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Anicka Yi creates art for all of the senses at MIT List Center

By Eryn Carlson JUNE 18, 2015



Peter Harris Studio

Who: Artist Anicka Yi

What: “6,070,430K of Digital Spit,” a sculptural installation with origins in gastronomy

Where: MIT List Visual Arts Center, 20 Ames St., Cambridge

Artist Anicka Yi first conceived of “6,070,430K of Digital Spit” at an unusual time: while she was working her way through an 8-hour, 42-course meal.

Inspiration struck at elBulli, a Michelin 3-star restaurant in Catalonia known for its inventive molecular gastronomy and haute cuisine. Dining at the now-closed restaurant in 2010, Yi was served Mint Pond, a flavored ice dish — sprinkled with matcha tea powder and brown sugar — that, when cracked, released an intense menthol scent emanating from the chilled water vapor within. The palate-cleansing plate stirred Yi’s senses and her imagination, sparking her desire to create a similarly stimulating experience through her art.

“Ever since then, I have wanted to create the experience of that dish, that scent, as an artwork,” said Yi, a 2014-15 visiting artist at MIT who often works within the realm of bioart, with projects utilizing materials ranging from live snails to tempera-fried flowers. “I want the exhibition at the List Center to be a totally encompassing experience, engaging the senses of taste, sight, smell, hearing.”

The focal point of Yi's installation is an illuminated plexiglass pool 8 feet in diameter, filled with clear hair gel speckled with dozens of colored contact lenses. Visually the pool evokes elBulli's Mint Pond, but is also not unlike a giant petri dish in which agar — the jelly-like substance often used to cultivate microorganisms in labs — aids the germination of bacteria and fungi.

In the periphery of a tongue-like gallery with red fleshy walls and carpeting, a series of laboratory stands support cellulose "leather" sheets grown from the bacterial cultures in kombucha tea.

Though "6,070,430K of Digital Spit," is a work for visual consumption, it engages olfactory and auditory senses as well. An intermittent soundtrack plays through speakers, and a subtle but discernable menthol scent permeates the gallery.

"In a way, consuming through vision, that screen, is so predominant," said Yi, who was born in Seoul and is based in New York. "I was trying to counter that in some way."

In the process of engaging viewers' other senses, the artist is also playing on the idea of good and bad taste, both as a bodily sense and as an aesthetic discernment. Her carefully calculated choice of music, Soft Cell's controversial 1981 song "Sex Dwarf," is, to some, a salacious composition.

"I wanted [a song] somewhat related to lust, to the forbidden and the bodily, which could be considered in 'bad taste,'" said Yi. "I edited out the verses because I wanted to create a registry of sensory experiences. You can close your eyes, and the smell of something fades over time if you have been exposed to it for a while, but you can't close your ears."

Taste — artistic, gustatory, or otherwise — is, of course, subjective, of which Yi is well aware. She hopes her installation, which is transparent but ambiguous, activates viewers' senses beyond the ocular, but what they take away from that is up to them.

"Perhaps the scent or the experience of the space will activate memories in people who visit it, or generate new ones," she said. "I don't want my work to be read in a determinate way, but rather for each person to come away with something different, something personal."

"6,070,430K of Digital Spit" is on view at the List Center through July 26.

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