

WHAT CONSTITUTES SELF? ANICKA YI

Sitting in a dimly lit kitchen of winter evening. New York just after Christmas. Anicka's face appears on the laptop. She is in the passenger seat of a driving car. Sunshine and palm trees of Los Angeles pass by. Her hand with an iPhone out the car window, headphones and white sports cap on. Two strangers, having a conversation.

I was reading an interview where at the end you said that there is so much that you want to communicate, that we are losing time, that there is not enough time. What is it that you want to communicate the most urgently?

The thing that is the most urgent is how we conceive ourselves, how can we move forward with a new concept or a definition of who we are. Until we have a new model, a new fiction, a new myth of what it means to be human, we are in a transformative stage in human history. We have a lot of the 20th century baggage which needs to be updated to the 21st century. The idea of who we are is not aligning to who we are right now.

What are these old notions of what it is to be a human?

The notion of human is really outdated. The notion that we are these sovereign individual selves. This has to do a lot with the fictions we needed during the industrial revolutions - we, the humans, were the robots. We were the one who built the factories. We did not have the algorithms that could do the jobs better than us. Now we do. The 20th century myth was that we all mattered, that individuality mattered. It was not important if you were rich or poor, skinny or fat, short or tall. You had a unique point of view, and your soul and DNA was your unique stamp. Science would teach us that the soul doesn't really exist, that we are comprised of algorithms, genes and our environment. These myths that we had were to some degree a useful hack but increasingly we have to update them. Even the idea of the human being separate from nature is only a couple hundred years old, derived from the 19th century. We take for granted that these concepts of ourselves are absolutes - and of course they are not. Through different generations and eras, we had to define ourselves in different ways. Currently, we are not evolving fast enough in a way that we can embrace what is beyond us. We are not at the center of the universe. I am challenging this human exceptionalist way of thinking that humans are at the centre of everything, of life, of intelligence. This is one myth that we really have to dispel and dismantle. We humans are not at the center of it all. The world will go on with or without us, and nature will always win.

Writing is part of your practice. You were saying that it is through writing that you figure out things, more so than through sketching. As I was reading all these texts about your work, which were essentially written for galleries and art publications, I wondered how your writing and these writings relate.

There is not a huge interface between an independent writer that would take on my work as a subject and my own writing. Unless they do a lot of research and read my writing. For me, it's more an under-the-radar kind of sketching, a way to communicate, to give the personality of an artwork. What I have just described to you, if I break it down, we can probably break it into fifteen Ph.D. dissertations on the transformation of the human. It's a dense idea. Writing is very useful just to communicate these larger dense subjects, and these drafts are constantly - shall we say - updated. I think it's becoming increasingly important for my assistants and myself. Everyone in the studio needs to know a more holistic practice. It's not just the artist's whim or a creative decision. There is a timeframe that is consistent. I share these papers internally with my studio, revealing the main themes and narratives. From there the ideas get developed, as my team becomes very intimately aware of what it is that we are trying to do. For me, it's just not enough to know the design principle of the physical realm of the work. If you don't understand what we are trying to do conceptually, intellectually, then the physical realm will suffer.

How do you bridge the work you do in the realm of the science with researchers, with the one you do in the realm of art for the public? Are you hoping to establish something in between?

I have different gradients of goals. With everything that would fall under the realm of art, I don't try to force anything. I am not trying to do anything didactic, I don't think that's art's function. When you try to do that, you compromise a lot of different very poignant

Ghosts In The Terroir, 2016. taxidermed mountain lion, silicone, acrylic rods, stainless steel joints, plexiglas, 48 x 34 x 68 inches (121.92 x 86.36 x 172.72 cm). Lifestyle Wars, 2017. Arts, mirrored Plexiglas, Plexiglas, two-way mirrored glass, LED lights, epoxy resin, glitter, aluminum racks with rackmount server cases and Ethernet cables, metal wire, foam, acrylic, aquarium gravel, and imitation pearls. Dimensions variable image courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal, New York. Photo: Joerg Lothe





*Escape From The Shade 1, 2016. Epoxy resin, stainless steel, lightbulbs, digital clock interface, wire
69.69 x 24.41 x 23.62 inches (177.01 x 62.00 x 59.00 cm)*

