CELL(F)

by

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I owe the inspiration and motivation for *Cell(f)* to my recently belated father, James Joseph Herden. When I became discouraged, he encouraged me to stand strong. *Cell(f)* is dedicated to his ever-present "being" beside me.

ABSTRACT

I see the human experience as composed of both objectivity and subjectivity. Objectivity in that science has helped us better understand our physicality, such as defining biological processes within our body. Empirical knowledge has provided a level of truth in explaining a foundation for our existence.

Subjective experiences materialize as we engage within the environment. Walking in the park or purchasing food seem to be similar experiences for everyone in that we can envision the process of doing it; however, that process is an individual process composed of unique characteristics and perspectives. A subjective experience is as unique as one's DNA.

As a scholar, I respect the knowledge science can offer and I enjoy researching the seemingly endless information presented on the human body. As an artist, I enjoy questioning and challenging what is presented as factual. How can the human body be quantified? Though science presents data in a very systematic and determined fashion, I believe the human thought process, subjectivity, and the experiential are not considered simultaneously and this limits my understanding of the human experience. My thesis is not to argue that science should adjust its methodology, but rather I interrogate the possibility of understanding the subjectivity of the human experience through the lens of science. *Cell(f)* is the result of the following question: can objectivity and subjectivity merge to enrich our understanding of the human experience?

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INTRODUCTION

I am uncertain of the role of "truth" in a definition of the human experience. Science defines "truth" as empirical knowledge, resulting from methodical testing. As humans we are composed of centrioles and basal bodies which aid in the ebb and flow of organism and cellular communication. But there is also a subjective human experience, oftentimes facilitated by the environment, which is not scientifically tested. Psychology studies the mind and behavior but it is not as determined and exact as our cellular and biological nature. Is there a way to ascertain a definition of "being" human?

Cell(f) (Plates 6-10) is the result of my interrogation of this inquiry. I am hopeful that this work will enrich our understanding of objectivity (science) and subjectivity (experience) as equal components of the human experience. My exploration of objectivity and subjectivity directs how I see my world and my place within it. An early skepticism of scientific truth as the determining factor of my own identity has progressed into an interrogation of what "being" is. In *Cell(f)* I have approached this question by considering both the internal physicality and the external experience of the body. These aspects have been investigated with specific lenses to formally and conceptually visualize my perspective of "being" within this thesis and body of work, thus the title *Cell(f).*

Cell(f) is composed of more than 400 individual components which will be referred to as discs. These discs are installed in a particular fashion. Grouped in constellations on the walls, they are reminiscent of cellular pathological images or what cell life looks like through the oculars of a microscope (Plate 1).

CONTENT

The field of science is one lens that has provided theoretical and conceptual frameworks for the examination of the internal body. Science is particularly interesting to me because it seeks to address human biology through "empirical" knowledge, but at the same time has yet to explain the subjective human experience in relation to this biology. The physical presence of the body is tangible. However, life's experience is not; it is as if we are navigating a labyrinth of varied interactions and that science favors objectivity over subjectivity.

Science attempts to explain anomalies in internal biological processes by looking at them objectively. My intention is not to question what is or is not anomalous, but rather to use that which is described as biologically anomalous as a metaphor for the questioning of scientific truth. This directly relates to the indefinable "being" when applied to physical and experiential components of humanity, and thus rationalizes the incorporation of the internal aspect pertaining to the body in this work.

Using science as a tool within this work allows me, as well as the viewer, to seek answers and to try to quench the desire to be objective. I see science as a representation of empirical knowledge, the process of attaining it, and even the early stages of inquiry. The incorporation of science is apparent in this work with the formal inclusion of discs that simultaneously resemble prepared microscopic slides and cellular structures.

Conceptually, I suggest the use of scientific methods as an avenue to pursue answers, but recognize that this system is not as all encompassing as it might appear.

The second lens providing the framework for the external experience of the body is something overlooked within our society. More specifically, particular objects are often thought of as remnants of the residue of "being" human. The word "remnant" suggests leftover parts, as if a whole has been used and leftovers from that whole remain. Can the seemingly ordinary everyday object communicate an extraordinary aspect of our identity? I ask the viewer to consider an ordinary element as a symbol of the body as it experiences the external environment.

