

OPENINGS

Anicka Yi

BEAU RUTLAND



Opposite page: Anicka Yi, *I'm Every Woman I Ever Met* (detail), 2011, vacuum-sealed peanuts and pearls, Plexiglas, 57 x 15 x 22".

Above, foreground: Anicka Yi, *235,681k of Digital Spit*, 2010, PVC and leather bag, hair gel, cow stomach, 10 x 14 x 20".
Background: Anicka Yi, *Skype Sweater* (detail), 2010, nylon parachute, box fan, approx. 20 x 10".



Anicka Yi, *Untitled*, 2011, digital video (color, silent, 90 minutes), tofu, talcum powder, dimensions variable.

THE TOFU WAS OOZING FASTER than Anicka Yi had expected. *Untitled*, 2011, her contribution to the 2011 New York group exhibition "Skin So Soft," organized by fellow artist Josh Kline for Gresham's Ghost, took the form of a winkingly medium-specific video—a grid of tofu blocks and packages—projected onto a craggy tofu-brick wall. But the wall wasn't holding its shape particularly well. To temporarily absorb the discharge (and mask the stench of deteriorating food), Yi dumped foot powder onto the rotting protein. And why not—since health food, body parts, and quotidian accessories share the same status in her work, and after all, she accepts decomposition as a side effect of living. If today the instability of an artwork is often excused as a stab at self-reflexivity, Yi's art, in its openness to structural failure, turns reflexively outward, demonstrating the incompatibility of the aesthetic realm with everyday life and even with our own physical presence.

Based in New York since 1995, Yi worked odd jobs and followed various creative pursuits (there are rumors of dreadlocks and a punk band) before choosing to become an artist. *Cruisin' for a Bruisin'*, 2009, made the year after Yi began exhibiting, could be seen as her auspicious start, especially given its provenance:

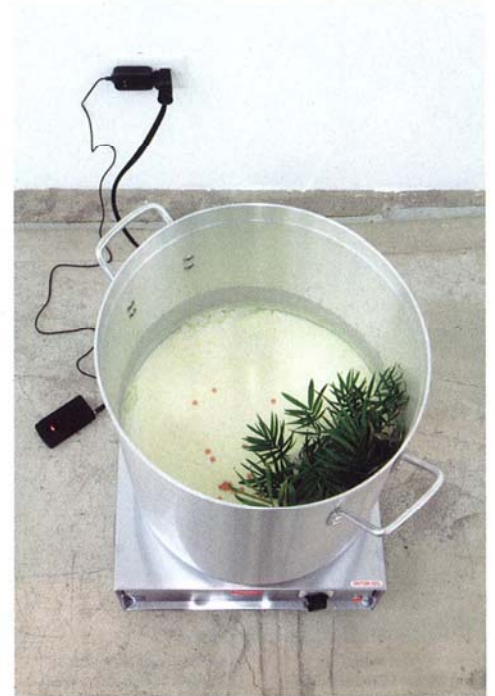
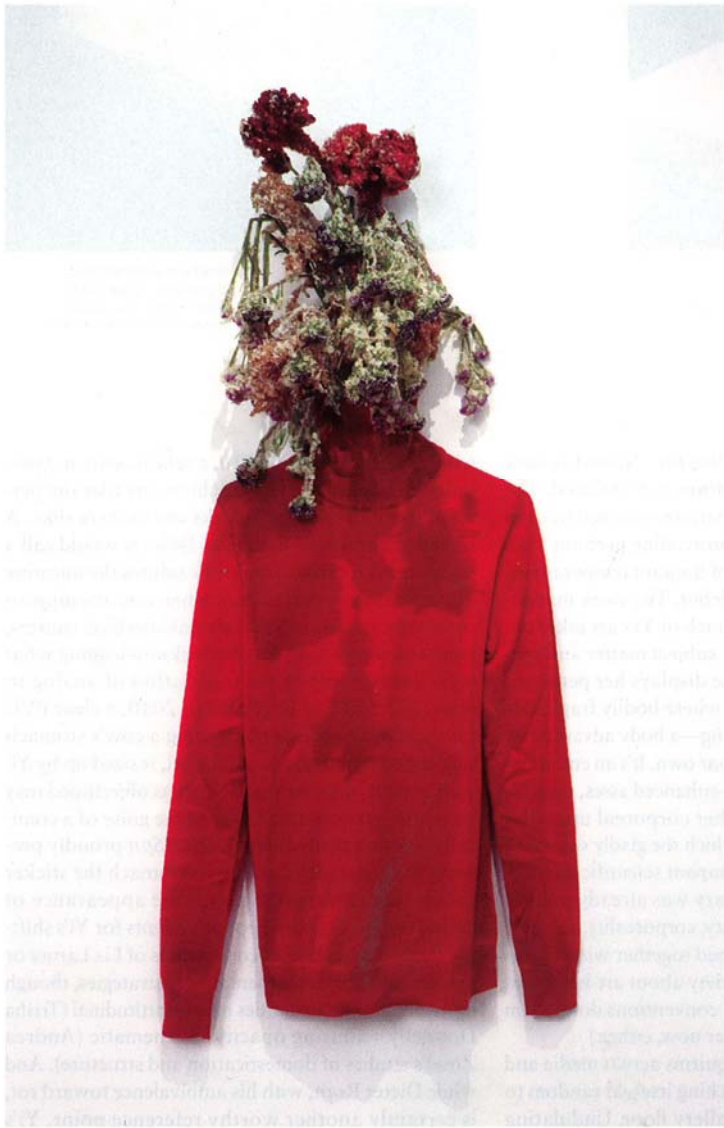
The work was selected by Kline for "Nobodies New York," the inaugural exhibition at 179 Canal. The rough-hewn *Cruisin'*, an aquarium occupied by cast-gelatin butts blemished by protruding perfume vials and accompanied by a vase of fragrant tempura-fried flowers, made for a telling debut. The work inaugurates the hybrid form that much of Yi's art takes on, dialectically pairing organic subject matter and synthetic material, and likewise displays her penchant for apocalyptic synecdoche where bodily fragments stand in for a posthuman being—a body advanced by science beyond the realm of our own. It's an entertaining prospect for Yi. Perfume-enhanced asses, eyeball-enlarging contacts, and other corporeal upgrades roam freely in her work, in which she gladly summons forth a future plagued by rampant scientific interference. Much of Yi's vocabulary was already present in *Cruisin'*: scent, perishability, corporeality, seepage, and transparency—all plopped together with youthful aplomb, void of any anxiety about art-historical lineage. (Though sculptural conventions don't seem to be much of a worry for her now, either.)