parts, and it does not result in a better whole. In certain areas where I try to be more rigorous, where I try to change things, I work on different levels, not under the rubric of art. I do a lot of talks, that's one channel of this multi-faceted organism. Art is very relevant because it speaks in the realm of culture, and culture seems to be one of the few systems that people still have faith in. People still actually believe in it, which is problematic because culture can often be an obstacle to how we see things. Culture, as positive as it can be, there is a lot of negativity to it. The nation-state, sexism, genocide, racism, all this falls under the rubric of culture. It allows humans to be so devoutly loyal to some terrible ideas that are irrational, don't make any sense and are very harmful - not just to each other but to other living beings, the environment, and nature. As an artist working in the cultural realm, I am also simultaneously working within the system trying to dismantle it, showing that culture is not this wonderful, magical thing that everyone should get a tote bag for. At the same time, I am still figuring it out. I have more questions than answers. I definitely don't have any sufficient answers for myself or anyone else. I cannot tell you I have a book coming out next year and I figured all of it out. I am starting to really question a lot of my own conditioning, how I grew up and how I regarded what it means to be human. We are running out of time and we have to ask the right questions. Even if we don't have the answers. We don't have the luxury to be stumbling in the dark for the next five hundred years, we really don't. From everything like rising sea levels, extinction, to technological disruption. If we don't ask the right questions to a lot of these philosophical problems, especially relating to technology, it will be too late. For example, if we leave the question around what the value of the human in the 21st century is, until the time when the human artificial intelligence arrives, it's too late. We need to be implementing these protocols now, with the head of states, governments, legislation, but our government in the United

States seems to be completely unwilling to engage with this questions of artificial intelligence. We seem to be electing the wrong people. We are regressing to the 20th century fantasy of nationalism and prosperity but that is not what is needed. That is the opposite. There seems to be this catastrophic collision of priorities and intelligence. This is what concerns me.

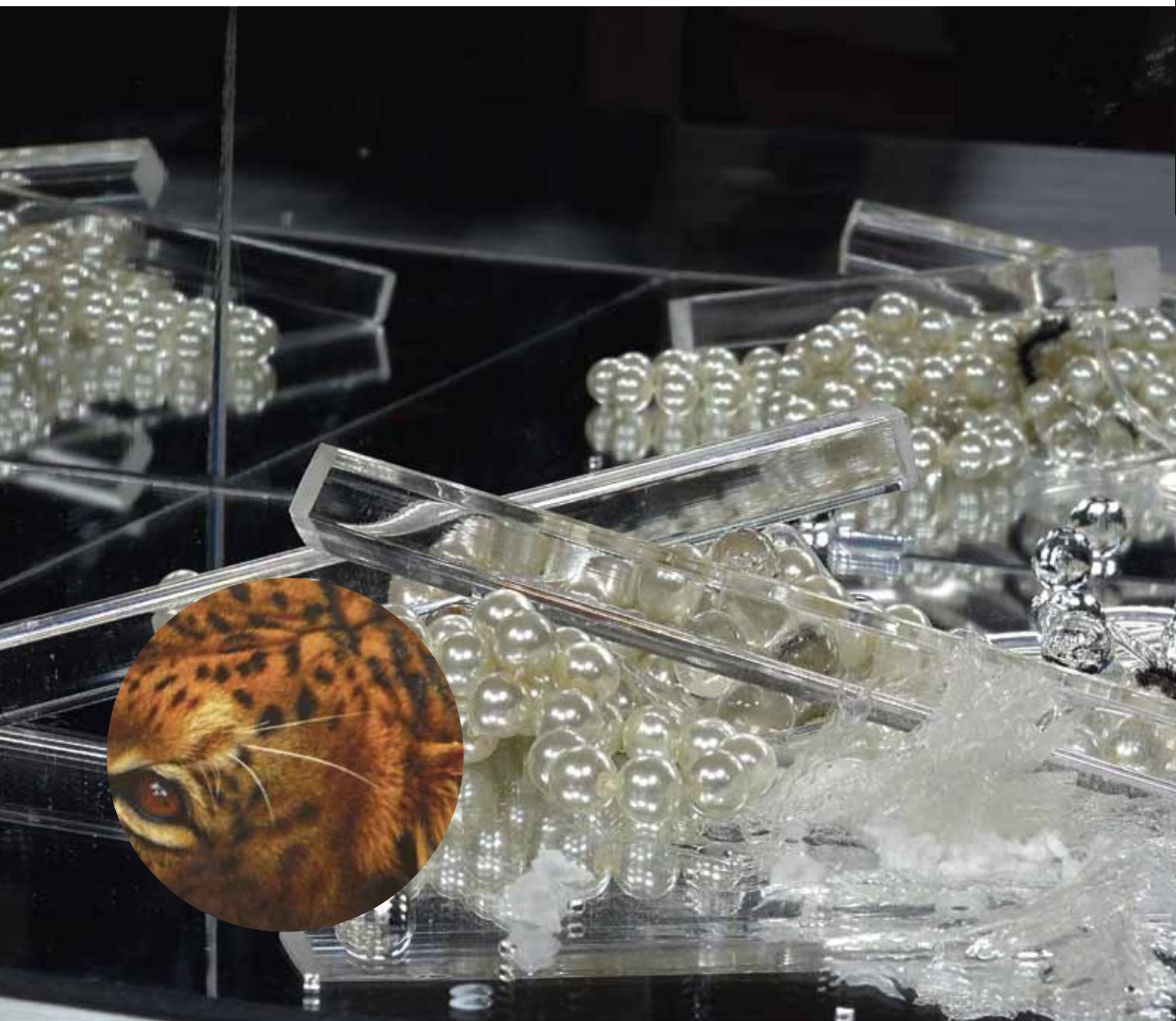
Smell is a big part of your work. I read about people leaving a gallery space because they could not stand the smell of your work. It's interesting how we react to unpleasant smell as a threat. We also don't have such a broad vocabulary for this sense. Where does all this come from?