INDIVIDUAL VS. WHOLE

A collection of an array of individual elements can be displayed to be considered a complete or whole entity. The relationship between the individual element and the whole is a binary opposition in which both parts are dependent upon each other. We would not be able to define individuality without the concept of a whole and vice versa, a whole is formed with the grouping of many individual elements.

In *Cell(f),* it is important to stress that both the individual and the whole are equally relevant. My installation consists of hundreds of small circular objects installed on the gallery wall. From afar, the wall appears to be inhabited by these discs. The installation is meant to suggest an overall presence of "being" where there is no distinction between the individual discs. It is this accumulation of individual discs that the viewer first encounters.

When the installation is viewed with an intimate distance, cellular imagery from pathology photographs come to mind, and the realization of individual "species" becomes apparent. A close inspection also reveals an unexpected fragility. Hanging on a very small metal pin, each disc displays intricate unique characteristics due to the variety of materials that are encased in each one. Curiously, they begin to demand individual attention. Up close, the discs transform from a mass or collection into individual beings. This kind of transformation also occurs in the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres

Felix Gonzalez-Torres's paper stacks and candy piles effectively evoke a recognition of the binary relationship between individual and whole. His stacks of printed paper, such as *Untitled* (Plate 2), and his mounds of edible sweets, such as *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (Plate 3) gradually change shape and even disappear, depending on a viewer's willingness to participate. Conceptually and physically there is an intimate relationship between that which can be considered individual and that which constitutes a whole in Gonzalez-Torres's work. Formally, the work consists of many pieces of paper or candy, not just one. Gonzalez-Torres notes that:

> …an individual piece of paper from one of the stacks does not constitute the "piece" itself, but in fact it is a piece. At the same time, the sum of many pieces of the identical paper is the "piece," but not really, because there is no piece, rather there is only an ideal height of endless copies.[1]

The importance of having many individual pieces in a pile is integral to Gonzalez-Torres for several reasons. First, the individual pieces of paper and candy that create whole stacks and piles invite physical interaction with the audience. The audience, the crowd or the whole, consists of individuals as well. The work then in this sense can serve as a metaphor for the relation between the individual and the crowd. Gonzalez-Torres states:

> Perhaps between public and private, between personal and social, between fear of loss and the joy of loving, of growing, changing, of always becoming more, of losing oneself slowly and then being replenished all over again from scratch. I

[1] Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 58.

> need the viewer, I need the public interaction. Without the public these works are nothing. I need the public to complete the work. I ask the public to help me, to take responsibility, to become part of my work, to join in.[2]

Secondly, the opportunity for an individual human to consume an individual piece of candy from a candy pile is suggestive of an erotic, conceptual undertone for the artist. In the piles that are titled "portraiture" the candy accumulation "represents" both the physical body and the spirit of its subject, for example by printing an adjective on the wrapper. Parts of one "body" entering the willing mouths of other bodies metaphorically suggest a breakdown of physical limitations imposed by human beings. The artist describes a level of sensual intimacy when he states:

> I'm giving you this sugary thing; you put it in your mouth and you suck on someone else's body. And in this way, my work becomes part of so many other people's bodies. It's very hot. For just a few seconds, I have put something sweet in someone's mouth and that is very sexy.[3]

Whether the intimacy is created between the crowd and the piles as giving and receiving of a gift, or between the individual and the single piece of candy as sensual and emotional fulfillment, both the individual and whole have active and very necessary roles. One is not favored over the other and both are dependent upon each other.

Cell(f) is similar to the work of Gonzalez-Torres both conceptually and formally. Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* is an example of a candy portrait in which the candy accumulation "represents" both the physical body and the spirit of

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[2] Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 57.

[3] Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 150.

its subject. In this specific candy pile, the chosen candy is Fruit Flashers with a total weight of 175 pounds, describing Ross through his weight and flavor preference. Though not specifically describing a particular individual (the title refers to my interrogation of this concept) *Cell(f)* can be viewed as a portrait. Information has been provided to capture "depictions" of life exhibited with cultural objects involved within it. Formally and similarly, *Cell(f)* is meant to be experienced as both a whole constellation as well as individually.

