estimation, pay proper respect to the people who were there. And, there is a point to be made, after all. The exhibition was called “Bodies,” not “People,” or for that matter, “Corpses,” or “The Dearly Departed,” or “The Dead,” or “Meat,” with this latter label drawing the analogy to food – disgusting, but in fact in certain places the visceral sense was that the human flesh looked like nothing so much as what you might find in the butcher’s case at a grocery store. The fact that these were people was carefully covered over, giving the viewer the opportunity to gaze on these people as if they were specimens, but without raising the question of how they came to be there, or what it meant to represent a particular ethnic group in such a way.

Tony Walter wrote on a similar exhibit, *Body Worlds*. He examined the log books that people wrote in at the end.<sup>3</sup> He argued that people were invited to engage in the scientific gaze, but that in fact that they were ill prepared for that experience, and that in fact the exhibition was more of a shrine to the human body in which medically untrained people can look at the body in new ways. He points out, and I agree, that there is an illusion that these are real bodies, but in fact the bodies encountered by the medical student or the coroner are very different. They are smelly, wet, decaying, tactile bodies. “The physical nature of the exhibits, together with the context of their display, makes possible a proto-scientific gaze that lacks the emotional complications inherent in the dissection lab and the autopsy room.”<sup>4</sup> The result is fascination, and in some cases awe, but the awe produced by a painstaking simulacrum rather than a body in its real form.

Notably, at the same time the exhibition was running, Hurricane Katrina was laying waste to the Gulf coast. There were early reports of bodies there as well – a woman left dead for days in a wheelchair, bodies floating down the river, some ending up as food for alligators. Like the bodies in the exhibition, they too serve to assure us that we are not them. They were overwhelmingly poor and black, and for the vast majority of those who would have gone through the MOSI exhibition (at \$20 per ticket), it would have served the same purpose, to assure us that we can gaze without being implicated. It is also worth pointing out that the press has been restricted in New Orleans (as they are when it comes to reporting

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<sup>3</sup> Tony Walter, “Body Worlds: clinical detachment and anatomical awe.” *Sociology of Health & Illness* 26:4 (2004): 464–488.

<sup>4</sup> Walter, “Body Worlds”, 484.

on the dead American soldiers coming back from Iraq), so that there are few pictures of the dead. It seems that we can gaze upon the dead if we can use the scientific eye, but if the dead might raise difficult political questions, they must be kept out of the public eye.

### **Bodies as moral objects**

There was a moral tone to the exhibition. The explicit message was that the body was good, that it was not something to be ashamed of, and that anyone could examine it with a scientific eye. Despite this message, though, views of the full body, skin intact, were avoided. Nakedness did, after all, seem morally problematic. If we had intact naked bodies, it might make people think about sex. But there was a strange inversion of nakedness here. If one gets progressively more naked as one takes off clothes, one also gets more naked as one moves from skeleton to skin. Showing the inside of a body is not naked – to become naked, one must “clothe” the body with flesh and skin.

There was also a moral quality to some of the narrative. The diseases shown, for instance, were largely diseases brought on by human action. There was a smoker’s lung, for instance, and a liver with cirrhosis, and a burst appendix that came from getting seeds or pits lodged in the wrong place. Most of the illnesses came as implicit cautionary tales, reinforced in the caption cards. The exception was in the womens’ part of the exhibit in which most of the bodies in the exhibition were male, ostensibly because they were much more available, which meant that women were marked as different in this display. There, the diseases tended not to be actively brought on, but rather passively endured. Diseases associated with reproductive systems were especially apparent. One might even suggest that what makes a woman what she is, is in some way prone to disease. At any rate, it is passively endured rather than the result of active moral transgression.

The narrative order of the exhibit reinforced a moral lesson. The womens’ part of the exhibit was also the part that dealt most explicitly with sexuality and it included male sexuality as well, although less prominently. Beside it, in a darkened room, was the result of sexuality, the place where fetuses in various stages of development could be seen in glass bottles. The room had a warning sign, which seemed to underscore the moral lesson of the rest of the exhibition. These were, after all, innocents, and even though it came near the end of an exhibition of dead people, the warning sign seemed to indicate that seeing whole fetuses. None were dissected like the rest of the bodies and were more disturbing than the rest of the exhibition. Why would this be? Would we be troubled by how these fetuses got to be there, after having failed to ask that question of the many bodies before that point? The presence of the sign seems to speak to the

rest of the exhibit more than to the room of fetuses. It suggests that their arrival in their present state must either have been because they or their relations consented, or because they somehow deserved to be there. Neither could be true of the fetuses.

