



## ANICKA YI: LIFE IS CHEAP

BY JOEL KUENNEN

Anicka Yi, the recipient of the 2016 Hugo Boss Prize, opened *Life is Cheap*, consisting of three works, *Lifestyle Wars*, *Immigrant Caucus*, and *Force Majeure*, at the Guggenheim on April 21, 2017. The exhibition title is one part indictment, one part plea.

“Life is cheap” is usually said with a quiet lilt; eyes down, a slight shake of the head. The disgust is projected both outward and inward. It’s a gesture of shame. But Yi hints at perhaps another invocation of the saying—that life is in fact *cheap* and easy to come by. It is all around you, waiting for you to recognize its glorious complexity. And sure, this interpretation is navel-gazey, but in times like these, where minutiae are almost always irksome, it’s nice to lose oneself in marvel for a few minutes and remember that we are a complex part of a complex part of a complex part... of something called a “whole.”

*H. sapiens, Homo, Hominidae, Haplorhini, Primates, Mammalia, Chordata, Animalia.* Our distinction is a denial of our dependence and a dismissal of our similarity. With her latest exhibition, Yi breaks down the notion of humanity’s

individualities and ethnic preoccupations by applying a scientific approach to sculptures consisting of carpenter ants, bacterial colonies taken from Chinatown and Koreatown in New York, manufactured scents, and a lot of agar-agar.



Anicka Yi. Photo: David Heald

**Joel Kuennen: *Life is Cheap* has two large dioramas, *Lifestyle Wars* and *Force Majeure*...**

**Anicka Yi:** *Force Majeure* is a staging of violence, proliferation, unregulated life. It's a staging of the genesis of life and also throws back at us a physical manifestation of our anxieties around life, disease, bacteria, around that which we consider as harmful when it's actually not. Not in every case at least, but that there is harm and maybe that's something that we can coexist with and be tolerant of and maybe do a dance with.

The ants in *Lifestyle Wars* are in this ceaseless motion and this transition of information, this data network. The power of ants is in their numbers; they don't really have individuality and they need, like our human society, social structures. They are the only other species, other than our own, that practices slavery. They are also highly guided by their sense of smell so they have a very refined, sophisticated olfaction.



Anicka Yi, *Lifestyle Wars*, 2017 (detail), Ants, mirrored Plexiglas, Plexiglas, two-way mirrored glass, LED lights, epoxy resin, glitter, aluminum racks with rackmount server cases and Ethernet cables, metal wire, foam, acrylic, aquarium gravel, and imitation pearls. Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York. Photo: David Heald © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation

**JK: You are presenting a new scent in *Lifestyle Wars*...**

**AY:** We have a scent, it's kind of a hybrid of species and forms. It's a scent that is based on an Asian-American female and a carpenter ant—it's a hybrid scent.

**JK: What constitutes the gesture towards the Asian-American female?**

**AY:** I wanted to talk about ethnicity through smell. I wanted to talk about smell as being a conditioned form of perception culturally, socially, politically.

Ethnicity is a very gray area, scientifically speaking, in terms of how we can designate certain ethnic groups by smell. There's no definitive real answer scientifically. You can't say all Asian people smell like this and all Black people smell like that or all Caucasian people smell like this or all Latino people smell like that.

**JK: What is the marker in this case?**

**AY:** It's contingent on a number of factors, primarily your diet followed by genetic make up. A lot of what you smell like is being produced through the bacteria in your gut. There is also the tertiary: the type of deodorant that you wear, the soap that you use, your shampoo... those are the main sort of components for how an individual human being smells. An Asian-American with a certain diet that is very similar to an African-American diet could end up smelling more similar than two Asian-Americans with vastly different diets. I was interested in that aspect of how it is very complex and inconclusive in terms of how you can designate a certain ethnicity smelling a certain way, and yet those types of prejudices still linger.

Everybody has these types of misinformed ideas about how Indian people smell like curry; well, guess what, if anyone ate a lot of curry, the turmeric would sweat through your pores and you would smell like curry! There's certain foods that have that ability to become part of you but also announce itself to the rest of the world through our pores. For me it's a rich area to think about in terms of these kinds of stereotypes and prejudices and how even historically different classes were associated with how they smelled. A lot of "improvements" and radical social changes have been made based on how these different classes smelled, especially the working classes.

