

Smelling A.I.: Anicka Yi On the Future of Olfaction, Death, and How Science Can Benefit From Working With Artists

By Shannon Lee

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Anicka Yi. Image via Frieze.



Describing any of Anicka Yi’s unorthodox works as being “multimedia” would be an accurate, though a severely understated characterization—that is to say, “multi” hardly encapsulates the vast imagination of Yi’s material resources and sensory oeuvre. Take her 2011 piece *Convoy Dialer Double Distance of a Shining Path*. Its material list included a brew of powdered milk, antidepressants, palm tree essence,

shaved sea lice, ground Teva rubber dust and a mobile phone signal jammer, all to generate the particular (and reportedly pungent) aromatic bouquet of "a life lived off the grid and on the run." Similarly, her now renowned 2015 work *Grabbing at Newer Vegetables* incorporated bacterial samples from 100 women which were then, with the help of M.I.T. synthetic biologist Tal Danino, synthesized into a single strand of bacteria. Yi used this literal culture of women as paint, applied onto an agar canvas (a kind of jell-O-like substrate used to cultivate bacteria). The odor permeating from this installation was, for better or for worse, powerful.

Pioneering what she terms a "biopolitics of the senses," Yi's emphasis on olfaction aims to decentralize and hack our perceptual bias toward vision and make us aware of our most primordial and reflexive sense—scent. Part of the brain's ancient limbic system, our olfactory receptors are deeply embedded with those neurological systems that process our memories, moods, and behaviors. Scent and its profound relationship to identity and subjectivity has made remarkably fertile ground for Yi's work. Having only begun her career as a fine artist around 2008 (she'd previously been an ad-copywriter and fashion stylist), Yi has had remarkable success, thus far culminating in the 2016 receipt of the prestigious Hugo Boss Prize and the accompanying Guggenheim solo show. Upcoming projects include an exclusive line of perfumes presented by London's Dover Street Market focused on semi-famous and notorious women, such as Hatshepsut, the second female pharaoh of ancient Egypt, and the Chinese-American human smuggler Sister Ping, who died in federal prison in 2014.

Here, following a panel discussion on future aesthetics presented by Culture Lab Detroit (with activist-architect Eyal Weizman and anarchic-engineer Mark Pauline), Anicka Yi speaks with Artspace's Shannon Lee on the future of olfaction, the scientific community, and why it's important for her work to experience death.

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Installation view of *Grabbing at Newer Vegetables* (2015). Image via 47 Canal.

I was reading a recent interview you'd done with W Magazine where you mention exploring virtual reality. How's that going?

I think it's a really promising form for smell and olfaction. How would you translate a virtual situation or scenario? I think smell is the thing that could really land it for you. There's a lot of potential there. I started a V.R. project but it's been kind of back burnt right now. I'd cancelled a bunch of exhibitions this year because I just wanted to get back into the studio and try to figure out what my next body of work is going to be about and what the next paradigm is.

I'd been on this kind of trek for the past seven years and have been articulating and executing this narrative that I really needed to get out into the world. Rather than continuing to make work and output, I needed to go inward and just think about what is really important. That takes time... it's

something I take very seriously. I went into a very deep tissue stage of research and development that I'm still kind of in. Out of that has been developing this next chapter and strong narrative... some sculpture, I've started writing a film... A lot of it has to do with what I was talking about last night—the notion of the de-centered human.

You also spoke about the experience of working with a lot of people in tech and the scientific community. What's that been like? How do you find the right people to work with? Do you put out a Craigslist post, work with labs?

