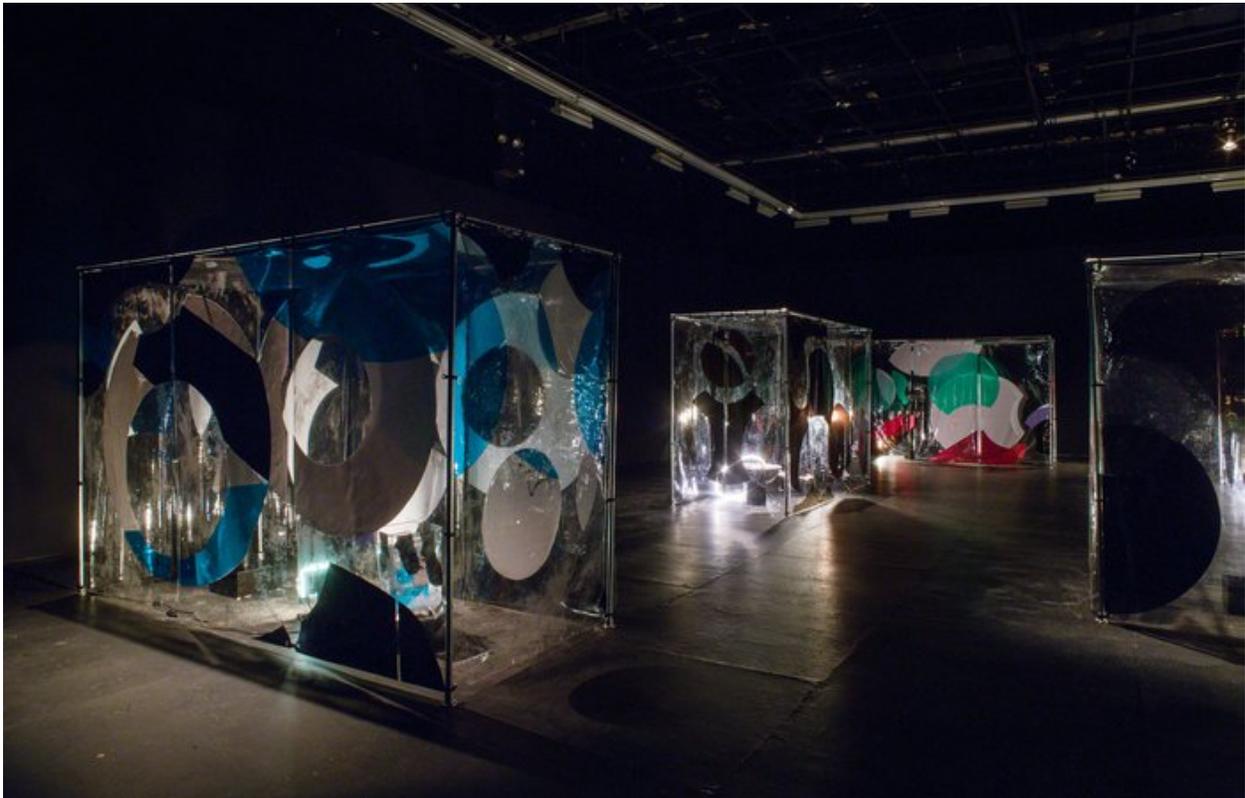


e-flux conversations

Anicka Yi on the power of smell, bacteria, and feminism

Karen Archey

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Anicka Yi, *You Can Call Me F*, installation view, 2015. Photo by Jason Mandella. Courtesy ArtSpace

Over at ArtSpace, artist Anicka Yi sat down for a chat about her current show at The Kitchen with Karen Rosenberg. Here's a few of our favorite excerpts below:

How and why did you start to work with scents?

I've always been looking to reorder the senses, because I felt that we in the West have been overly dominated by the ocular sense. Everything is about looking—we have such ocular fatigue. I know I do. I go online and I'm not even looking anymore, because there's just this proliferation of images. We have these tools open to us, and we're not using them. I believe we've lost our empathic core because we've neglected these other senses, like smell and touch and taste.

Smell is a form of sculpture, because it has a lot of volume. Also, it collapses the distance that painting has built into it—it's like, "Look, but don't touch, and keep your distance." I want to draw the viewer in further and have the viewer participate by having to be there physically to smell the work, rather than just transmit it through JPEGs.

What led you to team up with chemists and biologists?

It was a sheer necessity. A lot of the material I was working with, like glycerin soap and fried flowers, was challenging to stabilize. So I started soliciting chemists and chemical engineers to get some advice on how to work with these materials that were highly reactive and often would reject each other. I was flat-out ignored, mostly, until I got this residency at MIT. It really opened the gates for me, to have the opportunity to develop relationships with some of the top researchers and scientists. And then the biology started to become more tangible.

Why work with bacteria?

I'm interested in bacteria because it's the genesis of life. It also plays on a lot of our anxieties about cleanliness and hygiene. And there's so much good bacteria out there, whether it's in the form of fermentation and food or bacteria that helps your immune system.

Describe the process of coming up with the "collective bacteria" in the show, which is based on gynecological samples from 100 different women.

It was a lot of legwork. I would walk around with q-tips and Ziploc bags and a sharpie, wherever I went, and just get samples on the fly. I noticed it was challenging to get 100 women. If it had been 100 guys, it probably would have taken half the time. Guys tend to gather in clusters; with women, we really had to go all over the place. That was very telling. There's a lot of anthropological social experimentation that we were able to glean from the fieldwork. It's not just the biology. It was also due to all the interesting places that the culture samples came from, which I also think is very much a part of the work, that were very gender-based.

What were some of these places?

Vaginas.

You'd think the art world would be a more enlightened, progressive place.

There are predominantly female students, and yet very few stick it out. A survival mechanism kicks in where you have to align yourself with power, and this is why you gravitate towards the males. You tone down your femininity, or create an avatar that's more masculine.

I've also been frustrated with a lot of sexism in formalism. It's like, "Throw some metal on that and make it more masculine, and that will make it more powerful." My work has been accused of being too feminine numerous times. It's an unspoken trope: you've got to make it more macho, or it will not sell. Or it won't be legitimized, it's too vulnerable. You've got to make this cold, abstract, formalist work.

What about the wider professional culture, in which women like Sheryl Sandberg have become strong advocates for female networks? Has that had an impact on the art world?

I think there's a lot of potential in the art world, because it's so much about influence. People like being told what to like, what to look at. It's so word-of-mouth. There's a lot of power there, and responsibility. It's about reorienting those reflexes.

You're also, as you said earlier, trying to reorient our relationship to the senses.

Eyesight and vision are associated with knowledge, discovery, power and the masculine. Smell is shrouded in mystery, subjectivity, because it's related to long-term memory. There are things about smell that are objective; they're just really difficult to talk about. And anything difficult is put into a mysterious box, and therefore feminine.

I've always thought of my work as being on the precipice of a lot of discoveries that happen with smell. The day when we can smell a jpeg is probably just around the corner.