

**THE HUMAN BODY PROJECT:  
TEACHING VULNERABILITY**

**TASHA DIAMANT**

B.A. (Hons.) Queen's University, 1983

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## Abstract

This inquiry is part of the *Human Body Project*, a larger ongoing, interdisciplinary, arts-informed research project, which I began in 2006, on my own at a local arts centre. The *Human Body Project* is my service to humanity; I offer my experience in Gandhi's sense of "being the change," i.e., deliberately showing up in vulnerability with the intention of moving humanity beyond normal cultural, neurobiological avoidance of this shared experience to the creation of a necessarily broader and embodied understanding of our interconnectedness and the possibility of human harmony. The project resonates with who I am as an award-winning educator; it is my most important and urgent responsibility to model and to motivate each person to do whatever they too can do to move humanity forward. *Tasha Diamant's Human Body Project*, shot at six performances of the *Human Body Project* at the 2009 Edmonton International Fringe Theatre Festival, is a 53-minute video that both documents and provokes further exploration of the research inquiry of the *Human Body Project*. Both the film and the broader *Human Body Project* explore the ways that vulnerability can generate empathy, connection, conversation, creativity, and shared responsibility. I use nakedness, both literal, in terms of nudity, and metaphorical, in terms of offering up my authentic self. The nakedness deliberately employs and exhibits that which we all share as humans (a body and a self) but also provokes visceral vulnerability in the performer (myself and a co-performer, Megan Fairlee Fester) and the participant audience, which furthers our connection to ourselves as beings sharing the problems of the physical plane. The video shows how my co-performer, the audience, and I grapple with this dialogical experience while it expands the exploration to the viewer.

## Acknowledgements

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## **Dedication**

To Megan, who was moved to join me

To Dave, who is my “trough” (Hill, 1997)

and

To Claire and Sophia, who are the reason I created and continue

the *Human Body Project*

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## Background/Introduction

This Master of Education project, the 53-minute film entitled *Tasha Diamant's Human Body Project*, is part of the *Human Body Project*, a larger ongoing, interdisciplinary, arts-informed research project, which I began in 2006. The *Human Body Project* is my service to humanity; I offer my experience in Gandhi's sense of "being the change," i.e., deliberately showing up in vulnerability with the intention of moving us beyond normal cultural and neurobiological avoidance of this shared experience to creation of a necessary, broader, embodied understanding of our interconnectedness and the possibility of human harmony.

The larger *Human Body Project* is also part of an even larger project, my life. Through awakenings brought about mostly by way of yoga, aging, and motherhood, the *Human Body Project* is part of a deepening of my own life commitment to honesty; responsibility (to self, family, students, fellow humans); and compassion (for self and others). While not pretending or professing to be a paragon of these virtues, I have a strong commitment to working on them as consciously as possible. The life work and the research/art work are not separable. Arts-based educational researcher, Pauline Sameshima (2007), uses the term "embodied aesthetic wholeness" to describe this kind of work:

Embodied aesthetic wholeness attends to teaching and learning holistically through the body with consideration to: increasing receptivity and openness to learning; fostering skills of relationality; modeling wholeness-in-process in explicit reflexive texts; layering multiple strategies of inquiry, research

experiences, and presentation; and acknowledging ecological and intuitive resonances. (p. xii)

I also recognize that my work takes place within an interconnected system. The life work and research/art work are for both my own growth and for the wider world, by my own intention and by energetic definition. In other words, my actions and energy (or those of any individual) make a difference. My (our) actions and energy are also affected by what goes on in the world; for example, I have spoken and written about my illness, anxiety, and depression, resulting from sensitivity to environmental toxins, both chemical and spiritual/energetic (I am not alone in these sensitivities). I am not—no one is—separable from the world. Or, as feminist and consciousness scholar, Karen Barad, writes: “*Reality is an ongoing dynamic of intra-activity.... Human practices are agentic participants in the world’s intra-active becoming*” (2007, pp. 206-207). To clarify, I personalize the words of curriculum scholar William Pinar (2004, p. 37): my “complicated conversation with [myself is] an ongoing project of self-understanding in which [I become] mobilized for engaged pedagogical action—as a private and public intellectual—with others in the social reconstruction of the public sphere.” (Pinar uses the indefinite pronoun “one” rather than the first-person “I.”)

For this Master of Education research project, I put together the documentary video using footage from the six *Human Body Project* events that took place at the 2009 Edmonton International Fringe Theatre Festival. A *Human Body Project* event is, in brief, an experiential open forum where I model vulnerability by appearing naked and unscripted. I take inspiration from the words of Gandhi: “Be the change

you wish to see in the world.” By sharing my vulnerable experience, I have chosen to “be” and represent that which we all share: physicality, fragility, and mortality. These events generate: authenticity, emotion, and connection. The larger *Human Body Project* also includes photographic and video documentation of *Human Body Project* events; participant writing and art from the events; a website where some of these artifacts are posted (humanbodyproject.com); and a blog. The Master of Education project consists of the 53-minute video and this essay.