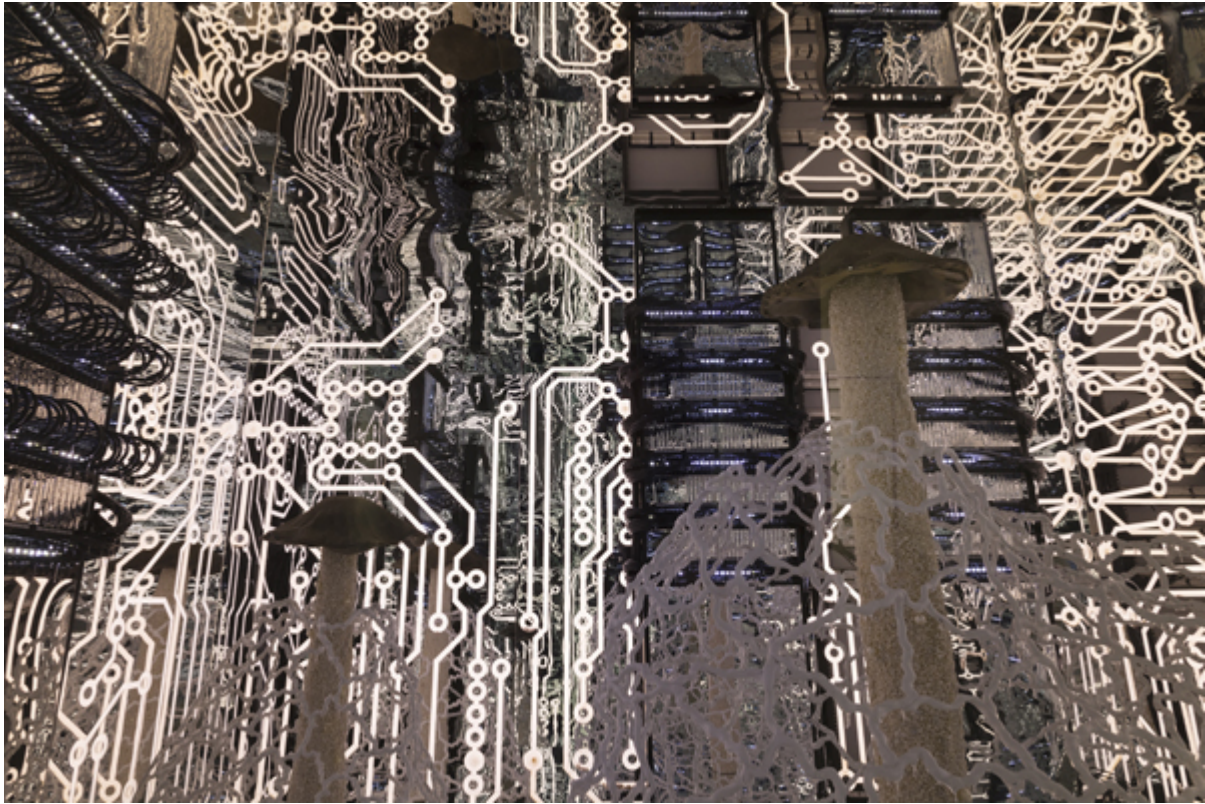
Even at this stage in my professional life, I'm always constantly hustling trying to get people to talk to me. These people are, in some ways, untouchable. For example, take these A.I. engineers—they aren't interested in talking to artists!

That's so weird because I instinctually kind of assume that people who get into A.I. are attracted to it because of its potentiation and imaginative capacity.

That hasn't been my experience. A lot of people who work in that field have a very strict agenda and they aren't interested in a representative from pop culture or an artist coming in and messing with their trajectory. That being said, there are a few out there who are interested in the philosophical conversations. And then there are fewer who actually value talking to artists because they know that we are the gateway to popular culture and that we are actually in conversation with these different disciplines and we can help unpack a lot of these ideas in ways that most people maybe wouldn't be interested. If you heard a synthetic biologist talking about CRISPR, you might be tuned out and uninterested but if I put it through my work or a filmmaker puts it through a narrative lens and you get to see it in a different way...

It's a more accessible language?

Not that art is really that accessible either but it targets a much broader audience than direct scientific audiences. With science, the language only really speaks to a few people, even though it impacts all of us. The language of science is something most people don't want to engage with and don't feel invited into.



Installation view of *Lifestyle Wars* (2017). Image via 47 Canal.

I do feel like it's fairly similar in art too.

Yes. There are a lot of similarities. The art vernacular is opening up a bit more but if you talk to a normal person walking down the street, they probably can't name five contemporary living artists. That's a pretty decent gauge of where we're at. But that never bothered me, you know? I don't expect people to know who anyone is—why should they know? Most people have been shut out of the conversation when it comes to art. It's predominantly Eurocentric anyway, right?

But to answer your question, we can communicate a lot of the more inaccessible ideas that are going on in the world, because we have a narrative or fictional license, we can think past these experts. We don't have to stop there. We can think of cultures past humans! I think there's real value there and I think some of the people in the scientific field that have been receptive to me really appreciate that.

Do these non-arts collaborators have a shift in attitude after seeing your end result?

I don't think it's so result-based. It's always about the process and the conversation and if there's anything that I can offer and if they are questioning my legitimacy or "value," the conversation is always the way you get in. For example, when I did my residency at M.I.T., they would just set up all of these appointments with people I wanted to meet. All of these neuroscientists and synthetic biologists and holographers. It was like speed dating! I had literally thirty minutes to pitch my schtick. Based on that conversation, these very, very busy people had to decide whether or not they liked me and wanted to work with me—all based on whether or not I could sort of charm them! That's a lot of social pressure. In that sense, when you're surprised that it's so difficult for me to harangue these people, it's never easy or a given. It's always new hurdles of access and I have to be persistent. I've become more persistent as I've become more experienced as an artist—I've had to! Even after you've done a show at the Guggenheim, the people I work with don't necessarily find any stock in that.

It also seems the work that you're doing always demands challenging not only yourself but your practice. It's constantly moving forward and doesn't stay in any given state.

You can compare it to a comedian who decided to retire their jokes—you're just not allowed to do that material anymore. With my studio, we throw everything out every couple of years and we have to start from scratch. It takes time, you have to learn how to do things, run tests, see what works... that's why I've taken this year to just develop.



Installation view of *Where Species Meet Part 3 (Sessile)* (2016). Image via 47 Canal.

Going back to your notion of the de-centered human, I recently wrote a piece about Donna Haraway's influence on this generation of artists. I feel like it's safe to assume you're familiar with her work.

