

Anicka Yi
Metaspore



Pirelli HangarBicocca

EN

Anicka Yi *Metaspore*

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Curated by Fiammetta Griccioli and Vicente Todolí

Cultural Mediation

Cultural mediators are present in the exhibition spaces to answer questions from the public, give information and context elements that can deepen the fruition of the artworks. The dialogue between mediator and visitor should take place in compliance with social distancing policies and the norms on the protection of personal health.

Public Program

The exhibition is accompanied by a series of events that allow visitors to learn more about some of the themes of the show and of Anicka Yi's work. Discover more on our website.

Anicka Yi



Anicka Yi
Photo Sebastian Kim

Anicka Yi (Seoul, 1971; lives and works in New York) has distinguished herself as one of the most radical artists of the last decade, thanks to her experimental practice that merges art and science and explores possible new definitions for the categories of human and non human, technology and biology, natural and synthetic. With her works, she analyzes the potential of invisible elements, such as bacteria, as well as ephemeral and organic materials—like flowers fried in tempura or glycerin—drawing on sci-fi narratives and imagery.

Collaboration is fundamental to Yi's practice: over the years, she has worked with professionals from different fields of knowledge—architects, scientists, perfumers—in a dialogue that also involves different figures in her studio, such as artists and biologists. To realize some of her most ambitious projects, the artist has also collaborated with multidisciplinary institutions, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge (MA) and international cutting-edge technology companies.

Yi studied film theory at universities in Los Angeles and New York and worked in various positions in creative industries such as fashion and publishing. A self-taught artist, she conceived her first works in 2008 as a member of the New York collective “Circular File,” composed by artists, designers and film-makers. During those years, she developed an interest in the sense of

olfaction and embraced the creation of scents; with her friend, the architect Maggie Peng, she produced her first fragrance, *Shigenobu Twilight*. The name references the contradictory figure of Fusako Shigenobu, the founder of the Japanese Red Army, a rebel organization active during the 1970s and 1980s. *Shigenobu Twilight* is the beginning of a series of three fragrances that portray unconventional female figures to challenge traditional notions of femininity and subjectivity.

Her oeuvre focuses on senses, such as smell, touch and taste, that are generally overlooked in the visual arts. By creating associations between components from different sensory spheres that merge organically in her work, Yi investigates intangible elements as air, odors and microorganisms to highlight the basic structures of everyday life and their repercussions in the political and social fields.

One of the key themes in Yi's work is the deconstruction of identity: «I grew up in a Korean-American home and my mother cooked Korean food. Our house was labeled by other kids as the stinky home. If you talk to Korean-Americans about smell, many of them associate early memories of smell with shame and rejection.» Thus, smell becomes Yi's privileged sense for reflecting on questions of identity and how these are related with physiological actions, such as sniffing, eating and digesting. In her oeuvre, scents and fragrances are conceived like sculptural works, occupying and defining space in the form of molecules that are imperceptible to our eyes, yet registered through our bodies: «I sculpt air» says Yi.

Fascinated by the sensorial spectrum, and with a specific interest in moving images in their sci-fi connotation, Yi employs a visual lexicon adopting unusual expressive means. Tripe, hair gel, and olive oil appear in her hybrid installations and sculptures, suggesting the human body in relation to other living species through its vital functions: metabolic and digestive processes.

Influenced by the theories of contemporary thinkers, such as Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing, who have proposed a model of coexistence between living beings as well as original perspectives on more-than-human forms of intelligence, the artist's research draws on such areas of knowledge as anthropology, philosophy, and sociology. In parallel, it also deals with artificial intelligence, microbiology and synthetic biology (a recent discipline that combines biology, chemistry, and engineering and deals with the construction of

"In Love With the World," 2021
Exhibition view, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London, 2021
Photo Will Burrard Lucas
© Tate



new organs). For example, for her New York exhibition at The Kitchen in 2015, Yi used special pigments generated by a bacterial culture developed with a biologist she met during an art residency at MIT.

By overcoming the distinctions between plants, animals, microorganisms, and machines, Anicka Yi's investigations on the concepts of interdependence and ecosystem have culminated in the project "In Love With The World." Presented last fall at Tate Modern's Turbine Hall in London, the project envisions a possible evolution of machines as living creatures. Called "aerobes" by the artist, the protagonists of the installation resemble aquatic and terrestrial organisms, which have tentacular extensions and float in the air. Their movement, activated by artificial intelligence software, suggests new possibilities for hybridization between species.