Cell(f) is not, however, an interactive constellation in which viewers physically help themselves to the work. The personal creation of each individual disc has created an intimate relationship for me with each one, resulting in my desire to not freely give them to others. The discs are not meant to be touched or taken off the wall; the role of the viewer is solely to observe it at both a far and intimate distance.

COLLECTION

Collectors have a hunger to seek, to find, and oftentimes to classify, arrange and display. A high level of curiosity drives this hunger. The resulting collection has qualities that lay somewhere between a rational scientific system and human idiosyncrasy. It can be considered a rational scientific system because the collector acquires his or her collection based on some set of standards that are objectively defined, perhaps by functionality, purpose in society, etc. A collection could just as well be considered idiosyncratic because it has been collected with more of a subjective mindset: emotional and or economic value, personal aesthetics, etc.

The materials collected in *Cell(f)* has been used, consumed, and found. They are remnants of whole objects. They are what might be considered garbage or might be unacknowledged because of their size or lack of function. The discs contain, but are not limited to, the following material: lint, string, fabric, metal, electronics, hair, paper, tape, wrappers, etc. These fragments from our physical environment could be read as elements from consumerist and technological culture, but this is not my focus. I have chosen the specific materials because of the ordinary interaction we associate with each material. The simplicity of the materials presented as art, then poses complex questions pertaining to value and personal association while perhaps conjuring experiences with the natural world.

The notion of collection provides an expanded context for my artwork. In the next chapter I will discuss curiosity's relationship to empirical knowledge, provide a brief historical reference for its relevance, and finally connect curiosity to *Cell(f).*

Curiosity

Curiosity initiates the potential inquiry of empirical knowledge. I use the term curious to define a human attribute that is inquisitive; it suggests an exciting or arousing speculation, interest, or attention. Curiosity, then references the condition of being curious. In *Our Knowledge of the Internal World*, Robert Stalnaker describes the human desire for knowledge as one that:

> …begins with the contents of his mind – with what he finds by introspecting and reflecting. This is what is unproblematic; these are the things and the facts that we know directly. The…problem then is, how do we move beyond these to form a conception of an external world, and how are we able to know that the world beyond us answers to the conceptions that we form. …human beings – ourselves – who are things that (it seems) can know about the world, can experience it, have a point of view on it.[4]

The desire to have concrete truth and knowledge is an innate human trait. For example, a mysterious assemblage consisting of fossils and lumps of iron pyrite was found in a cave in France once inhabited by Neanderthals. It is estimated that it was made more than 35,000 years ago and "appears far removed from serving any practical utilitarian

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[4] Stalnaker, *Our Knowledge of the Internal World,* 2-3.

purpose."[5] There must have been something intriguing and contemplative regarding the materials that stirred the impulse to gather them. Perhaps the materials posed tantalizing, seemingly unanswerable questions that only the voiceless materials could disclose.

Probably the most studied exploration of curiosity, of curiosities, and of curious people occurred during the early modern period at the start of the seventeenth century. For example, individuals who considered themselves conservative curious people exhibited a desire to know the forbidden. For the more modern and progressive members of society, curiosity promised greater knowledge and improvement. In either case, both recognized that as humanity's insatiable appetite, "curiosity is always transgressive, always a sign of the rejection of the known as inadequate, incorrect, even uninteresting."[6]

During the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries opportunities and commodities stimulated a modern pleasure in novelty, consumption, and inquiry into topics such as nature, the supernatural, and sexuality. At this time objects that exemplified rarity, strangeness, or oddity were considered items for pleasure and personal prestige, free from the trappings of science and scientific process. Curiosity fueled a search for personal advancement. Such an example of pleasure and personal prestige exists in the creation of "cabinets of curiosity" by connoisseurs. Initially these collectors were wealthy and eccentric individuals, but eventually the activity became popular among the bourgeoisie, scholars, and scientists.[7]

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[5] Purcell, *Finders, Keepers: Treasures and Oddities of Natural History*, 139.

[6] Benedict, *Curiosity,* 4.

[7] Benedict, *Curiosity,* 162.

