

HYPERALLERGIC

A Display of Sweat, Ants, and Bacteria at the Guggenheim

By ushering into the museum elements that are conventionally seen as unsanitary, Anicka Yi explores the “biopolitics of the senses.”

Claire Voon June 27, 2017



Anicka Yi, “Force Majeure” (2017), from the exhibition *Life Is Cheap* at the Guggenheim Museum (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

On a recent evening at the Guggenheim Museum, I was crouched in a dark corner, sniffing like a truffle hog. With my eyes closed to maximize nasal cognition, I was inhaling so deeply that I was sure those around me could hear the air rush through my nostrils. The museum doesn’t typically have a strong scent, but there was a legitimate

reason for my behavior. A foreign aroma currently wafts through one of its galleries, concocted from the least expected sources: carpenter ants and sweat samples from Asian American women.



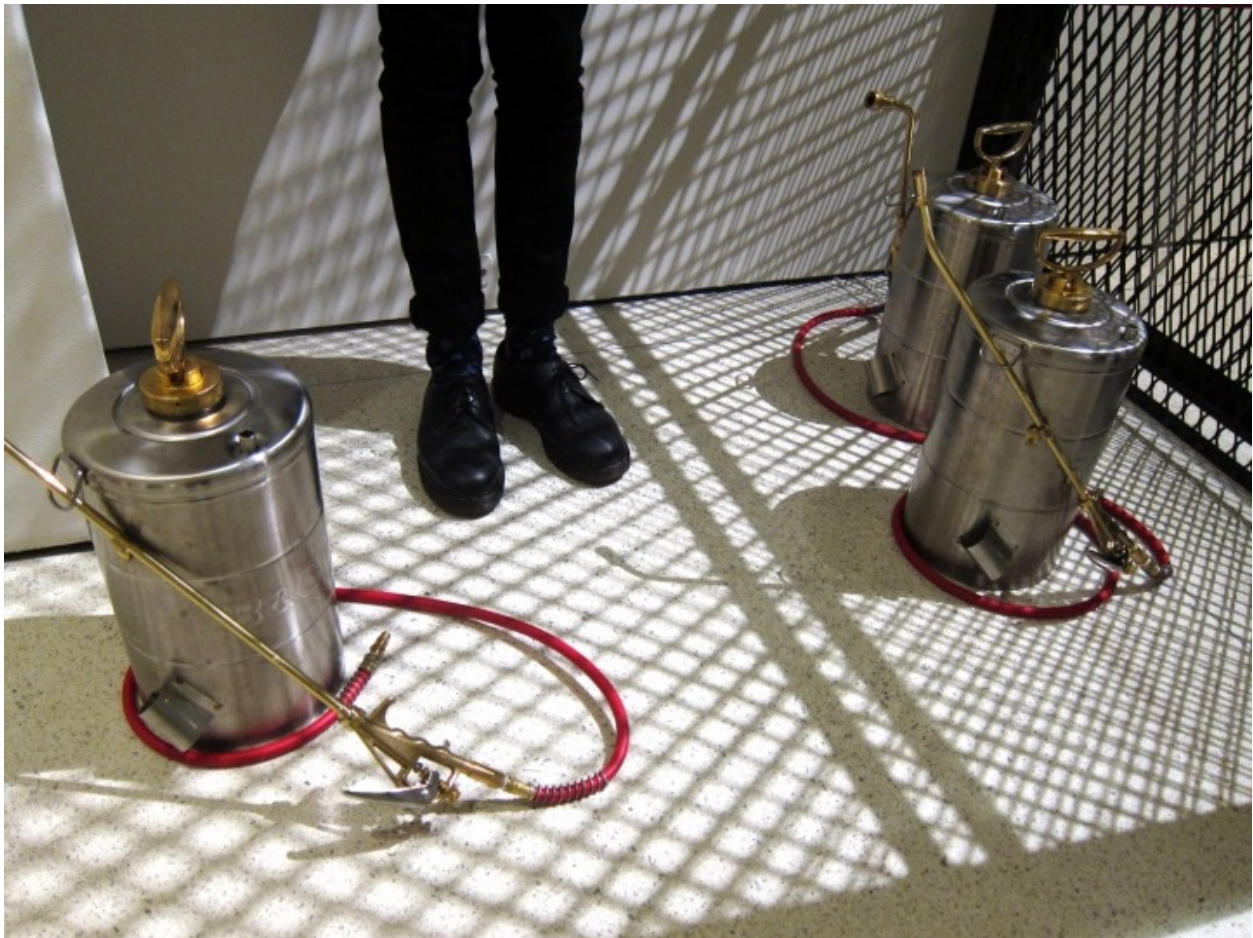
Anicka Yi, detail of "Lifestyle Wars" (2017), from the exhibition *Life Is Cheap* at the Guggenheim Museum