### **Rationale/Intent**

Given that we are at a time when there are real, urgent questions about how our world and humanity will continue; given that the Dalai Lama (2007) calls the 20<sup>th</sup> century the century of violence; and given that I am the mother of two beautiful perfect beings named Claire and Sophia; I feel strongly that I must do whatever I can do to move humanity away from the connected forces of greed, poverty, violence, and environmental disaster towards harmony and non-domination (Jensen, 2004). The *Human Body Project* emerged from the love I have for my children; it came to me as a calling.

These words of Paulo Freire reflect my own intentions and feelings:

What inheritance can I leave? Exactly one. I think that it could be said when I am no longer in this world: “Paulo Freire was a man who lived. He could not understand life and human existence without love and without the search for knowledge. Paulo Freire lived, loved, and attempted to know. For this very reason, he was a human being who was constantly curious.” (as cited in Darder, 2002, p. 33)



The project resonates with who I am as an award-winning college instructor. I feel that as educators our most important and urgent responsibility is to teach and motivate each person to do whatever they too can do to move humanity forward. By moving humanity forward I mean anything that can bring about empathy, shared responsibility, and connection. The *Human Body Project* provides that kind of dialogical experience.

Human beings live in vulnerable bodies on a vulnerable planet. But how do we live with our mortality? I believe we mostly exist in a kind of denial that in many ways has had to do with cultural and neurobiological fight-or-flight mechanisms designed for survival that are now wreaking the opposite effect. For example, industrialism's achievements have given way to, among other issues, pollution, global climate change, and, markedly, violence on a grand scale. How industrialism has contributed to violence is complicated. The relationships, as interdisciplinary researcher and activist Derrick Jensen's work explores, are difficult to untangle; he quotes psychiatrist, R. D. Laing: "To justify our military-industrial complex, we have to destroy our capacity to see clearly any more what is in front of, and to imagine what is beyond, our noses" (as cited in Jensen, 2004, p. 61).

A few examples may clarify: the industrial-level, mass violence of the 20<sup>th</sup> century wrought by advanced weaponry (such as nuclear bombs) and industrial methods (such as the efficient factory execution chambers of the Holocaust) helped contribute to the 200 million 20<sup>th</sup> century deaths by violence to which the Dalai Lama regularly refers in his talks. In terms of the economics of domination and violence, Jensen asserts that "exploitation and consequent privilege are not inevitable, but the

result of social arrangement and force” (2004, p. 62) and states persuasively that “property,” not human life, “has *always* been the central consideration of the United States government” and “has become more so over time” (2004, p. 92)—i.e., even the world’s flagship of democracy and economic freedoms is a sinking boat. Jensen goes on to cite the endless lists of figures relating to slavery (current and historic), the sex trade, inhuman labour practices, industry-supported militia and wars, etc. As anthropologist Wade Davis writes about the “crude face of domination” (2009, p. 167) and the “slow collective suicide” of our global economic priorities (p. 217):

We accept it is normal that people who have never been on the land, who have no history or connection to the country, may legally secure the right to come in and by the very nature of their enterprises leave in their wake a cultural and physical landscape utterly transformed and desecrated. (p. 119)

Industrialism may be seen as a kind of super-successful survival mechanism that has gone awry. In a world dominated by the structures and ideals of industrialism (and similar or complementary forces), the feeling realm has no utility. In our culture, for instance, inconvenient feelings require prescription. As education scholars, such as David G. Smith (2006) and Parker Palmer (2007), have discussed, super-successful industrialism (for Smith, imperialism and globalization) depends on non-feeling. Non-feeling got us into this mess.

Feeling may get us out (for Palmer, reconnecting with passion and heartfulness). The body, as the place of feeling, must deal with the pain and fears of existence, but also the potential joy of connection. In the *Human Body Project*, I use my own naked body as a symbol for all vulnerable human bodies and as an

individual's own place of vulnerability (mine). Working within this creative and generative praxis, I provide a way for participants (or anyone who sees the video, or even someone who just hears about the project) to experience and reconsider vulnerability and perhaps, through vulnerability, to experience empathy, connection, and, implicitly, a shared sense of responsibility—or, at least, to experience “questioning” and “curiosity” (Freire, 2000, p. 94).

In other words, I believe the route to non-domination and harmony is through a deeper, embodied understanding of and ability to abide in vulnerability. Anyone who has ever loved knows the truth. Love makes us vulnerable and love cannot exist without vulnerability. Love and heart connection, as Freire and others have observed, constitute a necessary pedagogical praxis. Like Freire, what I am asking of humanity and myself is to expand our ability to love, which we both equate with consciousness. Writes Freire:

*Consciousness of*, an intentionality of consciousness, does not end with rationality. Consciousness...is a totality—reason, feelings, emotions, desires...My *conscious body's* constant exercise in releasing itself *even to or from* my consciousness intending toward the world brings or contains in itself a certain quality of life that, in the human existence, become more intense and richer. (p. 94)

He goes on to link this state to curiosity, openness, and questioning, i.e., the “concrete expression of our possibility for knowing” (p. 94).