"Cabinets of curiosity" were collections of marvels and unusual objects – a bric-a-brac of rare items generally obtained through travel or trade. Typically objects were placed in some type of arrangement determined by the collector. He/she was thus able to create an unexpected aesthetic order to an audience, often times one that involved dislocation and irrationality.[8] Collectors vied for the biggest, the most beautiful, and the weirdest, for some in order to stun rather than to rationally systematize. Rosamond Purcell, author of *Finders, Keepers: Treasures and Oddities of Natural History* describes what a collection might look like:

> Objects of all sorts, size, and provenances could be mixed together – stuffed animals with ethnographic curios, bones with gold coins. The exotic and the old; a delight for the eyes and a challenge to the mind.[9]

Cell(f) is not only inspired by my curiosity, but it incorporates mysterious attributes as well. Conceptually the work is grounded in the questioning of "being" from both a scientific and experiential perspective. Curiosity can be considered the driving force of this interrogation but curiosity can also be experienced by the viewer while inspecting the unusual objects and materials preserved within each circular disc. The materials I am working with have been collected for their connection to physical and emotional human experience. Just as items in "cabinets of curiosity" are secular relics of past meanings, lost time, and irrecoverable importance, so is that which is contained in each individual disc of *Cell(f).*

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[8] Purcell, *Finders, Keepers: Treasures and Oddities of Natural History*, 16.

[9] Purcell, *Finders, Keepers: Treasures and Oddities of Natural History*, 17.

Mark Dion

Mark Dion is a contemporary artist whose work is modeled on the curiosity and collection of eccentric objects displayed as "cabinets of curiosity." Eccentric collections of oil cans, wooden mallets, stuffed birds, cabinet cards, photographs of boats and animals in zoos are examples of objects the artist uses to examine the ways in which dominant ideologies and public institutions shape our understanding of history, knowledge, and the natural world. *The Curiosity Shop* (Plate 4) is an example of one of his installations. Appropriating archaeological and other scientific methods of collecting, ordering, and exhibiting objects, Dion creates works that question the distinctions between rational scientific methods and irrational influences.[10]

Like Dion, I too question the objectivity of scientific methods and the objectivity of subjective influences. In Dion's installation *Toys 'R' U.S. (When Dinosaurs Ruled the Earth)* (Plate 5), a child's bedroom contains scientific models of dinosaurs and educational material suggesting a scientific inquiry, but simultaneously the room is decorated in pop-culture emblems of dinosaurs in various manifestations: cartoon-like wall hangings, wall paper with matching bedspread, a large blow-up doll, and a television displaying a scene with a dinosaur. It is apparent that Dion is commenting on both scientific inquiry and an obsession with consumerism. Like Dion, I am attempting to utilize a scientific method as a way to question it and its place in today's society by

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[10] *Art in the Twenty-First Century (4),* 82.

creating discs that look like microscopic slides that suggest fascinating details of worlds within worlds.

Cell(f) and Science

The discs in my work are not perfect. They exhibit feeble characteristics of struggle and frustration; I am not a scientist. Though the scale of the individual elements are small, inviting an intimate viewing distance (somewhat like the scale of microscope slides) the material in each disc is large enough to see with the naked eye and is not dependent on a scientific instrument. The discs also resemble the formal qualities of microscope slides or petri dishes with the inclusion of a transparent, gel-like reserve preserving the specimen and allowing for optimal viewing conditions. For educational purposes, slides are often prepared with a minute sample of a specimen that only a high powered microscope would enable the human eye to examine minuscule details. With the size of the contained materials in my discs, using such a microscope would not benefit the examination but would rather reverse the effect and create a blurred vision. *Cell(f)* references the view already through the oculars of a microscope, not the slide itself.

