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BIOLOGY WAFTS: HETEROTOPIC SPACE AND THE POSTHUMAN IN ANICKA YI'S WORKS

Résumé

Anicka Yi est une artiste conceptuelle contemporaine sud-coréenne-américaine dont le travail mêle biologie, paysages olfactifs et technologie. Son ascension dans le monde de l'art international au cours de la dernière décennie s'est faite à un rythme impressionnant, et elle semble avoir largement contourné le circuit des biennales - les tremplins contemporains vers les lieux d'exposition de haut niveau. Cet article explore les approches structurelles et conceptuelles d'éléments spécifiques de deux expositions : "In Love With the World", présentée en 2021 et 2022 au Turbine Hall de la Tate (Londres), et "Life is Cheap", une exposition présentée en 2017 au Guggenheim (New York), en utilisant la théorie posthumaniste et les notions d'hétérotopie pour déconstruire le travail de Yi et les écosystèmes artistiques mondiaux du cube blanc. Je m'attarde également sur le processus de développement des paysages olfactifs de Yi, sur le rôle que joue l'art olfactif dans le déplacement de la hiérarchie visuelle typique des espaces des galeries d'art, et sur la fusion de la biologie et de la technologie par Yi. L'objectif principal est de montrer comment la créativité de Yi s'attache à réarticuler la coexistence de l'homme avec les autres (humains, autres espèces, machines, environnement) afin de concevoir des formes de cohabitation plus harmonieuses dans notre monde post-humain.

Mots clés : Anicka Yi, In Love With The World, Life is Cheap, paysage olfactif, cube blanc, hétérotopie, posthumanisme, cohabitation

South Korean-American contemporary conceptual artist Anicka Yi has rapidly risen in the international art world over the last decade through her groundbreaking work melding biology, scentscapes and technology. The Guggenheim and the Tate Modern have both

Abstract

Anicka Yi is a South Korean-American contemporary conceptual artist whose work melds biology, scentscapes and technology. Her rise in the international art world over the last decade came at a dizzying pace, and she appears to have largely circumvented the biennale circuit — the contemporary stepping stones to high profile exhibition venues. This paper explores structural and conceptual approaches to specific elements of two exhibitions: "In Love With the World," on display in 2021 and -2022 at the Tate's Turbine Hall (London), and "Life is Cheap," a 2017 exhibition at the Guggenheim (New York), using posthumanist theory and notions of heterotopia to deconstruct Yi's work and 'white cube' global art ecosystems. I also elaborate on Yi's process of developing scentscapes, the role olfactory art plays in shifting the typical visual hierarchy of art gallery spaces, and Yi's fusing of biology and technology. The main objective is to show how Yi's creativity is concerned with a re-articulation of human co-existence with others (humans, other species, machines, the environment) in order to conceive more harmonious forms of cohabitation in our post-human world.

Key words: Anicka Yi, In Love With The World, Life is Cheap, scentscapes, white cube, heterotopias, posthumanism, cohabitation

hosted Yi's exhibitions within the last five years, demonstrating how she has largely circumvented the biennale circuit – that is, the contemporary steppingstones to such high-profile venues. My primary objective is to argue that Yi's work, which explores issues of

intersectionality, while offering perspectives on human co-existence (with others and machines), proposes a vision of a contemporary posthuman moment which fuses biology and technology. For my secondary objective, the focus on deconstructing aspects of Yi's exhibitions is to comprehend these works experientially, in their respective venues, for the purpose of juxtaposing, contrasting and drawing experiential asymmetries to the biennale circuit. This allows for a better understanding of how she managed to circumvent them so early in her art career. Although Anicka Yi's works defy the traditional parameters of the 'white cube' museum gallery norms with works that historically would be viewed as a risk to the institutions themselves (potentially unleashing Pandora's box into their art collections), these institutions have nevertheless chosen to exhibit her work, due to the way she explores timely geopolitical issues— using unusual media (scents + bacteria) and approaches (ephemeral, conceptual art) used by very few artists.

This essay will explore structural and conceptual approaches to specific elements of two exhibitions: "In Love With the World," on display in 2021-22 at the Tate's Turbine Hall (London), and "Life is Cheap," a 2017 exhibition hosted by the Guggenheim (New York). Each exhibit involves a trilogy of works

which combine experientially— a scentscape, a sealed environment with conditions created for bacteria (or living organisms) to aesthetically run amok, and the use of technology. My focus will be on the scentscape of the "Life is Cheap" exhibition entitled "Immigrant Caucus" and the living organisms (referred to throughout as "biologized machines" or "aerobes") from the "In Love With the World" exhibit.