As mentioned above, *Tasha Diamant's Human Body Project*, the video Master of Education project, is part of a larger project, the *Human Body Project*,

which I started in 2006. At the time I made a commitment to do at least one event per year. I made this decision partly to chronicle a body and human being (myself) changing over time and partly to fulfill the educative “modeling wholeness-in-process” (Sameshima, 2007) practice. (Producing a *Human Body Project* event requires time, energy, and money, so once a year seemed realistic. But the project is growing: in 2009, when I shot the video, I did six events and last year I did 21.) I started the blog in 2006, as well. The intention of the blog is to use my own life writing as another form of educative modeling. I describe myself in the blog title as a “sample vulnerable human, in process, when I can” (Diamant, 2010).

There is widespread awareness and consensus about the serious global issues humanity faces but almost no ability or willingness to deal with them. The culture and structures of what I have been calling industrialism and the industrial economy, or what Smith has termed, the tensions of globalization, keep us from moving forward. As a species and collectively as a society, we do not have the resources to deal skillfully with our feelings, still resorting to the irrational “survival” mechanisms of fight or flight. I use the curriculum of vulnerability to generate understanding and compassion for self, for others, and for the Earth. My only way of doing that is to model it and provide a visceral experience that does not stop at the neck. No one is going to learn about vulnerability without feeling it. Until we feel vulnerability and how, through our vulnerability, we are connected, we will not be able to make change toward peace, i.e., non-domination and harmony.

What does “world peace” look like? Who would know? My hopes for a harmonious world include non-violence, non-domination, human rights, and dignity

for all. Individual people have achieved these goals within themselves even during times of terrible violence (e.g. *Man's Search for Meaning* (1984) by concentration camp survivor and psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl); human rights movements, such as Gandhi's and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, have shown that humans can do it *en masse*. The possibility is there and must be cultivated.

### **Informing Sources: Contexts, Literature, Artists, Activists**

The “complicated conversation” (Pinar, 2004) of the *Human Body Project* and *Tasha Diamant's Human Body Project*, the film, fit within the related traditions of feminism and feminist and contemporary art, e.g., Andy Warhol, Diane Arbus (1972), and Marina Abramovic (as cited in Yablonsky, 2009); autobiography, life writing, narrative research, arts-based research, e.g., Sameshima (2007); Fowler (2006); Knowles and Cole (2008); Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, and Leggo (2009); hermeneutics; curriculum understood as *currere* (Pinar, 2004); and human rights activism. The video can be seen in the context of life writing and autobiography as “part of a larger meaning-seeking gesture. Without unitary and fixed interpretations of the social worlds, people seek understanding of the phenomena of lived experience, with all the difficulties and challenges that experience brings” (Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2009, p. 23). In the context of curriculum study, in Pinar's sense of *currere*, the project “communicates the individual's lived experience as it is socially located, politically positioned, and discursively formed while working to succumb to none of these structurings” (as cited in Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2009, p. 31).

Furthermore, the project lies within a growing field broadly known as arts-based or arts-informed research. As Ardra Cole and Gary Knowles, editors of the

*Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research* (2008) assert, arts-informed researchers have “deep roots in meaning making systems that honor the many and diverse ways of knowing—personal, narrative, embodied, artistic, aesthetic—that stand outside sanctioned intellectual frameworks” (p. 55). They also write that the “central purposes of arts-informed research are to enhance understanding of the human condition through alternative (to conventional) processes and representational forms of inquiry, and to reach multiple audiences by making scholarship more accessible” (p. 59).

In the context of feminism and feminist art, pioneering feminist artist Marina Abramovic (as cited in Yablonsky, 2009) also uses her naked body, but her method of working has been more brutal and endurance testing. For example, in her performance art work she has lain naked on a block of ice. In another piece, she carved a Communist star into her belly. My work is not meant to be as provocative as Abramovic’s; while nakedness often creates discomfort in my audience, I aim for a more gentle, internal resolution of the experience. I also take away the performance element and show up “straight up,” however I am in the moment. This parallels the idea of “troubling the boundaries between the *autos* and the *bios*” (Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2009, p. 17); my story and my life are both on display. Abramovic and I have similar understandings of our process, however. Her words reflect my own feeling of how and what I do what I do: “It does not come from you but through you. It is something you transmit... You come from your own story, and in the end it becomes everyone else’s” (as cited in Yablonsky, 2009, p. 95).

Two artists who have been very important to me since I was a teenager in the 1970s are photographer Diane Arbus and Pop artist Andy Warhol. Arbus’s work is

very raw and frank. Her subjects are often from the margins. Warhol was famous for soup cans and painting famous subjects. What I find resonant in both their work is the way they place responsibility on the viewer. Warhol troubles our complicity with commodification. Arbus troubles our complicity with marginalization. “You can turn away,” she wrote, “But when you come back they’ll still be there looking at you” (as cited in Fraenkel Gallery, 2007). My work parallels their work in some ways in that, even by hearing about the project, the hearer/viewer/participant (myself included) will be troubled by the idea of his or her own undressed, unvarnished, vulnerable self laid bare.

Human rights activists Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. worked with ideas about placing responsibility on the “viewer,” as well. I see my work in the same energy field as Arbus, Warhol, Gandhi, and King. Arbus and Warhol moved consciousness through art. Gandhi and King, by showing up in non-violent protest, forced their oppressors to deal with hurting people who stood with strong intention but would not fight back. The “not giving up” and the “not fighting” forced a different way of looking at the East Indian people and the southern Blacks. The “viewers” could not evade what they were seeing; they were stuck with a responsibility to deal with their relationship to the “picture.” In terms of what I’m doing, again, the viewer is struck with a new “picture” of vulnerability, one that he or she shares and may not have spent much time reflecting on. New or reconfigured knowledge creates new responsibilities.

