

## The Sights (and Smells) of Anicka Yi's Bacteria Art Show

By Hannah Stamler — Mar 17 2015



Anicka Yi, *Grabbing At Newer Vegetables*, 2015. Plexiglas, agar, female bacteria, fungus. 84.5 x 24.5 inches. Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal. Photo by Jason Manuela

There is something immediately unsettling about Anicka Yi's *Grabbing At Newer Vegetables*, the piece in the entryway of her *You Can Call Me F* exhibition, on view at New York's The Kitchen. Its rectangular, backlit shape is a familiar one, reminiscent of billboards or store signage. But unlike these forms of advertisement, its particular magnetism comes not from its imagery—the show's title, written out by hand—but its scent, a funky odor that is at once unpleasant and intriguing.

The rotten smell, as the gallery text reveals, comes from the fact that the piece is made from bacteria samples taken from women in the artist's circle of friends and acquaintances. The samples, 100 in total, will continue to grow—and in some cases mold—throughout the course of the exhibition.

Reducing women to bacteria samples initially seems odd, as does the choice to use this live material as the fabric of a microcosmic female network. However, as Yi's collaborator on the piece, MIT synthetic biologist and bacteria expert Tal Danino, clarified in a conversation with The Creators Project, bacteria are a more defining part of our identities than we realize.

Yi's exhibition opens at a time when a paradigm shift is underway in the scientific community, says Danino, who in the past helped Vik Muniz make portraits out of cancer cells. Bacteria are starting to be regarded as highly important and, in some ways, as "a unique identifier of who you are," he explains.



Image courtesy of Tal Danino

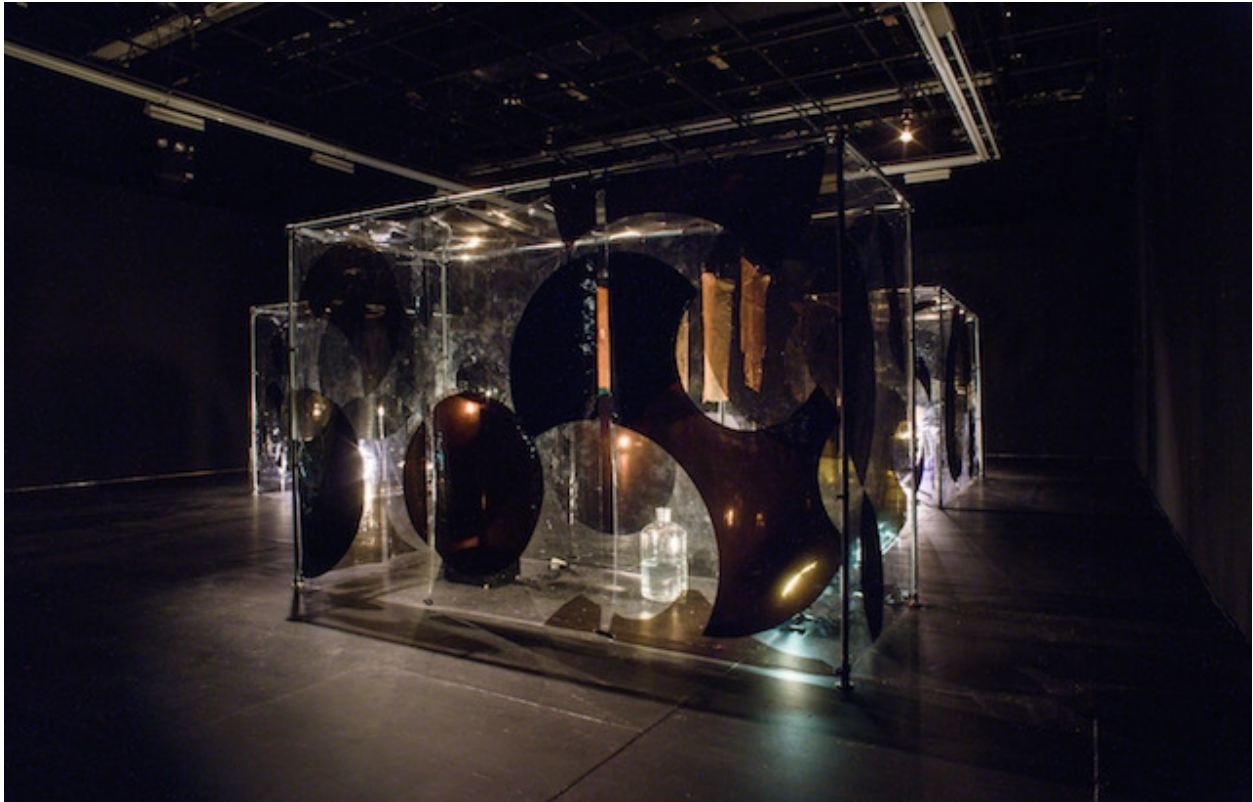
Humans are comprised of ten times more bacteria than human cells, making us effectively 90% bacteria. Like DNA, bacteria form in unique patterns, with genetics partially influencing the varieties that exist and grow in our bodies. They are a large factor in human-emitted smells, too—from pheromones to bad breath and B.O.

