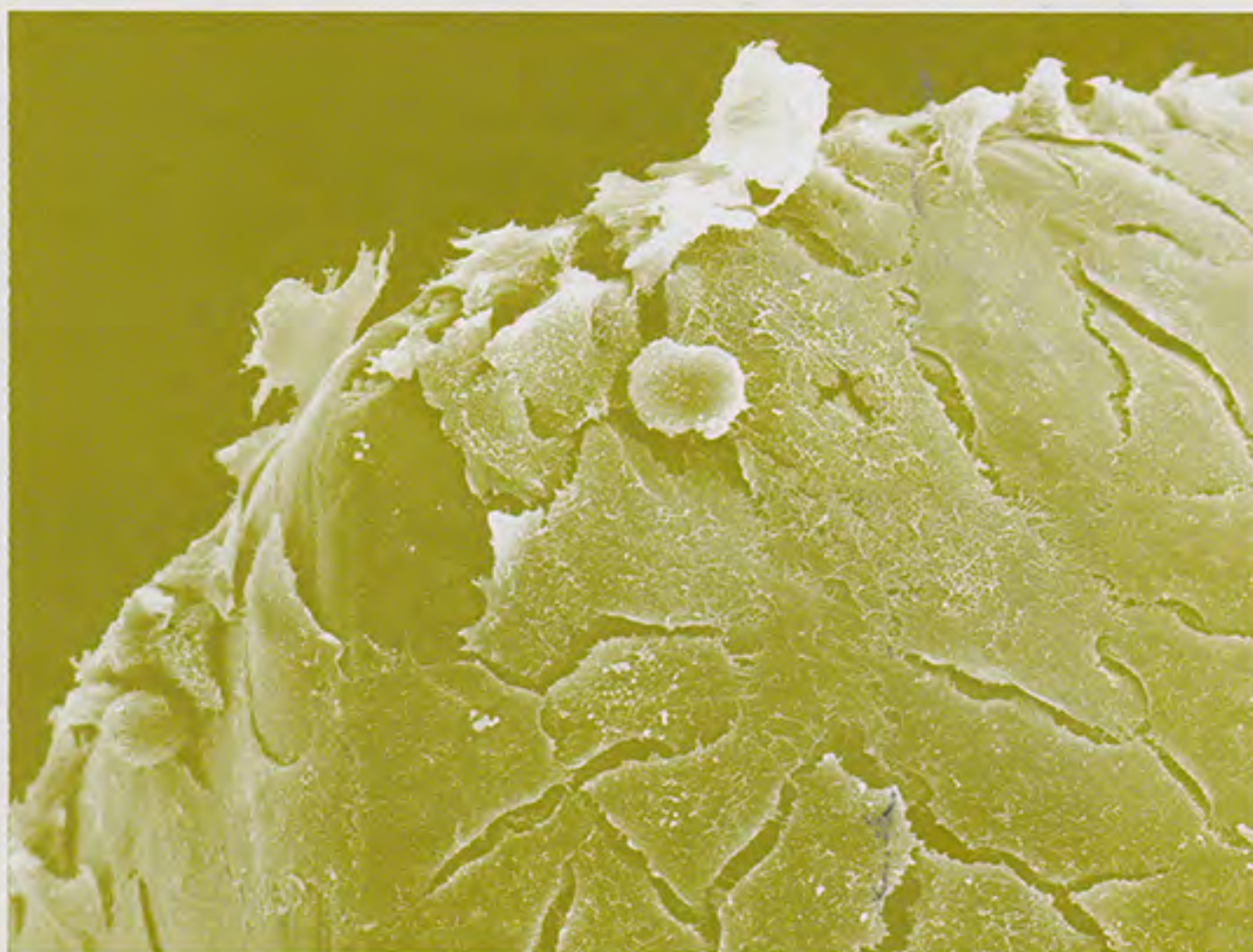


Portrait of a Woman



Portrait of a Woman I, 2015

Notes Between Art and Science on Henrietta Lacks



Forever, image made with Dr. C. Backendorf & G. Lamers, 2013

A couple years ago, while I was perusing online wares on eBay, I stumbled across a strange entry: human skin, fingertip. I clicked the link to 'buy it now'. A week later, I received a rumpled white envelope posted from the United Kingdom. The envelope was unmarked with no return address, should I have buyer's regret. Buried in bubble wrap, I found an unremarkable glass microscope slide with a pink stained fingertip.