Few of the comments in the logbooks at the end mentioned the fetuses, and those that did tended to be uneasy with them. Many, though, mentioned the smoker's lungs. Evidently at least one moral lesson had found its place. Some made reference to religion or faith, likely because some of the opposition to the exhibit came from religious people. The objections that were recorded were few and far between, though. Many of the religious comments were of the sort "I don't know how anyone can see this and not believe in God." Versions of Paley's watch argument made an appearance, with no hint of Hume's refutation of it.

### **Bodies as aesthetic objects**

While the bodies were de-cultured and in many cases moralized, they were certainly not de-aestheticized. The bodies were, in many cases, quite fixating and fascinating, if not beautiful in the classic sense. One might even see this as the logical extension of the Greek and Renaissance fixation on the body.

One body, at the beginning, reminded me of Boccioni's statue "Unique Form of Continuity in Space." The body was posed as if running, but the flesh was flayed, giving an impression of motion, even speed. The educational purpose was to show the body under the stress of motion; the pose, however, signified something else entirely. It was a kind of anti-futurism – whereas Boccioni was trying to render sculpture into something that could communicate both fluidity and sleek technology, the anti-Boccioni gave the sense of someone literally running out of their skin, as if the flesh could not keep up to the skeleton. There was speed but no fluidity. A little girl brought her father over to the body and asked, "Why is he running?" That's the right question, whether she realized it or not. Other figures and poses similarly made reference to classical or modern sculptures or other art forms.

But while Boccioni might have been the reference for that body, the aesthetic that was much more relevant was that of the super-realist sculptors, particularly Ron Mueck.<sup>5</sup> Mueck worked as a puppet-maker and model maker for many years before moving into sculpture. He constructed life-sized (sometimes smaller or much larger) human images in such exacting detail that even a close examination could leave the viewer uncertain as to whether they were alive or not. The visual

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<sup>5</sup> On Ron Mueck, see Artcyclopedia's site:  
<[http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/mueck\\_ron.html](http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/mueck_ron.html)>

and textural appearance of the bodies in the exhibition owed a great deal to super-realists, because we find ourselves in a visual world where even the body may well be fabricated. If that is so, then we may find some psychological distance from the reality that the bodies before us are really corpses.

The super-reality of the bodies places them at a safe distance, and places them in the category of commercially produced objects. They have become cyborgs, truly infused with technology, impossible to separate from the technological process that preserved them, and yet indistinguishable for most people from “real” bodies. The irony, of course, is that most visitors would not have seen the inside of a human body, and so their ability to know real from fake is about the same as our sense that the dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park* are real. They are less real than they are convincing, and they are convincing not so much because they look like bodies, but because they look like models of bodies.

And there were other aesthetically interesting things as well. There were many examples of doubling, for instance. Right at the beginning, one meets a body that had had its musculature separated from the skeleton, and the two parts were put facing each other, holding hands and leaning away as if they were playing a child’s game. Elsewhere, a body was cut in half, and the right and left side faced each other. In another place, a face was cut in half – this time, the two parts faced away from each other. The doubling usually had an explicitly educational purpose, to compare aspects of the same human body, but inevitable questions about the formation of subjectivity were posed as well. It is we who are supposed to learn from the doubling of the bodies, but that requires us to forget that the bodies were and are persons, and that there is another double, our body facing this inert simulacrum, which is the most interesting.

The doubled bodies, us and them, raises the further question of how one can look on these cadavers. The bodies “gazed” at each other, and we gazed at them, fascinated, sometimes revolted. We were all doctors, for a little while, the critical and distant clinical eye that Foucault excoriated. A coroner (or for that matter, any doctor) is taught to gaze upon the body as an object, as a puzzle to be solved. The gaze is detached. And the gaze in the exhibition was likewise detached, as we were encouraged to decipher the puzzle of the body. While this goal was no doubt met (at least the log books at the end suggested that many had figured out the puzzle, and had the commensurate sense of pleasure and accomplishment), it also reinforced that clinical gaze. Of course, that gaze also gave all of us the permission to stare, to be voyeurs of death.

