

Artist Anicka Yi Explains Why COVID-19 Is Terrible for Humanity, But Fundamentally ‘Good for the Planet’

The artist says it is counterproductive to ask artists what their role in any given situation is supposed to be.

Taylor Dafoe, July 8, 2020



A quarantine self-portrait by Anicka Yi. Courtesy of the artist.

What do viruses want? What are their roles? Are they enemies, as many people around the world feel, or are they secret allies?

Most of us don't think about viruses on an eco-philosophical level. But Anicka Yi, an artist known for her work with microbial matter, is not like most people. For her, the coronavirus pandemic is not the world-altering phenomenon some consider it be; instead, it was world-affirming, a reminder of nature's resilience.

Yi's much-talked about 2015 exhibition, "You Can Call Me F" at the Kitchen in New York, looks in hindsight like a fever dream. Illuminating the front of the dimly lit gallery was a glowing vitrine of live bacteria culled from 100 women, a menacing symbol of society's fear not only of pathogens, but also of female bodies and networks of all kinds. In the back was a suite of translucent quarantine tents.

Since then, the artist has gone on to explore themes as varied as imperialism, the immigrant experience, and the politics of the senses, each time pulling back to look at the larger systems at play. And she's done so with materials not common in most artists' studios: algae, ant colonies, animatronic insects, AI-controlled soil, and—on multiple occasions—custom scents.

Earlier this year, Yi was commissioned to create [the next Turbine Hall installation](#) at Tate Modern in London. Her plan, she explains cryptically, is to create an "aquarium of

machines.” (Though originally scheduled to debut this October, the project has been pushed to fall 2021.)

In the middle of quarantine, Artnet News spoke with Yi about virology, the lure and fallacy of anthropocentrism, and collaborating with microbiomes, rather than representing them.



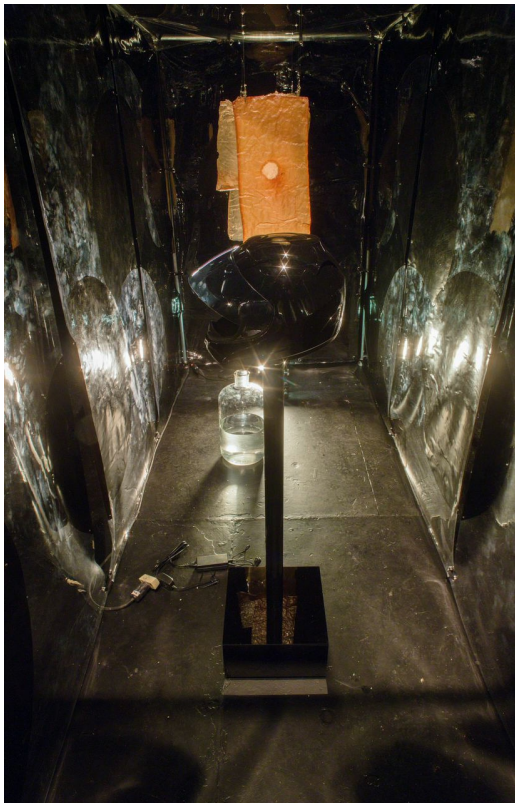
Installation view of Anicka Yi's "You Can Call Me F" at the Kitchen, 2015. Courtesy of the artist and the Kitchen.

To start, I want to go back to your 2015 exhibition “You Can Call Me F” at the Kitchen. That show positioned the theme of viral pathogens against a patriarchal fear of female networks. What about viruses interested you then?

That exhibition was born from a virus—the Ebola virus. I remember this palpable tension, fear, dread, especially around dense public spaces like the subway or Times Square, on the street. We laugh at it now because it just was just one toe tipped into a vast ocean of anxiety. I remember being calibrated to this tension because of my microbial research, because of my interest in the anxiety around hygiene and viruses and disease. It happened to coincide with my residency at MIT, where I was doing microbial research and working with Tal Danino, a postdoc from MIT and a synthetic biologist. So it was like this perfect storm: the Ebola virus, my research from MIT, and

the opportunity to show at the Kitchen, which has a lot of history—and a lot of, dare I say, microbial history [laughs].

It was this wonderful convergence, and that's how the initial, early zygote stages of the show developed. And then, of course, bring to that the idea of female networks. I was hosting a podcast called Lonely Samurai, and I was dissecting and analyzing why there aren't stronger female networks. Why don't women help each other? It is one of the oldest forms of success—the network, the family. If you look at the Mafia, they have these predominantly male networks, and that's been working for a very long time, centuries even. Why couldn't female networks operate similarly? It just seemed like a really tried and true formula. So I wanted to examine that.



Installation view of Anicka Yi's "You Can Call Me F" at the Kitchen, 2015. Courtesy of the artist and the Kitchen.all Me F at the Kitchen. Image courtesy the artist and the Kitchen.

It's unsettling to think how quaint Ebola seems now. How has your thinking about viruses changed since that moment?