Its creator is Anicka Yi, who worked closely with a professional *nez* to produce the curious composition for her solo show *Life Is Cheap*, the result of her winning the Hugo Boss Prize in 2016. Organized by Guggenheim curators Katherine Brinson and Susan Thompson, the show consists of just three installations: a group of canisters diffusing the fragrance and two enclosed dioramas that showcase very different types of colonies. One contains real ants — 10,000 crawling black dots — and the other,

blooming strains of bacteria, originally swabbed from surfaces in Manhattan's Chinatown and Koreatown. To establish these living installations, Yi also enlisted the help of three PhD students in biology at Columbia University.

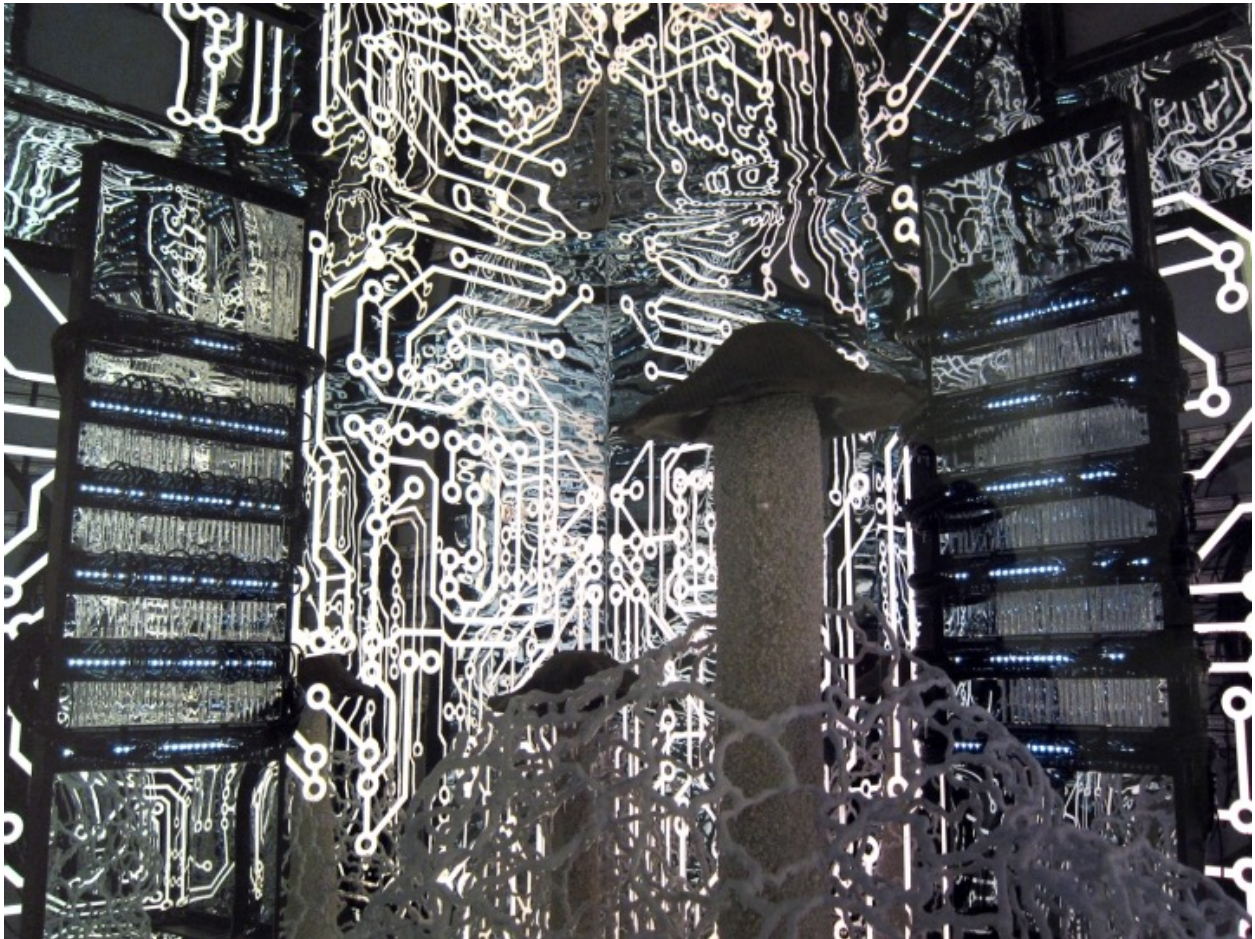
Life Is Cheap sounds like a show about science fiction, but it deals intimately with real issues that will hit close to home for many. By ushering into the sterile museum three elements conventionally seen as unsanitary (sweat, bacteria, ants), Yi explores what she describes as the “biopolitics of the senses.” In doing so, she seeks to highlight how our associations with smell, along with sight, breed prejudices and anxieties towards others based on their race, gender, class, or age.

