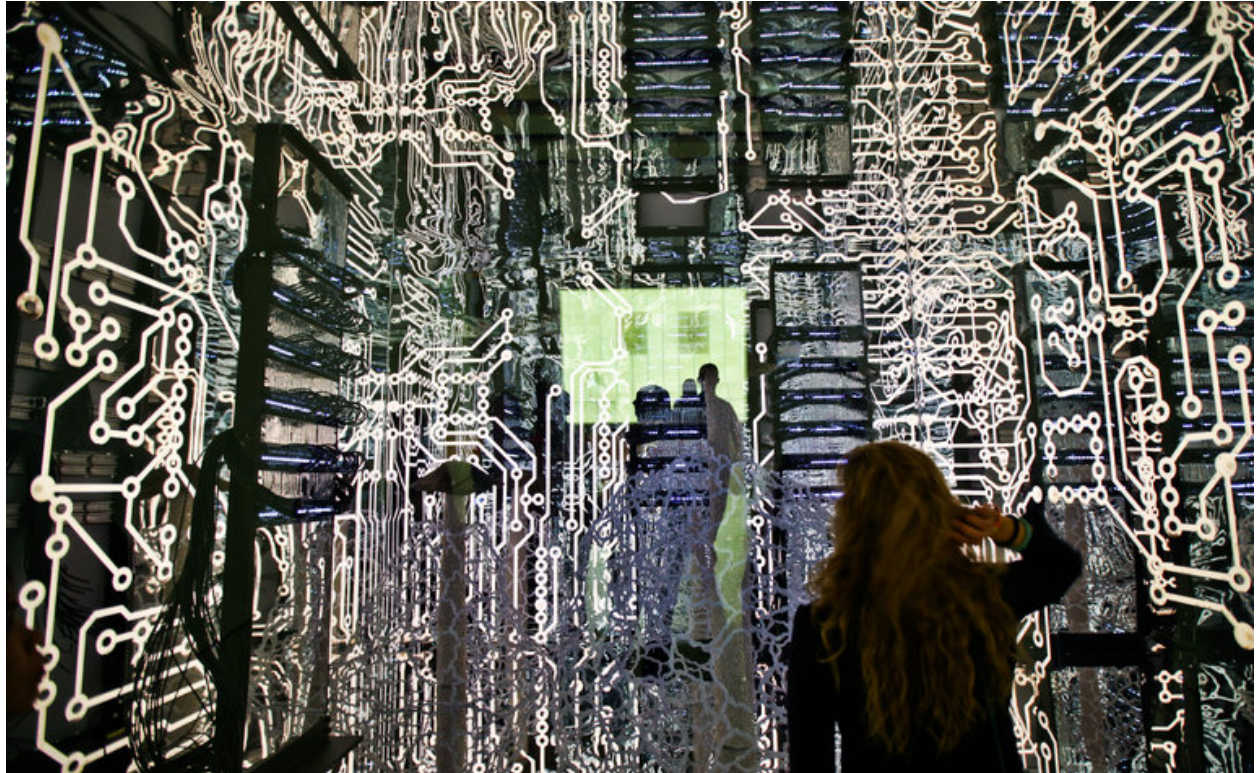


# The New York Times

## Please Smell the Art: Anicka Yi Will See That You Do

By KAREN ROSENBERG MAY 11, 2017



"Lifestyle Wars" (2017), in the Anicka Yi exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum. This piece houses an ant farm within an installation of aluminum racks, computer hardware and LED lights. Credit Byron Smith for The New York Times

When Anicka Yi won the Guggenheim's Hugo Boss Prize, an award of \$100,000 paired with a solo exhibition at the museum that confers it, art lovers familiar with her heady synthesis of sculpture, biography and biotech wondered what sights — and smells — might await them.

Ms. Yi, 45, collaborates with biologists, forensic scientists and perfumers to make art that tests the boundaries of perception and personal hygiene. She has injected snails with the human bonding hormone oxytocin, attempted to bottle the rarefied scent of a blue-chip megagallery and cultivated a feminist "collective bacteria" based on samples from women in the art world. Although her work can be visually seductive, she often asks us to approach art nose-first — not the way our species, over thousands of years, has generally experienced it.

