

Reading the Air

by Naomi Pearce



Anicka Yi, *Odor in the Court*, 2015 (installation view, *7,070,430K of Digital Spit*, Kunsthalle Basel, 2015). Courtesy the artist

The atmosphere at musician Terre Thaemlitz's talk at Café Oto in London smelled cultured and expensive – too much Comme D and Le Labo. A friend who loves perfume would say that they were 'scents with strong *sillage*' – French for wake and the 'correct' way of referring to the musky trails that fragrances radiate: invisible reminders of physical presence.

Thaemlitz, who is based in Japan, spoke about silence and withdrawal as strategies of resistance. Hostile towards the online 'sharing economy', she began by quoting a 1979 interview with Susan Sontag, published in *Rolling Stone*: 'You want to share things with other people, but on the other hand you don't want to just feed the machine that needs millions of fantasies and objects and products and opinions to be fed into it every day in order to keep on going.'

I go through my notes the day after. Written in the corner of one page is *Japanese saying: 'reading the air'*.

Kuuki wo Yomu, which translates awkwardly in the English tongue, means to be sensitive to the atmosphere of social situations – to be aware and to value what's unspoken between a group of people. In order to avoid conflict and remain polite, it's important to be perceptive to the 'air', to read and obey it. 'KY' is an abbreviation with negative connotations used to describe people who ignore the 'air': those who say too much or not enough, who say things at the wrong time, who stick out.

I go on an online forum for expats, read a comment from *yagian*, 'an ordinary Japanese salaryman living in Uptown Tokyo':

'I'm trying to be "KY", even if someone is angry at me, because I believe that nothing will come out of "reading the air."'

Recent exhibitions by Anicka Yi, Michael E. Smith and Anne Imhof, all of which I've experienced over the last six months, have activated atmosphere both as material and conceptual tool. I've *read their air* and made connections between the ways they employ reductive processes – be it taking away light, replacing speed with slowness or prioritising smell over sight. These removal strategies provoke us to pay attention differently. They challenge sustainability, clarity and productivity as dominant languages that 'feed the machine', Sontag observed more than 30 years ago.

As that awkward translation 'read the air' suggests, it is difficult to define 'atmosphere' in relation to artworks. A total phenomenon, largely nonrepresentational, an immaterial quality that's felt. 'An atmosphere is neither an object, nor a subject; neither passive nor neutral', argues German philosopher Gernot Böhme. We are unsure whether to attribute atmospheres to the objects or environment from which they proceed or to the subjects who experience them. We are unsure *where* atmospheres lie.

In his discussion of West Coast Minimalism from the 1960s – think Larry Bell's transparent cubes or James Turrell's Light and Space experiments – Dave Hickey writes about the work harnessing atmosphere as a benign presence. The artists cooked materials like chemists: oxygen, neon, lacquer or chrome – 'this is a world that floats, flashes, coats and teases' – exposing the fullness of empty space as it flirts with the boundaries between object and atmosphere, mind and body,

self and other. This atmosphere was elegant: 'California Minimalism created a gracious social space in its glow and reflection.' It was *also* durable. Look at a work by Peter Alexander now and its surface *still* shimmers like it was made yesterday.

In the wake of perpetual technological updates and rolling news streams, permanence doesn't feel like something worth striving for any more. A list of mass deaths and apocalyptic visions remembered since my childhood: the Cold War, AIDS, Y2K, the greenhouse effect, famines in 'Africa' as told by Comic Relief, bird flu and all the disaster films I tried and failed to watch due to fear. Who needs things to last forever when forever won't be that long?

Standing in the second room of Anicka Yi's Kunsthalle Basel exhibition this summer, seduced by her translucent glycerine soap slabs: minimalist elegance now comes in a fragile form. In the bacterial patterns

of her Petri dish stickers, I imagined a luxury fashion store at the end of the world: mould spoors multiplying in the damp creases of leather handbags.

As an experience, 7,070,430K of *Digital Spit: A Memoir* releases itself slowly, an incremental oozing interrupted by bursts of olfactory sensation. Yi follows a strange kind of recipe, combining unstable organic ingredients such as tempura-fried flowers with cool clinical objects – steel, plastic tubing, ultrasonic gel – to create an atmosphere of instability. With her fragile compositions, Yi stages perishability as something that is intimately connected to our sense of self as it is transformed by increasingly digital technologies.

Among these Frankenstein fusions, Yi's perfume-impregnated exhibition catalogue rotates slowly above a single flame: she asks that you burn it after reading. Heat releases *Aliens and Alzheimer's* (2015), the fragrance Yi designed in collaboration with a French perfumier. Their brief: to create the scent of forgetting. The air of the gallery is literally filled with loss.

Resisting remembering provokes a world with no ends, no monuments to visit or minutes of silence to mark. Yi is not nostalgic: she made her muse perpetual mutation. Alongside the soap-slab sculptures are living, shifting paintings bred from the air and samples collected from surfaces of the kunsthalle; they contain bacterial traces of the institution's every past exhibition, visitor and event.

To make her cultures, Yi sticks swabs in mouths and scrapes genitals. Decorating walls with the dirt of bodies, she fills the air with their many secretions. Like Timothy Morton's desire for a 'queer ecology', Yi challenges the fantasy of 'Nature'

as something other than 'human'. Morton writes: 'Society used to define itself by excluding dirt and pollution. We cannot now endorse this exclusion, nor can we believe in the world it produces. This is literally about realizing where your waste goes.' Yi harnesses the atmosphere to make us think about how insignificant we are within it.

'Air has entered the list of what could be withdrawn from us,' writes Bruno Latour, drawing on the theories of Peter Sloterdijk. Since the use of mustard gas in Ypres in 1915, a science of atmospheric manipulation has been declared. Latour argues that with this activation, air has been reconfigured: 'You are on life support, it's fragile, it's technical,

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