Biologizing the Machine (terra incognita), 2019
Acrylic vitrines, powder-coated steel, Venetian mud, calcium carbonate, calcium sulfate, egg yolks, cellulose, custom PCB, gas probe sensors, variable dimensions
Photo Renato Ghiazza



The Exhibition

"Metaspore" is Anicka Yi's first solo show in an Italian institution and the most comprehensive of her career to date. With more than twenty works created since 2010, the exhibition explores the artist's sculptural language, which often activates chemical and biological processes to generate complex ecosystems.

The title—a neologism coined by Anicka Yi by juxtaposing the prefix "meta" to "spore"—metaphorically evokes the process of proliferation that the artist employs in her work, which contaminates and is contaminated by its surroundings. "Metaspore" has thus been conceived as a survey of Yi's most iconic works and follows a multisensory and immersive path, centered on the one hand on the olfactory dimension—with a series of works that feature fragrances—and, on the other, on the dynamics of the transformation of matter, such as corrosion and metabolic processes.

The exhibition gathers Yi's most recent works—including a new installation—together with early works characterized by recurring motifs in her poetics such as transparency, immateriality, and perishability. Especially conceived for the exhibition, *Biologizing the Machine (spillover zoonotica)* (2022) pursues the artist's investigation into the microscopic dimension of bacteria: seven large display cases, suspended from the ceiling, house an ecosystem of soil bacteria, resembling landscape paintings. By combining works that probe the idea of embodiment along with others focused on the hybridization of living beings and machines, "Metaspore" reveals essential themes in Yi's practice, such as the co-existence of different organisms, nonhuman forms of intelligence, identity and social injustice.

1. *Skype Sweater*, 2010/2017



Skype Sweater, 2010
Installation view,
179 Canal, New York,
2010
Photo Cris Moor

Skype Sweater is among Anicka Yi's seminal works, one of the first to evoke basic life processes in the body, such as respiration and digestion. The installation consists of a military parachute laid out on the ground, with electric fans that move and lift the fabric to create a billowing, undulating form. Its space is delimited by three pedestals which bear sculptures with a translucent, viscid quality. They include a see-through Longchamp bag filled with cow entrails and hair gel; a transparent Plexiglas display case containing a folded Mylar envelope fried in tempura batter; a rectangular block of glycerin in which rubber tubes and razor blades are embedded. The use of elements like plinths and vitrines mimics museums' exhibition displays while the inclusion of unusual components and culinary techniques calls to mind other contemporary artists, such as Dieter Roth (1930–1998) and Rirkrit Tiravanija, who have worked with food, both as an ephemeral substance and as a social and cultural element.

Skype Sweater alludes to physiological processes while also addressing the political and social theme of migration in a poetic yet jarring way. Regarding the installation, the artist has noted that it refers Cheng Chui Ping (1949–2014), known as Sister Ping, a human smuggler who brought thousands of immigrants from China to New York City from the mid-1980s to 2000s. By referring both to a biological and political significance, Yi states: «I think of how bodies, identities, and intelligences get metabolized into systems, but also how we might willfully metabolize ourselves into these systems.»

2. *Auras, Orgasms and Nervous Peaches*, 2011

A black, ceilingless chamber, the installation includes walls and floor paved in the white tile typical of anonymous spaces like public restrooms. A thick, yellowish liquid that contrasts with the almost antiseptic aesthetic of the room, flows endlessly out of three spouts placed on the outside wall. Although its color might evoke urine, it is olive oil, which tends to have a peculiar odor. Its constant stream, almost imperceptible to the eye, evokes the physiological processes that regulate our metabolism. The entire installation can thus be seen as a body, an organism structured around the exchange of fluids and nutrients.

For this installation the artist takes the iconic urinal (*Fontaine*, 1917/1964) by Marcel Duchamp a step further by incorporating a sensorial element. With a synesthetic approach, Yi creates a perceptual condition in which unrelated senses are activated at the same time.

3. *Le Pain Symbiotique*, 2014

Le Pain Symbiotique,
2014
Installation view, Taipei
Biennial, 2014
Photo Taipei Fine Arts
Museum



Originally conceived for the 2014 Taipei Biennial, this installation consists of a transparent PVC dome that houses an unusual ecosystem of organic and industrial elements with a sci-fi aesthetic. Inside this large inflatable membrane, the floor is covered in bread dough and ochre pigment. Placed on five pedestals, are glycerin and resin sculptures of abstract forms.