Holding the fingertip between my thumb and index finger, I wondered who it belonged to, whether it was a consensual or nonconsensual donation to scientific research, and what the path was that led to its online and global commodification. I considered the creative research I started in 2012. The work is based on the narrative of an African-American woman named Henrietta Lacks who died of cervical cancer in 1951. Scientists

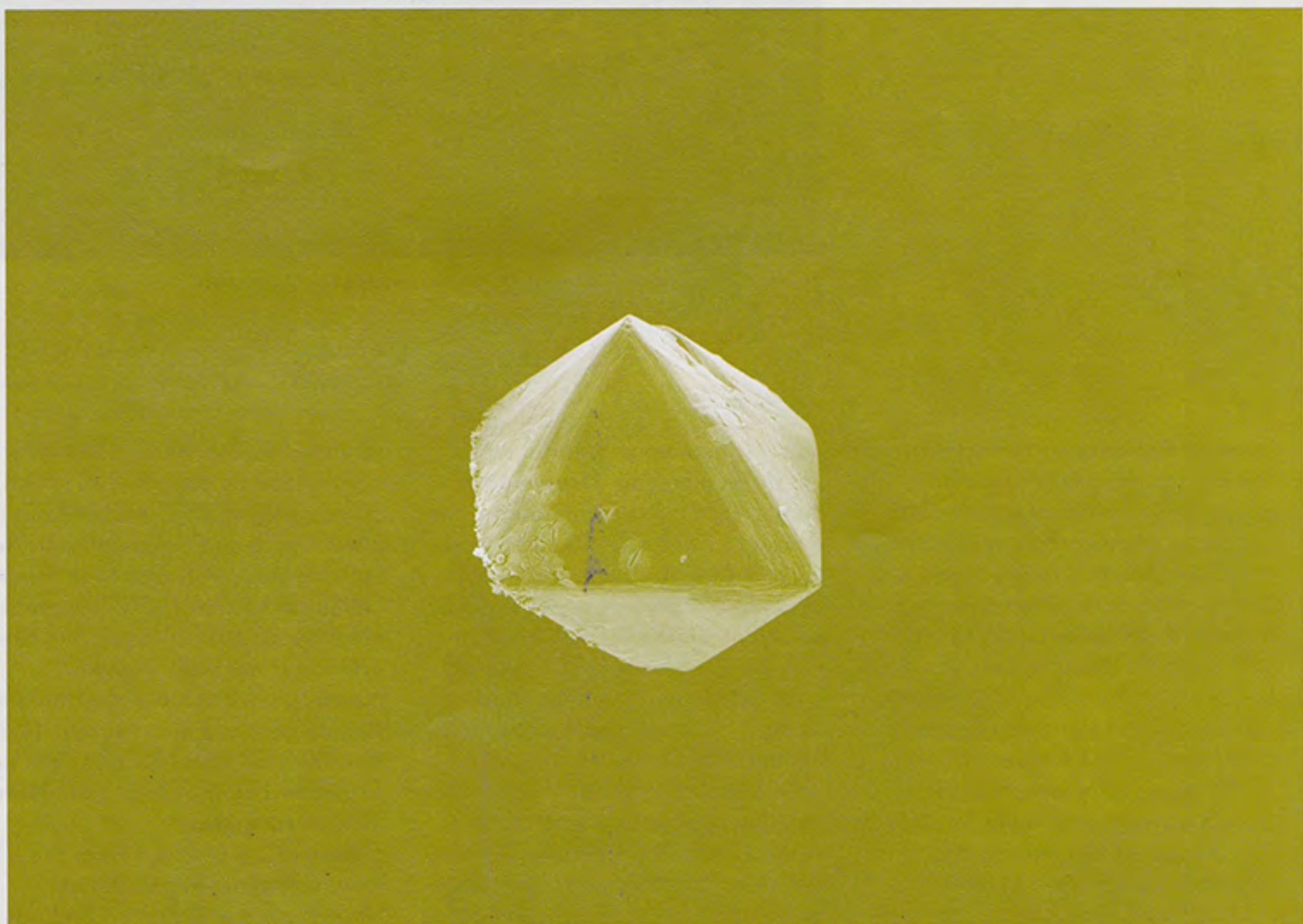
at Johns Hopkins University took her cells without her or her family's consent; medical consent was not yet an established protocol.

