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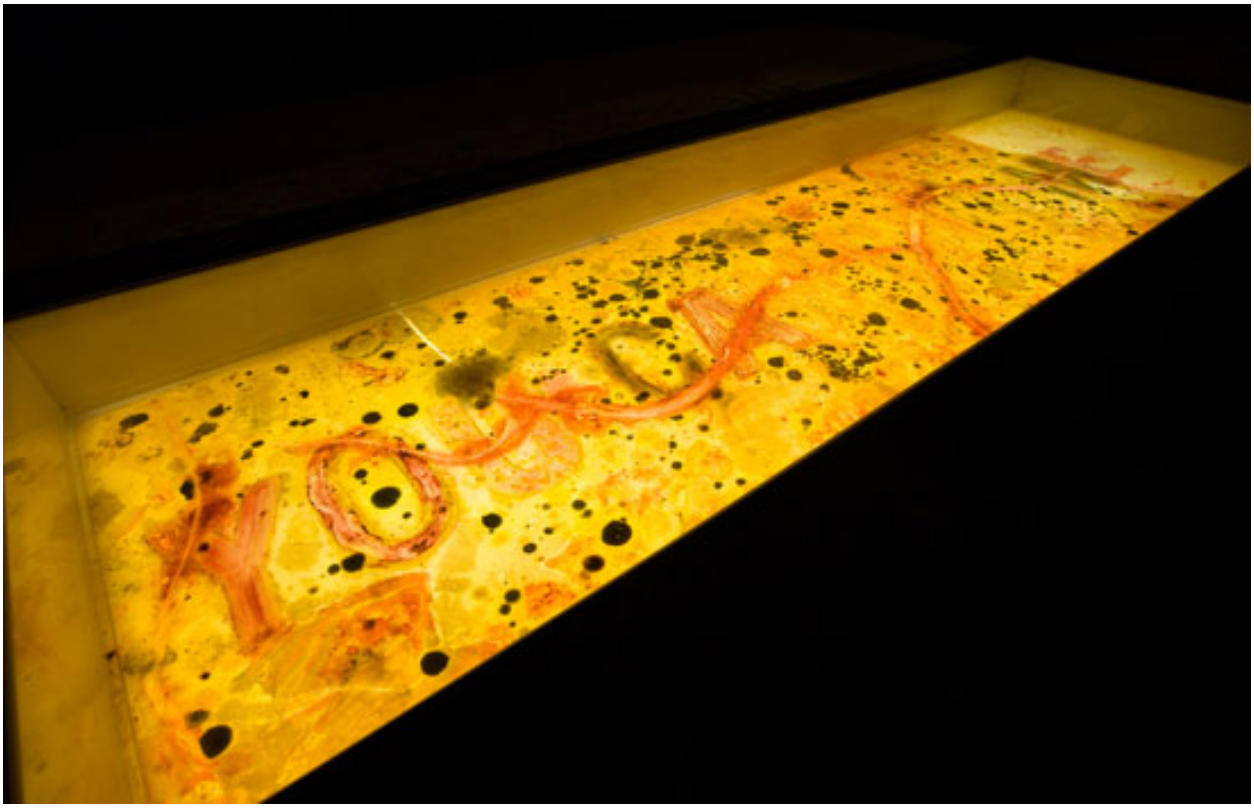
Viral Feminism: Anicka Yi at The Kitchen

by Taylor Dafoe

***Anicka Yi: You Can Call Me F* at The Kitchen**
March 5 through April 11, 2015
512 W 19th St (between 10th and 11th avenues)
New York, 212 255 5793



Anicka Yi, installation view of "You Can Call Me F," 2015, at The Kitchen. Photograph by Jason Mandella, courtesy of the artist and The Kitchen.

Remember Ebola? The outbreak of the disease was the biggest news story of 2014, with no issue receiving more media coverage or search engine hits, proving that there's still a great sensitivity to the idea of contagion in the country. This fear is often exploited in the name of branding, be it in the form of big-budget Sci-Fi movies or flu-shot sales.

