

Anicka Yi: 'Everything, everywhere, all at once'

In Conversation with
[Anna Dickie](#)
Seoul, 5 September 2024

Anicka Yi. Photo: Jae An Lee.



Ahead of her first institutional presentation in Asia, [Anicka Yi](#) discusses her most recent work, which moves in new directions, but addresses enduring themes.

From the plethora of contemporary art, certain works rise to become ingrained in cultural memory. In 2019, Yi's *Biologizing the Machine (Tentacular Trouble)*—yellowish, glowing, bulbous forms suspended, lantern like, within the cavernous space of the Arsenale—was one of a handful of pieces that came to define the 58th Venice Biennale.

Each sculpture's sheath-like skin, constructed from kelp and acrylic paint, contained animatronic, flying creatures that cast anxious, flickering shadows. Beneath the suspended constellation were shallow craters of liquid, adding to an otherworldly atmosphere. Wafting unseen through the air was a scent made in collaboration with

French perfumer Barnabé Fillion as part of the companion piece *Biologizing the Machine (Terra Incognita)* (2019).

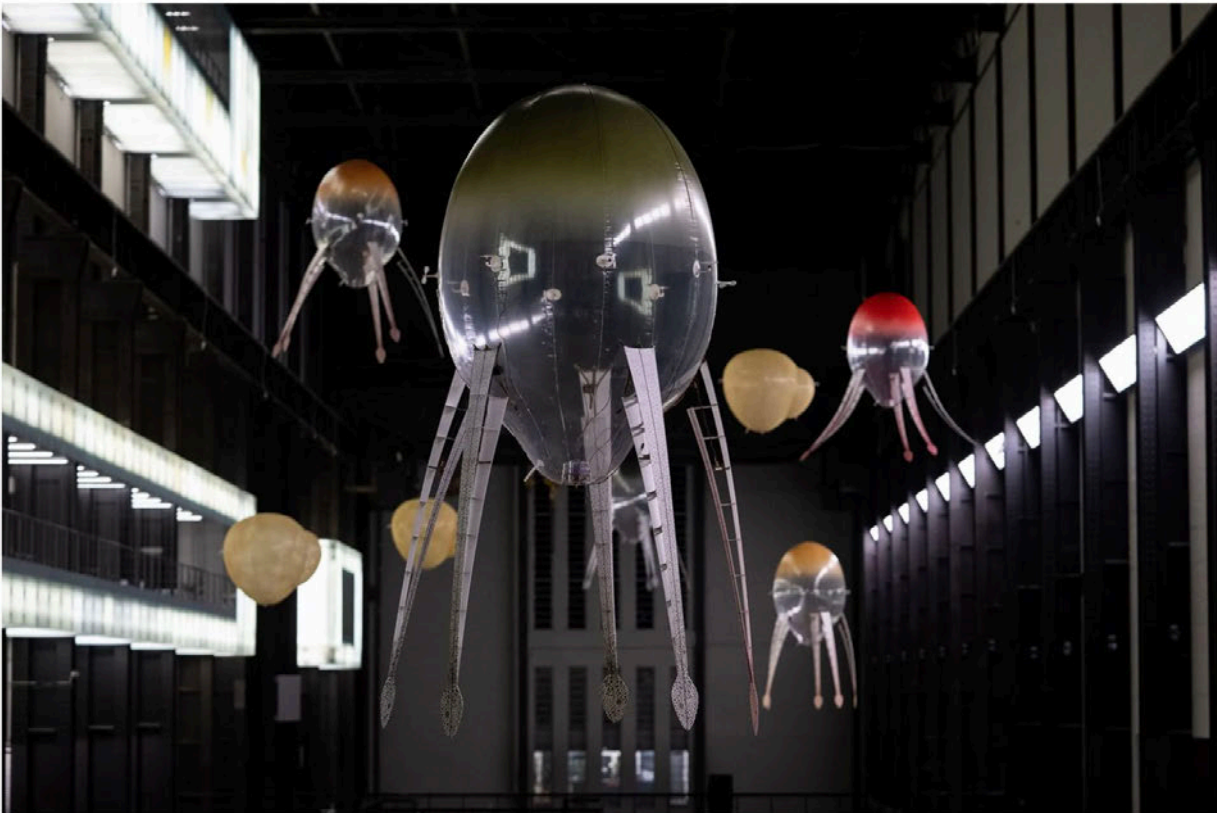


Anicka Yi, *Biologizing The Machine (tentacular trouble)* (2019). Kelp, acrylic, animatronic moths, concrete, water. Dimensions variable. © Anicka Yi / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy the artist, 47 Canal, and Gladstone Gallery. Photo: Renato Ghiazza.