### **Method: Complicated Conversation/Art**

I show up naked. This means actual, physical nakedness. I have no clothes on. I do not consider myself to be a nudist or an exhibitionist. I have spoken at events and written on my blog about my difficulties with my body image and with showing up naked. I feel vulnerable when I am naked in front of people. True, I am more used to the feeling of being naked in front of people after having done it several times over the last five years. It is not such an explosive feeling of discomfort as it was the first time. It is still a reliable way, however, to create a strong experience of vulnerability for me. It is also a reliable way to create a vulnerable experience for the audience. They have to deal with their feelings about being in a room with a person who is obviously feeling vulnerable as well as with their own feelings about nudity, sexuality, body image, age, and disrupted social norms, among others.

There is no set. I stand in front of my audience but don't have an "act." I give the audience drawing and writing materials (I call it "school without assignments"). I do not plan what I am going to say, I feel what I feel, I allow the conversation to emerge. Sometimes I am quiet. Sometimes I really look at everybody. Sometimes my eyes are closed. Sometimes I cry. Sometimes I explain things. Sometimes the audience members speak. Sometimes they draw or write (see [humanbodyproject.com](http://humanbodyproject.com) and HBP blog for participant art and writing). In the film, my co-performer, Megan, also talks. It is not performance, *per se*. We (Megan, me, the audience) are art and artist, researched and researcher, audience and performer, participant and facilitator. The responsibility for what happens is shared, creative, and generative—a little microcosm of my vision for the world.



As the film shows, and as I have discussed above, each person has his or her own experience. Sometimes those experiences appear to be raw, stunned, thoughtful, intelligent, empathetic, etc. It is messy, not “prescriptive or codified” (Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 65). One can see that, as in Freire’s sense, many audience members are curious and open. Many, also, appear to be disturbed and/or confused. To me, this kind of reaction is appropriate and perhaps a necessary first step to move further along the spectrum of Freire’s curiosity and openness. It is art. As a colleague of mine at Lethbridge College wrote on my blog:

I understand why people cry. This project is wrenching—I think of Holocaust victims and those who are thought of as so much less than human, forced to strip to nakedness. So many human beings of worth and beauty who’ve been incarcerated and tortured by the soulless machinery of bureaucracy. And laid bare as part of the dehumanizing. How humiliated people are made to be. Utterly alone and helpless. In fact, the human form is a creation of beauty and spirit. It needs the respect I can see your audience giving you. Those who would degrade and abuse that are the monsters, even as they celebrate their power over others. You’re a woman with courage. Who knows who you will influence with this stab into the darkness of Big Brother. Thanks for what you’re doing, Tasha. It’s jarring, it’s multi-layered; it’s poetic, it’s art and it’s necessary. (2011)

I also work with metaphorical nakedness, as in using the physical nakedness to work toward heartfelt nakedness. I have discovered that showing up naked is much easier than showing up openhearted. To be openhearted, one must allow oneself to be

vulnerable. Freire and Palmer, for instance, believe(d) that heartfulness is necessary to teaching and being human. This practice, for me, includes writing the public blog and speaking at *Human Body Project* events about truthful emotions and life experiences—that intersection of life and self again, as Hasebe-Ludt, et al. (2009) refer to. As a form of “modeling wholeness-in-process in explicit reflexive texts” (Sameshima, 2007), I write about struggles I have as a human in the world learning to be a friend to myself and to model that nobody is perfect. One of my intentions is to get people to look at the judgmental reactions that they use to avoid feeling vulnerable. I offer assessments of my own judgmental reactions, intolerant attitudes, and difficulties. As I have mentioned, I am no shining example of compassionate humanity. I am a “sample vulnerable human” and a sample “FB,” as well. As psychologist Albert Ellis puts it, “the main diagnosis of what most humans are is FBs—fucking babies” (as cited in Bernard, 1990, p. 69).

I have recorded all of my events (March 2006; two in January 2007, when I was eight months pregnant; April 2008, when three women joined me spontaneously; the six events at the 2009 Edmonton Fringe; and 21 events at the Calgary, Edmonton, and Victoria fringes of 2010). The Master of Education project video is a document/artwork to share/disseminate/evoke the experience of *Human Body Project* events. The video is a way for others to observe and experience the *Human Body Project* events without having to be at one.