Microscope images of microorganisms in constant motion are projected onto them and seem to merge with the transparent, rubbery surfaces of the sculptures themselves. These become screens for the projection of swarming images and patterns.

Le Pain Symbiotique encapsulates the artist's primary explorations on the role played by microscopic, invisible entities within the body, and in a broader sense, within an ecosystem. Yi focuses on the idea of symbiosis (the coexistence among organisms of different species) and incorporates edible elements or even culinary techniques, using the process of leavening—which transforms matter through the action of bacteria—as a metaphor for the vital importance of non-human, invisible organisms. Like a “giant, synthetic stomach,” this work changes over time, highlighting a key theme in the artist's oeuvre: fermentation in both the literal and allegorical sense.

4. *New York's A Bitch, But God Forbid The Bitch Divorce You*, 2014

Two dryer doors, the kind one might encounter in a laundromat, punctuate the wall at the end of the exhibition space. By opening the door, visitors will perceive a dark space that diffuses separately two fragrances—*Traennen* and *Bullfrog*—created with the aid of the French “nose” Christophe Laudamiel. With this work characterized by a cold, minimalist aesthetic, the artist minimizes the presence of visual stimuli in order to explore feelings that belong to the intimate and personal dimension, such as desire and the sense of loss. In fact the title, inspired by the lyrics of *Affirmative Action*, a song by the rapper Nas, sharply and sardonically alludes to contrasting emotions generally accompanying the end of a relationship.

Underlining the scientifically proven connection between the olfactory system and the areas of the brain that deal with emotions and long-term memory, the installation leads the visitor in an olfactory dimension while overturning the concepts of interior and exterior, natural and synthetic.

5. *12 Synesthetic Crayons*, 2015

6. *Fontenelle*, 2015

7. *Home in 30 Days, Don't Wash*, 2015

8. *We Are Water*, 2015

9. *Your Hand Feels Like a Pillow That's Been Microwaved*, 2015

This series highlights a central theme in Yi's practice: contemporary fears surrounding hygiene and contamination. The idea grew out of the Ebola epidemic spread

in 2015 in West Africa, and the form of each installation alludes to quarantine tents: each is a transparent rectangular enclosure made of PVC, with brightly colored abstract shapes reproduced on the outer surfaces, reminiscent of biological hazard symbols. They are seemingly impermeable structures containing objects and elements that can only be seen from the outside. As explained by the artist: «I reflected the societal violence I observed through my own version of “quarantine tents,” containers that restrict air exchange, but also the movement and interaction of living beings.»

In proximity to the installations, visitors perceive an olfactory environment: a pungent feminine aroma inspired by a “super” bacteria created in collaboration with an MIT-trained synthetic biologist for the 2015 exhibition “You Can Call Me F” at The Kitchen. In order to create the massive culture, bacterial samples were collected from one hundred women in the artist’s professional and personal network. Yi also worked with a perfume manufacturer, Air Variable, to distill a second fragrance that is diffused from rotating motorcycle helmets inside the tents. This fragrance was created by analyzing air samples taken in 2015 from Gagosian Gallery, New York. Yi juxtaposes two very different realities: a robust communal female network and the vaunted art gallery, a symbol of a patriarchal ruling class. The combined olfactory experience thus foregrounds the friction between these two ideologically contrasting spheres.

10. *Bacteria Photograph*, 2015

11. *Deep State*, 2017

Bacteria Photograph consists of twelve photographs of cell-culture dishes containing bacteria originating from the project presented at The Kitchen in New York in 2015; *Deep State* comprises two lightboxes with prints of cultured bacteria taken from the offices of the Raven Row exhibition space in London in 2017. With different approaches, these works unveil the range of colors that can be found in microscopic entities. Yi frees bacteria of their negative connotations, revealing qualities that could be described as painterly.

The presence or depiction of microbes points to the constant shifts in scale typical of Yi’s vision: the microscopic realm of bacteria often takes on the larger proportions of the animal or human sphere. The life of a microbial colony can thus serve as a metaphor for the dynamics governing a community and an entire ecosystem.

12. *Shameplex*, 2015

Shameplex is made up of seven aquarium-like tanks, each containing a layer of ultrasound gel. Characterized by a phosphorescent green color, the work has an antiseptic aura, as if it were a generator of alien worlds. Inside each vessel, a white LED light illuminates a large number of pins stuck into the gelatinous surface at the bottom. Over time the metal elements undergo corrosion and oxidation, producing a



Shameplex, 2015
Installation view,
Kunsthalle Basel, 2015
Photo Philipp Hänger/
Kunsthalle Basel

reddish pattern that gradually seeps into the gummy substance.