In two New York Times articles, entitled "Anicka Yi is Inventing a New Kind of Conceptual Art" and "The Artistic Aromas of Anicka Yi," her work is characterized as slyly autobiographical feminist subversions, far-ranging in social critique (institutional sexism and racism, cultural obsessions of cleanliness, art world power structures, etc.), with the use of unusual material— notably science and scent (Gregory, Thackara). As a conceptual artist, her body of work explores issues of intersectionality; a theoretical concept exploring connections between domination and subordination across race, ethnicity, gender and social class, often used to critique communication in its messaging, production and reception as vectors of power (Fischer 846-847, Hekman 101-102). Emerging in the 60s in reaction to an increasingly commercialized art world, the socio-political critique of conceptual artists subverted art world norms by

emphasizing process and production methods as the primary value of the work. Conceptual art is characterized by its use of varied media, invisible systems, structures and processes, everyday materials and “ready-made” objects (“Conceptual Art”). What is perhaps most captivating about Yi’s work is how she augments her elaborate, sometimes ephemeral, science experiment exhibitions (air-sealed for public safety) with scentscapes— each an individual work in its own right, specifically formulated to add a conceptual layer of meaning to her installations. Scents Yi created previously include “Shigenobu Twilight,” inspired by heroine Fusako Shigenobu, presumed leader of the Japanese Red Army, and “Aliens & Alzheimers,” which explored ideas of forgetting for a divorce themed exhibit (Gregory 69, Jeffries).

For her Guggenheim exhibition, “Life is Cheap,” Yi collaborated with a perfumer, an olfactory artist and a forensic scientist to create a hybrid scent of an Asian-American woman and a carpenter ant. Carpenter ants are notable for their matriarchy, industry and sense of smell allowing recognition of caste rungs within the ant colony. Yi’s scentscape had 3 parts: fragrance (vegetal and floral, notes of cedar, hay, cumin and cellophane), ant (citrusy, meaty), and a set of scents evolved from compounds identified in human sweat and ant

tissue. Combined, these created the scent “Immigrant Caucus,” which she describes as “sweaty and herbacious, until the garlicky note of the ant kicks in” (“How I Solve It”). The scentscape was piped into the entranceway and exhibit space through canisters, activated when people entered. Within the physical exhibit itself, one of two dioramas (“Lifestyle Wars”), depicted a giant circuit board (‘motherboard’) housing tunnels which held a colony of twenty thousand live ants, reflected infinitely in a series of mirrors; the scent was pumped into the ant tunnels to parallel the audience experience. The second diorama (“Force Majeure”), was a sealed environment evoking a bathroom vanity, created for bacteria to colourfully, aesthetically run amok for the duration of the exhibit. Bacteria samples were sourced from Manhattan’s Chinatown and Koreatown neighbourhoods; the work was intended to call out depictions of the Asian community as an “ethnically invasive life-force overrunning their environment.” Yi says the “Life is Cheap” exhibition was, in-part, a reaction to the divisive climate of intolerance towards visible minorities incited by the Trump administration throughout the year (Lee 705-707). The invisible process by which Yi developed the scent and the socio-political connotations involved is indicative of conceptual art practices. I propose that the manner in which

Yi layers them with other spatial-sculptural-living conceptual works and the multi-sensory aspects of the exhibition are a contemporary articulation of conceptual art.

The “In Love With The World” exhibition at the Tate’s Turbine Hall (see fig. 1 and 2) is more uplifting and future-forward, while being lighter on socio-political critique. The installation combines aeronautics, drone technology and scents in “aerobes” and “biologized machines” floating throughout the space, which are spatially aware in response to humans. These are facilitated by an artificial life simulation to provide real-time contextual

information to inform the “aerobes” inner motivations and individual traits (Airstage). Yi’s “aerobes” (tentacular, bulbous creatures based on ocean life forms and mushrooms) individually respond unpredictably to the air they are enveloped by through programming that activates their own set of behaviours. Heat sensors throughout the space enable them to detect the presence of visitors and uniquely respond to them. Yi says she hoped to return machines to nature, allowing them to manifest and represent “the intelligence of diverse life forms, not just human intelligence” (Thackara). She also uses a range of scentscapes (released