I think socially it's a little bit different. The way that it has impacted our day-to-day reality today and our civilization here in America. But I think fundamentally the principles of virology remain. What I've learned during COVID-19 is that the teachings of this virus are such that it is here to regulate monoculture. It predates life, but it's technically not living. It really destabilizes what we think about in terms of the living and the nonliving, and its implication of what that means for, let's say, artificial machine intelligence. The idea that because something is not alive it has a different sort of categorization in terms of consciousness or life. The virus is teaching us that that binary distinction is obsolete now. It doesn't really matter. The virus is here to promote ecological biodiversity. And the reason why we humans seem to be feeling like we're being punished is because, in a sense, we are.

Viruses punish winners. If one species becomes too greedy, if one species is too dominant, then it actually needs to go dormant for a while. Fundamentally this is good for the planet, because humans are not great for biodiversity. And humans have roughly 8 percent virus in their DNA—we are made of virus.

As an aside, I hesitate to use the word “pandemic”; it’s very human-centric. As soon as humans are in discomfort because of a virus, it becomes a pandemic, right? But it doesn’t account for all the other species. So I’m very cautious about over-identifying with a pandemic because that is recapitulating a kind of human supremacy that I’m also trying to question with my work.



Anicka Yi, *Lifestyle Wars*, (2017). Courtesy of the artist and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Anicka

What about our current definition of nature needs to change?

First and foremost, I think it reaffirms that nature is all there is. We are subsumed in nature, and we can qualify nature as being evolution as well. Prior to this moment, our definition of nature has changed through different eras. In the Middle Ages we thought of nature as being divine intelligence, the cosmos—everything circulated through nature. In the modern era we defined nature as something that we as humans emerged from—a physical space, a space of inquiry and study that we no longer inhabit. Something from which we have completely detached ourselves, something that we can eradicate at our convenience.

We still adopt a very modern definition of nature today: a space that we can willfully jump in and out of. What COVID is teaching us is that actually, nature is everywhere. It’s

in us, we carry it everywhere, and environmentally it's everywhere. We can't eradicate it. And so we need to create a new kind of political philosophy based on this lesson.



Anicka Yi, *Force Majeur*, detail (2017). Courtesy of the artist and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

The idea of virality has become synonymous with the dissemination of information—a popular meme goes “viral,” and so on. Now, that notion is so fraught with other associations that it feels perverse to employ it as a metaphor. Do you think our relationship to that term, “viral,” will change for good?

Well, that's interesting. I've been accused of being the virus's publicist, because I consider it something that is actually good for the planet, even if it's not optimal for humans. [Laughs] Again, that is a very human exceptionalist reaction—to say, on one hand, that a virus is bad, but to implicitly embrace its ability to move and adapt so quickly on the other. I understand it. It's about a kind of duality; it's positive and negative. It's something that is threatening but as humans we can see the value and the potency of its model. I wonder if that idea couldn't be transferred into a more positive relationship to the human if we could take our own self-interest out of the way.

Increasingly with my work, I'm trying to collapse that distance between metaphor and representation. When you collaborate with microbes or viruses or antibodies, you don't need a stand-in; you don't need a metaphor. You don't need to say, "This is like that"; you can just use the thing in itself.

The macro-level idea of the virus being a regulatory agent in a healthy ecosystem is hard for people to square intellectually in a time of so much sickness and death. Is that something you've had to reconcile for yourself?

Oh, sure. But historically viruses have wiped out a lot of the population—that's just how they work. I feel that the virus's work is a lot less treacherous and malevolent than the kind of violence that we inflict on each other as humans, as a society. To me, the virus is not really personal. It's the social injustice that is.

People are talking about the perils of extinction for our species, about climate crisis, about going to Mars to propagate a new planet, all of that. For me, the thing that I believe in is evolution, and we're evolving in the way that we have to evolve. I don't necessarily want to focus on trying to propagate our species at all costs, even though, by definition, evolution requires us to do just that. There's an evolutionary trajectory that we as humans have tried to accelerate tremendously—and that is also a part of evolution.



Installation view of Anicka Yi's "Biologizing the Machine (Tentacular Trouble)," at the 58th Venice Biennale, 2019.

What, then, do you consider your role to be as an artist in this moment? You certainly don't seem like somebody who's willing to sit back and let evolution take its course.

It's funny, I have been asked this question a few times during the quarantine and in other periods of civic unrest. I would say that, as an artist, I am not some sort of siloed, isolated entity; I have to respond with that in mind. I think that artists can ask the difficult questions and demand a lot of accountability. That is really what I'm trying to do, first and foremost. But I think that it may be counterproductive to just ask artists, "What is your role right now?" when that is all contingent upon everyone else's roles, everyone else's desire or ethical matrix.

For me, it's a question of how we can align these goals together rather than singling out just one entity, such as an "artist," who can lead the charge. We can't do anything alone. We make an artwork and want to speak with an audience; that requires a symbiotic relationship. Not to sound glib or contrary, but I do think that the artist's role is to be, first and foremost, acutely aware of the symbiosis, and then start to influence that symbiosis.