

## Anicka Yi with Olivier Berggruen



Anicka Yi, *Home in 30 Days, Don't Wash*, 2015. Vinyl, steel pipes, metal bowl, wire mesh, nylon string, DVD, black tea, foam, plasticine, neon light, hydro gel beads, plexiglas, sponge, worklight?. 78 × 122 × 50 inches. Courtesy the artist.

A symbiotic organism in its own right, Anicka Yi's work fuses multi-sensory experience with synthetic and evolutionary biology to form lush bio-fictional landscapes. Utilizing a "biopolitics of the senses" Yi challenges traditional approaches to the human sensorium, emphasizing olfaction as well as microbial and embodied intelligence. Through her "techno-sensual" artistic exploration, Yi is opening new discourse in the realms of cognition, artificial intelligence, and machine learning, introducing concepts of the sensorial ecology of intelligence, the machine microbiome, machine ecosystems, and "biologized" machines.

**Olivier Berggruen (Rail):** Is the experience of a physical thing essential? Could art be created in such ways as to unfold on a home device; on a large screen in the high street; in the context of window shopping? To what extent can screens generate forms of sensuality and tactility?

**Anicka Yi:** Biological entities perceive and experience reality through the sensorium, through an embodied intelligence tied to a memory or a glimpse of the physical, that's what gives the virtual its potency. If I am in the ocean swimming with sharks and whales

in a virtual setting, the experience is amplified by a physical relationship to the ocean and its memory. However, a virtual experience set on the moon could be something altogether metaphorical or proximal which can create new unrealized sensations based on our perceived ideas about the moon and its physical properties. The physical will probably always be a metaphor to think through the virtual even if it's just a counterpoint. Screens can be successful interfaces for art if only because the physical realm makes it possible to have another facet to perception. Screens can compress the qualities of the physical in remarkable ways, in heightened ways that an actual physical reality does not. As long as humans exist, we are still in the physical realm even if we choose to "live" in the virtual or augmented realm, meaning the dialectic tension is necessary for both realms to exist.



Anicka Yi, *Grabbing at Newer Vegetables*, 2015 Plexiglas, agar, female bacteria, fungus 84 1/2 x 24 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist.

**Rail:** In your work, what are possible ways to rethink and reconfigure the spatial and experiential terms of pure (traditional) visual art?

**Yi:** Olfaction comes to mind. Smell activates air as a medium: a vital site for social, political discourse as a trans-corporeal art experience. I'm referring to air as a vital site for social and political discourse on, for instance, atmospheric injustice. Underprivileged bodies are most often subjected to poor air in polluted neighborhoods even though the wealthier class often produces the majority of pollution and toxicity in the air from

planes, cars, factories that produce the accessories for the rich such as laptops, iPhones, etc. The air in art museums and galleries is climate controlled to protect the art, which creates consequences for the climate. A symbiotic exchange occurs with aromatic art. Porous bodies become a part of the work as they take elements of the work with them while they travel through spaces. The ephemeral material reminds us of how transitory life is, how nothing is permanent amidst a series of constant change. This symbiotic relationship between art and visitor underscores the ceaseless connection, collaboration, and change that constitutes life.

**Rail:** To what degree does biology offer metaphors for our spatial and sensorial experience, and how does your work offer a representation of various life forms, organic and transient—in short, the biological?

**Yi:** Biology has been a metaphor for philosophical and artistic ideas since the dawn of these disciplines. Representations of the biological have helped us relate to our human-made world as well as the natural world. They allow us to examine life, death, evolution while maintaining these separate domains, always keeping nature at bay as something that is external to ourselves as humans. Metaphors promote the idea of human space as separate from nature while lending us sensorial cues in measured doses.