Gaston Bachelard, author of *The Poetics of Space* discusses an interesting phenomenon of the scientific method:

> A scientific worker has a discipline of objectivity that precludes all daydreams of the imagination. He has already seen what he observes in the microscope and, paradoxically, one might say that he never sees anything for the first time. In any case, in the domain of scientific observation that is absolutely objective, the "first time" doesn't count. Observation, then, belongs in the domain of "several times." In scientific work, we have first to digest our surprise psychologically. What scholars observe is well defined in a body of thoughts and experiments… When we have forgotten all our habits of scientific objectivity, we look for the *images of the first time.* If we were to consult psychological documents in the history of science…we should find that the first microscopic observations were legends about small objects, and when the object was endowed with life, legends of life.[11]

Bachelard, in continuing to discuss how the nature of the world changes in appearance under the microscope, states that viewing a nucleus calls forth an entire world of unwanted contortions. In this state then, the imagination sends waves of unreality over what was formerly the real world.[12]

Using a scientific method of inquiry, or suggesting it with *Cell(f),* may seem antithetical to the solution of the very broad and subjective question I propose. Because of this contradiction I question what the role of science *is* in understanding the human "being"? Today's society depends heavily on what has been proven as fact, usually by scientific methods, to substantiate particular knowledge on a topic. If a scientific method only was used in my inquiry, it might be possible to answer factually. This is not possible however, because I am a unique "being" and science fails to consider my subjective influences and experiences.

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[11] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places,* 156.

[12] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places,* 157.

SPACE

Cell(f) at first glance from afar is seen as a field, but when looked at closely, the individual discs can be observed from various angles – top, bottom, left and right side, etc. It is also first seen from the wall displaying *Cell(f):* 1. Due to the nature of the wall unit, I explore three different uses of space with *Cell(f),* referred to as: *Cell(f):* 1 (Plate 6), *Cell(f):* 2 (Plate 7), and *Cell(f):* 3 (Plate 8). In this chapter I will describe and discuss the relevance of space as it relates to the artwork.

Overlapping is the primary spatial device used to create depth in this work. Some discs (or "cells") are installed on top of each other, to maintain a particular distance between themselves. Each disc's proximity to the wall varies, with some hanging three inches away from the wall while others are hanging one-sixteenth of an inch from the wall. These qualities allude to the animation of living cellular structures, providing some "validity" within the scientific field, but at the same time negating it with inertness.

The object(s) in *Cell(f)* and the background are well defined. The positive shapes are the physical discs themselves, constituting the positive space. The negative shapes are those that are left surrounding the discs as they hang on the wall. It is important to note that both elements have been thoughtfully designed and planned; the negative space is not the residue or an afterthought of the positive space.

The negative space is equally as fluid and consistent as that of the discs. The light that radiates on and through the translucent discs create shadows, an extension of the positive space. The presence of the shadows correlates to the ephemeral and transient qualities of living human cells. Creating various distances between individual discs and clusters of discs suggests the possibility of reproduction, proliferation, and accumulation. Simultaneously, it offers space for contemplation, rest, and silence. It can be read as activating the discs themselves, or it can function quietly to supplement and assist with the interrogation of the discs. Bachelard explains the phenomenological experience associated with both positive (sounds) and negative (silence) space:

> There is nothing like silence to suggest a sense of unlimited space. Sounds lend color to space, and confer a sort of sound body upon it. But absence of sound leaves it quite pure and, in the silence, we are seized with the sensation of something vast and deep and boundless.[13]

Bachelard suggests that the setting is more than the immediate objectivity of the work and it is often the armature around which the work revolves, offering an enhanced intimacy with the entirety of the work. This directly relates to the space utilized in *Cell(f):* 1, *Cell(f):* 2, and *Cell(f):* 3.

Upon entrance into the exhibition space, *Cell(f):* 1 is visible first. Clusters of discs are apparent, with greater concentration and proximity from the wall in the middle of the clusters. As the clusters spread in space, there are individual discs and small clusters forming outside of the larger clusters suggesting more activity and interaction among the collection.

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[13] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places,* 43.

Cell(f): 2 is directly behind *Cell(f):* 1 and is more minimal in terms of the amount of space consumed with the discs. There are a few discs inhabiting the space individually or in pairs, in addition to three clusters whose perimeters are more defined than those in *Cell(f):* 1 and are less concentrated. The edges of the walls become more apparent and shapes begin to emerge in the space where discs are not placed.