This installation epitomizes the encounter between art and science. The use of basic geometric shapes—an hybrid between coffin and incu-

bator—arranged on the floor in two parallel rows harnesses the potent visual impact of minimalism. According to the artist: «The presence of ultrasound gel can be connected to the female body incubating life vis à vis to the oxidizing patterns that stain the process.»

13. *When Species Meet Part 2 (Vegetable Psychology)*, 2016

This work features a 2-meter wide cube-shaped cage open at the top, its bars covered in fake fur. Inside is a sculptural element resembling the bamboo mushroom, a tropical fungus widely employed in Chinese cuisine and traditional medicine that is characterized by a net-like veil stretching down from the top of the stalk. The same kind of structure is also used in technology, for example in the circuitry within hardware.

Placed around the edges of the cage is lab equipment that includes flasks of liquid, while the fur lining evokes an animal dimension. It recalls the iconic sculpture *Object* (1936) by the Surrealist pioneer Meret Oppenheim (1913–1985): a teacup, saucer, and spoon completely covered in animal fur thus deprived

of their function. Taking a similar approach, Yi visually and conceptually upends predefined, rational, accepted categories such as content/container or animal/vegetable.

The varied nature of the elements constituting the work underscores the anti-speciesism that Yi often references in her work, and particularly her rejection of the anthropocentric vision of species, which tends to put non-human living beings outside the range of moral consideration.

14. *Immigrant Caucus*, 2017

The work is both a physical threshold—a metal mesh gate through which visitors must pass—and an intangible one: an aroma diffused through the space by three industrial steel tanks. This fragrance, created in collaboration with perfumer Barnabé Fillion, was obtained by mingling the chemical compounds in sweat samples collected from Manhattan's Chinatown and Koreatown, with the emissions of carpenter ants, a species that nests in tunnels dug in tree trunks. The blend of the two olfactory components creates a political commentary on Asian-American identity and the exploitation of labor that often affects these minorities, highlighting how the sensation of unease linked to odor is intrinsically connected to the fear of difference. Through its direct sensory impact on visitors, *Immigrant Caucus* conveys a sense of otherness that modifies the perception of the environment.

Using the political term “caucus”—a meeting aimed at coordinating the actions or positions of those belonging to a group—Yi expresses the need for a paradigm shift: «Perhaps the trans-species scent could move one past the way things merely appear to us, a relative mode of reality, and instead allow us to access something more universal.»

15. Effectively Synergizing Backward Overflow, 2015

(2666, 2015; S.S.S., 2015; *Lung Condom*, 2015)

16. Ice Water In The Veins, 2015

(*Embassy Row*, 2015; *Laptop Lap Burn*, 2015; *Faking the Books*, 2015)

17. Orbis Mundi Is Yours to Take in Hand, 2015

The installation comprises a corridor enclosed by two works (*Effectively Synergizing Backward Overflow* and *Ice Water In The Veins*) which create a point of transition between the museum lobby and the exhibition space. Both works—originally presented at Kunsthalle Basel in 2015—are lined by three sculptures placed in backlit niches; their surfaces are dotted with numerous round, colorful images of bacteria seen through

Lung Condom, 2015
Soap, paint, acetate,
resin, rubber tubing
24 x 30.5 x 5 cm
Photo Philipp Hänger/
Kunsthalle Basel



a microscope which are titled *Orbis Mundi Is Yours to Take in Hand*. The display of the sculptures evokes those of museums and luxury boutique windows. Each sculpture sits on a small base and combines various elements and materials. On the left side of the structure, for example, the

work *Lung Condom* is a hemisphere covered in abstract patterns, made from resin and transparent soap and intersected by a red rubber tube. On the opposite side, the rectangular sculpture *Embassy Row* is composed of bacteria and agar (a gelatinous substance extracted from boiled seaweed), sealed inside a Plexiglas container. With their aura of “techno-sensual alchemy,” these assemblages can be seen as an attempt to capture ephemeral and mutable processes by suspending them in materials like soap or resin.

18 – 21. Releasing The Human From The Human, 2019

22 – 23. Releasing The Human From The Human, 2020

Six glowing spheres hanging from the ceiling illuminate the exhibition space like Japanese lanterns. This series, made from a kelp-based substance, highlights the artist's interest in the ecological qualities and potential of algae to produce energy. The sculptures give off a greenish-gold light that brings out the scratches and marks on the surface of each piece: «The organic forms of these sculptures are a mutating play off of the iconic Akari lamp by Isamu Noguchi, while the scratches resemble the work of abstract expressionist artists such as Cy Twombly,» says the artist.

