

Anicka Yi

Narratives of scent and material decay

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by Kari Rittenbach

In 1969, Gordon Matta-Clark fried up a series of Polaroids of Christmas trees in vegetable oil and an iron skillet for the group exhibition 'Documentations' at the John Gibson Gallery, New York. Once cooked, each photograph in the *Photo-Fry* series was dusted with gold leaf, which quickly melted into the surface of the exposure such that the object 'took on the appearance of charred skin'. Gibson reported that the melting photographic emulsion 'smelled terrible' when it commingled with the frying grease. In a canny dissemination of evidence, Matta-Clark later mailed the Polaroids to friends as holiday greetings. Whether the acrid stench had evaporated by the time they were delivered, can only be known by the postal workers of the time.

When I first met Anicka Yi in her studio, we discussed the possibilities of transmitting scent digitally. Despite recent technological advancements, today's ubiquitous digital images nonetheless fail to convey certain physical sensations. Smells tell us about our urban environment and economy; wafts of bacon grease expelled along Manhattan avenues by deli counters, or rancid notes of parmesan from caked layers of human perspiration that cling to the interior of tube trains. Yi has described the familiar yeasty scent of baking bread that emanates from the Subway franchises as an exemplary radical artistic development of the 21st century – a measure of the growing dominance of the flavour industry on our reality. And the proliferation of curating has encouraged articulations of 'taste' in consumables of all sorts, not just culinary ones.

Smell functions formally and conceptually in Yi's installations. Echoing the methods of the beauty industry, the construction of a narrative around scent can be critical to the experience of the artist's work, which expands beyond clichéd tales of seduction, everlasting youth and love. The perfume *Shigenobu Twilight* (with Maggie Peng, 2008) was inspired by the Japanese Red Army leader and former member of the Marxist-Leninist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Fusako Shigenobu; it blends, among other elements, cedar tones with those of shiso leaf. For the 2011 exhibition 'Excuse Me, Your Necklase is Leaking' (a line appropriated from counterculture writer Richard Brautigan) at The Green Gallery, Milwaukee, Yi aged

a trio of 'essential oils' derived from existing fluids that were notionally based on scenarios of rape (*He Wood by Dsqared2*), political dissidence (*Tsing Tao*) and tropical disease (Listerine as unexpected malarial antidote). In 2012, she produced *Mutual Glaze*, an aroma evoking Barbara Stanwyck's femme fatale heroine from the 1944 film *Double Indemnity*, for a noir-inspired group show of the same name at Cornerhouse, Manchester. When Yi's work takes on sculptural dimensions, scent serves to confound interpretations of incongruous objects and materials: in *Auras*, *Orgasms*, and *Nervous Peaches* (2011), a trio of warmly fragrant olive oil trails leaked from the punctured wall of a narrow tiled room, which simultaneously recalled a sterile commercial kitchen, an interrogation cell and a public toilet.

By contrast, the artist's framed glycerine soap works – such as *Prada String Quartet No. 15 3/4 in A Minor, First Movement* and *Untitled* (both 2013) – refer to industrial applications of aroma, personal hygiene and physical preservation (though not always preservation of the human body). Yi's material suspensions include resin, acrylic paint, plastic petri dish, sodium silicate, dessicant bead, Prada moisturizer packaging, silicone insole and teeth whitener. Here, Matta-Clark's agar-agar multiples from *Museum* (1970) serve as a point of departure: chocolate Yoo-Hoo, V8 tomato juice, yeast and the fungus *Mucor racemosus* fermented steadily in trays of the gelatinous solvent, eventually hardening into a sort of stiff canvas. At different speeds, both Yi's framed glycerine and Matta-Clark's moulding agar-agar bear out processes of material decay, creating organic surface abstractions sympathetic to the fallibility of humans.

The pungent odours expelled by *Convex Dialer Double Distance of a Shining Path* (2011) – a witch's brew of powdered milk, antidepressants, palm tree essence, shaved sea lice, ground Teva rubber dust and mobile phone signal jammer – cause an immediate gut reaction to the supposed romance of life lived off the grid or on the run. This was hinted at by the titular reference to the rebel Maoist Peruvian Communist Party, The Shining Path, and boiled-down inventory (antipsychotics, practical footwear, counter surveillance device). In comparison, the heady readymade concoction *235,681K of Digital Spit* (2010) – transparent PVC and leather Longchamp duffel bag stuffed with hair gel and tripe – performs something of a metaphorical evisceration. Not only an expression of disgust or acid reflux,

spit also contains key digestive enzymes; in this work, Yi manifests the phantom stomach required to metabolize what we consume online.

For her contribution to 'Some End of Things' (2013) at Basel's Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Yi revisited her most definitive *objet d'art* to date, the tempura-battered-and-fried cut flower (an element that first appeared in *Cruisin' for a Bruisin'*, 2009). Crystallized in acrylic and displayed on grease-saturated resin beds in delivery boxes laid out in rows throughout the gallery, these post-apocalyptic fritters suggest an unsentimental take on ecological symbolism. While the violence of Matta-Clark's *Photo-Fry* destroyed the content of his Polaroid images, Yi's more delicate method preserves some of the plant's structural integrity even as it frees essences via accelerated breakdown; polluting the museum and its art works with traces of peanut oil.

For 'The Politics of Friendship', an exhibition she organized at Studiolo in Zürich last year, Yi greased the gallery walls with butter in a collaboration with New York artists Jordan Lord, Carissa Rodriguez and Lise Soskolne. This Beuysian application of fatty lipids was exposed to the social environment and allowed over time to melt, adhere, decompose. While Matta-Clark's fried mail art survived as archival objects of a particular network of artists and acquaintances, Yi's more recent fragrant interventions explore the dynamics of being in and out of touch with others. In a text accompanying 'The Politics of Friendship', Yi wrote: 'I said I am awkward. You said you delete yourself. Getting at this is a queasy ordeal. I still like you because it's all I can do. [...] We have friendships built on knowledge, but more and more they're built on information. Can we know someone whose scent we've never smelled?'

Anicka Yi lives and works in New York, USA. In 2013, she had a solo show at Lars Friedrich, Berlin, Germany, and her work was included in the 12th Biennale de Lyon, France, as well as in group shows at Studiolo, Zurich, Switzerland; Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, USA; T293, Rome, Italy; Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Basel, Switzerland; Murray Guy, New York; and Altman Siegel, San Francisco, USA. In 2014, she will have a solo show at 47 Canal, New York.



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Despite recent technological advancements, today's ubiquitous digital images fail to convey certain physical sensations.



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