Anicka Yi believes the same thing can be said about the general public's idea of female networks. And in the dank and dimly lit gallery of her new exhibition, "You Can Call Me F," at the Kitchen, she compares the two, pitting the public's fear of pathogens with its fear of female networks as a threat to our patriarchal paradigms. For the show, Yi gathered biological samples (read: collected swabs) from 100 women in her professional network — artists, curators and friends. Most of these women are named, some of them recognizable art-world personalities; others remain anonymous. These samples are alive and on display in the gallery. And they're growing.

The Kitchen's second-floor gallery space is divided into two parts. The first is a small room with the show's central work, *Grabbing At Newer Vegetables* (2015) — a rectangular and backlit Plexiglas box that is essentially a large petri dish. You can look at it closely, overhead, and are drawn to do so, it being the only source of light and activity in the gallery's entrance. In it Yi has painted the words "YOU CAN CALL ME F," using both the biological samples and agar, a substance derived from algae with a long tradition of being used to culture bacteria. This text, once big and blocky like that found on billboards or storefront signage, is now all but obscured by the organisms that have been growing around it since the show's opening in March.

Simultaneously expanding and disappearing, "Grabbing At Newer Vegetables" cleverly subverts conventional notions of ephemerality and objecthood in visual art. It's also an interesting take on using feminine fluids as material, a typical trope of the feminist art movement. And it doesn't necessarily stop there: Yi, who has worked closely with the biology department at MIT, where she is currently in residency, has suggested she might even use the still-growing bacterium in future projects.

The second half of the gallery looks like the aftermath of a viral outbreak. It features five tent-like constructions meant to mimic quarantine units. But these units, roughly constructed from steel pipe and suspended vinyl, are actually open and thus not protective at all, the implication being that the concept of quarantining — extinction through isolation — is a flawed one. Inside the tents are various artifacts, all of which add the show's themes to some extant: DVDs, calling attention to the Hollywoodization of viral disease; seaweed and dried shrimp, examples of simple organisms used for food; jars of kombucha, serving as a reminder of bacteria's benefits, to name a few.

Most notably, in three of the tents are individual motorcycle helmets rotating slowly atop black rods, their visors slightly open like the larger encasement in which the sculptures sit. The helmets diffuse a unique scent that Yi developed specifically for the show. The scent is a hybrid of two other, distinct odors: one was obtained from the female samples; the second is the scent of the Gagosian Gallery, which Yi gathered using a device that takes and reproduces an air reading. She then worked with the "scent fabrication company" Air Variable to synthesize these two odors into her own fragrance.

The smell, though, is innocuous. It's doubtful the gallery-goer would be conscious of it — not to mention the derivations thereof — were they not told about its peculiarity. And at first it seems that these works could be more effective if the smell were stronger, easier to detect: it would makes sense that a show comparing the insidiousness of deep-seated patriarchal systems to the threat of viral pathogens might benefit from establishing an equally visceral experience, forcing its audience to confront both.

Yet this same subtlety is the point. Smell, while the most redolent of the senses, is also the most elusive — we are only cognizant of it when something smells particularly good or particularly terrible; because we are rarely aware of smell, despite the fact that it is fundamental to our experiential relationship to a place, especially in memory, its power lies in its subtlety. That the scent of the Gagosian Gallery (which Yi suggests is the biggest perpetrator of art-world patriarchy) is hardly a scent at all reinforces the institution's inequities. There's also an implicit critique of the idea of the gallery as sterile white cube. Considering all there is to see in the show, it's surprising its most potent aspect lies in the olfactory experience, or lack thereof, it provides. This might be both the show's biggest strength and its biggest weakness. The conceptual implications behind it are dense, though there remains a disconnect between this element and the rest of the ideas in the show. Too many cooks in the kitchen, so to speak.