With their porous texture and luminescence, the spheres are reminiscent of sea creatures floating through the depths. Flitting inside the sculptures are animatronic insects, which create a subtle buzz and play of shadows that lend a kinetic dimension to the work. By mingling animal elements with robotic ones, Yi explores non-human forms of intelligence.



Releasing The Human From The Human, 2019
Installation view,
Gladstone Gallery,
Brussels, 2019
Photo David Regen

Her work is informed by the latest scientific discoveries regarding the microbiome, AI, and animal and plant consciousness, which sweep away the ideas of human exceptionalism.

24. *Biologizing the Machine (spillover zoonotica)*, 2022

The installation is a new expanded version of *Biologizing the Machine (terra incognita)*, first presented at the 58th Venice Biennale in 2019, and consists of seven rectangular structures made of glass and metal suspended from the ceiling at different heights. Their abstract patterns reference both traditional landscape painting and abstract expressionist art. Each vessel contains a Winogradsky culture, a highly diverse micro-ecosystem

of soil bacteria and algae. Prior to installation, soil samples are locally sourced, then grown on-site for several weeks, resulting in a site-specific work. The installation functions as a portrait of the region and represents the minute complexities of the local environment, its genetic, bacterial, and geological profile. Once sealed, the culture continues to evolve on its own over time, changing in color, texture, and pattern in reaction to the ambient environment such as oxygen levels, light, and temperature.

The work also features a custom electronic board installed at the top of each panel. The electronics are used to sense the microbial activity of the living ecosystem contained within the chamber below. Sensors detect varying levels of hydrogen sulfide, a gas produced as the microorganisms experience fluctuating periods of growth, decay, and stasis. An e-ink display shows the overall activity of the microbes in the immediate past, ranging from a few hours to a week. The microbial species live in fragile and agitated symbiosis with each other, all the while being perceived by the electronic system. These panels gesture towards a future of more complex and precarious multi-organism and machine hybrids.

For the show at Pirelli HangarBicocca, Anicka Yi's studio collaborated with the Department of Environmental and Earth Sciences of the Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca to create and grow the Winogradsky culture. The title, *Biologizing the Machine (spillover zoonotica)* references "zoonotic spillover," a concept that has become familiar during the Covid-19 pandemic, as it describes the process by which viruses are transferred between species.

Selected Exhibitions

Anicka Yi's solo exhibitions have been held in many leading international institutions, including the Hyundai Commission, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London (2021); Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2017); Fridericianum, Kassel (2016); Kunsthalle Basel, MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The Kitchen, New York (2015); and Cleveland Museum of Art (2014). She has taken part in several group exhibitions, including the Venice Biennale (2019); Whitney Biennial, New York (2017); Okayama Art Summit, Gwangju Biennale (2016); Taipei Biennial (2014); and Biennale de Lyon (2013).

Anicka Yi has won major awards, including Guggenheim Hugo Boss Prize (2016) and The Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award (2011). In 2019, the artist realized *Biography Fragrance*, a line of three fragrances in limited edition in collaboration with Barnabé Fillion.

This publication accompanies the exhibition “Metaspore” by Anicka Yi

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Pirelli HangarBicocca is a non-profit foundation, established in 2004, which has converted a former industrial plant in Milan into an institution for producing and promoting contemporary art.

This dynamic center for experimentation and research covers 15,000 square meters, making it one of the largest contiguous exhibition spaces in Europe. It presents major solo shows every year by Italian and international artists, with each project conceived to work in close relation to the architecture of the complex, and explored in depth through a calendar of parallel events. Admission to the space and the shows is completely free of charge, and cultural mediators are on hand to help the public connect with the art. Since 2012, Vicente Todolì has been the foundation's Artistic Director.

The complex, which once housed a locomotive factory, includes an area for public services and educational activities, and three exhibition spaces whose original twentieth-century architectural features have been left clearly visible: Shed, Navate, and Cubo.

As well as its exhibitions program and cultural events, Pirelli HangarBicocca also permanently houses one of Anselm Kiefer's most important site-specific works, *The Seven Heavenly Palaces 2004-2015*, commissioned for the opening of Pirelli HangarBicocca, while the exterior area hosts *La Sequenza* (1971-81) by Fausto Melotti.



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