

**the guardian**

# NOTES & THEORIES

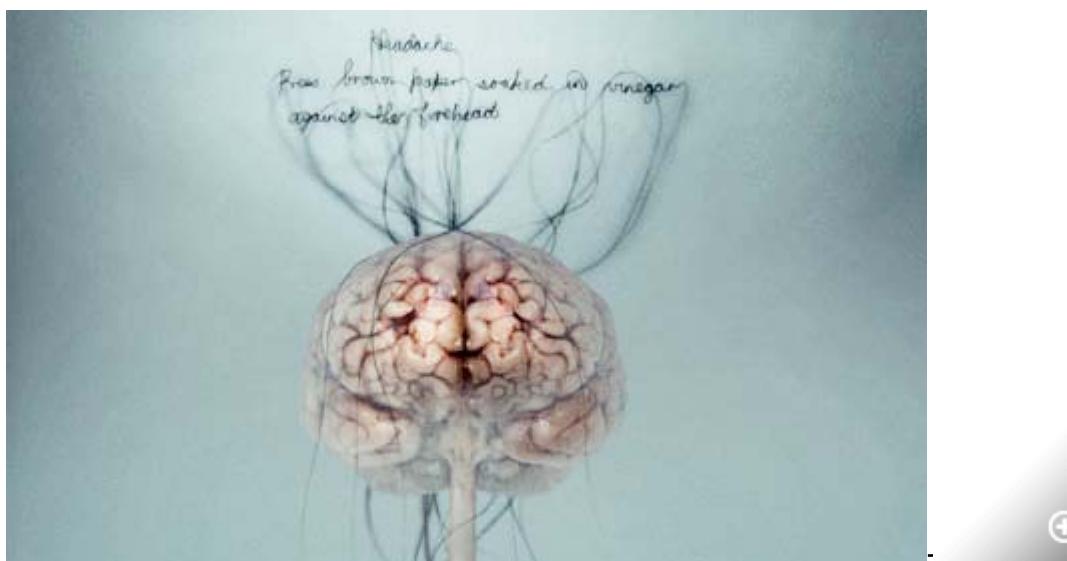
DISPATCHES FROM THE SCIENCE DESK



## Brainstorm art exhibition demystifies the brain – it is not 'degrading'

Would an exhibition of kidney tissue have provoked such a reactionary response, wonders **Dr David Dexter**, scientific director of the Imperial College Tissue Bank

[View a gallery of the artworks](#)



Headache by Helen Pynor, one of the works on display at the GV Art gallery's Brainstorm exhibition. Photograph: Helen Pynor/GV Art

The [Brainstorm exhibition at GV Art in London](#) is a very exciting venture: a visually stimulating, thought-provoking and educational display of sculptures, paintings, artwork and scientific material focusing on the normally taboo topic of the brain. But it has come under attack from those who believe it is wrong for human tissue to be

displayed in public. The Conservative MP David Amess, for example, has been quoted referring to the exhibition as "degrading", adding that "this is a disrespectful way to treat the human body and is unacceptable."

I disagree and would encourage him and anyone else who believes it to be degrading and disrespectful to visit the exhibition, where they will discover that this simply is not the case.

Would we have had such a reactionary response to an art exhibition about the kidney and kidney disease? What is it about the brain that generates such an exaggerated reaction? Is it because the brain is the organ we use to think?

Some of the art work in the exhibition was generated when a group of artists observed a routine neuropathological examination of a brain, which the Tissue Bank at Imperial College London uses to confirm clinical diagnoses.

Brain slices from previous neuropathological examinations are used in the human section of the display at GV Art. They are there not only to educate the public about what a brain looks like and how it can be affected by disease, but also to contextualise where some of the art work originated. Art has a significant role to play in science as a tool for communicating to the public what the scientist sees in the laboratory, in a form that can be understood by everyone.

But this exhibition does not just push boundaries. It is also important because it raises public awareness of brain disorders like multiple sclerosis and Parkinson's disease that affect a significant number of people worldwide, and highlights the importance of brain donation for research.

For many of these conditions, there are currently no effective therapies or cures. Because animals are not affected by such diseases we are wholly reliant on brain donation pledges from patients to provide brain tissue for study, so that we can find out their causes. Without such donations there will be no way to develop effective therapies or cures.

Importantly, researchers rely on tissue donations not only from patients affected by these diseases but also from healthy donors. The latter are often in shorter supply but are necessary for comparison studies. To secure such tissue donations along with the finances to carry out the research, we need to raise public awareness and have an open debate about how best to tackle these complex diseases.

Realising that this would be a remarkable and new way to help people understand why brain donation is so important, the exhibition was given the full support of the charity that funds the Tissue Bank at Imperial College.

Nobody stands to gain financially, and the brain tissue exhibited meets the strict guidelines that govern the display of biological materials. In addition, the tissue was not altered or enhanced in any way, so the public is viewing exactly what the scientist has observed in the laboratory. Furthermore, displaying it in this exhibition will not have affected its usefulness for researchers when it is returned to the Tissue Bank.

Great lengths were taken to exhibit the tissue tastefully so as to respect the dignity of the donors. Visitors who have seen the exhibition have praised the gallery for the way it has handled such a sensitive topic and report that the experience was thought-provoking and educational.

You don't go about demystifying the brain by locking it away in a laboratory, but by appropriately involving it in widely accessible media like art. This exhibition is a bold step in the right direction.