Informed by scientific research, technology, cosmology, spirituality, and biography, Yi has established a reputation as one of this generation's most experimental and thought-provoking creatives. The New York-based artist's exhibition at Leeum Museum of Art in Seoul, *There Exists Another Evolution, But in This One* (5 September–29 December 2024), presents new and earlier works, including versions of the 'Kelp Pods' shown in Venice.

Despite, by her admission, 'not setting out to be an artist'¹, Yi's ascent over the past decade has been meteoric. In 2015, she garnered global attention for *You Can Call Me F*, her solo exhibition at The Kitchen in New York, which included petri dishes

housing microbial cultures that mushroomed into crimson, black, and pink clouds, as well as transparent PVC structures resembling quarantine tents, referencing society's anxieties around contagion and cleanliness. Later that year, her Kunsthalle Basel show, *7,070,430K of Digital Spit*, presented tempura-battered blooms encased in mylar balloons.



Exhibition view: Anicka Yi, *In Love with the World*. Hyundai Commission, Tate Modern, London (12 October 2021–6 February 2022). © Anicka Yi / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy the artist, Gladstone Gallery, and Tate. Photo: Will Burrard-Lucas.

(ARS), New York. Courtesy the artist, 47 Canal, and Gladstone Gallery. Photo: © Philipp Hänger.

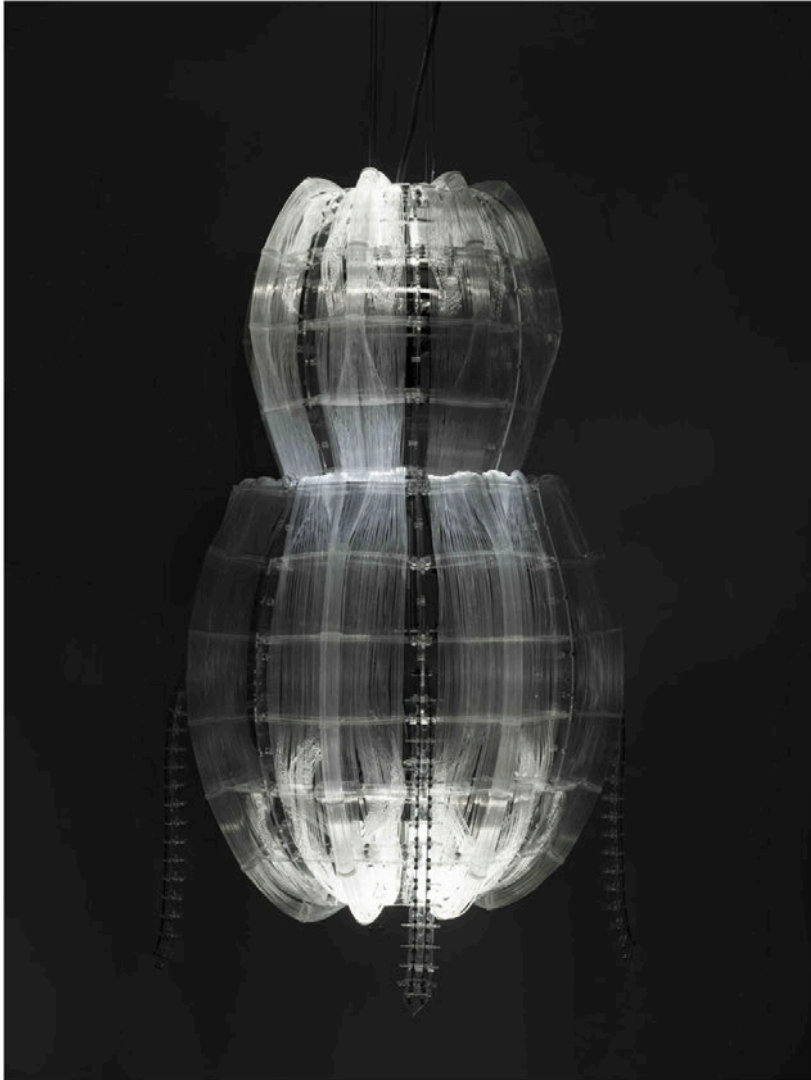
In 2016, Yi was awarded the Hugo Boss Prize, and a show at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York followed, as well as an invitation to exhibit in the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall in 2021. In 2022, she presented a solo exhibition at Pirelli HangarBicocca, which took as its title *Metaspore*, the name also given to a nomadic research project initiated by her studio, which



