‘Nobody knows what a body can do’: on difference, relations and body worlds

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In The Body in History John Robb and I developed the notion of body worlds to explore how particular corporeal regimes emerge in specific historical contexts. From the hunter gatherers of the Palaeolithic through to medical workers today, different body worlds emerge in the intersection of architecture, technologies, practices and beliefs. In this paper I reflect on the concept of the ‘body world’ and its usefulness. In particular I aim to explore how the idea of the body world changes once we stop thinking of difference (between bodies, between periods) as negative, and start approaching it as a positive and creative force. Here the broader relational notion of the body world encounters the differential philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, and returns us to one of Deleuze’s, and his inspiration Baruch Spinoza’s, key questions: what can a body do? This question will be explored through a number of empirical snapshots of different bodies in differing body worlds.

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