In contrast to both *Cell(f):* 1 and 2, *Cell(f):* 3 allows viewers to observe more discs within a smaller surface area. Containing more discs than either *Cell(f):* 1 or 2, *Cell(f):* 3 is suggestive of a view that is zoomed in. It is reminiscent of crystallographic balance that exhibits equal emphasis and weight, with the exception that *Cell(f):* 3 contains more concentration near the bottom of the wall, inclusion of clusters, and varied distances among the discs.

CONCLUSION

While it is possible for science to define the physicality of human beings by studying biological processes, it is impossible to define human experience completely, primarily because that experience includes subjectivity. The inquiry that drives the need for scientific data and empirical knowledge also drives my interest in understanding a holistic perspective of "being." *Cell(f)* is not defining "being" but rather exploring further interrogation of this inquiry. This is facilitated with presentation of tangible material that we experience, but in a scientific fashion suggesting reality and truth without traditional scientific specimens. It is my hope that viewers may be reminded of experiences associated with the material, while simultaneously searching for a deeper inquiry of the material as a scientist would with specimens.

As a result of this work, I have begun to consider these individual discs as a metaphor for pursuing more questions within an inquiry process. A small disc containing lint, located in the center of a dense cluster shares similar traits with another small disc located elsewhere or similarly with another medium or large disc containing lint. In this sense, questions arise pertaining to relation and classification. The same inquiry process can be applied to larger dynamics of society: family, politics, culture, etc. Elements of one category can link association to another category and so on, continuing an engagement with inquiry as one question leads to another. As I continue to work with collection and multiples, I wish to engage in similar inquiry processes that allude to correlations within various societal categories.

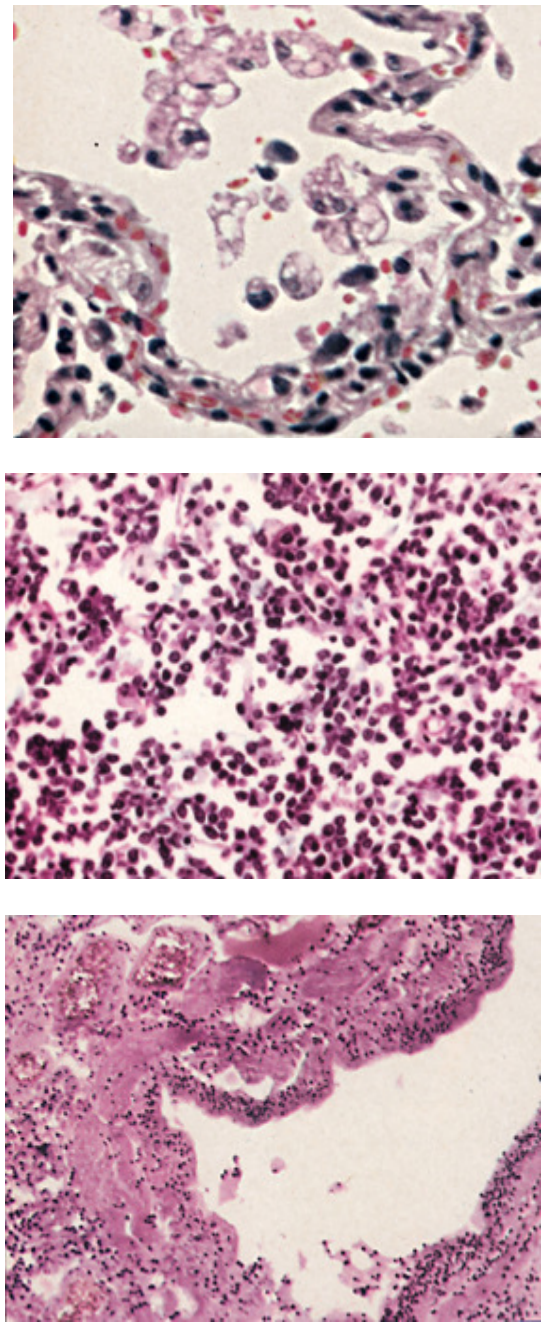

Plate 1. Three images of cellular pathology: Lipoid Pneumonia (T), Reticulum Cell Sarcoma (M), Steam Burn (B).
(Source: Color Atlas of Pathology, J.B. Lippinott Company, 1944.)

