



PORTFOLIO

Anicka Yi

SOMETHING SMELLED OFF IN THE GALLERY. Something ruined, or bad. The distinctive, slightly sickening odor turned out to be emanating from a plain cardboard box: Inside were stacks of clear plastic petri dishes, each flush with its own living, burgeoning bloom. Anicka Yi was growing bacteria, and the microbial cultures were spreading, metastasizing, like an unholy contagion in crimson and black and pink.

Yi had cultivated the organisms from the swabbed samples of one hundred women, mostly friends, or friends of friends. Working with biologists and the firm Air Variable, the artist embarked on a process of conversion: she chromatographically analyzed scent molecules from air samples of the collected bacteria, as well as air samples taken at Gagosian Gallery in New York during the run of an Urs Fischer exhibition. The data from both sets were then translated into a formula of synthetic compounds and produced as a chemical, recalling the way commercial fragrances are composed and generated. A scent diffuser will send the synthesized aroma wafting through the gallery for Yi's solo show at the Kitchen in New York, opening on March 5; the bacteria themselves will also be on view, remaining alive during the run of the exhibition and likely finding an afterlife in subsequent projects. Shown here for the first time, the germs can be seen both life-size and microscopically, in photographs and video stills that capture two different timescales—both the cells' imperceptible creep in agar and their magnified movements up close.

Teeming and communing, the bacteria conjure a microcosm of the larger social structures from which they are culled. But this isn't some seamless *sensus communis*; the microbes' wayward undulations are isolated biological events, evoking an unsettling scenario of biopower broken down and reduced to Brownian motion, primordial soup, dumb stuff. In much the same way, Yi's olfactory missives are stubbornly physiological. For upcoming exhibitions at the MIT List Visual Arts Center and at Kunsthalle Basel, Yi will give us a lake of menthol aroma—her madeleine for a specific memory—and a burning book, made of incense paper she crafted with the aid of a Parisian perfumer. So, too, the artist's previous work teases our nerve endings with the material admixtures of our time: Perspex and tripe, aldehydes and silicon oxide, hair gel and nori.

Yi's amalgamations give the lie to so many present-day clichés about our world as some infinitely wired, immaterial, immersive surround. They remind us that such an omnipotent totality is itself a man-made narrative; they force us to remember that the supposed instantaneity and acceleration of our current moment is everywhere snagged by waiting, faulty infrastructure, signal interruption. Against the humanist and idealist myth of the seamless digital world—a myth that is inevitably reduced to the visual—Yi's scents give us something messier and more granular, something discontinuous. They do not remain at the level of symbolic code, of programming language, but revel in matter and hardware. They alter our chemistry.

—Michelle Kuo

"You Can Call Me F" is on view at the Kitchen, New York, Mar. 5–Apr. 11; two solo exhibitions, each titled "Anicka Yi," will be on view at the MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA, May 22–July 26, and at Kunsthalle Basel, June 12–Aug. 16.