But it was not only a clinical gaze that we were all trained to adopt. We were engaged by the choreography of the bodies. Many of the bodies were posed engaged in activities much more Western than anything they might have done in life. There was a soccer player, straining backwards to kick a ball over his head, body parallel to the ground with his foot in the air. There was a basketball

player, cutting right, presumably driving the lane. There was an orchestra conductor, haughty even in death, baton raised, and another person “reading” an anatomy text, presumably to identify the parts of himself that were newly visible to the world. He was as much a puzzle to himself as he was to us.

All were vigorous, all engaged and engaging, in a kind of mockery of their present state. The irony was double – not only were the bodies engaged in recognizably Western activities, which is not to say that those from China have not engaged in all of these things, but rather that the activities in no way drew attention to their ethnic or national origins, but the bodies are also animated in a way that we would never animate our own dead. We lay people “to rest,” we do not pose them, although of course lying in an open coffin, hands folded, is as much a pose as anything. But lying in a coffin is metaphoric – it signifies the rest that the departed one now enjoys. The poses that these bodies had were more like what was once done to game animals – the tiger making a ferocious leap, the deer turning its head in alarm. Those metaphors pointed to the moment of death, the past, instead of the eternal rest, or the future. But even those are “natural” movements for the animal, even if they too tell a story that is ultimately about our triumph over nature. These “unclaimed bodies” from China, on the other hand, found little rest, perhaps because there was no one to mourn them. They neither looked back, metaphorically, nor looked forward, and so could only be read with an eye that imagined itself as detached, whether it was or not.

Even without the literal poses, the bodies were necessarily posed. They were “rendered” in at least two senses of the term – they were the product of a rendering process in which parts are separated from each other, and they were also rendered the way a computer artist or animator converts a file from data to a visual state. The bodies started as raw material, and they were converted, both in the sense that they underwent a physical process to drain out the water and replace it with a hardening substance that retained the body’s form, and also in the sense that they were converted from culturally forgotten objects into aesthetic objects. They were not rendered in a third sense, though, which was that they were not given their due.

Walking among the posed bodies, and parts of bodies, was itself an embodied experience, and one which was strangely overlooked in the presentation. Our bodies faced these posed bodies, and as they put on a foreign pose, we put on the pose of detached observation. We peered at muscles and nerves, and pointed, often almost touched, the various parts. No one saw the irony in all of us taking on clinical poses that were as ill fitting and contrived as the poses of these bodies.

The aesthetic story is blurred by the fact that, in Tampa, at least, it is a science museum that is hosting the exhibition. The displays do not follow the conventions of science museums, enacted elsewhere in the same building as this exhibition is housed. There, the education is engaged and participatory, and

assumes that the main clientele will be children. This exhibition is more like either an art museum or a natural history museum: cases are used and caption cards are everywhere. The explicit narrative is educational and scientific while the implicit presentation is aesthetic.

The implications of the presentation are worth noting, because they implicitly reference other similar experiences. If this is like an art museum, then we expect objects of beauty or at least aesthetic interest. The classical Western sense of art is of work done for its own sake, to embody beauty or capture some universal. As modernism became more problematic, art became embedded in the social and political structures of the world.

Notably, this exhibition does neither of these, even as it draws on both forms of presentation. It does suggest a universal, but a material and biological one. The fact that these people are Chinese does not matter – these bodies are all of ours. The universal is not, however, a conceptual one. There is no “beauty” here, no truth except in the form of scientific facts. And, the exhibition also resolutely avoids engagement in the social, political, or cultural, even as the show continually attracts those very interpretations. References within the exhibition to issues of cultural location or power are explicitly absent, but implicitly ubiquitous.

