

Justin Fitzpatrick

Ballotta

17th November 2023 – 20th January 2024

A 'Ballotta' is a small wooden ball or bead traditionally used to represent an individual in a vote. A ballot box filled with beads of one colour or another thus represents the aggregate decision of a group of people, which is then enacted. In the human body, a similar voting process is at work. A multicellular organism, like our own, is always in communication with itself. Each individual cell expresses its level of health to the body, and the aggregate of this is felt as a sense of ease or dis-ease¹. One could go a step further, as some do, to suggest that consciousness itself could be expressed as the aggregate sentience of the individual cells of an organism. For this exhibition, I am interested in the ways that a body talks to itself, focusing on two systems that negotiate between these different cells and allow them to consort together to be an individual: hormones and nerves.

The first room of the exhibition focuses on hormones. Here, I was inspired by the story of Pergonal, a fertility treatment consisting of the hormones FSH and LH. Originally, these hormones were extracted from the urine of menopausal nuns throughout retirement convents across Italy², until the 1990s when the hormone was synthesised. The urine of these nuns was collected, absorbed into Kaolin clay, dried, and refined to make a treatment. For this room, I am making a proposition for a public toilet based on this idea. Free public toilets are disappearing in most major cities due to a lack of political will to provide for this fundamental human activity. Responding to this, I looked to the social-media model of business strategy, where the consumer becomes the product. In this scheme your urine could pay for your bathroom visit and could be used to create hormone-based treatments or for general analysis.

I imagined this toilet/collection facility to be lavishly decorated, so I made wall-based collection consoles inspired by the Italian designer Carlo Bugatti, with removable ceramic bedpans to collect urine, and a sequence of paintings to decorate the walls that allegorise the role of hormones and signalling molecules in the body. Long protein chains, depicted here as pearls, flow through various figures: in and out of open mouths and orifices, being introduced into cells like keys into locks, inducing cascades of hormone production, being interpreted by the cells themselves, causing cell growth, regulating cell death. A visitor depositing their urine would be able to see on the walls around them how hormones operate in their body, like the didactic imagery of a medieval church.

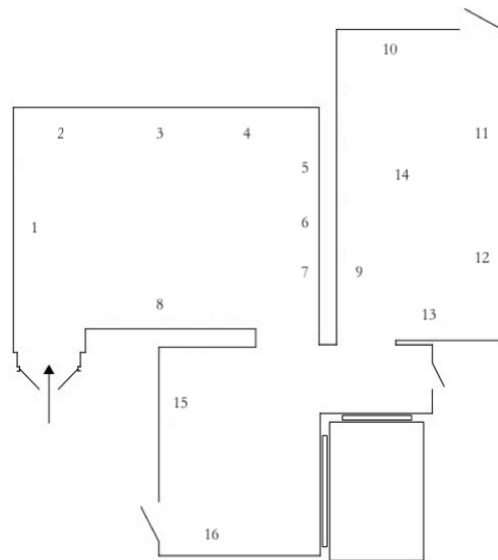
The second room of the exhibition focuses on the nervous system. In this room, the nerve cell is represented as a cord, a grid, a cat's cradle, or a lacework that surrounds and negotiates communication between cells. The nervous system is threaded through the body itself, woven into its muscles and organs. It makes a map of the interior, a drawing of the body in the body (interoception). It also takes information from the outside world through the sense organs and makes it into a mental map of the body's orientation in the world (proprioception). These two maps are overlaid on top of each other, temporally positioned in the present but also interpenetrated with the past and the future through the functions of memory and imagination, all together creating the consistency of experience, of being a being in the world.

In looking at the subject of multicellularity, I have been drawn to instances of the aggregate in the tradition of craft, specifically in beadwork - a practice that is shared in almost every human culture. The bead, threaded onto string is used to build up form and pattern and also to externalise and make tangible mental processes (the abacus, the rosary). The building up of a unified structure from multiple individual units relates beadwork to biology, but also to community. The trucks full of nun urine travelling up and down the highways of Italy to help other people conceive a child similarly externalises and makes tangible the journey of hormone molecules traveling through the bloodstream of the body, and the web of connections that draw countless individuals together into a network.

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¹ See Antonio Damasio's 'The strange order of things' for more on this subject.

² Pope Pius XII was persuaded by his nephew Giulio Pacelli, a Serono executive, to give permission to collect the urine from around Catholic retirement homes throughout Italy. It took 10 nuns 10 days to produce enough urine for one treatment of the drug. Using the urine of nuns was also specifically beneficial, given their vow of chastity, as the urine of a pregnant woman would contaminate the batch.



Room 1

1. *Pearl Liaison 4: Interpellation*, 2023

Oil on linen
182 x 142 cm

2. *Urine Console 1*, 2023

Oak wood, lead free pewter, resin, ceramic, cotton, key rings, birch wood
195 x 60 x 14 cm

3. *Pearl Liaison 5: Intercession*, 2023

Oil on linen
182 x 72 cm

4. *Urine Console 2*, 2023

Oak wood, lead free pewter, resin, ceramic, cotton, key rings, birch wood
195 x 60 x 14 cm

5. *Pearl Liaison 1: Instruction*, 2023

Oil on linen
182 x 142 cm

6. *Pearl Liaison 2: Induction*, 2023

Oil on linen
182 x 142 cm

7. *Pearl Liaison 3: Interpretation*, 2023

Oil on linen
182 x 142 cm

8. *Pergonal*, 2023

Wood, keyring, key
15 x 11 x 15 cm

Room 2

9. *Deee-Lite Dendrite*, 2023

Oil on linen
119 x 142.5 cm

10. *Interoception: Stubbs Horse*, 2023

Oil on linen
182 x 98 cm

11. *Muscle fibres and nerve fibres* 2023

Oil on linen
182 x 142 cm

12. *Neuron*, 2023

Wood, pewter, steel
50 x 17 x 9 cm

13. *Proprioception: Split Nativity*, 2023

Oil on linen
182 x 98 cm

14. *Receiving a painful message from my foot*, 2023

Beech wood, ceramic, cotton, resin, reversed clock mechanism
120 x 460 x 58 cm

Room 3

15. *Drainpipe Analyst*, 2023

Oil on linen
148 x 112 cm

16. *Head Press*, 2023

Birch wood, lead free pewter, epoxy resin, polyurethane, lace
80 x 39 x 56 cm