While Henrietta Lacks's family had no medical care, her immortal HeLa cells would become the first commercially produced cell line, paving the way for biotech enterprises. And perhaps more remarkably, her cells would become the first human material in space. Meanwhile, researchers and scientists used HeLa for numerous ventures: sequencing DNA, developing vaccines for tuberculosis and polio and marrying her cells with mouse cells for the first known scientific cross-hybrid. Prisoners were even injected with cancerous HeLa cells to see if they too, would develop cancer.

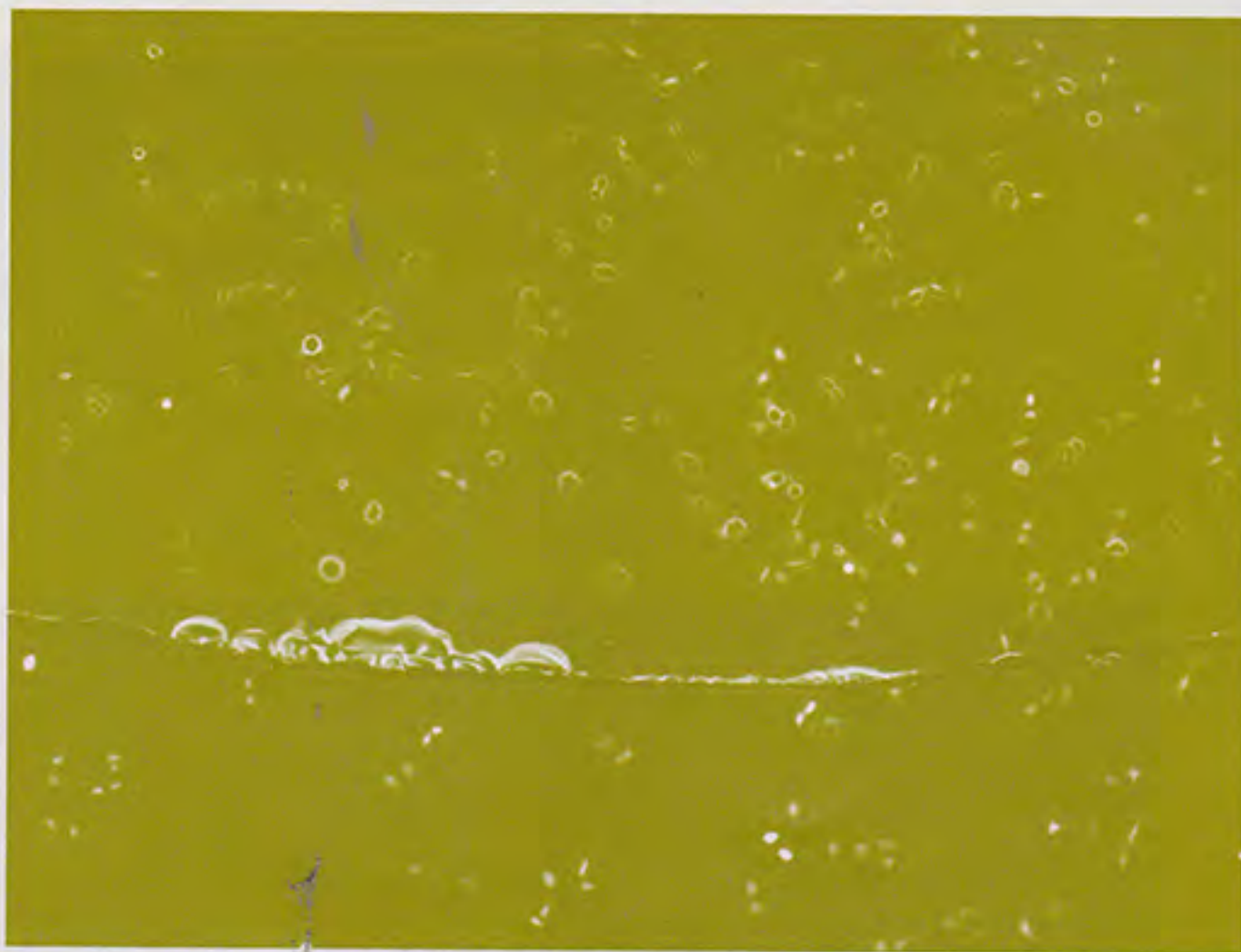
My first introduction to Henrietta Lacks's narrative was through the Whitney Independent Study Program. Reading a text about

medical ethics, I recall a short paragraph about Henrietta Lacks in passing. I don't remember the article or any other content, only the fact that I read and reread this single paragraph about Lacks's enormous involuntary contribution to modern science. Other scientific experiments crossed my mind: Saartje Baartman ("Hottentot Venus"), whose body was deemed an anomaly and was literally dissected by a scientist who later put her genitalia on display; the Tuskegee experiments in which treatment was withheld from African-American men infected with syphilis in order to be able to observe the disease's 'natural' progression; and numerous pharmaceutical drug trials at home and abroad on persons deliberately exploited and uninformed about the true nature of these experiments.