Yi's art often involves smell, and her desire to capture people's "smell identities," as Danino termed it, is what first brought them together during Yi's artist residency at MIT last year. During their collaboration, Yi collected swabs on Q-tips and gauze and sent them to Danino, who then streaked them onto petri dishes and let them grow in MIT's lab. To create *Grabbing At Newer Vegetables*, they combined these samples in The Kitchen's kitchen space—a process that, Danino reports, alarmed staff members who were unaccustomed to the "terrible" stench of open, live bacterial cultures wafting through their offices.

While watching an artist attempt to paint with bacterial cells was novel for Danino, painting isn't a foreign concept to his research. Coloring petri dish samples to bring out the clarity of microorganism features is common practice in biology, and often results in beautiful, vivid images. In this project, he and Yi even played with streaking the bacteria on the plates to create different designs. The series of plates—featured as this month's Artforum portfolio—look vaguely Abstract Expressionist; their painterly feel is due in part to the fact that they were photographed from behind, flattening the samples' organic, textural properties.

Much of Danino's academic work has been about exploring the visual quality of bacteria, and their "naturally occurring patterns." He finds compelling images helpful when it comes to presenting research: "When you have a good image, it can be convincing... [it's a] really important part of the science itself," he said.

But while visibility has always been important to Danino's work, before Yi smells were fairly absent. Sterility is something scientific laboratories share with galleries—spaces often referred to as 'white cubes' for their purported ability to serve as neutral backdrops for displayed artworks. "As scientists, we don't ever really think of scent as being part of the information we gather about an experiment," Danino noted, adding that smell is only really considered when it relates to safety concerns: gas leaking from a Bunsen burner, or something accidentally set on fire in the lab.



Anicka Yi, *Fontenelle*, 2015. Vinyl, steel pipes, motorcycle helmet, scent diffuser, glass container, water, kombucha scoby leather, nylon string, worklight. 122 x 78 x 50 inches. Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal. Photo by Jason Mandella

Danino's work with Yi caused him to reflect on the smells present in scientific research that he had overlooked. Agar, for example, the gel in which bacterial samples grow, has a strong smell that is "really divisive," provoking extreme disgust in some, and attraction in others. Contaminated samples, especially bacterial ones, smell differently than their unspoiled counterparts.

Of course, as has been discussed since the 1970's, the idea of the gallery-as-white cube is fallacious. There are no entirely neutral or ahistorical spaces in galleries or in science labs. This is a truth that Yi addresses with the specially-fabricated perfume she created with scent fabrication lab *Air Variable* that sprays at timed intervals in the exhibition's main room. It's made from a mixture of the bacterial scents from her network of female peers, and smells gathered from the Gagosian Gallery.

As the scent of 100 women, many of them artists, comingles with those from one of the most formidable (and traditionally patriarchal) international art galleries, the smell of Yi's show, at first sour, grows to seem considerably sweeter.

*Anicka Yi: You Can Call Me F*, curated by Lumi Tan, runs until April 11.