How do you improve on something where it's a matter of just prejudice or intolerance about certain ethnicities? Because it's not a question of hygiene and it's not a question about health risks—it's a question of certain preferences for diet, a certain predilection for body ointments in the tertiary route, and genetics. It's very complicated and it's not something that has been resolved through science. That's what I'm interested in: that science can't help us get past this. We also can't seem to come to terms with it intellectually or psychologically.

**JK: "Tertiary," for example, refers to a lotion you put on and external variance to the personal biome, correct?**

**AY:** Yes, it is part of the constellation of my material choices.

*"There's a consciousness there that's been assembled."*

**JK: In that sense, are you then constructing objects out of tertiary and secondary realities where the primary becomes the participant?**

**AY:** If we follow that to the logical conclusion, then does that mean that my work needs a viewer?

**JK: Then it's just biology?**

**AY:** No, there's a consciousness there that's been assembled. With ants, there's a consciousness that's been assembled, so is that art as well? Ants are matriarchal; they only have males as drones and they die immediately after. They inseminate the eggs, which as far as I'm concerned, is pretty good for me. Especially recently, I've been telling my straight male friends, *just sit out a few*.



Anicka Yi, *Force Majeure*, 2017, Plexiglas, aluminum, agar, bacteria, refrigeration system, LED lights, glass, epoxy resin, powder coated stainless steel, light bulbs, digital clocks, silicone, and silk flowers. Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York. Photo: David Heald © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation

**JK: Your material vocabulary can be kind of cacophonous, a grab bag of consumer items and organisms. Can you speak to the importance of combining these different technical materials?**

**AY:** It's through the filter, the lens of the lived life. In that sense, it's probably somewhat autobiographical. That's something I've never really articulated to anyone. What is the binding agent of all of these materials? What is the reach of a length of a human arm or what is in this cosmology of the person who is trying to assemble the combinations? In that regard, there's something, probably a shattered narrative by a person who is living through these materials through a desiring body or a slightly repulsed body, a body that's not entirely pleased but not displeased. I don't know how to unravel that narrative logic until the very end and that's probably when I'm dead. I can't really say and I don't even know if I'm capable of doing that for you. I think that every person, especially creative people, they have a kind of wiring, a sensibility that overlaps with a certain zeitgeist and personal history much in the way we're describing how an individual smells in

their own unique sense. There are these contributing factors: diet, genetic, and tertiary influences. Tertiary is separate from the zeitgeist. It's not necessarily something someone else picks up on that is in the air.

**JK: One other thing about materiality in your work: when you use organisms you leave the names general, like “bacteria,” “dough,” “fungi.” Is there a particular reason for this?**

**AY:** It does tend to be a catch-all because it would be very difficult for me to clarify what kind of bacteria will be grown in the Guggenheim diorama. There are specific certain kinds that we are introducing but we cannot be exclusive to that. For me to be able to categorize, I would have to go back throughout the course of the exhibition and start to analyze what type of bacteria is actually growing there. Once I put up an installation, it's difficult to do the reading after the fact because things are changing so rapidly.

**JK: Colonies can emerge and collapse in a number of hours...**

**AY:** There's a fair amount of what can we call a “microbial eugenics” that does take place in my installations. I do have aesthetic considerations: certain bacterial growth yields better colors; certain bacterial growth yields better shapes.



Anicka Yi, *2666*, 2015, Bacteria, nutrient agar, Plexiglas, 24 x 20 x 4 inches (60.96 x 50.80 x 10.16 cm). Courtesy of 47 Canal, New York and Kunsthalle Basel. Photo: Philipp Hänger

**JK: Your work often begins with an essence and then the work is allowed to live from there and go where it may. How do you consider this relationship between refinement and growth?**

**AY:** Refinement is an area that I think, as far as my participation and intervention, requires a tremendous amount of research and backstory. I have to learn a lot about a certain subject matter in order to set the conditions for the type of refinement that I would qualify as my version of refinement. Then there is an entire cosmology of chaos around that. It's always in flux, paradoxically different speeds, gears, logic. I think that's something that is maybe a leitmotif that doesn't get spoken about very often in relation to my work.

There's a lot of counter-intuitive logic going on with the material choices, arrangement, juxtaposition, and the timing. We're talking about metabolic timing, physical time, geological time and there's a lot of counter-intuitive time and rationale that's embedded into the work and that's what I'm working against. That's what happens when these collisions take place where they're not supposed to. Where a flower rejects the resin that is supposed to encase it and then you have this leaking...a lot of that...and so there are a lot of alchemical kinds of contradictions. We're in a universe that's populated with very sinister elements that don't really intend for anything to survive.