In real life, Henrietta Lacks was not being celebrated. Rather, 'Helen



I Live to Fight (No More) Forever, image made with Dr. C. Backendorf & G. Lamers, 2013



Culture Studies, image made with Dr. C. Backendorf & G. Lamers, 2013

Lane', a fictional woman invented by Dr. George Gey, who first extracted Henrietta Lacks's cells, received undue credit. It was only in 1973 that Lacks's family found out about HeLa cells, when scientists called to ask other Lacks family members for genetic samples. Later a journalist in *Rolling Stone* very publicly outed Henrietta Lacks's true identity in a feature article.

My creative research tends to fixate on historical incidents where the veneer of civilization begins to crumble. In the case of Henrietta Lacks, I was implicated in her narrative before I could comprehend its ethical dilemmas. I was injected with the polio vaccine and I have Henrietta Lacks to quietly thank.

After moving to Amsterdam in 2012, I began looking into the history of Jewish diamond polishers and traders from the Netherlands who fled or were persecuted during the Second World War. An entire specialized group of people

generating a very specific value of the diamond were made to disappear. I began considering the diamond, itself a symbol of foreverness. Despite the four Cs used by diamond graders — cut, colour, carat and clarity — the authenticity of a diamond can only be verified under a microscope. I decided I would create my own microscopic memorial to Lacks. Working with scientist Dr. Claude Backendorf and imaging specialist Gerda Lamers at the University of Leiden, we grew HeLa cells on diamonds. The forever diamond became a resting place for her immortal HeLa cell line.

While I initially experienced Henrietta Lacks's narrative as problematic and a violation of medical ethics, I also found some aspects poetic: a woman whose very skin colour denied her the right to be treated for cancer by other hospitals ended up travelling farther than any human had travelled at that time. Her cellu-

lar material was being intimately scrutinized by people with whom, in some geographies, the law wouldn't allow her to sit in a restaurant. Her cells aggressively overtook other cell lines, so that many researchers were unwittingly studying the effects of her cells, resulting in numerous retracted scientific experiments. On a microscopic level, Henrietta Lacks's immortal cell line expressed agency and articulated a claim for space.

Sankofa, a concept from the Akan in Ghana, translates as: "Reach back and get it." Embedded in this concept is the possibility of shifting one's relationship to a past event, memory or person. I wanted to reevaluate Henrietta Lacks, the woman, and humanize her image. I developed *Portrait of a Woman I* and *Portrait of a Woman II* with consideration of the woman and the female form as both subject and muse. In artist Willem de Kooning's oeuvre, one can track

GIRLS LIKE US

the trajectory of the female form through his male gaze: realistic renderings, gradually clumpier female forms, and at the end of his life we watch the female subject fade into oblivion. His works are titled *Woman* and in them the female body lingers between image, muse and, in my opinion, an increasingly distant subject as he ventures further into abstraction.

In my own version of the *Portrait of a Woman*, I consider Henrietta Lacks and the portrait. While her immortal cell line is still used in biological research today and her cells are included in over 11,000 patents in the US alone, many scientists familiar with her cells may not recognize her face. Yet her cells hold her DNA, itself a detailed rendering of a person's genetic structure. In this series, I juxtapose one generic image of Henrietta Lacks culled from an internet search, albeit digitally modified, and another image of Henrietta Lacks's immortal cells. I substitute the male gaze with a technological gaze, and I wonder if one is simply a coded extension of the other. The portrait of Henrietta's cells remains a portrait at a microscopic level. The portrait of Henrietta's face remains a portrait in the standard form. Both are ghosts from an interior life and subjectivity that can only be imagined. With *Portrait of a Woman I* and *Portrait of a Woman II*, I nominate Henrietta Lacks as the Mona Lisa of our time.



Notes from the Archive, 2015