

TEXTE ZUR KUNST

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**ART
VS.
IMAGE**

**BILD
VS.
KUNST**

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SPLIT SUBJECTS

Johanna Burton on *Anicka Yi at 47 Canal*,
New York

Remember “The Women”? Starring actresses like Joan Crawford and Rosalind Russell, the 1939 film is strikingly man-free, despite its cast of more than 130. Indeed, while the plot follows the various dramas that ensue as a crew of glamorous (if, yes, sometimes petty, too) society women go through the various undoings of marriage, the spouses themselves remain out of view – redundant, perhaps, or, better, simply rendered obsolete. I watched “The Women” as a teenager, and not at all by chance; in addition to offering the holy grail of female-only protagonists, the film was set not only in the city I was determined to live in (New York) but also in the city I grew up in (Reno, Nevada). This latter setting, of course, was only visited by the upper crust under great duress – the six weeks required to dissolve the contract of marriage was akin to jail time.

“The Women” was hardly the only thinly-veiled-feminism-laced-divorce-film I had under my belt. I’d seen them all, from the little-known 1931 “Peach O’Reno” to the canonical 1961 Marilyn Monroe-infused “The Misfits” to the high-1980s lesbian camp-classic “Desert Hearts” (in which yet another New York woman comes to the desert, but finds much more than divorce papers). Yet, “The Women” stuck with me for its portrayal of divorce not as liberation from the binding oppression of patriarchy so much as just one more symptom of the disasters of class structure. The women – The Women – in the film are glamorous, privileged, and, for the most part, utterly dysfunctional, often diabolical. It’s a story – not incidentally, one written by women – that serves as a cautionary tale, a stark portrayal

of the claustrophobia and myopia that luxury can breed. It’s light, and funny (a comedy!), but horrifyingly so: Gossip and innuendo are the sole modes of communication, and self-worth is an oxymoron. The film closes with one character’s desperate, deliberate struggle to win back the husband she had freed herself of. With or without him, we come to realize, her story is essentially the same.

So, yes, I was intrigued, to say the least, to learn that Anicka Yi’s recent exhibition in New York at 47 Canal would be titled “Divorce”. The second in what the artist promises will be a three-part investigation into “the forensics of loss and separation,” “Divorce” followed on the heels of “Denial” (staged last year at Lars Friedrich in Berlin, and described as “focused on the dispossession of truth”) and specifically aimed to “gather [...] further evidence of the past tilted toward symbolic laws of displacement.” Without my knowing what the final iteration of the exhibition trilogy will be, Yi’s progression nonetheless calls to mind a condensed approximation – and reversal – of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s well-rehearsed, if also controversial, stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance). Yet, where the trajectory set by Kübler-Ross underscores an inherent ability for human beings to heal after (or to at least survive) tragic events, Yi seems to throw her weight behind an opposite impulse, whereby things come increasingly undone.

At another historical (and art-historical) moment, we might have referred to Yi’s obsessions as exhibiting a predilection for “nihilism” or as “entropic” in nature. Yet, in today’s context, one now almost offhandedly categorized as defined by continuous crisis, such terms feel



Anicka Yi, "Washing Away of Wrongs", 2014

almost quaint – offering, as they do, the possibility to stall or stop, to self-determine, if negatively. The artists we most associate with these tactics (if nihilism and entropy can be defined as tactics) – Dieter Roth, Robert Smithson, and Paul Thek, among others – have inadvertently come to assume the role of twentieth-century Romantics. While Yi is clearly playing on and with legacies such as these (her enduring recourse to the visceral, the odiferous, and the ephemeral inevitably call to mind the canonical list above), she nevertheless starkly illustrates something of our contemporary cultural ethos. While on the one hand nodding toward the affective and the interpersonal, Yi's approach is tangibly cool – not



Anicka Yi, "Fever and Spear", 2014

aiming to be either distanced or objective, it is still strangely aloof in a way that is perhaps best accounted for as pharmaceutical.

It's a strange word to describe art that is manifested through partially organic means, which so much of Yi's work is. In "Divorce" alone, to give some examples: "Nuit de Cellophane" (all works 2014) consisted of 13 shiny DVDs, content unknown, slicing through a sheetrock wall and draped with thick dribbles of honey; "Washing Away of Wrongs" were two metal dryers (a pairing reminiscent of works by Félix González-Torres), which viewers opened and stuck their heads into, only to be greeted by two unpleasant, but distinctly natural aromas; and, within a larger

pile of boxes each titled “*verbatim? verbatim?*”, one contained live snails, moss, and oxytocin (the so-called “love hormone”). Yet, for their ostensible earthiness, these works and others call up both the body’s immediate, undeniably animal, instincts and senses, while calling attention to how rarely these are activated – or, perhaps more accurately, given any primacy.

Yi’s project, though, isn’t a lament on how far we’ve drifted from our primordial selves. The artist uses materials that galvanize almost unconscious physical triggers in viewers to insist that – for a split second – they inhabit the present space and time in which they view her work. They operate strategically to ground us in the specificity of the here and now by harnessing the body before the mind can wander into explanation. Yet, unlike so much anti-intellectual “experience” art, Yi only serves up this disconnect to mark and problematize it. Etymologically, “divorce” derives from “divert,” and describes a turning aside or a turning back and forth. In Yi’s show, one has the feeling that the artist is gesturing toward not only the vast distance that comes to stand between two human beings once intimate but also toward the inherent internal alienation that every individual person experiences at some point in their lives. “Divorce”, that is to say, was obviously poised as a platform by which to examine relationships, in all their clichéd and predictable forms of development and disintegration, but it also quite provocatively poised annulment as a condition inherent, even deeply internal, to the modern subject.

Nowhere was this made more overtly clear than in two other works in the show. “Fever and Spear” featured a mirrored Plexiglas Larry Bell-like box, but that was where any reference to Minimalism ended. The lower half of a transpar-

ent, well-muscled, male torso filled the box, and within this partial body, cartoonish red hearts swarmed up – bloated overdetermined stand-ins for love, or procreation, or passion, or disease. In “Somewhere Between I Want It and I Got It”, Yi displayed – via projections on ridiculous vinyl inflatables in the shape of text bubbles – some five years of text messages she has sent to, we assume, various recipients. Ranging from ruminations on “Game of Thrones” to seemingly earnest reflections on her life and the overwhelming state of the world, Yi’s words are presented on their own, without responses. They are sent into the ether, messages in a contemporary bottle.

Anicka Yi, “Divorce”, 47 Canal, New York, April 30–June 8, 2014.