The art world privileges the act of seeing, which has a gendered history rooted in the male gaze. Yi often turns instead to smell as her artistic point of entry — see, for instance, her 2015 installation *7,070,430K of Digital Spit* or her 3D film “The Flavor Genome,” shown at this year's Whitney Biennial. It's our starting point as well for this enigmatic exhibition, and I mean that literally: her sweat-based scent flows from the nozzles of three canisters at the start of the show, in front of a metal gate visitors must pass through. As you see the puffing mist, the installation, titled “Immigrant Caucus,” recalls the unsettling entrance to a hazard zone. The setup delivers a sense that what lies beyond will destabilize you.



Anicka Yi, “Immigrant Caucus” (2017), from the exhibition *Life Is Cheap* at the Guggenheim Museum

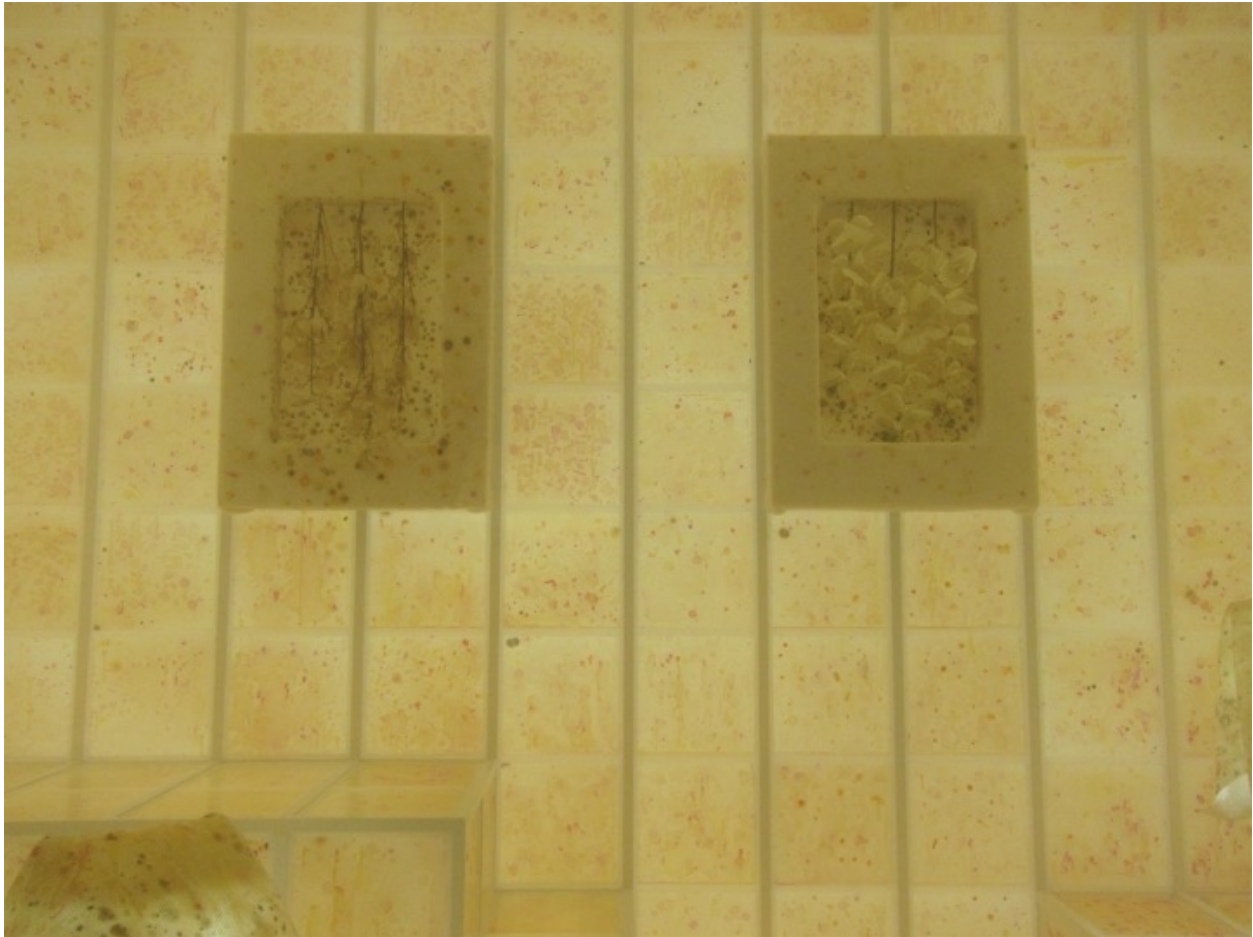
The work unnerved me for its reminder of how strong a role smell plays in the Western world in building stereotypes about Asian communities, especially Asian women. I visited the exhibition twice and smelled nearly nothing both times, aside from a few faint whiffs of what recalled a wet cave or a wooden table wiped with some cleaning product. But what was I expecting an identity to smell like? Others certainly have set olfactory standards for my own; what were they expecting here? I thought about the disgusted expression an ex's mom made when she smelled Chinese food. I thought about a widely shared *New York* magazine article that deemed a block in Chinatown the "smelliest block in New York." I thought about an angry note John Lennon once penned about receiving clean but stained laundry, his words no doubt intended as a compliment but, in reality, serving to other Asians: "[Yoko Ono] DOES NOT SWEAT (MOST ORIENTALS DO NOT SWEAT LIKE US)." So often we "orientals" are judged by extreme biases about our supposed odors: off-putting because we dig pungent food or fetishized because Asian women are exotic beauties biologically incapable of secreting rank fluids from our glands. Did John and Yoko never ride the subway together on a hot New York summer day?