Anicka Yi, *Another You* (2024). Acrylic, LEDs, MDF, mirror, two-way mirror, bacteria, agar. 200 x 200 x 35cm. Courtesy Leeum Museum of Art.

held its first symposium in San Francisco last year in collaboration with Stanford University. Reflective of her interest in fostering dialogue between the sciences and arts, Yi's work often combines what she terms the 'biosphere' and 'technosphere'. Her Guggenheim exhibition, *Life Is Cheap*, featured a colony of 10,000 ants living inside a network of computer parts, while her 2021 Tate installation, *In Love with the World*, saw her fill the museum's cavernous hall with 'aerobes', AI-generated floating amoebas.

Similarly, her 'Radiolara' series (2023–24)—giant white jellyfish-like sculptures that gently float and unfurl their tentacles on the first floor of Leeum—are also 'biologised machines'. They are the outcome of technology combined with research on single-celled



Anicka Yi, *Nested Lung* (2023–24). PMMA optical fibre, LEDs, silicone, acrylic, epoxy, aluminium, stainless steel, brass, motors, and microcontrollers. 118.1 x 74.3 x 74.3 cm. Courtesy Leeum Museum of Art.

zooplankton that first emerged around 500 million years ago during the Cambrian period.

Also collapsing time, and included in the show at Leeum is *Another You* (2024), which resonates with the artist's journey as a diasporic Korean American. Presented in an enormous, mirrored petri dish, the work incorporates synthetically generated bacterial organisms that draw on the genetic legacy of sea creatures from the 'kelp highway'—a coastal route believed to have

supported the migration of people from Asia to America more than 13,000 years ago. Referencing the ancient past's contemporary presence, the work challenges entrenched notions of evolution and existence, linking the artist's biography to broader ideas of immigration, identity, and belonging. Another work debuting at Leeum is the video *Each Branch of Coral Holds Up the Light of the Moon* (2024), the inaugural piece of Yi's 'Emptiness' project, which employs simulation and machine learning to mimic and

remix her existing artworks to create new works. Having abdicated partial autonomy over her work in the past through collaborations and the use of morphing materials, the project further questions the notion of the artist as sole creator. Intended to continue beyond the artist's death, it also raises existential questions regarding consciousness and existence, asking where



Exhibition view: Anicka Yi, *There Exists Another Evolution, But In This One*, Leeum Museum of Art, Seoul (5 September–29 December 2024). Courtesy Leeum Museum of Art. Photo: Andrea Rossetti.

life begins and ends.

In this interview, Yi discusses her new work and the questions it poses.



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AD The title of the upcoming show, *There Exists Another Evolution, But In This One*, is written as a koan. Can you discuss why you settled on this koan?

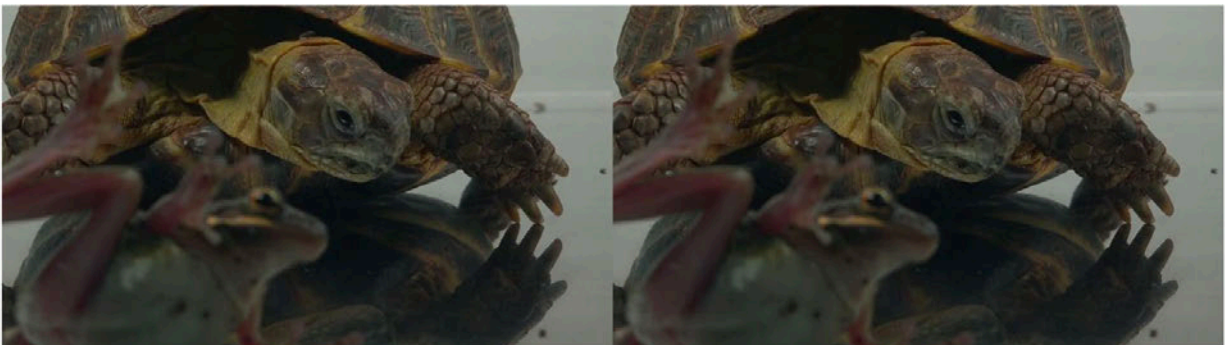
AY The title is partially influenced by Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and my meditation practice, but also a commissioned conversation between poet Alexis Pauline Gumbs and biologist Kriti Sharma for a book I am working on. In their dialogue, they discussed a blessing Gumbs had written, *May we evolve*, and the importance of not abandoning each other to the story of natural selection. This resonated with me and I was inspired to write the title in the form of a koan—a meditative puzzle without a definitive answer—reflecting some of the existential questions central to my work: What are the latent potentialities within evolutionary paths