With my work, I'm asking, isn't it time for us to merge with the biological directly, bypassing the need for the metaphorical, at least in part? Isn't it time we rethought, reset our relationship to the biological and by extension, the natural world? Most of us regard nature in one of two ways: as pure cosmos, where all things are explained by divine intelligence—through God for instance—or, we see nature as separate from humans, as a physical space for empirical research on non-humans, like animals and plants. Humans originated here but quickly evolved out of nature. While I do deploy metaphorical traces of the biological philosophically, collaborating directly with microbes or plants or animals collapses the distance between humans and nature. I no longer need to point to biological examples to illustrate the organic, the entropic, the decayed. The biological doesn't have to stand for anything other than what it is, moreover, it can reveal that nature was all there ever was, all along, like an ecology of intelligence.

**Rail:** How can works be experienced without the specificity of the “tactile” reaction of the viewer to a physical thing? Or is tactility perhaps being displaced, rather than cancelled altogether?



Anicka Yi, *Home in 30 Days, Don't Wash*, 2015. (Detail) Vinyl, steel pipes, metal bowl, wire mesh, nylon string, DVD, black tea, foam, plasticine, neon light, hydro gel beads, plexiglas, sponge, worklight?. 78 × 122 × 50 inches. Courtesy the artist.



**Yi:** Tactility is important because it relates to the physical world. We cannot cancel the tactile altogether because as long as there is nature, tactility will persist or at least the memory of it will persist. Most art isn't meant to be touched while the haptic is implied, often activated. One can transfer the tactile experience of one material through virtual means such as olfaction. Smelling a tactile object will allow for contours of the physical because the experience is grounded in corporeal intelligence. The experience of smell is precognitive—that liminal space before we designate meaning derived from that experience which stems from the sensorial paradigm—but often the cranial paradigm gets the credit. Digitized scent is a step in this direction. Smelling a digital image will help retain some connection to tactility. We must not cancel tactility!



Installation image: *You Can Call Me F* at the Kitchen. March 5, 2015 -- April 11, 2015. Courtesy the artist.

**Rail:** How do you conceive of your work in terms of its physical attributes and realization? In other words, could your works have a multiplicity of incarnations and still represent the same idea? Or do you find it impossible to distinguish between idea and form?

**Yi:** My works often take on multiple forms because I want to explore different material manifestations of an idea but I also thread different facets of an idea that can best be expressed through a panoply of forms. Let's take the subject of microbes. For the 2015 exhibition at The Kitchen, I took bacterial data from 100 females then grew the living cultures on agar in a massive petri dish. I took that same bacteria and translated the

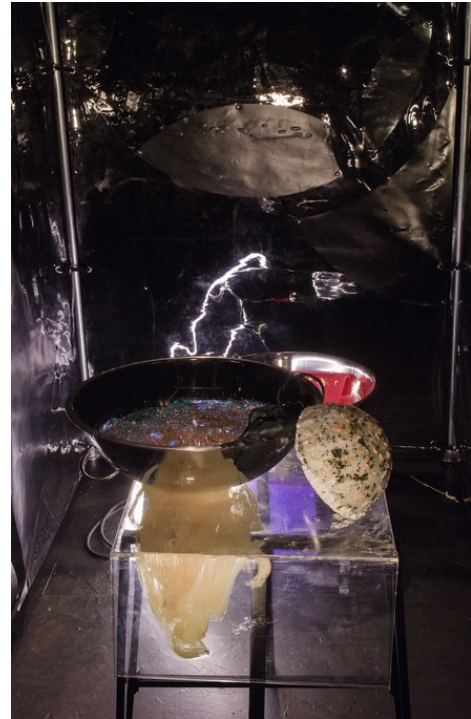
microbes into a molecular compound that was then pumped through a diffuser hidden inside a rotating motorcycle helmet sculpture inside a vinyl quarantine tent. Then that bacteria was photographed. It became a UV print light box sculpture. Furthermore, that original bacteria was preserved and blended into a new microbial sculpture. Ideas are like viruses that can jump through “cell walls” of different forms and synthesize, mutating with different species of art works. I’ve never really known any other way of working so thank you for pointing this out!