Anicka Yi, detail of "Lifestyle Wars" (2017), from the exhibition *Life Is Cheap* at the Guggenheim Museum

While "Immigrant Caucus" makes us aware of our own stereotypes about different cultures, the other two pieces encourage us to move past them. "Lifestyle Wars," the ant

farm diorama, puts on display a world where smell truly conditions social interactions. Ants structure their colonies around their strong sense of smell — they relate to one another based on the chemicals in each other's bodies, building a stratified society that exemplifies the relationship between perception and power. The eerie, cybernetic case that Yi has constructed for the colony — a shimmering labyrinth of ethernet cables and illuminated paths — also receives invisible puffs of her special aroma. Knowing this, we're left wondering how the fragrance will impact the ants' relationships, strangely concerned about the possibility of conflicting communication between creatures we'd usually disregard.



Anicka Yi, detail of "Force Majeure" (2017), from the exhibition *Life Is Cheap* at the Guggenheim Museum

Although less dazzling, "Force Majeure" is more hypnotic, transforming 400 tiles coated with agar into a living, evolving painting of splotches of all colors. Yi has cultivated different bacteria on the agar, which covers the entire enclosed room; inside are versions of some of her previous works: draped epoxy resin sculptures and framed, artificial flowers.

The tableau is beautiful — so much so that I saw many people pose for photographs in front of it. It visualizes, in an arresting scene, the source of many of our anxieties: odor, after all, is the invisible result of bacteria breaking down. Western society especially obsesses over hygiene and cleanliness, arguably to the point of mania. To come face-

to-face with what's largely perceived as revolting, yet always unseen, is a jolting but illuminating experience. Yi and her team swabbed these bacteria samples from Koreatown and Chinatown, but the point is that the bewitching splotches could stem from anyone, not just Asian Americans or Asians. These microbes are within and around us all the time. To stare at manifestations of our biology is to acknowledge that we comprise one species, capable of tolerance and empathy as much as prejudice.