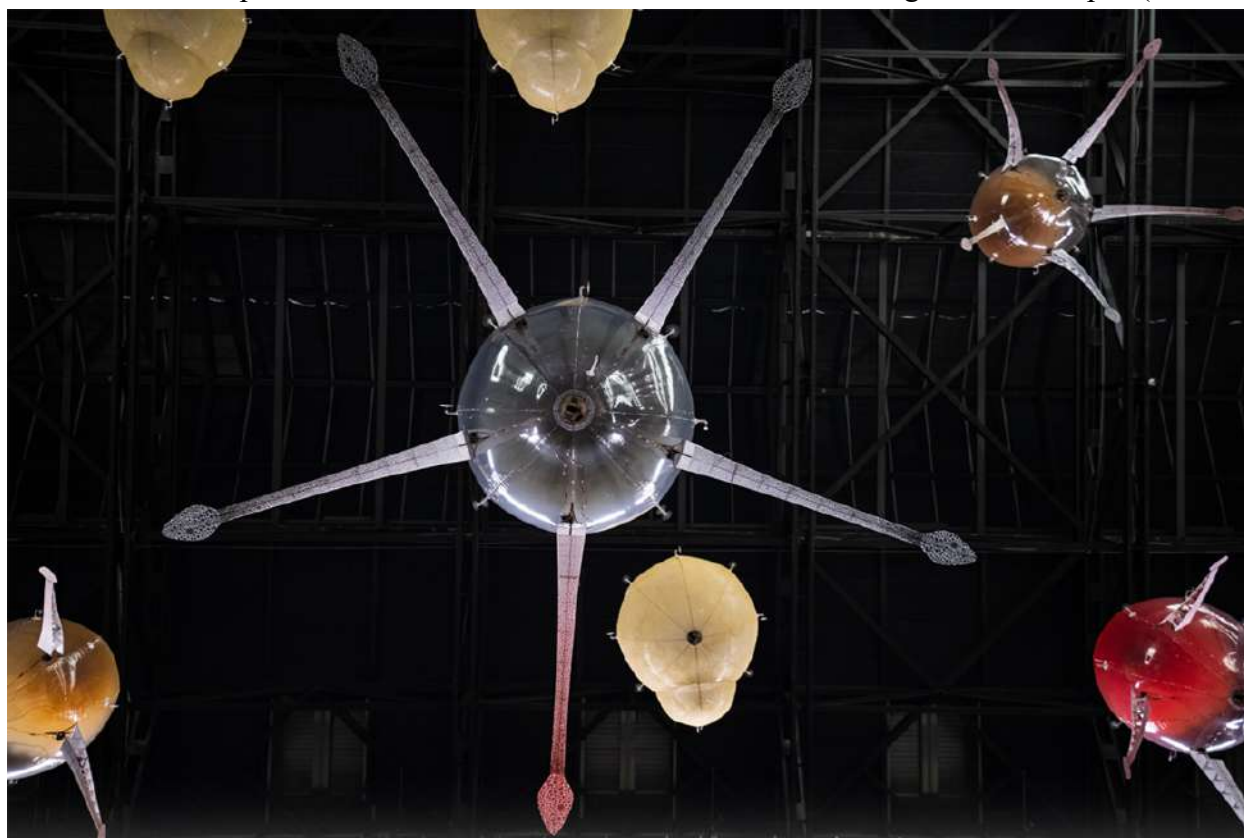


Fig. 1. “In Love with the World,” Tate Modern, Turbine Hall, London (2021-2022)