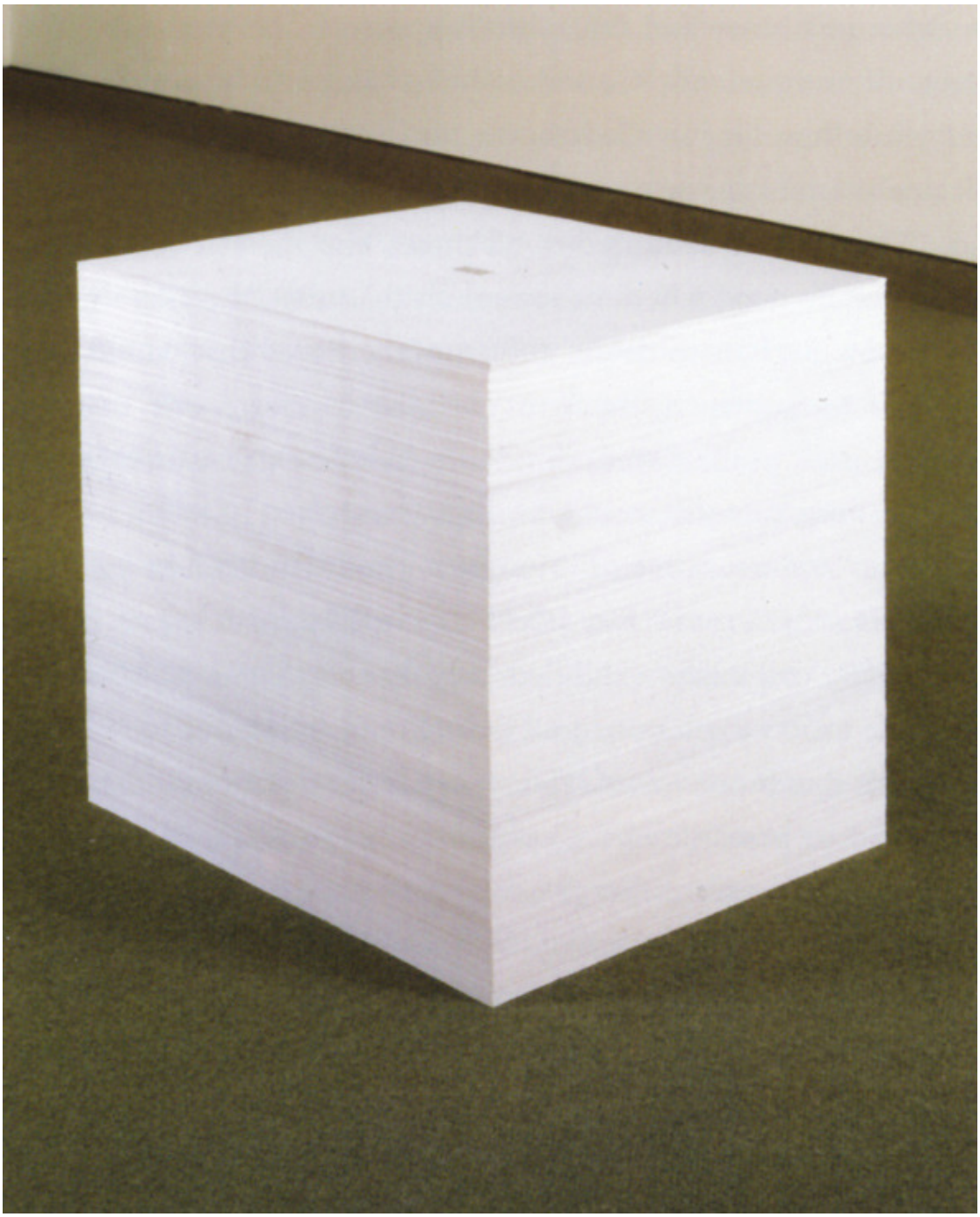

Plate 2. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled*, 1990.
(Source: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Nancy Spector, Guggenheim Museum, 1995.)

Plate 3. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.),* 1991.
(Source: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Nancy Spector, Guggenheim Museum, 1995.)

Plate 4. Mark Dion, *The Curiosity Shop*, 2005.
(Source: Art in the Twenty-First Century 4, Abrams, 2007.)