I've always been a fan of Haraway but I don't think I was actively ever thinking about trying to translate her work directly. It's just so much in my DNA that you kind of just take it for granted like, "yes, of course we're all cyborgs!" The layers of her education for an artist like me has become so deeply embedded that you wake up and don't even actively think about it specifically anymore. It's become so

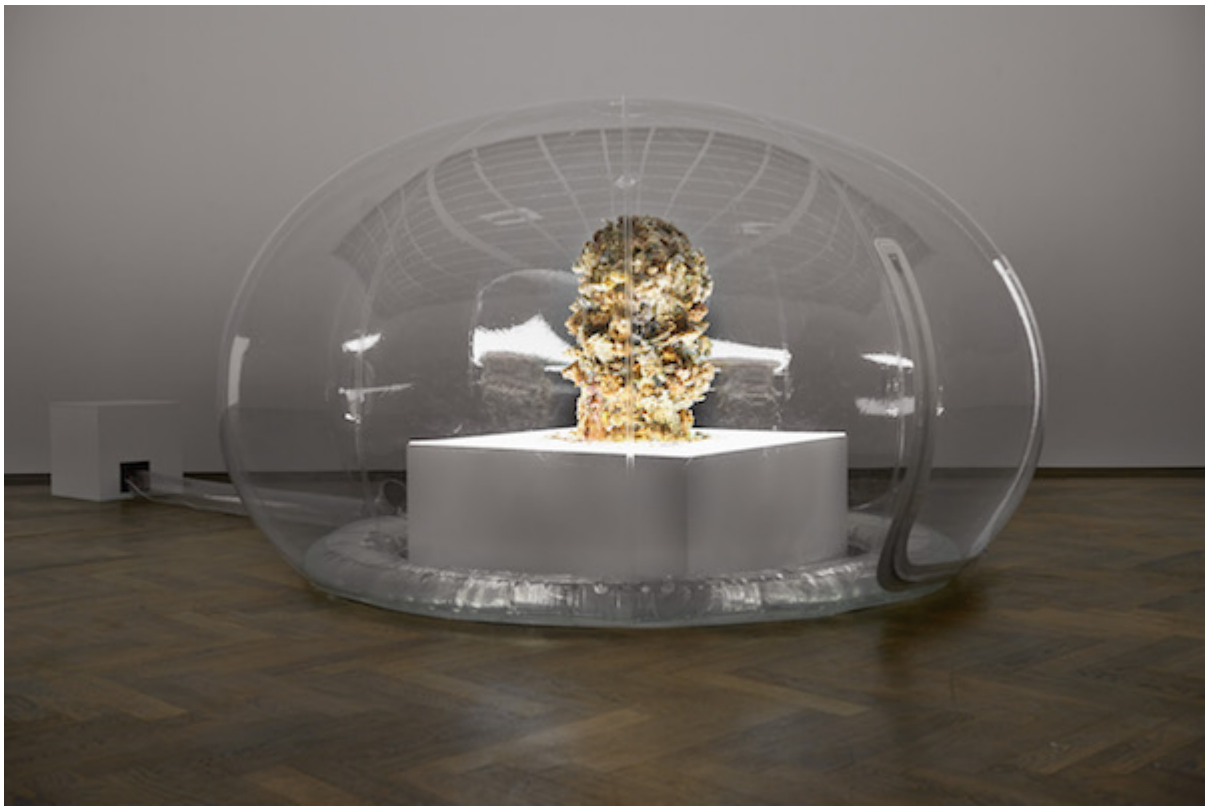
much a part of the paradigm. It's hard for me to focus on any one person or influence in general. When you research, it's omnidirectional—you're pulling from all these different areas and a lot of it is happening in such a rapid succession that you don't know what begins and what ends.

Are you still looking to explore scent and olfaction?

Absolutely! I want to explore scent and artificial intelligence. I'm concerned that smell is just going to disappear and that these qualities of confusion and more nuanced, inconvenient-seeming and hard-to-understand states of feeling and sensing are becoming less and less tolerated. Because smell has no direct function for non-organic biological entities (machine entities), will we find a place for it?

Can you speak a bit about the role of temporality in your work? So much of what you create is perishable which obviously makes for some pretty interesting conversations when it comes to collecting.

On a very subconscious level, I'm very drawn towards entropy as a natural process and things that have a life and, closely following that, a demise or a death. I think that's just one of the most natural processes that I'd prefer to foreground.



Installation view of *Maybe She's Born with it.* (2015). Image via 47 Canal.

That's so antithetical to cultural production, historically—so much of art is about transcending death.

I think it's a very masculine drive—that anxiety around one's own mortality. That whole notion of needing to create things that are going to outlive us all, that these cradles of civilization need to have these sculptures until the end of time... I don't think about that! I have no anxieties about legacy. First of all, I don't know what that is. I don't go around thinking or worrying about legacy because half of my work doesn't last beyond six weeks. It's more about the communication. The work itself is, like life, mutable.

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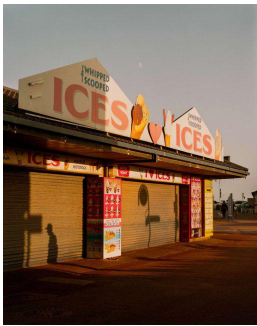
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