SJWG Field Trip to Body Worlds Exhibit at San Jose Tech Museum
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SJWG Rapporteur Report

‘Body Worlds’ is a traveling exhibit of plastinated human bodies that are displayed in various poses and deconstructions. Body Worlds was developed by German anatomist and artist Gunther von Hagens, who invented the plastination process that allows the bodies to be preserved and displayed. The exhibit is promoted as artistic and educational.

The Science and Justice Working Group decided to attend Body Worlds in San Jose because of the controversies that have surrounded the exhibit—as one of the more dramatic conjunctions of science, public education, and human values, Body Worlds has drawn a lot of critical attention. These controversies include problems with informed consent of those people whose bodies were used in earlier versions of the exhibit, portrayals of pregnancy and fetuses, and the use of human cadavers in a public art exhibit. Prior to attending the exhibit, SJWG circulated a paper by Natalie Loveless, a student in History of Consciousness who studies relationships between art and science, that examines the ways Body Worlds is promoted in different cultural contexts alternately as art or education.

The exhibit was also attended by members of the Santa Clara University Center for Science, Technology and Society. Afterwards, SJWG members attended an informal meeting at the CSTS office in San Jose. Together, we discussed our impressions of the exhibit. Much of the discussion focused on the gendering of the exhibited bodies. Male bodies were portrayed primarily as engaging in aggressive sports activities or representing ‘thinking.’ Female bodies were primarily engaged in graceful activities (yoga, dancing, and ice skating), pregnant, or generally passive objects of art. No females bodies were in ‘thinking’ poses. The pregnant female body, with an exposed fetus in the uterus, was titled ‘Woman With Life,’ which struck our members as an attempt to ameliorate the objections from anti-abortion groups. Many members were especially struck by an exhibit claiming that male and female brains are fundamentally different in a way that echoed egregious gender stereotypes and is not supported by cognitive science. Finally, for an ‘educational’ exhibit in a science museum, we found it surprising that there was no mention of the biological evolution of the human body.

SJWG and CSTS members close by discussing future opportunities for collaboration. One possibility is a shared conference on biotechnology and aid for third-world peoples.