The recordings, as edited, are straightforward documentation of the events. But, of course, editing is about choosing what to leave in and what to take out; e.g., one of my favourite clips did not make it in because it was too long. In that clip I

speak at length about how doing the *Human Body Project* was partly inspired by my experience as a serious practitioner of yoga. I talk about how yoga is not just about doing postures but also about unifying body, mind, and spirit and taking action from that place of unity (karma yoga). I relate how yoga awakened a connection for me between self and the bigger picture and how the project is my way of affecting the bigger picture. A man with an Indian accent who looks to be in his 50s, comments: “You say you are teacher of yoga. I see nothing yogic about this. I hope you know that yoga is not just about doing postures.” He says this, as I stand there naked, not doing postures, and explaining my presence as karmic action! It’s a very funny moment and one that certainly shows there are no guarantees about how to reach people. Muniré Armstrong and I edited from more than nine hours of footage following in the traditions of documentary cinema, *cinéma vérité*, and reality TV—from Allan King (who I worked for briefly when I graduated from university) and other Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and National Film Board documentarians, to *Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew* (2010). I based the editing choices on how much I felt the final product mirrored the impact and experience of an event; the vulnerability comes across onscreen.

### **Reflections on Nakedness**

Nakedness, perhaps too much of a distraction for the audience member I just mentioned, is an interesting problem. The University of Lethbridge’s own WestCAST 2010 committee, upon realizing that I intended to be naked to make a presentation about my *Human Body Project* research at that teacher education conference, rescinded their earlier acceptance of my proposal. In the end I was allowed to show

photos and video of myself naked but not actually be naked. My work is an “explicit challenge to logical positivism and technical rationality” (Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 59) and “a way of redefining research form and representation and creating new understandings of process, spirit, purpose, subjectivities, emotion, responsiveness, and the ethical dimensions of inquiry” (p. 59). Because no one involved was willing to come forward to give me a reason and I was not allowed to learn their identities to ask them, I do not know why the University of Lethbridge’s WestCAST 2010 conference committee made that decision. And I cannot always know what goes through people’s heads when they are present at a *Human Body Project* event. Some examples of people’s reactions in the film include the overtly emotional woman whose father owned a sex shop, whose dealings with nudity and nakedness had so many difficult associations with her upbringing. There are the thoughtful people who offer their feelings or questions in the moment, such as the man who is a dwarf or the man who realizes that “vulnerability brings people together” or the young woman who wonders about allowing vulnerability and the risk of broken heartedness. There is deadly, uncomfortable quiet and out of that quiet a woman who both looks and voices her extreme discomfort. There is a woman who tells me I’m beautiful who is sure that people would not be so “compassionate” towards me if I were fat.

(An aside about people having “compassionate” or, as my colleague wrote, “respectful” feelings toward me: In the film, a middle-aged woman speaks about her experience as the wife of a man who has always told her she is beautiful even though she sees herself as obese. It is an uplifting moment where she expresses her own realization that she is beautiful and an audience member, not with her, tells her he

also thinks she is beautiful. The following year, 2010, I was back at the Edmonton Fringe passing out flyers in line-ups and recognized that woman and the friend who had been sitting beside her in 2009. I handed them both a flyer and the friend gave me a dirty look, handed it back, and said, “I saw it last year and thought it was stupid then.” The lady who had spoken so openly the year before said nothing and looked away. This is just one minor example. In 2010, as I did a three-city tour of fringe theatre festivals, many people decided to join me naked. I would always say to them that even though I would do my best to treat them kindly and respectfully, there was no way of guaranteeing whether the audience or future audiences of the photos or video recordings would treat them kindly and respectfully.)

### **Reflections on Intention**

Most importantly for me, in the video there are children (my own, as well as my cousin’s daughter) whose purity and authenticity parallel my own intentions. Though I am certainly not free of ego, assumptions, desires, and other human scrapings and scramblings, my intention with the project in simple language is to “be the change.”

“What better way is there to learn [empathy] than through reading?” (Jones, as cited in Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2009, p.26). I would argue that, while reading can be moving and is necessary, it has its limitations. There is often too much distance between reader and subject matter; reading can also be an escape from, rather than an engagement with, the world. A stronger, more concentrated way for people to learn empathy is through a close-up visceral experience (think of love or illness). If I believe that people must understand their shared vulnerability so that my daughters

and their children have a chance to see a full life on the planet, and I do, then I need to give people an as-close-up-as-possible, visceral experience of vulnerability to work through. My intention to show up as a flawed naked human being in the moment is about being as close-up vulnerable as I am able without actually endangering myself or anyone else. Like a child, I am also as authentic as I can be because, contrary to many assumptions, even with practice, I am uncomfortable about exposing my body and self to judgment. My use of the curriculum of vulnerability, i.e., modeling this method of being, is part of my larger intention to do whatever I can do to promote/provoke/teach/learn/study/allow a way of being that is non-dominating and harmonious. It is also, of course, counter to our prevailing culture and the grand narrative of education (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), which is why it takes place in the margins.

### **Reflections on Unscriptedness**

Out in the margins, the *Human Body Project* has evolved from its humble origins of me setting up on-a-shoestring events in the local community art centre to the only very slightly less humble niche of North American fringe theatre festivals. The film was shot at the first fringe festival I attended, the 2009 Edmonton Fringe.

Fringe audiences are an interesting demographic. As shown in the video, age and racial backgrounds vary widely. They are the people who are, on some level, open to being surprised because fringe shows are solely chosen by lottery. That aspect of the audience demographic and the lottery-based structure is why I decided to use the fringe machinery to gain a wider audience for the *Human Body Project*.

