

VISUAL ART

Being Human at the Wellcome Collection review — I've seen the future and it's terrifying

An exhibition exploring what it means to be human has bracing things to say

Rachel Campbell-Johnston

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Health



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What does it mean to be human today? That, at its most basic, is the subject of the latest Wellcome Collection display. The question is simple. The answer, however, is anything but, and visitors to this new permanent exhibit in London can expect to be fascinated, challenged, discomfited and sometimes downright confused.

Being Human, installed in a single gallery (the space that for the past 12 years has been occupied by *Medicine Now*), brings together about fifty scientific objects and artworks. These have been loosely organised into four thematic groups: genetics, minds and bodies, infection, and environmental breakdown. With a subject matter so vast and complex visitors will discover any number of overlaps. The open-

plan installation, its wood panelling and rich colours designed by the multidisciplinary, Turner prizewinning collective Assemble, supports this interconnected approach. It encourages a flow – even a flood – of ideas. You will frequently wonder which of the sections you are in.



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Flooded McDonald's, 2009

SUPERFLEX

The range of this display runs from the scientifically literal to the imaginatively hypothetical, from the straightforwardly factual to the futuristic. At one moment you might be peering at the surgical gloves and syringes of the DIY bacterial gene engineering CRISPR kit and wondering where precisely the spanner comes into the process. This product, commercially available and dispatched through the post, claims to contain everything that you need to edit your DNA. At the next moment you

are looking at a lifesize model of a cosmonaut kitted out in a spacesuit and carrying, on his back, a large net crammed with luggage. This is Yinka Shonibare's *Refugee Astronaut*.

At first glance the two objects may seem worlds apart, but which seems the more preposterous: the apparently practical or the manifestly fabulous? Which feels the more possible: the more prescient, the more disconcerting or quite frankly true? Is the future that Shonibare imagines, in which we wander exiled through space as intergalactic refugees, really that much stranger than that in which, in the privacy of our bathrooms, we might begin tinkering with our genetic codes?



Refugee
Astronaut III,
2019, by Yinka
Shonibare
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The display sets out to be emphatically relevant and looks determinately forwards. As environmental degradation increases, how many of us will end up as exiles, asks Shonibare's spaceman. By incorporating the contributions of so many artists, curators set out not only to articulate some complicated scientific ideas, but to consider their implications in a wider socio-cultural context.

Heather Dewey-Hagborg's three-dimensional printed portrait is more than some eerily lifelike rubber mask of a face. Sequencing the DNA from chucked cigarette butts and spat-out lumps of gum that she found on the street, she has picked out the genetic markers that influence physical appearance and created a portrait. Do you recognise this litter lout? Dewey-Hagborg acknowledges that genetics alone cannot reveal exactly what someone

looks like, but police are already trialling similar techniques to produce speculative “wanted” posters. What sort of Big Brother world might this lead to? How will our privacy be invaded? Where will such genetic investigations advance?

Some advances lead to a better world. Take the protective suit used by health workers in areas where ebola has broken out. The faceless costume was frightening to patients so, during the 2015 west African epidemic, many carers would try to humanise themselves by customising their clothing with writing or drawings. The artist Mary Beth Heffernan took this one step farther by producing simple photographic portraits that could be stuck on to the front of the suit. Patients now knew what their carers looked like. The already traumatic experience of being nursed in strict isolation was reduced.



No Human Being
Is Illegal (in all
our glory), 2014-
2018, Deborah
Kelly and
collaborators
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More usually, however, with every incremental expansion of our knowledge, a new array of potential problems or dilemmas are introduced. Sometimes these are of a basic biological nature. Faecal transplants can increase gut bacteria and improve our responses to antibiotics. Never mind that a DIY performance of the process (there's a commercially available kit) doesn't sound that appealing; it can also be detrimental, potentially transferring diseases and bringing side-effects.

More often the problems this show confronts are broader and decidedly more pervasive. What does it mean to be “normal” in a world in

which mental difference is labelled, pathologised and medicated; at a time when gender is increasingly fluid? Climate change is a vast and topical problem that we are only just beginning to address. Saving seed from potentially threatened species in seed banks is just a beginning.

A film by the hyper-fashionable collective Superflex shows a replica McDonald's restaurant slowly flooding. It makes the scale of an imminent crisis seem suddenly more real. Yet, although the artworks in the "environmental breakdown" section issue plenty of shrill alarm warnings, few are offering any practical solutions.



Advertisement,
2011, by Cassils
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Being Human is more about awakening our minds to ideas. At every turn the visitor will find something to fascinate. For instance, meet Henrietta Lacks, the African-American whose cancer cells, owing to some unique genetic mutation, proved immortal and continued to divide when removed from her body. Lacks died of cancer, but there may be more of her diseased cells surviving in laboratories round the world than there were cells making up her living body. Furthermore, that this disease remains alive has helped doctors to save thousands of other people from death.

Mostly, however, this show asks simple questions. Basic problems are posed. How far you follow them is up to you. You may leave this display with a weighty philosophical burden. Failing that you can always pop into the shop and take home a breast-milk-scented candle as a souvenir.

***Being Human* is at the Wellcome Collection, London NW1 (020 7611 2222) from today**

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Mr S McNeill

1 DAY AGO

I suggest Ms Campbell-Johnston studies John Carey's marvellous, "The Intellectuals and the Masses" before her next review. In it he quotes Clive Bell, "What distinguishes these rare and gifted beings [the intellectuals] is their ability to detect true

form in works of art.....true art does not



The Ref consists in what the grocer thinks he sees but in the sense of ultimate reality the artwork

I think you mean I have seen the future and yields to educated persons of extraordinary it is terrifying art, sensitivity. I wonder what Bell would have XenaWarriorPrincess made of a flooded McDonalds!

X

The future has always been terrifying - not least because we (so far) won't be in it.

Have to say, the above photos are just silly!

Gordon W

1 DAY AGO

Alternatively, you could visit your local recycling centre and spend 30 minutes looking into a skip. Any skip. I'm not sure if

the skips themselves set out to be

Amfortas emphatically relevant and look

I DAY AGO determinately forwards, but the effect is the More woke nonsense!

A

T Community Admin STAFF

1 DAY AGO

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N Ned Dalton I DAY AGO Erm, no, maybe not...



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