This can cause some confusion and consternation, as it does in Ms. Yi's ambitious and richly philosophical Boss Prize exhibition, subtitled "Life Is Cheap." Involving human bacteria, a working ant farm and a hybrid ant-human perfume, it seems to will into

existence an enlightened art audience of the future — one that connects with art on a molecular and metaphysical level.

Before visiting the Guggenheim show, I recommend visiting the Whitney Biennial to see Ms. Yi's 3-D film, "The Flavor Genome." Part travelogue, part manifesto, this seductive tale of a "flavor chemist" hunting for a mythical plant in the Brazilian jungle is an excellent introduction to Ms. Yi's multidisciplinary oeuvre. She anticipates a future in which animal-plant-human hybrids are commonplace, in which any sensory experience can be mapped, recreated and marketed by big pharma.

These radical ideas — and others related to gendered hierarchies of the senses — permeate Ms. Yi's Guggenheim show. (She has said that she considers smell "the sense most closely associated with women," whereas sight has been associated with men, as in the "male gaze.") In one of the museum's Tower galleries and organized by the Guggenheim's contemporary art curator Katherine Brinson with the assistant curator Susan Thompson, "Life Is Cheap" has three components: two contained "biospheres," in the form of glass-walled dioramas, and a third that's more expansive.

"Immigrant Caucus," at the exhibition entrance, douses visitors in a special aroma as they pass through metal gates designed to evoke a holding pen. The scent, made in consultation with perfumers in Paris and Los Angeles and sprayed from stainless-steel insecticide canisters, combines two sets of chemical compounds: one derived from Asian-American women (a group that includes Ms. Yi), the other from carpenter ants.

Despite this intriguing provenance, the smell is not especially memorable; I found it powdery and faintly sour. (Carpenter ants have a vinegarlike pungency, thanks to the formic acid they release.) But the piece's pointed title, and its forbidding architecture, emphasize the politics in Ms. Yi's self-described "biopolitics of the senses." Scent can't be easily controlled or contained; it knows no borders, even if it's often invoked by those who fear the "other."

If the ant-human symbiosis is not exactly the most stimulating part of "Immigrant Caucus," it plays a more intriguing role in the diorama "Lifestyle Wars." This dizzying construction houses the labyrinthine tunnels of a working ant farm within an installation of aluminum racks, computer hardware and LED lights. The ants, it turns out, are also being exposed to Ms. Yi's custom perfume — generating "a shared psychic experience between ant and human," per the curators' text. This is, of course, impossible to prove, but it's fun to think about. So is the fact that carpenter ants are a matriarchal society — male drones mate with a queen, and die shortly thereafter. Might inhaling essence of ant help, in some small subconscious way, to overthrow the patriarchy?

Some of the other connections made in "Lifestyle Wars" feel trite: in particular, the ant farm as nature's equivalent of the data-processing center, a connection reinforced by stacks of server cases and tangles of Ethernet cables. Ms. Yi asks that we experience her art through senses other than sight, but she nonetheless goes to a lot of trouble to anchor it in something visual — and here, at least, that something is much less compelling than the ideas at play.

But in "Force Majeure," the show's other diorama, Ms. Yi cedes some control of the work's formal elements to natural processes. Here, the growths of bacterial colonies shade an illuminated grid of agar-coated tiles with delicate, watercolorlike splotches of

pink, yellow and gray. These particular strains, we are told, were sampled from sites in New York's Chinatown and Koreatown, linking "Force Majeure" to the explorations of Asian-American identity in "Immigrant Caucus."

Other lineages, connecting art and pathology, suggest themselves: Kazimir Malevich's obsession with the tuberculosis bacterium, as a model for the development of abstraction, or Hannah Wilke's unsparing documentation of her own terminal illness.

Of the three works in "Life Is Cheap," "Force Majeure" is the most conventional art experience: It's essentially a painting, and its unpleasant odors are safely behind glass. It's a little concession from Ms. Yi, perhaps, that her art is often more evolved than we are; that in its futuristic appeal to our noses, it runs the risk of passing right over our heads.