Yi's amoeboid practice squirms across media and modes of presentation, attaching itself at random to pedestals, walls, and the gallery floor. Undulating

wildly, *Skype Sweater*, 2010, a refashioned and partially inflated military parachute, invades the personal space of nearby artworks and viewers alike. A vestment befitting what Gilles Deleuze would call a body without organs, the work salutes the uncanny disembodiment that occurs when one attempts to communicate through this virtual interface: stutters, lags, and image loss. Further acknowledging what is frequently lost in the translation of analog to JPEG, *235,681k of Digital Spit*, 2010, a clear PVC Longchamp handbag containing a cow's stomach suspended within globs of hair gel, is sized up by Yi, who nonchalantly estimates what its objecthood may be worth in kilobytes. A pun in the guise of a comically assisted readymade, *Digital Spit* proudly presents the consumer's ability to stomach the sticker shock that comes along with the appearance of "good taste." One can spot precedents for Yi's shifting output in the beaker concoctions of Liz Larner or in Haim Steinbach's presentational strategies, though more illuminating affinities may be attitudinal (Trisha Donnelly's alluring opacity) or thematic (Andrea Zittel's studies of domestication and structure). And while Dieter Roth, with his ambivalence toward rot, is certainly another worthy reference point, Yi's

Perfume-enhanced asses, eyeball-enlarging contacts, and other corporeal upgrades roam freely in Yi's work, in which she gladly summons forth a future plagued by rampant scientific interference.

Anicka Yi, *Sister*, 2011.
tempura-fried flowers, cotton
turtleneck. dimensions variable.



Above: Anicka Yi, *Convex Dialer Double Distance of a Shining Path*, 2011, recalled powdered milk, antidepressants, palm-tree essence, shaved sea lice, ground Teva rubber dust, Korean thermal clay, steeped Swatch watch, aluminum pot, cell-phone-signal jammer, electric burner, 23 x 15 x 15".

Below: Anicka Yi, *Ear Condom May Contain Traced Nuts*, 2009, tempura-fried Q-tips, plastic product packaging, 4 x 3½ x 3".





Left: Anicka Yi and Maggie Peng's perfume Shigenobu Twilight, 2009. Photo: Noah Sheldon.

Right: Anicka Yi, *Midcentury Olfactory Brutalism* (detail), 2010, light box, transparency paper, potato chips, ground Cheetos, 6 x 24 x 21".



practice isn't beholden to a hermetic studio and the poring-over of monographs. Collaboration and group-think are often in play. This is best evidenced by her activity in the artists' collective Circular File, which includes spa-oriented performances and a segment for a 2009 Performa-commissioned television series, *Circular File Channel*, that commingles young artists with plotlines more appropriate for a crime drama than for today's gallery-laden Lower East Side.