**Rail:** If pandemics force social-distancing, and art cannot be experienced in traditional ways, what are novel ways to engage with the public?

**Yi:** One way to think of this current moment of social distancing is that humans are bad for the homeostasis of this planet. A virus’s function is to regulate monoculture and to promote ecological biodiversity. We humans have been an obstacle to biodiversity. Having to shelter is helping the planet recuperate. We must make and experience art that respects this rebalancing. So instead of thousands of human bodies congregating at a single site, can we imagine more tempered engagements? Open expansive spaces accommodating limited bodies come to mind as well as decentralized hubs for art. We can no longer crowd urban spaces with this one-stop-shopping mentality of viewing art. Perhaps art becomes something more customized and unique but more rarified. It can’t be for the masses. Also, there may be more work for the visitor to invest in before engaging with the work. Part of the work can be done online leading to a pilgrimage or site. Maybe we’ve been too spoiled with too much access to art and there have been dire ecological consequences to all this traveling and energy consumption. Didn’t we all sense intuitively that the global art circuit was unsustainable? Can we bring caves back?

**Rail:** How is the experience of space (in a gallery, museum, public space, the home, the computer screen) related to art? And how can art find new conduits for visibility?

**Yi:** Site specificity has always been important to the experience of art. The air in galleries, museums is different to the one at home and on computer screens. The customs, the rules, are different as well. It’s a good time to think about more expansive spaces to contextualize art. Space shuttles? Mars? Microscope slides? Armpits? We need to explore zooming into more intimate corporeal spaces and zooming out towards more planetary options. Artists have to keep expanding art to where it doesn’t traditionally belong or exist. If we build these spaces, visitors will come.



Anicka Yi, *Your Hand Feels Like a Pillow That's Been Microwaved*, 2015. (Detail)  
Vinyl, steel pipes, metal bowls, beeswax, dried shrimp, glycerin soap, hair gel, metal pins, seaweed, foam, plasticine, pigment powder, worklight. 78 × 122 × 50 inches. Courtesy the artist.

**Rail:** How does the experience of pandemics, the social distancing, etc., shape art to come? Could art be generated in other ways, virtually, or through AI?

**Yi:** Right about now, a lot of artists are starting to think about the invisible world of microbes. Could art be shifting away from the ocular-centric world? My hope is that art may focus less on surface realities and expand more along subsurface geological time scales. Can art think beyond observable human time? Currently, we have been given invaluable lessons about life/non-life, how the human experience is part of a relentless patterning, re-patterning of life. Yet again, we are forced to confront the idea that we do not own this life anymore than we are autonomous individuals. We are a multitude of beings that exist in symbiosis with other organisms, a colony enclosed within a single body. The outer world is a reflection of ourselves internally. So while humans need to observe social distancing, we are not alone. No life is lived in isolation. Microbes connect us to soil, water, air, buildings, the environments around us. They connect us to each other and to the world. Art can be generated with more acute awareness and collaboration with the multi-species collective that comprises who we are. By limiting the need for metaphor or representation, CRISPR could be a tool for art. Made from microbes, CRISPR allows biology (nature) to be the technology for advanced human aspirations. This would be an example of a biologized machine, a concept I've been trying to cultivate recently in an attempt to integrate nature with technology and by extension industry.

**Rail:** If we've lived, until recently, in a condition of hyper-socialization, could that environment disappear and what new forms of art making should be encouraged?

**Yi:** Hyper-socialization could be a metaphor for anthropogenic navel-gazing as we have clearly ignored the setting, the environment as host. Could humans have the capacity to team up with other organisms that might balance the environment? Perhaps a kind of art that opens out from a human-centric focus could emerge. Maybe it's time for art, which has been a strictly human endeavor, to invite animals, machines into the art process. Not just as mere material agents but as creative collaborators.