Still, there is an orthodoxy that I have to contend with at almost every fringe show. In the film there is a sense of it, as I talk about how I would feel if I were in the audience or when I talk about the mind-numbedness of a culture that constantly requires entertainment. The *Human Body Project* crosses a line that takes responsibility from the performer and implicates the whole room. No fancy lights, no show, no you-over-there-me-over-here, which is the whole point. But for some people, this, more than the nakedness, is a source of great discomfort. Megan and I do exactly what actors and performers never, ever want to have happen in their whole career, and we do it on purpose: we die onstage. Some people love it, that erasure of boundaries; some don't. Why, I was asked many times, are you doing this at the fringe? My answer: "Um, if not the fringe, where would you suggest?"

### **Outcomes/Emergence**

The film shows how, through intention and through a willingness to let events and conversation emerge rather than play out by way of an agenda or script, people were provoked/inspired to connect with others and themselves (even if only in irritation or confusion) by way of a visceral, vulnerable experience. My experience of being the *Human Body Project* creator, performer, and filmmaker is that the project is extremely powerful, which is not to say that it feels good or leads to easy resolution. My intention to be vulnerable and to use vulnerability has been personally "excruciating" (Brown, 2010) and the catalyst of much emotional plumbing for me. I am me in the film, I am me in the project, I am not a separate person from that "role." This is huge work that doesn't end at 5:00 PM. For audience members, I can only know what I see and what some people share. The film is a vehicle for others to see

the powerful effect the project has on audiences, as I've described in some of the material above.

But, just as some audience members “get it” and go with it and some don't, so will some viewers of the film. One of the most interesting and disturbing results for me has been the reaction people have had to Megan, who was 22 at the time the film was shot. Eve Ensler, in her moving video presentation on TED.com, *Embrace Your Inner Girl* (2009), speaks about the way we in our culture have erased the girl in ourselves to the point of destruction. To me, Megan is an embodiment of that open and emotional girl. People viewing her seem to experience a huge discomfort to face what they have lost in themselves. Many of my peers who have viewed the film have expressed irritation with her girlish vocabulary (many “like”s and “totally”s) and they see her expressiveness as affected or even pathological. She herself has found it very difficult to explain her involvement to her own peers who seem only able to understand the idea of her nakedness as sexual.

In other words, projection abounds. I see engaged audiences. I see Megan and myself as courageous women willing to take risks to make a difference. People, from colleagues to family members, after expressing willingness to advise or give feedback about the film, never mentioned it again, presumably once they had seen it. I would say it pushed their edges too far but who really knows what they think? “Narrative research can be an authentic, autobiographical project...Narrative research can also be too narcissistic” (Fowler, 2006, p. 7). My authenticity may be another man's narcissism, especially when projection abounds.



Some words from viewers and participants may show the power the project has had on some people. I received an unsolicited note from a friend and former colleague when I taught at the University of Lethbridge, Ann Braybrooks, who told me she watched the film four times in three weeks. In July 2010, she wrote:

You and I talked once about how we all use clothes, titles, status, and “stuff” to help mask to the world all our insecurities and fears....what was so profound, really, was that everyone (or almost everyone) in that room did initially feel uncomfortable and awkward, yet as the show progressed, people really opened up and that awkwardness seemed to shrink away, or at least shrink back a bit. I guess what struck me is that maybe it isn't so hard to shed at least some of our culturally programmed vulnerability after all; maybe it's just a question of us all recognizing and acknowledging that we are all the same in that respect.

Your experience at *Maclean's* was very thought provoking. How many of us live through jobs we hate without ever analyzing why? We say, “That was such a shitty job” and dismiss it from our experiences and in doing so never learn anything from it and so fail to grow. I was in tears throughout your show...

I was fascinated by the comments that came from the viewers/participants. I'm glad you included the comments by the woman who thought the show was “subversive” as I think she articulated what many of the more conservative public would feel, but in doing so, I think she inadvertently emphasized the very point that you were standing up there making: we all feel

vulnerable! The “subversive” comment was, I think, more defensive on her part, but it was interesting to hear her views....Also interesting how, as you noted, most of the audience was male, and many of them older. It was interesting to see how they easily adapted to the situation and were able to offer their insights so honestly.

Writing left for me in one of the sketchbooks I hand out, from a participant who is a youth counselor, in Edmonton, August 2010:

The show is about everything, not nothing.

Hopefully the heart felt people will become the norm. By bringing brutal truth to everyone and find the beauty of it all. And in that finding the earth is our home and we need to act...we need to take a stand and try to be a supporter of mother earth...which includes every body.

Tasha when you came out I saw the shaking hands and shaking knees and wanted to run up and give you a hug because you looked so anxious. You are such a strong person and hopefully I can take your message to my students and get them to realize what makes people naked (which like you said is not being unclothed) being a youth counselor and teaching students daily.

From Chandra, a participant in Edmonton who joined me naked, August 2010:  
WOW Tasha you have changed the course of my life. Thank you so much. I wanted to send my initial unfettered response to the experience....Thank you thank you thank you for that.

I almost don't want to write as the experience was so visceral that I am in a state of feeling and don't want it to end. Yet it needs to be recorded.