Propelled by a nearly alchemical use of metaphor, incongruous objects align in Yi's tableaux, each selected for what it suggests rather than for what it actually is. While her works depend on the interaction of unrelated materials, her agglomerations retain their potency even when they've been boiled down. *Convex Dialer Double Distance of a Shining Path*, 2011, presents an abstract amalgam of ingredients including recalled powdered milk, antidepressants, shaved sea lice, and ground rubber Teva-sandal dust, all of which simmers in a large aluminum pot placed atop an electric burner. A nearby cell-phone-signal jammer offers the ever-connected viewer a reprieve from text and e-mail interruptions, enforcing a literal presentness. No panacea (or work of relational aesthetics, for that matter), *Convex Dialer* mourns the decreasing presence of soup-kitchen altruism by providing a bitter curative for twenty-first-century malaise. The concoction's relief comes at a price, clouding pristine gallery air with its acrid-savory scent.

It isn't unusual to smell a work by Yi before seeing it stewing in a corner or leaking down a wall. Scent becomes an interception, a piling-up of unexpected triggers, awakening sensations often ignored in aesthetic spaces. *Bolivian Bath*, 2012, contains five unevenly handmade glass bowls filled with a viscous layer of fluorescent gelatin that has been impregnated with Yi's handcrafted scent, Shigenobu

Twilight (created with architect Maggie Peng and—quite unlike Marcel Duchamp's "eau de toilette" *Belle Haleine*, 1921—hand-distilled and sold at luxury boutiques). The radical militant Fusako Shigenobu, founder of 1970s Communist insurrectionary group the Japanese Red Army, assumed to be living in Lebanon until her 2000 arrest, serves as the fragrance's heroine, its clashing organic ingredients paying homage to Shigenobu's orchestration of guerrilla warfare. When first shown at Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea in Bergamo, Italy, the fragrance radiated outward from the sculpture in hulking wafts, yet the cool air stifled the perfume's warmer shades, amplifying the sharp tones of yuzu and minty shiso. Less forgiving than a pulsating wrist or neck, the institutional siting of *Bath* controlled more than just the work's perception and framing, flexing its capabilities for biological manipulation, too.

Unsurprisingly, considering her interest in the senses, and taste in particular, Yi makes a studio of her kitchen, though she doesn't exactly enjoy laboring over her own meals—her first solo exhibition in New York, 2011's "Sous-Vide" at 47 Canal, was named after a rather sexless method of vacuum-sealing and then slow-cooking food to produce flawless results. (The exhibition's ingredients included everything from peanuts to pearls, as seen in *I'm Every Woman I Ever Met*, 2011.) Her culinary efforts (think El Bulli plus Gordon Matta-Clark's pan-seared *Photo-Fry*, 1969) connote movement, though less along the lines of a modernist kinetic sculpture than along those of gastric distress after a trying meal. Consumption and digestion are likewise evoked by a well-known gastronomic tactic of Yi's: tempura-frying. The elegiac wall hanging *Sister*, 2011, a red turtle-neck with a bouquet of fried flowers for a head—one of several wallflowers—offers up a questionably edible subject for viewer, collector, and gourmand alike. Over time,

the seductive sculpture withers and emulsifies, resembling a bereft figure doubled over and weeping, though here peanut oil, not tears, pools on the gallery floor below. Yet appetite quickly displaces sympathy; *Sister* smells good enough to eat. While masticatory pleasure is often a tempting possibility in these works (indeed, a critic was once witnessed snacking on a box of tempura-fried Q-tips, *Ear Condom May Contain Traced Nuts*, 2009), Yi's conflation of the toxic and the healthful recalls what we routinely swallow blindly, whether in a deli, an aspirational retail store, or a given news cycle.

In dealing with natural materials, decay is unavoidable. So how long should one expect an infected artwork to live? To this end, Yi has penned an obsessive ten-page manuscript detailing the production of her fried works, aiding the re-creation of future incarnations. Pushing past Sol LeWitt's passive instructions to impassioned precision, she touches on hyperspecific matters ranging from the batter's frothiness to a flower's texture and frying capabilities: "If it's a light flower like baby's breath, it doesn't need more than 3 seconds to brown." Yi's safeguard manual exposes her exacting orchestration of chaos and, in turn, what remains uncontrollable in her oeuvre. A desiccated filler flower such as baby's breath, inherently fragile and prone to snapping, inevitably self-destructs and crumbles onto the floor, staining the sweater and thereby fulfilling the work's final state. This remnant of uncertainty calls to mind the swiftness of the vagaries of life (catching a cold, getting pregnant, classified information getting leaked) and the falsehood of believing in our ability to control every facet of being alive. By repeatedly colliding the anthropocentric with natural order, Yi reveals in time how very little we're actually able to keep confined to the petri dish. □

BEAU RUTLAND IS AN ART HISTORIAN AND CURATOR BASED IN NEW YORK. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)