

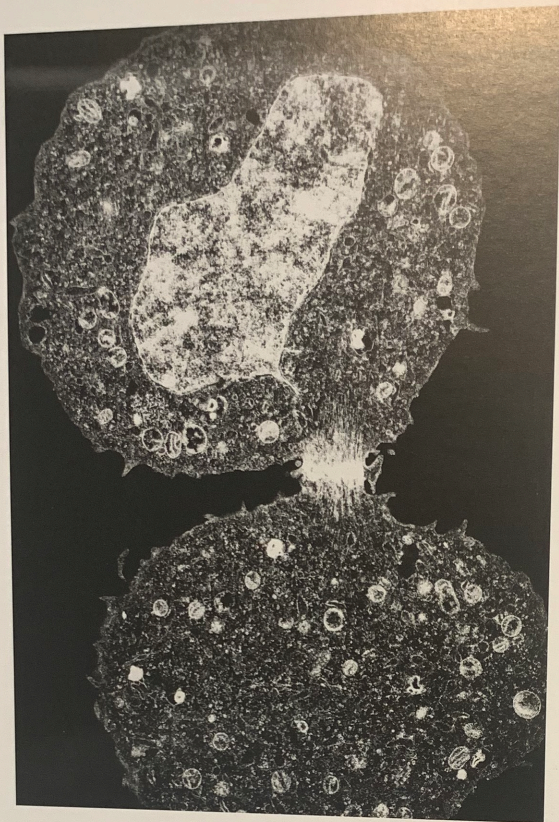


THE MOLECULAR GAZE

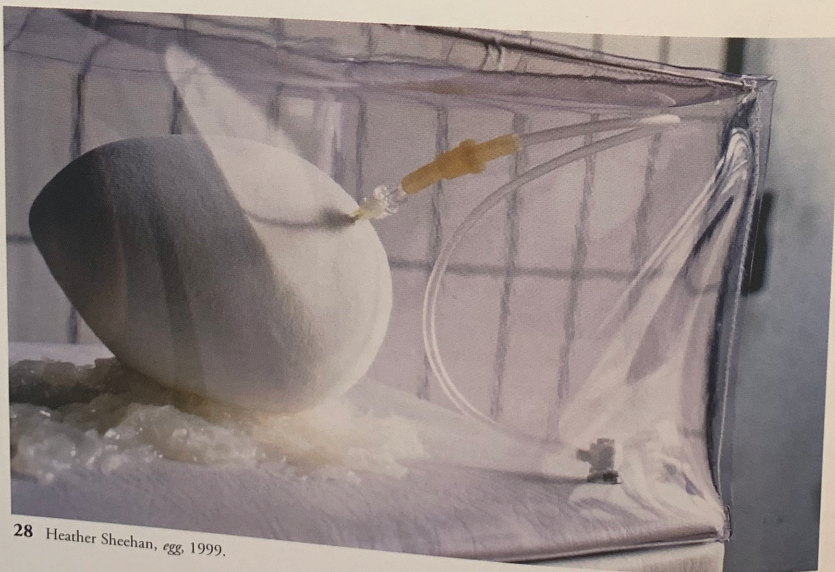
ART IN THE GENETIC AGE



SUZANNE ANKER • DOROTHY NELKIN



27 Catherine Wagner, *Dividing Cell*, 1999.



28 Heather Sheehan, *egg*, 1999.

artist converts a boat into a sexualized vaginal image that is floating over a sea of sperm-like fish. A magical star descends from the sky like a comet. This cosmological event seems to mysteriously reflect the creation of a new union.

The actual process of cell division is the subject of photographer Catherine Wagner's *Dividing Cell* (1999) (Fig. 27). Looking inside the cell, she depicts a greatly enlarged asymmetrical organic mass as it moves through the process of becoming two. In producing this photo, this artist has worked with scientists at the Weizmann Institute in Israel, and her work, relying on stark beauty for its artistic impact, is closely linked to scientific photography.

In videos and sculpture, Heather Sheehan addresses the ways in which the body and its parts can be artificially grown and nurtured through laboratory procedures. *egg* (1999) (Fig. 28) portrays an oversized egg that is nourished through a clear plastic tube attached by an external plug into its delicate surface. While incubating, the egg sits on a bed of Vaseline that looks like jelled albumen. One is led to wonder whether the egg in this vinyl environment has been artificially manipulated and, thus, to question the ethics of supporting life in the laboratory that could not exist otherwise or elsewhere.

Similar questions shape Helen Chadwick's series entitled "Unnatural Selection." In *Nebula* (1996) (Fig. 29), a series of photographs of human embryos displayed like jewels, she points to the ambiguous status of the frozen embryo. Is it a natural or artificial object? In her research at the Assisted Conception Unit at Kings College Hospital in London, Chadwick photographed dead human embryos and found their cellular patterns and partially formed features beautiful and poignant. She also discovered that doctors select embryos for implantation on the basis of aesthetic considerations and their sense of the "best" morphology as an aspect of viability.⁵¹

ART and Authenticity

Artists' images of ART and its association with eugenics and controlled reproduction convey concerns about the perpetuation of family, its history and blood lineage. The expression of "blood lines" is important in these images, sometimes denoted abstractly as in the red linear elements that appear in the work of Kahlo, Rule, and Zhang; and other times more literally in the visual representations of gametes as the agents of reproduction. Close to the surface in these depictions is the specter of a new eugenics.⁵²

The issue of authenticity pervading the art of ART has been a recurrent theme, especially in response to techniques of mechanical reproduction. Through such means, Andy Warhol, in a 1963 replication of images by