



ANICKA YI
AT TATE MODERN

Anicka Yi, who will create her largest and most ambitious installation to date for Tate Modern's Turbine Hall this autumn, engages the senses to ask what unites nature and technology

The Politics of Air

BY MARK GODFREY

There are some studio visits that you leave feeling grateful to be a curator, having just come into contact with an artist who inhabits the same world you do, yet looks at it in a unique way, changing the way that you think. They link their lived experience to bodies of knowledge and questions that haven't been connected before, and they kind of blow your mind. So it was when I first visited Anicka Yi in Brooklyn in 2018.

At that time, she was working on a couple of forthcoming shows, but had no sculptures in the studio to view. Instead, most of my visit was devoted to smelling three scents she had made in a series called *Biography*. One, called *Shigenobu Twilight*, was 'inspired by Fusako Shigenobu, fabled leader of the Japanese Red Army', and the perfume's 'esoteric notes intimate metaphors of Shigenobu's stateless existence, exiled in Lebanon while yearning for her native Japan.' Another, *Beyond Skin*, imagined the scent of a future being, a 'hypothetical artificial intelligence entity'. 'The fragrance imagines a machine that holds the individual and collective history of every woman in a single, composite scent. Not limited to a simple partnership of

human and machine, *Beyond Skin* embraces untamed animal and vegetable characteristics to form a fully hybridized olfactory experience.'

Yi's website for *Biography* gives smelling notes for each of these scents. *Beyond Skin*, for instance, has 'dark, fleshy base notes of suede and myrrh [that] are complemented by an earthy, herbal core of indole and rose, while spicy, animalistic top notes of civet, cumin and cloves are set off by a hint of red seaweed.' I confess that if you'd asked me to name what I smelled, I would not have been able to identify these ingredients. I can say that the smell was confusing and interesting and unexpected.

I was amazed: here was an artist who could reinvent the genre of portraiture while creating an olfactory monument to a transnational feminist hero or speculating on a future combination of the biological and machinic using scent. Other artists have used smell before Yi, but not many have made it so central to their practice and way of communicating with their audience. For Yi, scent is so powerful, because it literally enters the body as you take in her work.

Anicka Yi in her studio in Brooklyn, New York, photographed by Cait Oppermann, July 2021



Anicka Yi's *Biologizing the Machine (tentacular trouble)* 2019, made with kelp, acrylic, animatronic moths, concrete and water, installed at the 58th Venice Biennale, 2019

Yi came to art relatively late: she had worked in various jobs before starting to make things for exhibitions. She joined a community of artists – many of them Asian Americans – who showed at the downtown New York gallery, 47 Canal, and found that the fact of not having been to art school gave her the freedom to approach object-making without the weight of sculptural history.

Early on she took a critical position towards the idea of making permanent and stable sculptures, instead adopting an extremely imaginative approach to materials. *Skype Sweater*, a 2010 work, is typical in this respect – among other things it includes a transparent Longchamp handbag filled with hair gel and cow intestines, and envelopes fried in tempura batter. Later works employ kombucha leather, fried flowers, ultrasonic gel, chrome-plated dumbbells, oxytocin and ground Cheetos dust. These combinations

sometimes trigger a visceral reaction, but Yi's interests always extend well beyond her experiments with materials. *Skype Sweater* includes a giant parachute, bunched in places, inflating and deflating like lungs using a fan inside it. It is, for Yi, a complex response to the history of the smuggling of undocumented Chinese migrants into the Lower East Side. Just so, in subsequent works, Yi has used her material imagination to reflect on questions of power and politics.

Her installation *You can call me F* at The Kitchen in New York in 2015, for instance, started from her perception that patriarchal attitudes towards femininity are analogous to other fears of contagion. To explore this analogy, she created a huge tray of agar jelly on which she cultivated bacteria deriving from swabs taken from 100 women in the art world. Inside the main space was a series of open quarantine tents in which some objects exuded a scent derived in



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part from the bacteria: it was as if feminine power was breaking free from attempts to contain it.

After winning the Hugo Boss Prize in 2016, Yi created an installation at the Guggenheim the following year. Called *Life is Cheap*, it was entered through a narrow passageway, which was, for her, a reference to the containment cells that the Trump administration were then employing to imprison migrants crossing the Mexican border. She filled the space with a pungent scent that she had produced by combining the smell of sweat from Asian American women with that of carpenter ants. These ants were visible in a diorama in the next part of the show, where they busied their way through illuminated tunnels resembling giant circuit boards. Meanwhile, bacteria harvested in New York's Chinatown and Koreatown grew on panels coated with agar. Yi said she was 'trying to render visible the source of our discomfort, our anxieties and our intolerance', and it seems that she had in mind the projections made by parts of American society onto migrant populations. She had become increasingly interested in our perceptions of scent and hygiene, and the politics of sharing the same air – probing our experiences and perceptions of air-borne molecules long before the Covid-19 pandemic.

Yi is alert to the strange and changing beauty of bacteria and other natural forms, and likes to combine these with industrial materials, partly to pose questions about the relationship between the 'natural' and 'synthetic' so as to undo this binary. Her work also puts pressure on other binaries that we have come to accept, like the machine and the animal. She is particularly sceptical about the category of 'human' on which so many of our understandings of the world are based. How, she asks, can we still hold up the idea of a human as a discrete and empowered being when multiple life forms (bacteria for instance) inhabit our bodies?

In recent years, Yi's thinking around the intelligence we gain through our bodies, senses and microbiome has been channelled towards an exploration of embodied artificial intelligence. The companion projects she presented at the 2019 Venice Biennale elaborated visions of 'biologized machines' that learn through their interactions with different environments. In *Biologizing the Machine (tentacular trouble)*, animatronic insects were beginning to take flight inside large kelp cocoons. In *Biologizing the Machine (terra incognita)*, a light-based machinic language was developed in response to the emissions of bacteria living in mud-filled panels. She asks, can artists propose new forms of AI that are not seen as threatening?

As with all her projects, Yi began her proposal for the Turbine Hall by posing many interlinked questions, which in turn required an extraordinary range of collaborators to engage with. If not all of the questions Yi poses with her works are apparent to all her viewers, it is perhaps because there is no obvious or direct way to respond to our complex historical moment, no single enquiry. You may or may not follow all the threads of research that Yi pursues, but there's no doubt that her latest installation will be as seductive and strange as those that have come before.

Hyundai Commission: Anicka Yi, Tate Modern, 12 October 2021 – 16 January 2022. Curated by Achim Borchardt-Hume, Director of Exhibitions and Programmes, Mark Godfrey, former Senior Curator, International Art, and Carly Whitefield, Assistant Curator, International Art. Produced by Petra Schmidt, Production Manager, Commissions. In partnership with Hyundai Motor. Supported by the Anicka Yi Supporters, with additional support from the Supporters Circle and Tate Americas Foundation.