I have never had such a sense of humanity. You read about humanity in anthropology textbooks, have this concept of a line swiveling through history in different garments but when it comes to real humanity- knowing that we are all individuals, together. Well, for me, that is rare. At the end of the presentation this guy started to talk about...rearranging life to start living. Moving past, working with, the time thing by showing up in the wrong place and wrong time—like traveling, map making beyond the dim but steady whirl of common structure...being real, being alive. Tasha thank you so much for embedding in me an understanding of moving past our fight or flight consciousness. You talked about it before, and now having been naked on a stage I **get it**. This isn't a wishy- washy new age thing for all those out there who doubt that life can move fully beyond the mundane at some point. **To know humanity we need to move beyond fight or flight. To do this, we need to love ourselves...**Individuality, not capitalism...Do you know humanity? We were all there in that room all knowing it just then...Thanks to the body for bringing me back there.

### **Challenges/Successes/Next Things**

I had the inspiration for the *Human Body Project* in 2004 but didn't actually stage an event until 2006. It took me two years to get the guts up to be naked. Besides my own difficult emotional process and the projections that land on Megan and myself, my biggest challenge at this point in the project is about getting up more guts...

As I get around to explain further I will first mention another person who didn't make it into the final version of the film (because of a technical problem). She was an articulate young woman who kept insisting that the *Human Body Project* should be part of public school curriculum. I agreed with her but pointed out that schools, like all corporate organizations in our culture, are liability-driven. I shared with her my own surprise and difficulties with encountering a high degree of caution and reluctance from public school administrators when, as a volunteer parent, I offered to provide seemingly non-controversial extracurricular yoga and creativity activities. Seriously, what children's school in the universe would take on *Tasha Diamant's Human Body Project*, the film, much less a *Human Body Project* event?

I, myself, exercise caution when I produce the *Human Body Project* at fringe festivals; I designate the shows as 18 and over or for children accompanied by a parent. I do this, not because I think the *Human Body Project* is harmful to children, but to protect myself because I know there is high potential for adult freak-out. (For instance, true story: a plainclothes detective came to my first *Human Body Project* event because a Lethbridge citizen had lodged a complaint. As it happens, she did not arrest me and, when she left, told the person working at the door: "That was beautiful.") Even academic professionals at my own university where I am conducting this research, the University of Lethbridge—populated solely by adults—would not allow me to present an actual *Human Body Project* experience at their teacher education conference. And, so far, no one at Lethbridge College, where I am an award-winning instructor and where I received an Applied Research grant to finish

my film, has invited me to present the film or a *Human Body Project* event, either. (I did present a portion of the film at a Lethbridge College Applied Research event.)

As the project has grown and as I have personally experienced its depth and power, it has been a disappointment to me that both the *Human Body Project* and the film, *Tasha Diamant's Human Body Project*, in itself an important artifact of inquiry and documentation, have not found much of an audience or "place." I take a little heart that there has been some movement in this area. The Executive Director of the Institute for Art, Religion, and Social Justice at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City recently invited me to present a real *Human Body Project* event and talk about my film there in April of this year. This will be an exciting chance for me to share the work more broadly in an institutional educational context. The interdisciplinary, spiritual, creative, and social-justice-oriented nature of the *Human Body Project* work make it a fit for the UTS context and other such niches (e.g., teacher education, arts-based education, etc.) within post-secondary educational institutions. Indeed, I have also been accepted to make a presentation about my research at the Canadian Society for the Study of Education conference in May-June 2011. It is one of my key challenges to understand and navigate ways to tap such opportunities.

I am also planning to do three more fringe festivals this year; the *Human Body Project* was drawn in Winnipeg, Calgary, and Victoria. I will record those, as I did my dates last year. I have ideas about creating "webisodes," video documents of events on my website. I am also in the process of figuring out how to make a book of photos, writing, and art that has emerged from the project.

Now back to getting up more guts... When I started the *Human Body Project* I had no idea what would happen but, as I gush in the film (somewhat to my present embarrassment), I have had a semi-magical belief that the energy of the work would spread and create tangible, miraculous strides toward human empathy and connection. Thus my disappointment with the project's marginality. But that disappointment comes from the "magical thinking" (Didion, 2006) that, like many of us in this "culture of make believe" (Jensen, 2004), I indulge in. It is simply obvious that, as much as it would be valuable, there is essentially no place for the *Human Body Project* in schools for children in the current cultural/political environment, and there are no easy fits for it in post-secondary institutions.

Probably no one understands better than me the potential and power of this project. Because of that understanding and as the project's creator, I have come to the realization that I have a non-"wishy-washy," non-"magical" responsibility to create the "tangible, miraculous strides" I hope for by finding a bigger "place" and wider audience myself. That means taking it outside—literally into the streets. It is one thing to experience the *Human Body Project* inside a performance (or video) space. It is a whole other thing to take my naked self out into the real world to stand up in solidarity and vulnerability for endangered humanity. For many reasons—from, "NOOOOO!" straight from my amygdalae, to, "Who am I to start a naked human rights movement?" to, "Will I be kicked out of the fringe?"—I am afraid to do it. But I think many of my fellow humans will stand with me, as they have in theatres, and I believe it is the next step for the project. It is quite possible that the next *Human Body Project* events will start inside but end outside the theatre.