not taken? How can we evolve beyond our current biological and cultural limitations? The title captures my view of evolution as not just a biological process but one intertwined with culture, technology, and countless possible outcomes existing simultaneously, inviting us to consider evolution as a dynamic, multidimensional phenomenon. The 'everything, everywhere, all at once' of life's possible outcomes.

AD I understand your new body of work will consider the distinction between self/non-self, and the idea of the afterlife. How do you see the 'afterlife' in relation to ideas around the self?

AY My view of the afterlife isn't about a literal existence after death but about continuity and transformation beyond the physical body. In Buddhist philosophy, the self is an illusion—a temporary collection of transient elements. This idea of emptiness, where nothing has a permanent essence, aligns with how I envision my art evolving without me. What happens to art when the artist is gone? Can it grow, change, and create new meanings on its own?

I'm fascinated by how digital simulations and algorithms might be able to give art an "afterlife", allowing it to operate independently, evolving in ways I can't predict. This creates a new phase of creative existence, where the absence of the artist marks not an end, but a beginning—a continuation where the art, much like life, is free to transform.



Anicka Yi, *The Flavor Genome* (2016) (film still). Single-channel 3D video. 22 min. Courtesy Anicka Yi.

For instance, in *The Flavor Genome* (2016), I used 3D film to explore sensory and biological intersections between species, imagining "chemical personas" that would let one experience another being's perceptual world. The film introduced a type of vexed biochemical empathy, where the tension between connection and the dangers of extraction or appropriation came to the forefront—how do we connect with deep intimacy without distorting or erasing the other?

My newer work builds on these themes, bringing in metaphysical and cosmological dimensions that were only hinted at before. The Leeum show traces this artistic evolution—how these ideas have expanded over the past decade, how my practice has matured while staying true to its philosophical core.

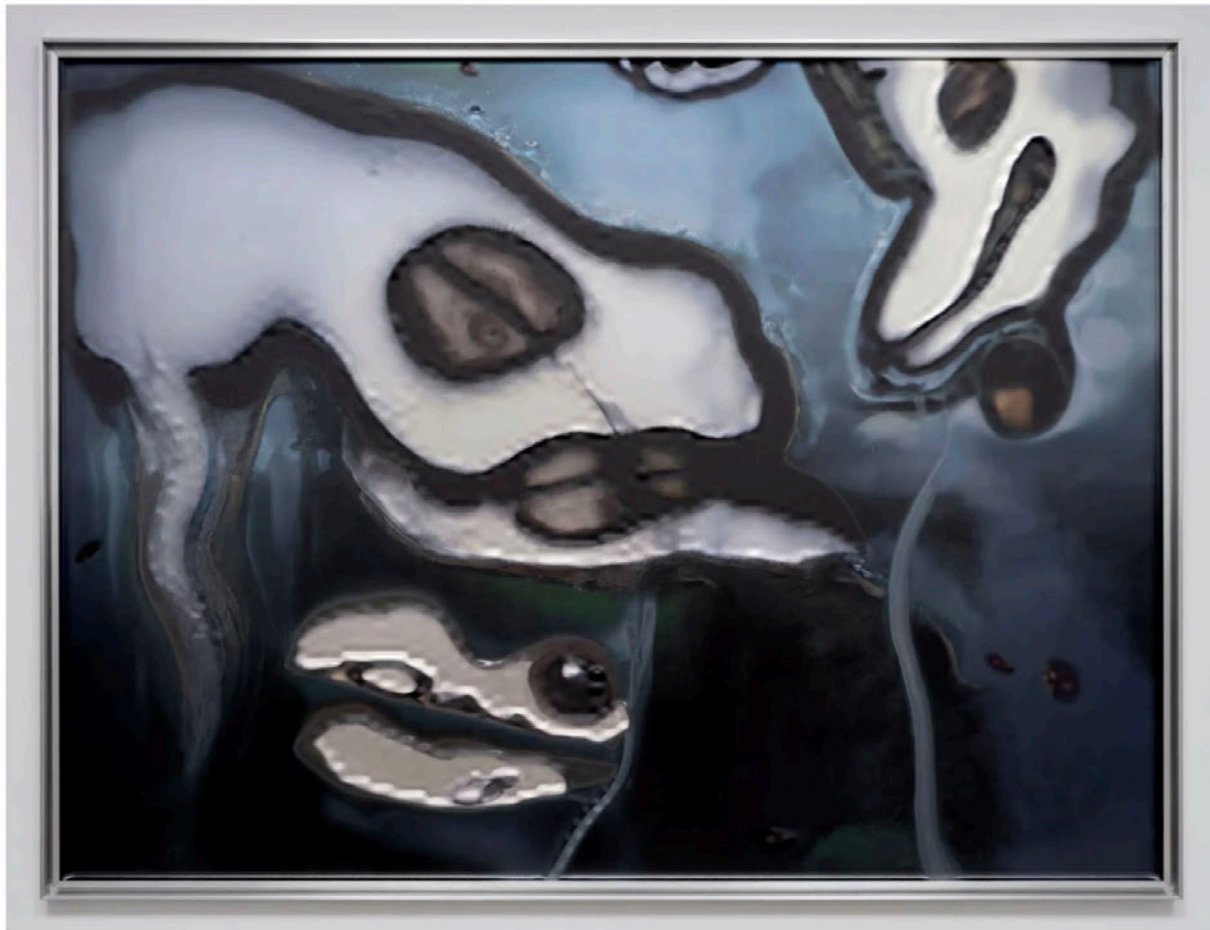
AD The show at Leeum will also present an arc of ten years of work. To what extent are the ideas in the new work visible in the earlier work?

