

ANICKA YI

6,070,430K OF DIGITAL SPIT

REVIEWS BY PETER R. KALB FROM SEPT/OCT 2015
MIT LIST VISUAL ARTS CENTER

KOREA, SOUTH USA



Anicka Yi, Installation view of *6,070,430K of Digital Spit* at MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, 2015.
Photo by Peter Harris Studio. Courtesy MIT List Visual Arts Center.

In the near decade since the MIT List Visual Arts Center presented “Sensorium” (2006), an artistic exploration of aesthetics, technology and the senses, the institution has championed art that engages the body as well as the eye. It was thus fitting that Anicka Yi—a Korean-born, California-raised and New York-based installation artist, known for her use of such unexpected perishables as animal hearts, fried flowers and bacteria—was an MIT artist-in-residence for 2014–15. A selection of works completed during her residency were featured in “Anicka Yi: 6,070,430K of Digital Spit,” held at the List in May.

Visitors to “6,070,430K of Digital Spit” first heard the exhibition before seeing (and smelling) it. As part of the introductory installation, synth-heavy Euro-Pop could be heard fading in and out, playing the hook of the once-controversial song “Sex Dwarf,” by British duo Soft Cell, but with the lyrics omitted. In this reinterpreted version, sex is no longer spelled out and, instead, sensuality is heard and felt. Beckoning the viewer up toward the gradually raised center of the rose-hewed, carpeted gallery was *Our Love Is*

Bigger than an AIDS Quilt (2015), an approximately 1.2-meter-wide, illuminated pool of hair gel, where dressmaker pins are suspended into the 12.7-centimeter-deep basin. Across the pool's surface float various lenses: clear eye-glass lenses, blue-tinted projector lenses and brightly colored starburst contact lenses, the latter of which are each pierced with a pin. Over the course of the exhibition the pins' rust tinted the gel pool and created a field of increasingly rich golden palettes, accented by the blues, greens, violets and purples of the floating lenses. An uncanny smell of mint also filled the room.

Though *Our Love* looks like a large petri dish and seemingly references the scientific background of MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), the installation was actually inspired by molecular gastronomy—specifically, a dish called “Mint Pond,” invented by the world-famous *elBulli* restaurant in Spain, consisting of a sheet of ice sprinkled with matcha tea and brown sugar, which releases the aroma of mint when cracked apart. Crouching down to the surface of *Our Love* to better smell the mint, however, reveals nothing. The gel is, in fact, unscented, and the odor is dispersed from a small box in the ceiling that emits a special perfume, composed by sculptor and scent artist Sean Raspet using four different mouthwash scents.

In addition to the ocular *Our Love*, the exhibition included four upright sculptures from 2015 that offer different compositions of solid form, entropic material, sight and smell. Each sculpture is composed of two laboratory stands: approximately 1.2-meter-high poles with steel rods attached like perpendicular branches. The rods, which are positioned on the stands in a helix-like formation, are draped with sheets of cellulose “leather” made by culturing kombucha enzymes in a shallow bath of black tea. The moisture and earthy smell of the growing enzymes cling to the new sheet forms, which have the appearance of vellum or Eva Hesse’s polymer sculptures. In hanging the rectilinear sheets—some with folds or tears—over the arms of the laboratory stands, Yi juxtaposes the tactile presence imprinted on the “leather” with the unassuming anonymity of the reflective, chrome metal rods, as well as the towering verticality of the stands with the circular gestures of their draped arms.

Yi is one of today’s most visible artists whose practice focuses on the olfactory medium. Shortly before the MIT show, she permeated the Kitchen art space in New York with two competing odors—that of cultured bacteria harvested from the bodies of 100 female arts professionals coupled with that of the carefully sanitized air of the local Gagosian gallery—with the assistance of Raspet and MIT-based synthetic biologist Tal Danino, who also contributed to “6,070,430K of Digital Spit.” In comparison to the various scent-conscious installations of recent memory, such as the flower- and spice-filled suspensions of Ernesto Neto and the chocolate works of Dieter Roth, Yi’s aesthetic is slightly more fetid, human and a bit less romantic, but nonetheless enthralling. “6,070,430K of Digital Spit,” therefore, represented Yi’s extra-visual aesthetics hitting an increasingly wide range of notes.