The other museum experience that this draws on is the natural history museum. When they have been anthropological museums, they have a history of presenting the “primitive”. Here, we also have the primitive, the ones who were unclaimed when they died and therefore presumably not part of proper society. The display of humans or their images have often appeared in dioramas depicting life in primitive communities. It is notable that those depictions are completely about the cultural life of the individuals, and serve to make them distant from us, while this exhibit hides the cultural life of the individuals in an attempt to universalize their biology. When actual humans are displayed, they are of sufficient age as to render their social or cultural connections to the present as questionable. To the extent that a modern group claims ownership over those ancient bodies, e.g., contemporary Native Americans claiming kinship with pre-Columbian people that are found, there is a political dispute. Therefore, mummies from ancient Egypt or an ancient person frozen in a glacier might be displayed, but only because the culture has receded to the point that all cultural connection with the present is lost.

These people, however, are not ancient. Their distance is not temporal, but cultural, in several ways – they are from China, typically the place on the far end of the world, they are unclaimed people from morgues, which gives them further distance in that we presume that no one cared about them, and they are therefore, most likely, poor, which gives them economic distance. These three distances substitute for temporal distance in the minds of those who host the

exhibitions, but I suspect the substitution is more difficult to make for those who do not stand to gain from the exhibition.

What is noteworthy, though, is that culture is embedded in the exhibition despite its best efforts. It is only cultural distance that legitimates the exhibition. If anyone tried this with those who were “unclaimed” after the recent hurricane in New Orleans, they would be accused of racism, insensitivity, and a host of other moral outrages. Yet, they are just as unclaimed as these people were. They are just not as socially distant from the viewing public as these Chinese people are.

### The Economics of the Scientific Gaze

The controversy over this exhibit came in large part from the Florida Anatomical Board, who voted to censure the exhibition at an emergency meeting in Gainesville just before the show was due to open. Proper authorization had not been sought from the families, they argued. The share price of the company that put the show on (Premier Exhibitions, which is PXHB on the NYSE) dropped, but the museum decided to open the show a few days early. Business was brisk, and the share price went up again. The Anatomical Board dropped its efforts to stop the exhibition.

Even before one enter the exhibition itself, there is a sign that disavows any connection to other related shows in which the body is on display.<sup>6</sup> This was not the first show to exhibit preserved human bodies. The fact that there are several shows of this sort suggests that it is a lucrative business to display humans. And indeed, the censure by the Anatomical Board could hardly have been better advertising. On the first day there were 1350 people, not including an event in the evening for 1500 teachers,<sup>7</sup> and in the first four days the exhibit broke an attendance record by drawing some 12,000 people.<sup>8</sup>

Premier Exhibitions is the company that put on the Titanic exhibition.<sup>9</sup> There is no corporate website apart from the sites for the shows, and website for *Bodies: The Exhibition* has almost no information on the show, apart from an application

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<sup>6</sup> See <[http://www.sptimes.com/2005/08/15/Tampabay/Rival\\_body\\_shows\\_asse.shtml](http://www.sptimes.com/2005/08/15/Tampabay/Rival_body_shows_asse.shtml)> for an account of the various groups that have put up shows on the body, including the original and most famous, the *Body Worlds* exhibit first hosted by German businessman Gunther von Hagens in 1995. The *Body Worlds* is here: <<http://www.bodyworlds.com/>>.

<sup>7</sup> See Baird Helgeson, “Controversy Draws Viewers to ‘Bodies’” *Tampa Tribune* August 19, 2005. <<http://tampatrib.com/News/MGB5ADAYJCE.html>>. This source also has some images from the exhibit.

<sup>8</sup> ABC News, August 23: <<http://abcnews.go.com/Business/wireStory?id=1061509>> and USA Today “Cadaver Exhibit Sets Tampa Museum Record”, Aug. 23, 2005. <[http://www.usatoday.com/tech/science/2005-08-23-cadaver-exhibit\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/tech/science/2005-08-23-cadaver-exhibit_x.htm)>

<sup>9</sup> R.M.S. Titanic, Inc. <<http://www.rmstitanic.net/>>.

for a press kit. The most extensive part of the site is the “Terms and Conditions” page. It seems clear that any attempt to engage the narrative or the content of the show with those who made it is limited to the comment books at the end of the show itself. The company does seem to specialize in the presentation of death for profit: in the Titanic show too, and in the exploration that preceded it, there were questions about the treatment of the dead. The Titanic was, after all, a graveyard for hundreds of people. The exploration and show was defended on the grounds of scientific exploration and public education, although it was no doubt also a good thing that the show was, and continues to be, extremely profitable. This company has experience in dealing with questions about the treatment of the dead when there is money to be made.