AY Looking back, it's clear that I've been exploring themes like evolution, interdependence, and the breakdown of boundaries from the very start, even if I wasn't fully conscious of it at the time. Early works like tempura-fried flowers and bacterial cultures were already pushing against the conventional divides between life and death, organic and synthetic, human and non-human. Over time, these ideas have deepened and become more nuanced, particularly as I've integrated technology and digital processes into my practice.

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Anicka Yi, *KL\$E'Lβ\$*R* (2024). Acrylic, UV print, and aluminium artist's frame. 121.9 x 162.6 x 3.8 cm (framed). © Anicka Yi/Artists Rights Society, New York. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

AD You work a lot with biologists and scientists, but to what extent does imagination and fiction inform your work?

AY While I work extensively with biologists and scientists, imagination and fiction are equally crucial in shaping my practice. My work is deeply informed by literature, especially science fiction, which allows me to explore ideas beyond the empirical. I loved Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* trilogy, with its eerie and unsettling, otherworldly landscapes where the boundaries between the known and unknown, the earthly and the alien dissolve. Many of Ted Chiang's precise explorations of possibility and philosophy have stuck with me and influenced my own thinking. Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*, with its dreamlike mix of ancient and modern, and its vivid, sometimes grotesque vision of a dystopian future, has also been a big influence. Lai's focus on forbidden smells ties into my own exploration of scent as a way to create immersive, transgressive experiences.

There is immense potency in the places where fact meets fiction, where the empirical becomes the speculative. It's in these liminal spaces—where life's evolution might take a different turn—that my work truly comes to life. This collision of science and imagination opens up moments where our usual rational frameworks begin to destabilise, allowing us to enter a more non-conceptual space. In these moments, art has the potential to disrupt conventional thinking and invite us into an experience that transcends logic.

AD Your work addresses topics that evoke emotions of anxiety and fear—of machines, AI, contamination, the other, extinction, aliens, and death. Can you discuss these emotions in relation to your work?



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AY Fear and anxiety aren't just emotions; they're deep biological responses that highlight how fragile we really are. Through my work, I try to probe the molecular and sensory foundations that shape how we see the world. In a time where technology blurs the lines between human and non-human, fear and anxiety naturally arise as reactions to the unknown. But instead of giving in to these fears, I believe we should embrace uncertainty as a tool for liberation. Engaging with uncertainty can spark creativity and freedom, helping us navigate an ever-changing world. As an artist, I see my role as protecting the space where ambiguity and possibility thrive. Just like air is full of invisible exchanges that shape our thoughts and emotions, fear and anxiety can both limit and expand our understanding. We need to confront what makes us uncomfortable because if we don't, someone else will—and we

risk losing our voice in shaping the future. Through art, I aim to create a space where we can critically engage with these feelings, challenging and redefining what it means to be human in a world in flux.