*"I want my work to perish."*

**JK: When I was a kid I would make ant castles, blocks of wood that I would fashion into a castle structure and then I would entice ants with sugar water. The whole structure became this moving breathing thing but after a while, I realized they would all just go to the sugar water and drown. Then I realized, this isn't that cool and I'm basically just killing a bunch of ants.**

**AY:** It's a very fine line and death is all around us. Life is death. With ants I have to stress that they are not really that great at individualistic thinking...and if they are, they are bullied and sequestered and extinguished. When we do these experiments with ants we've found that an ant that smells a little different will be sequestered in a corner. They are put under a kind of trial. Other ants are there for hours questioning this ant that's different, this *rogue* ant. They don't go immediately into action. They just put it under this Kafka-esque trial. There are levels of security and authority at play.

**JK: You've said before that perishability is essential to your sculptural vocabulary. How do you think about your works as they move through time?**

**AY:** Time is probably the dominant material. It's the unspoken, un-cited. A lot of my work is time-based and I'm intentionally foregrounding that time. The motivation for that was trying to get at a present-ness, to be here. Don't worry

about a hundred years from now—that also seemed like a very masculine type of aspiration: that the art should outlive us all and that signifies my proximity to the gods, immortality, legacy, all that nonsense. I personally don't care if you don't talk about me after I'm dead. That's not a motivation for me. My motivation is the living, the suffering. That's what I care about.

**JK: Is it more about creating a situation where that suffering comes into focus?**

**AY:** Absolutely. I want to diminish and eliminate the suffering. In order to do that, you have to reveal the suffering and foreground the suffering to give that a voice. It's not about ignoring it or eliminating it but asking *what can we influence?* If we are even here to influence at all. Time is greater than I am and yet time is also non-linear when you think about it in a quantum way. I want my work to perish.



Anicka Yi, *Sister*, 2011, Tempura fried flowers, cotton turtleneck, approximately 41 x 19 x 7 in Courtesy of 47 Canal, New York. Photo: Joerg Lohse

**JK: At the MIT Residency you did, you worked on stabilizing things. How has stabilization entered your practice, specifically in regards to the reactive and active nature of your work?**

**AY:** It's a framework. Without agar it's really hard for us to grow bacteria. Agar is a relatively known substrate, so in terms of that kind of "stabilization" that's how I point to it. In order to render tangible or visible.

**JK: Is it more about producing a predictability?**

**AY:** Let's just say it something that's more of a neutral value in order to support some principles, ideas, characters, voices. All equally important and necessary in the balance. I respect that kind of stability because I wouldn't be able to do what we're doing here without a giant cooling refrigerator system to get the bacteria to grow at the right temperature. Without the right temperature you have lots of problems: no growth or conversely over growth, where the bacteria just takes over. The bacteria I work with loves 72-75 degrees. That's the sweet spot when you'll have really nice, steady, consistent growth but you won't have an insane proliferation or, conversely, a completely empty, visual space.

*"If you're going to work with bacteria you have to work with the laws of bacteria."*

**JK: So it's not necessarily about preservation but rather facilitation.**

**AY:** Yes, it's about these kinds of dichotomies, these shifts in the balance and learning temperatures. Understanding basics around physics. When you have humidity that the bacteria really thrives on, you're going to get condensation. I don't want a drippy piece of glass, for example, so how do we deal with that? The more I've been using a conventional science laboratory as a tool for my work, the more I'm having to understand all matters of stability because in order to create these experiments you have to offset it, to run it through something that is under your control. If you're going to work with bacteria you have to work with the laws of bacteria. It teaches me a great deal of physics and chemistry.

**JK: Art is, almost by definition, historically stable. Performance art may have done the most to change this assumption, as far as art history goes. Do you consider your sculptural work as performative objects? How do you think about that relationship to performance?**

**AY:** It's a good connection. Performance implies there's a certain kind of transience, ephemerality, and so it makes sense that some of my less permanent works would be in that performative state. I don't have the kind of art education or conditioning for that kind of language to act as the fencing around my actions and my thoughts, but I often think in terms of farming and agriculture with certain forms of organisms. You can consider that performative. I think that my use of "science" is performative: I am performing a science. Is it science? Yeah, but it's more of performing *as science*. Performing an act of control and chaos. So yes, I think performativity is running rampant throughout my work. One could even say I'm performing as an artist. I didn't study art at all, I studied film theory.