A lot of our understanding, or lack of understanding, of the senses are conditioned. Part of the reason why we know so little is because we don't seem to value smell as much as sight. It does not have such a strong function within our species at this stage of our evolution. Five hundred years ago smell was a lot more important and vital. It is again this theme of our relationship to ourselves mutating and evolving, the idea of the human two thousand years ago is not the same as today. It's not beneficial for us to think of us the same way as we did in the 20th century because the world has changed, technology has changed, and it is changing us. It's not that we are just making machines more anthropomorphised like humans, but we are becoming more mechanic ourselves. We are not the sovereign selves out there. What constitutes self? If the self is comprised of a multitude of organisms, even in microbiological terms, the human does not even exist which is kind of funny. We are so low on the threshold of what makes life possible on this planet.

Going back to scent, we have our social conditioning of what we interpret through biological senses, and they are not necessarily compatible, and they don't necessarily align. We also just don't know so much about how olfactory works because it occurs in the precognitive part of our brain, the pre-understanding part, where memories are formed too. It's really hard to understand how to interpret smell and how it works for humans. What we know is that we experience smell on a multi-model level. It's not just one aspect. Lavender is not just a colour, it's also texture, and it's a region in France. It is also personal memories, it is subjective. Humans actually have a sophisticated relationship to smell. We don't give ourselves enough credit for that. Even though perhaps it's not as strong as dogs currently. We have a lot of scent receptors that have just become dormant because we don't activate them as we used to. Here in the West, we don't like strong smells and odours. We don't like what it means in relation to the body and vulnerability. Smell has this direct relation to vulnerability because it's related to the biological.

You worked with Barnabé Fillion, a French perfumer, on a fragrance line inspired by some 'notorious' women like Fusako Shigenobu, the former leader of the terrorist group Japanese Red Army. These women were in some way historically important but, as you said, they would not necessarily make it on the postage stamp. Why have you decided to do this project?

The narrative of commercial fragrance is really boring. You have this beauty narrative of fashion houses, rock stars - these tropes that have persisted for the entirety of commercial fragrance industry. I am just not interested in them. These female stories you would not necessarily hear about, and the smell is that sense that is the most closely associated to the feminine, which is not accurate. So I thought since smell is already perceived as feminine I will use this tool to investigate these female stories but also try to move the dial on what could be considered female or feminine. I reject essentialized definitions of the feminine. Maybe we just need to understand what female is in a deeper and richer sense rather than what the beauty industry teaches us about femininity. I don't even know how to define this in the human genomic sense. It's tricky because you are dealing with cultural perception and biology as well. When I get together to develop fragrances with Barnabé we mostly just philosophise for hours. You really have to think about every gesture you make, there are infinite vectors. How would you, not justify, but why would this gesture be meaningful and why this action versus the other direction. Barnabé is an artist, he knows how to think beyond the limits. He also respects the limitations. To truly make a leap into something new you have to respect your limitations, humble yourself and come clear with what you don't know and how there are things you cannot do by yourself. All of us cannot do the same thing, that's just not evolutionarily productive.



The Flavor Genome, 2016 single-channel 3D video 22 min. Image courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal, New York.

He made a fragrance of how the moon smells, which in reality is a mystery. There were only a few astronauts who had the chance to smell the moon. They brought moondust with them to the lander. There it reacted with oxygen and for a moment created the smell. The team brought the moondust to the Earth, but it lost all its scent. I remember you could buy this perfume and either keep it unopened, never knowing what the smell is like, or open, but then with time it would soon disappear.

He is a real poet with scent. There is not any direction he cannot go. This is inspiring for me and I am very grateful that he is involved in my work.

What did you learn about the connection between smell and memory through your work?

I don't know if I have more to add in terms of data to this. In the prelimbic system of the brain where memories are born is also where we receive smell. It's very tightly linked, but we don't know so much about the human brain. The quality of the memory based on smell is almost impossible to predict. What I am interested in is how we can translate this if a machine does not need smell in an evolutionary sense, then what use it will serve a machine.

What were your thoughts related to your work now when you are in Los Angeles, where you grew up?

In Los Angeles, there is so much more vast space than in New York, yet you experience it in small cars. It's important to have this contraction and expansion relationship to space. It certainly influences me coming back since I grew up here. There is this level of comfort. For a long time, it was not this way. It was driven by discomfort. I was rejecting this place. I disliked what it stood for, this region of America, I went as far away as I could. Increasingly whenever I return, I appreciate these elements, especially the environmental ones. I think of how vulnerable California is. When you are a kid, you think we will have oceans until the end of time, which is not the case. I am more sensitive now and try not to take things for granted.