

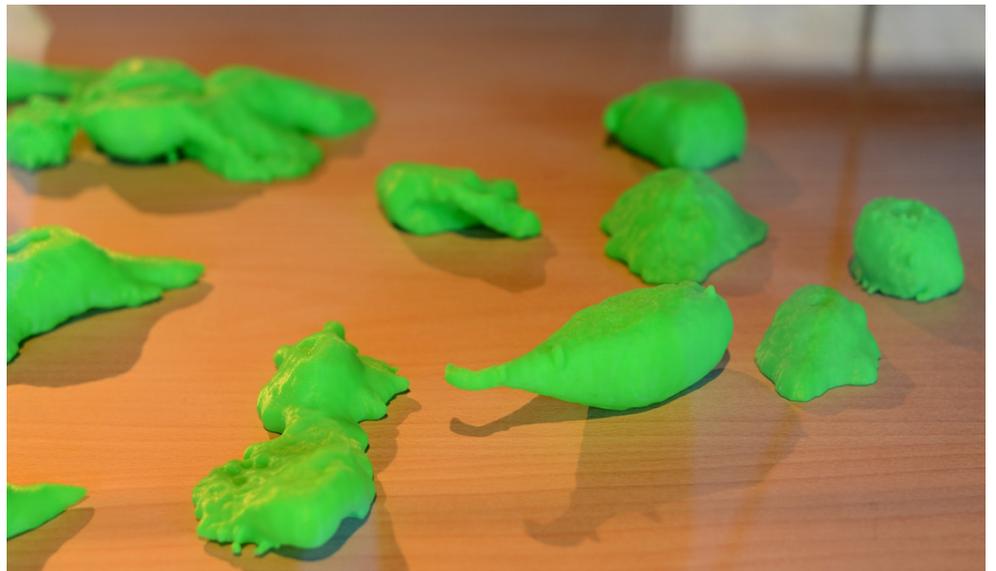


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We Began as Part of the Body

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Abstract:

We Began as Part of the Body, is an installation, made up of a series of creative research artworks, including sound piece, 3D printed skins and 360 photographic images, that immerse the viewer in the scientific and emotive issues raised by the use of human tissue for genetic research. The artworks were created during an ASCUS micro-residency in Professor Sara Brown's skin genetics lab in 2017. The project makes complex genetic research, that can be difficult to grasp and understand, more accessible. It attempts to challenge audiences to think critically about science, the value and implications of genetic research, and the impact this has on our understanding of what it means to be human.

THE PROJECT

We Began as Part of the Body, is an installation developed as part of an ASCUS micro-residency in Professor Sara Brown's skin genetics lab in 2017. The work evolved through observing the day to day activities of the lab, from carefully nurturing skin cultures, to the precise, complex and delicate processes use to analyse these samples.

Fig. 1. *We Began as Part of the Body*, 2017.
Photography by Erika Stevenson.



The micro-residency resulted in a series of artworks: *We Began as Part of the Body* (a 6 minute spoken word sound piece), *Exhume* (a series of 3D printed skin cells) and the *Atopic* images (360 degrees photography). These elements were intended as a research library of materials, the initial stage towards creating an immersive virtual reality experience. The spoken word sound piece, written in response to a series of interviews with staff from the Brown Lab, leads the audience through the artificial skin cell culture's journey during their short, precious, three weeks long 'in-vitro' life, from operating theatre to research lab, and finally to disposal. Artificial skin cells were cultivated and scanned using confocal microscopy to create the series of 3D models, which were 3D printed 2.000 times larger-than-life. Blown up into objects that fit in the hand, the cells were given a tangible, physical manifestation, a made-ness. The culture of skin cells is a group, made up of individual cells, different to one another, and going through a process of differentiation, changing. They are active, responsive and precious in their short 3 weeks lifespan, here permanently fixed

within their captive printed form. The 360 degrees photography presents the viewer with an immersive glimpse of the different environments of the lab; a window into a world not normally accessible to the public. Here we are presented with a somewhat ghostly version of the lab environment, without researchers or technicians, inhabited only by specimens; the organotypic, artificial skin.

What is so fascinating about these cells, is that they are real but synthetic, taken from an actual person, but then processed and maintained outside of the body. They are other. Almost indescribably similar and different from the cells that exist within our actual body. Are they better, worse or just different? And what does that difference mean? Does it affect how we understand our own bodies, not just in medical and scientific terms but in terms of what it means to be human?

Fig. 2. We began as part of the body, 2017.
Photography by Erika Stevenson.



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