It is worth raising the question of the relationship between money and the exhibition of these bodies. Clearly it is very lucrative to put on a show like this. To what extent does that payoff allow us to overlook the question of where these bodies came from, and what story is being told about them? The justification is scientific, but of course, there is no science here, in the sense of the discovery of new knowledge, this is at best education. Bodies are also obtained by medical schools in the same way that these were obtained, and that may be argued to be scientific, although, we might also raise questions there, but we can leave it for the moment.

If this is not science, then, one might argue that it is at least public education, which might make people more open to science. The values of science – disinterested observation, collection of data, construction of theoretical explanations – have recently come under attack in the United States, as many see evolution as a “theory” and “intelligent design” as a viable option. Other examples – stem cell research, global warming – also could be given. The questions raised about this exhibit have been ostensibly moral ones, most notably from the Florida Anatomical Board, hardly a religious body, but those objections may well be put in the same category as the general anti-science tenor in society.

So, it may seem that standing for this exhibit is standing for science, and that raising questions may be anti-science in a time when science seems to be less influential and decisive than it once was. It may seem that questioning science might not be a good idea. The problem, though, is that those who want to undermine science as a reliable narrative in society are simply using an equally unexamined narrative themselves. The answer is not to refrain from questioning science at a time that it is already beleaguered, but to question any narrative that holds exclusive truth to itself, and fails to see the narratives that it propounds. It is the questioning of metanarratives, not the advancement of relativism. It is particularly important in this case, as the presentation of these bodies as science seems to be as much about enhancing corporate profit as anything else.

And, in the end, this exhibition would not have been put on had it not been lucrative for Premier Exhibitions. So it is worth wondering just how much this is driven by scientific investigation, and how much it is driven by making a profit. And that necessarily takes us back to the earlier questions about the ways in which culture is overlooked, and the kinds of narratives that stand beneath this enterprise.

### **Bones of a different sort**

The original reason I was in Tampa that weekend was not to see this exhibit, but to be involved in the unveiling of a website celebrating the work of Taft Richardson. Richardson is an artist who works with animal bones to create eerie, powerful sculptures. I was part of a team called Folkvine which has put Florida folk artists on the web, using as much as possible their own aesthetic.<sup>10</sup>

Richardson works with animal bones, while the *Bodies* exhibit is of humans, bones and more. But the contrast went further than that for me. Richardson was not interested in a scientific examination of the animals, nor did he take delight in the minutiae of their physical structure. Rather, he used the bones to build new things. They were still unmistakably made of bones, but no one would recognize the animals that were created in this work.

Was Richardson any less interested in truth? Certainly not. And yet, it was a different truth. There were no lessons here about the evils of smoking or drinking, even though he was very concerned about the moral order of the community. There were no implied metaphors contained in the poses of his creations, and no “show.” His work was unambiguously art, and did not pretend to science at all. But the issue of truth was still central for him.

Of course, I am not suggesting that anyone should do what he does with human bones. He wouldn't – that's “too sacred” for him. The point is that it is the cultural that bears the truth, for Richardson, not the scientific. The truth resides in people finding their identities, and recovering lost identities. His treatment of bones relies on actions every bit as violent, most of his bones come from road kill, but his sculptures do not celebrate that violence. They do not make the visual into violence, cutting, rending and flaying so that we can see all the parts. They do not trade on simulacra. Where *Bodies: The Exhibition* dissects, Richardson constructs; where the exhibit invites a fascinated and voyeuristic gaze, Richardson invites self-reflection.

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<sup>10</sup> See Folkvine at <<http://www.folkvine.org/>>. Taft Richardson's site is <<http://www.folkvine.org/richardson/>>.

Is there a place for the display of real human bodies? I don't know. But I do think it has to be handled in a way that raises the question of their personhood, not simply of their biology. Surely it must be possible to engage in scientific education in a way that understands this.

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