Dion's work examines the ways in which dominant ideologies and public institutions shape our understanding of history, knowledge, and the natural world. The job of the artist, he says, is to go against the grain of dominant culture, to challenge perception and convention. Appropriating archaeological, field ecology and other scientific methods of collecting, ordering, and exhibiting objects, Dion creates works that question the distinctions between “objective” (“rational”) scientific methods and “subjective” (“irrational”) influences. The artist's spectacular and often fantastical curiosity cabinets, modeled on Wunderkammer of the 16th and 17th century, exalt atypical orderings of objects and specimens. Dion also frequently collaborates with museums of natural history, aquariums, zoos, and other institutions mandated to produce public knowledge on the topic of nature. By locating the roots of environmental politics and public policy in the construction of knowledge about nature, Mark Dion questions the objectivity and authoritative role of the scientific voice in contemporary society, tracking how pseudoscience, social agendas and ideology creep into public discourse and knowledge production.

In this interview, Giovanni Aloi and Mark Dion discuss *Herbarium Perrine*, a project dedicated to the work of a doctor, horticulturist, and diplomat, who was one of the first American naturalists to grasp the vast agricultural potential of Florida. As a pioneer in subtropical botany, Dr. Henry Perrine (1797–1840) tirelessly collected previously unknown flora, gathering masses of plants, roots, seeds, shoots, and herbarium specimens. In 1838, the United States Congress awarded Dr. Perrine a vast land grant in southern Florida to establish an experimental botanical station for the research of alien tropical plants introduced to United States soil. However, before the experimental station was operational, Perrine was murdered in a Seminole raid on Indian Key. During the attack, the house and compound were burned and Perrine's invaluable herbarium and specimens were lost. Dion's distressed portfolio of pressed marine algae specimens is in response to this tragic loss, presenting itself as the few remaining specimens salvaged from the remains of Perrine's herbarium.

Giovanni Aloi: Plants and animals have been a recurring presence in your outstanding career as an environmentally aware artist. What brought you to focus on algae for *Herbarium Perrine*?

Mark Dion: I am drawn to life forms that are uncanny and strange. I have produced works about jellyfish and corals. So, marine algae are kind of like that. While plant-like, seaweeds are not true plants with vascular systems. They have a marvelous diversity and highly varied morphology. The work I produced was part of a meditation on botanical Florida. I was interested in how this amazing semitropical wilderness became the agricultural juggernaut and development nightmare it is today. Horticulturalists like Perrine and early plant hunters and botanists like David Fairchild, with their enthusiasm for economic botany, were a big part of that story. Of course, much scientific material was destroyed when the Indian raid burned Perrine's house. My portfolio mimics a herbarium from the collection and appears to have miraculously escaped the fire.

I am also making reference to the history of the Victorian seaweed preparations. Both scientific and decorative seaweed displays on card and paper were made in the nineteenth century and turned into the most delicate of specimen
books. The chemicals in algae are a perfect glue, adhering the organism to the paper and making them look very like fine drawings.

**GA:** Fieldwork has been a very important methodological approach to many of your projects. I guess it is fair to say that you understood the importance of localized geographies and ecosystems well before these became an artistic trend a few years ago. What role did fieldwork play in the making of *Herbarium Perrine*?

**MD:** The *Herbarium Perrine* work is part of a much larger investigation of the issues of plant ecology, conservation, and science in South Florida. The fieldwork aspect involved a variety of extended trips to South Florida and spending time with botanists and historians of science at the Fairchild Botanical Garden and Everglades National Park as well as at the University of South Florida in Tampa. I became interested in drawing a line between the botanical plant collectors of the nineteenth century, which included orchid hunters, and botanists today who are forced to see some of America’s rarest habitats go under the bulldozer blade. I built an exhibition around the excitement of discovering new plants and environments and the melancholy of having to watch them disappear.

I heard some botanists at the Fairchild Botanical Garden speak about how they have “rescued” rare plants from a site about to be bulldozed to make room for a housing development. That gave me the idea for the project “The South Florida Wildlife Rescue Unit,” a vehicle belonging to a fictional organization which captures and relocates plants and animals from zones threatened by development. These organisms are then released into safe environments. We know that there are few safe zones in the rapidly developing landscape of South Florida.

In order to understand the issues at hand with South Florida ecology and development, I had to spend some time on the ground as well as read a great deal. My partners at the Miami Art Museum, including Peter Boswell and Rene Morales, were marvelous guides and informers regarding the cultural landscape of real-estate development shenanigans. Of course, these aspects of the south Florida landscape do go all the way back to the aspirations of Perrine’s vision.

**GA:** How is this project related to others that have explored the ethics and philosophies of collecting and displaying and thus of constructing nature?

**MD:** In the original exhibition at Miami Art Museum, there were images of plant hunter’s wagons and cars piled high with orchids, bromeliads,