Plate 5. Mark Dion, *Toys 'R' U.S. (When Dinosaurs Ruled the Earth)*, 1994.
(Source: Art in the Twenty-First Century 4, Abrams, 2007.)

Plate 6. ***Cell(f):*** **1, Exhibition view from front left side.**
Photograph by Nicole Herden

Plate 7. ***Cell(f)*****: 2, Exhibition view from back left side.**
Photograph by Nicole Herden

Plate 8. ***Cell(f)*****: 3, Exhibition view from far back.**
Photograph by Nicole Herden

Plate 9. Close up of a *Cell(f)*: 2 cluster.
Photograph by Nicole Herden

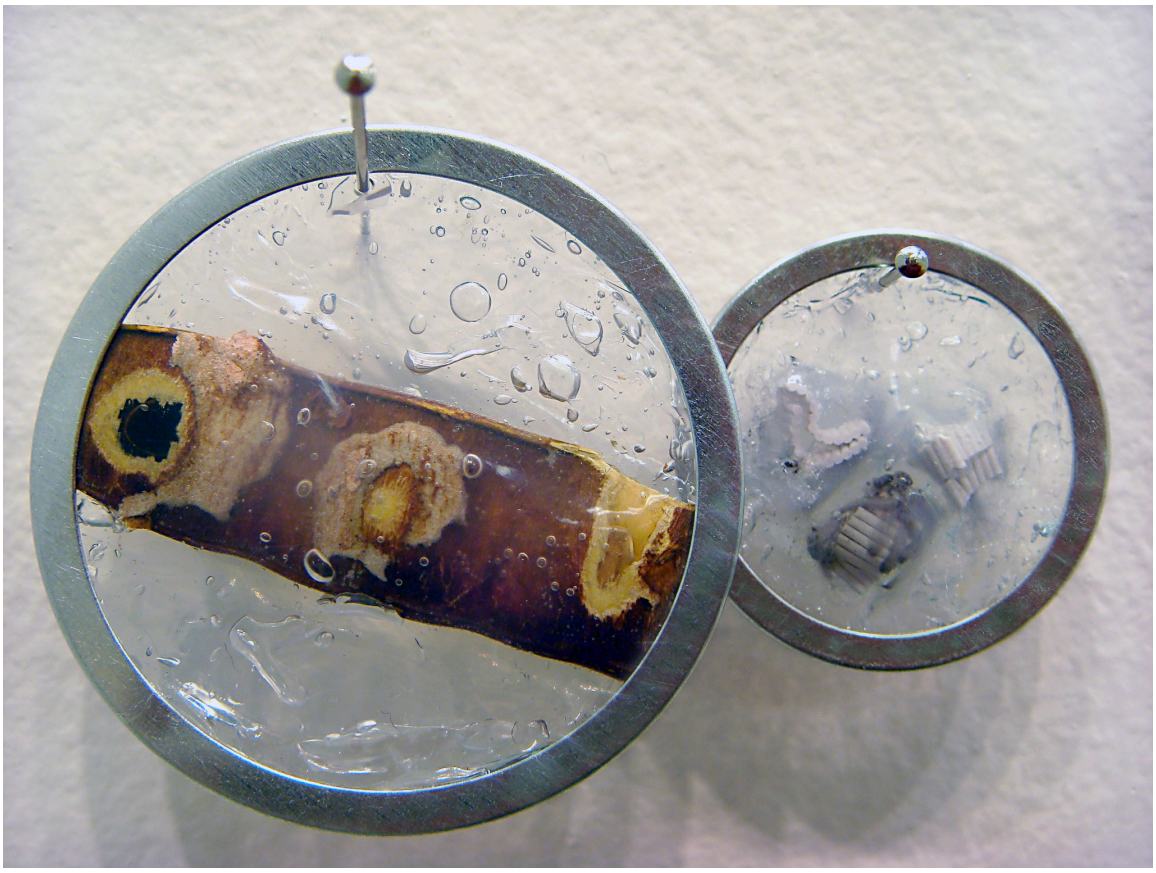

Plate 10. Close up of *Cell(f)*.
Photograph by Nicole Herden

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