## Summary

Anthropologist Wade Davis talks about how Haitian practitioners of Vodoun say, “You white people go to church to talk about God, we dance in the temple to become God” (Davis, 2003). Following this line of thinking, I would describe how I experience myself as a (mostly thwarted) version of “God.” The soul sickness that I often suffer and my project emerge from this belief/beingness. I believe children are beautiful perfect versions of “God” and our most disgusting crime in this culture is that we intentionally make them into our thwarted image.

Davis mourns the loss of the “ethnosphere” (Davis, 2009, p.2), the expressions of humanity in the thousands of cultures and languages dying as we speak. As Davis says of the disappearing cultures, “In every case these are dynamic living peoples being driven out of existence by identifiable and overwhelming external forces” (p. 167). Davis notes that scientists have “revealed beyond any doubt that the genetic endowment of humanity is a single continuum” and feels hopeful about “an end to race” (p. 17). My mourning is for something similar and connected: I mourn the automatic way human societies replicate objectification and dehumanization over and over and over. And my hope is larger, but also connected: as the possessor of the world’s most damaging birth defect, a vagina (and the mother of two more afflicted), I hope for the end of civilization. Or, put more simply, using the *lingua franca* of sports: if this is the best we can do, we suck.

As Derrick Jensen writes in the premises for his book, *Endgame (Volume 1)*:

*The Problem of Civilization:*

Civilization is not and can never be sustainable. This is especially true for industrial civilization...The longer we wait for civilization to crash...the messier it will be...The culture, as a whole, and most of its members are insane. The culture is driven by a death urge, an urge to destroy life...From the beginning, this culture—civilization—has been a culture of occupation...From birth on...we are individually and collectively enculturated to hate life, hate the natural world,...hate women, hate children, hate our bodies, hate and fear our emotions, hate ourselves. If we did not hate [ourselves and] the world, we would not allow it to be destroyed before our eyes. (2006, pp. ix-xi)

Humans on this planet have not yet been able to get past the neurobiological, ego-driven, testosterone-fuelled “survival” mechanisms that hold us in the current culture/power structure that creates the “identifiable and overwhelming external forces” that we refuse to confront. Our “fucking baby”-ish attachment to “magical thinking” disguised as rationality in what is clearly a time of great urgency will inevitably lead to our destruction. All while another possibility exists, right within our reach: to connect in our mutual vulnerability and live as complete, whole versions of “God” (spirit) on this beautiful gift of a home, our Earth.



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## Appendix

### MODEL/ACTOR RELEASE

**To: TASHA DIAMANT (the "Producer")**

I, \_\_\_\_\_ hereby irrevocably consent to allow you to utilize my name, likeness and voice, as recorded, photographed, filmed and taped by you via picture and sound on the following date(s): \_\_\_\_\_, (the results of which are referred to herein as the "**Personal Footage**"). I acknowledge that the Personal Footage may include nudity and that you may use/display the Personal Footage, at your sole discretion, in any of Producer's videos, multi-media projects and/or on Producer's Internet websites (collectively the "**Projects**"), which shall include but not be limited to the following website(s): [www.humanbodyproject.com](http://www.humanbodyproject.com).

You may exhibit, advertise and translate the Personal Footage and the Projects throughout the universe in perpetuity in and by any and all means, media and languages now or in the future known. You may freely use, adapt, revise, add to, edit and subtract from the Personal Footage and the Projects. You may assign, license, transfer or otherwise dispose of any of these rights in whole or in part without notice.

I waive and relinquish all rights and remedies at law or in equity, including so-called "droit morale" (moral rights), and release and forever discharge you and all others dealing with you from, and agree not to sue you or any of them, with respect to any claim, cause of action, liability, loss or damage of any nature whatsoever arising out of your exercise of rights granted herein, including claims relating to defamation or invasion of any right of copyright, privacy, personality or publicity.

As full compensation for the above grant of rights and release, I acknowledge that Producer has paid me a fee of \$1.00. I agree that I shall not be entitled to receive any other compensation whatsoever with respect to the Projects other than the fee set out above.

I declare that I am not a member of any performer's union or guild or that if I am a member of such a union or guild then I warrant that the subject matter of this agreement does not fall within the auspices of such union, guild, or other collective bargaining association.

I have read and understand this Agreement prior to signing and I am fully familiar with all terms herein.

I ACKNOWLEDGE THAT COMPANY HAS REQUIRED ME TO PRODUCE PHOTO IDENTIFICATION ATTESTING TO THE FACT THAT I AM NOT UNDER THE AGE OF EIGHTEEN (18) YEARS. I WARRANT THAT THE ABOVE NOTED IDENTIFICATION IS VALID AND ACCURATELY REFLECTS THAT I AM NOT UNDER THE AGE OF EIGHTEEN (18) YEARS.

The parties acknowledge that they have requested that the present agreement, as well as all documents, notices and legal proceedings entered into, given or instituted hereto or relating directly or indirectly hereto be drawn up in English. Les parties reconnaissent avoir exigé la rédaction en anglais de la présente convention, ainsi que de tout document, avis ou procédure judiciaire relié, directement ou indirectement, à la présente convention.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Witness

Name (Print): \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

E-Mail Address: \_\_\_\_\_