*Dr David Dexter is a reader in neuropharmacology and scientific director of the Joint Multiple Sclerosis Society and Parkinson's UK Tissue Bank at Imperial College London. For more information about donating brain tissue contact the [Parkinson's UK](#) or the [UK Multiple Sclerosis Tissue Bank](#)*

[Brainstorm will be at GV Art London until 22 January](#)

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14 comments, displaying Oldest first

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 Contributor



sciber2

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### ZogFromPlanetZog

14 January 2011 2:21PM  
 Because animals are not affected by such diseases..." Humans are animals. As an ambassador of science to the rest of the world, I'm disappointed to see you reinforce this understanding. Amess's angle.

Responses (0)

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### petrifiedprozac

14 January 2011 2:22PM

Just wondering how an art exhibition is more informative than a scientific exhibition with informative explanations and analysis. Art, I would have thought is better dealing with metaphysics but is the use of human tissue necessary in this context? There certainly seems to be a fashion to take human tissue out of the laboratory/clinic/morgue and into public space. Human tissue is a good way to carry on the culture of cheap shock in contemporary art. It's often be cynically joked about as to when human bodies will be used in art. How to shock next, snuff exhibitions? Just a thought.

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### walterygaud

14 January 2011 3:17PM

The Brainstorm exhibition at GV Art in London is a very exciting venture: a visually stimulating, thought-provoking and educational display of sculptures, paintings, artwork and scientific material focusing on the normally taboo topic of the brain.

I'm not sure that the brain is a 'taboo topic' in the arts, and not any more taboo than any other organ.

But it has come under attack from those who believe it is wrong for human tissue to be displayed in public. The Conservative MP David Amess, for example, has been quoted referring to the exhibition as "degrading", adding that "this is a disrespectful way to treat the human body and is unacceptable."

This doesn't follow form the first sentence. Amess wouldn't care

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 **dolceb** 1 or not -- he is 'strongly pro-life' and a Roman Catholic. I imagine that he would find Serrano's *Piss Christ* degrading as well (and likely to have a problem with Mapplethorpe and Ron Athey too). Art in the service of science? Prophesy may be key to disentangle the hiatus. Great lengths were taken to exhibit the tissue tastefully so as to respect the dignity of the donors.

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 **Intersubjective** 1 the exhibition have praised the gallery for the way it has handled such a sensitive topic and report that the experience was thought-provoking and enlightening.

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This is all very well, but who defines 'tastefully'? Some people, like Amess, find it distasteful and there's not really anything you can do about it... He has an ethical objection to the work, one I don't share, but which you don't really address.

On the other hand some people will find it 'thought-provoking' and 'educational' - but that's not why a lot of people go to an art exhibition - and it isn't an ethical issue but an aesthetic one. What is the seat of the person, consciousness, and all that is a human life biologically determined?

Unless the author holds a separate (not made explicit) dualist view which underpins this minimising of the brain as another kidney?

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 **zookie** 15 January 2011 4:17PM

As we humans progress, or digress our conception of art changes. All we do and all we see goes through a filtering process our brain offers to us. So naturally all people are not going to see art the same way.

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And people who still want to claim any part of the human body is shocking or taboo should remember when Maria Montessori went to med school. She was forced to take her classes in anatomy alone in a basement at night for fear she would look at a corpse penis, (for example) in the company of male med students. We have come a long way. Today all sorts of nude art is hanging in galleries for all to see.



**rApalled** of art possibly just another program in God's

15 January 2011 4:34PM

Well said, David. It's a wonderful show and Robert Devcic and colleagues should be congratulated for it.

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**Denisa**

16 January 2011 4:36PM

I think this is great. If I was in the UK I would definitely go to see it.

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**muscleguy**

16 January 2011 9:45PM

@dolceb

Unless the author holds a separate (not made explicit) dualist view which underpins this minimising of the brain as another kidney?

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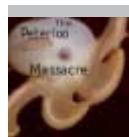
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Since a brain without stimulus is not capable of consciousness (see Helen Keller on how she was before she was 'awoken' (her term)), then it is just like a kidney without a functioning blood supply or connection to a bladder, or connection to a heart secreting ANP or a brain ADH for that matter.

I'm a physiologist by training so individual organs separated from their living context are, unless they are about to be transplanted, just tissue. For the record in my education I dissected one whole and two half human brains (I also did anatomy). Though the physiology dept due to a shortage of donors and a rise in student numbers switched to sheep brains, less boring cortex to cut through to find the ganglia and in New Zealand very available (they sent a technician down the local freezing works with a power saw).



**muscleguy**

16 January 2011 10:44AM

Here in Germany we had a touring exhibition, made of exhibits of all parts of the human body, also whole bodies without skin. If you had done an anatomy course instead of just looked at a book you would have been introduced to an anatomy museum which contains a lot of stuff like this, and 'worse'. What Gunter von Hagens has done with plastination is move the anatomy museum out into the public sphere and I say this is a good thing and were stick onto each billboard, were awful. I mean, maybe it's typical that such an exhibition happened in Germany. Alone the posters, which announced this exhibition and my undergraduate degree had anencephalic foetuses and other malformations. Once you have seen those the von Hagens' displays seem tame exactly, that all bodies came from free donors.

BTW I handled my first plastinated prosection back as an undergraduate in probably 1985, so the only new thing was doing it to whole bodies some real graves from the Bronze Age. So you can see the bones and the soil in which they lie. I think even that's impious.



**artist23**

Following millennia, please don't put me in seums!

17 January 2011 12:21PM

However, I read a book about anatomy when I was a little younger. That's enough if you really want to learn something. But I bet nobody who visited these exhibition will buy an anatomy book. So it's just sensationalism. Hats off to this exhibition. If you find this uncomfortable to look at, then remember that the discomfort is happening in your brain - right now! Thank you.

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