Anicka Yi, *Each Branch Of Coral Holds Up The Light Of The Moon* (2024) (detail). Courtesy Leeum Museum of Art.

AD Previous shows have been the outcome of coincidental events. Your seminal show at The Kitchen, *You Can Call Me F*, grew from your residency at MIT, where you conducted microbial research, and this coincided with an Ebola outbreak and you hearing a podcast that sparked ideas around female networks. How do you practise staying open to ideas?

AY Staying open to ideas demands a certain permeability—a readiness to let the world seep in and leave its mark on you. It's about cultivating an insatiable curiosity, always on the lookout for fresh experiences, new ways of being liberated, and never succumbing to complacency. I envision it as building up a kind of endurance, much like maintaining cardiovascular fitness for the mind and spirit—how much can you expand your capacity to breathe in the world around you? It's not always comfortable, but it's vital for remaining flexible and resilient in the face of change.

This means resisting the temptation to become stagnant, instead staying actively engaged with the latest music, books, fashion, and cultural shifts. It's a way of keeping your inner life vibrant, ensuring you remain open to reinvention and transformation. A key aspect of this openness involves loosening the grip on identity —releasing the ego and shedding the labels and roles that give us the illusion of self-knowledge. These rigid definitions—like 'I'm this' or 'I'm that'—can become shackles. By letting go of these constraints, you liberate yourself to explore new possibilities, to embrace the unknown without the burden of having to fit into a predetermined mould.

AD What is it about cosmology that interests you, and how does it connect to considerations around biology?



Anicka Yi, *Le Pain Symbiotique* (2014). PVC dome, projector, single channel video, glycerin soap, resin, dough, pigmented powder, plastic, mylar, beads, tempera paint, cellophane, rice. Dimensions variable. Exhibition view: 9th Taipei Biennial, *The Great Acceleration* (13 September 2014–4 January 2015).

AY Cosmological questions are intricately woven into the fabric of biology, as life itself emerges from the cosmos—the same physical laws that shape galaxies also dictate the workings of our cells. We are not merely spectators of the cosmos; we are an integral thread in its vast tapestry, constantly interacting with planetary and cosmic systems. My work spans these scales—from the microscopic to the cosmic—because insights into one realm often illuminate the other.

The biosphere and technosphere are increasingly intertwined, blurring the line between the organic and artificial. My practice explores these shifting boundaries, creating ecosystems where materials, organisms, and algorithms interact. By embracing the continuum of biology, technology, and the cosmos, I aim to foster a new symbiosis—where living and technological worlds co-evolve, enhancing our understanding of the universe and guiding us toward a more harmonious existence, where the cosmic, biological, and technological are seen as inseparable parts of a unified whole.

AD You have been asked a few times what the role of the artist is, and you have proposed that part of the role is to ask the difficult questions. If someone was to frame this exhibition as a series of questions, what would these be?

AY Today, we're awash in information, yet true understanding often eludes us. After reading philosopher Byung-Chul Han's *Infocracy* [2022] I started to think that the most powerful act an artist can perform is to use materials to pose a question that lingers like a koan—an enigma that invites deep contemplation rather than demanding immediate resolution. In our current infocracy, where information is meticulously curated to project transparency and control, genuine understanding is frequently

drowned in a sea of data, obscuring more than it illuminates. The artist's role, then, is not to provide definitive answers but to cultivate spaces of uncertainty and introspection.



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Consider the profound questions that challenge the very fabric of our existence: how do we transcend the self and dissolve the boundaries that define us in order to merge with the greater cosmos? How can we penetrate beyond mere appearances and uncover the underlying structures that shape reality? In a world in perpetual flux, how do we cultivate equanimity? And how can we reimagine the relationship between the organic and the artificial, seeing them as interconnected threads in the continuous tapestry of becoming?

These questions stand in defiance of the relentless stream of information, inviting us to engage on a deeper, more nuanced level. They embrace uncertainty as a wellspring of creativity and understanding, challenging the supremacy of data and reminding us that true insight often lies not in what we know, but in our willingness to explore the unknown. —[O]