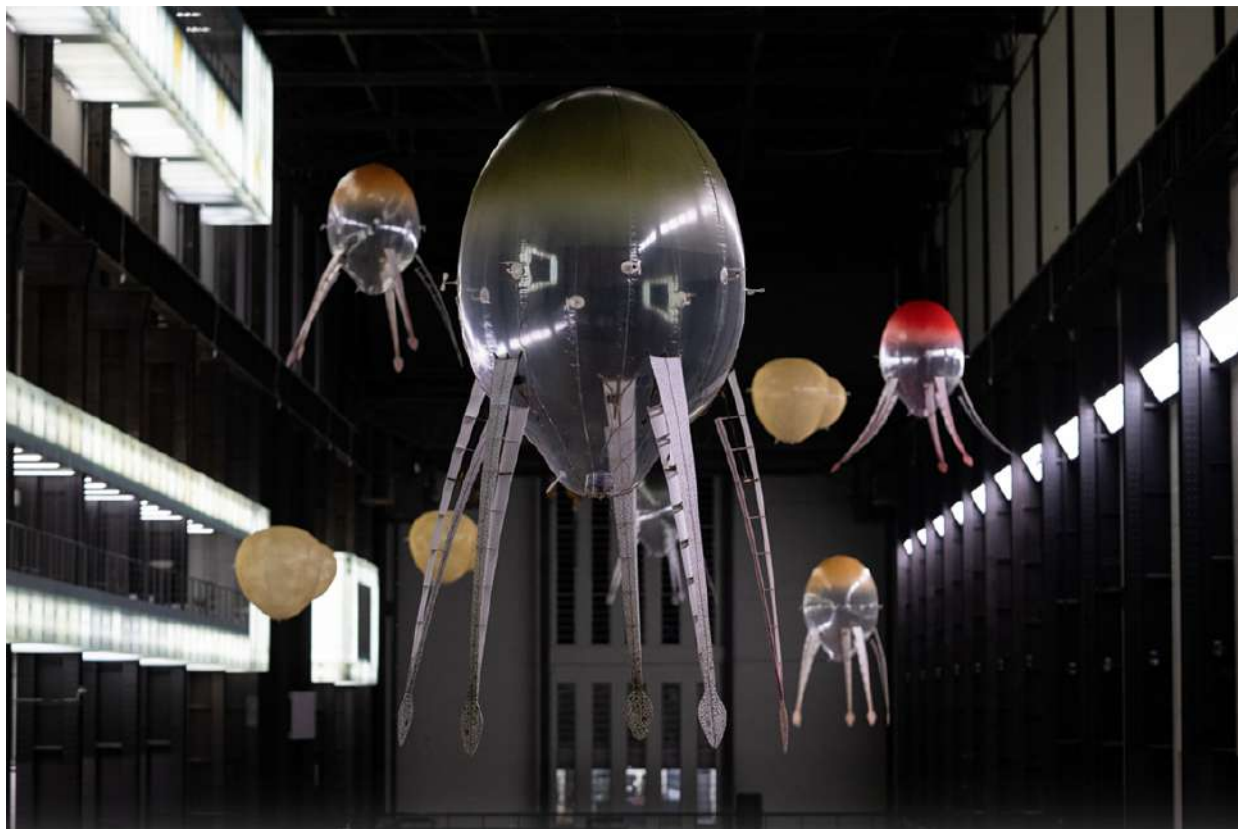


Fig. 2. “In Love with the World,” Tate Modern, Turbine Hall, London (2021-2022)

weekly) to conjure the “fragrant socio-political history” of the area around the museum, one of which evokes cholera (Art:LIVE, Compton, Rea, Thackara, “Hyundai”). The intent behind the exhibition was to re-envision a manifestation of artificial intelligence and propose a new picture of machine design, rather than being predominantly anthropomorphically-driven. The exhibition proposes air as a sculpture we all inhabit and alternative approaches to how intelligent machines can interact with us, themselves and their environment (the inferred parallel, an equilibrium in human interactivity in a shared

environment).

In order to examine Yi’s work within related global art ecosystems, I employ the concept of heterotopia and posthumanist theory. I further reflect on the definition of conceptual art and Yi’s contemporary interpretation of it, elaborating on her process of developing scentscapes, the role olfactory art plays in shifting the typical visual hierarchy of art exhibition spaces, and her fusing of biology and technology. For the analysis of elements of both exhibitions (scentscapes and “aerobes”), I use posthumanist theory due to its focus on the dissolution of barriers between

biology, technology and human interactions with the environment. Posthumanism is described as the mediation of human experience through computer-coded language, a theory analyzing the collapse/dissolving of technology into the biological, social, political and ecological (Callus 145-150). I also apply the concept of heterotopia, as proposed by Foucault, to my interpretation of international art ecosystems. My contention is that the contemporary art institutions and ecosystems should be interpreted as heterotopias of our posthuman moment. Heterotopia is a theoretical concept useful to describe “disciplinary” or “liminal” interconnected spaces, where society or institutions are able to continuously transform their nature and purpose to suit their needs. Heterotopias are: first, of a defined specificity; second, amenable to transformation, reinvention and refreshing; third, able to juxtapose in a single physical place multiple experiences which are logically incompatible; fourth, experientially characterized by ruptures or breaks in time; fifth, both open and closed, isolated yet penetrable; and sixth, transformative in a manner which catalyzes our relation with the physical space, often employing a sense of surrealism (Buchanan).

My focus on examining Yi’s work (how she explores issues of intersectionality and

posthumanism in her conceptual artworks) to understand how she found her place within the broader contemporary art ecosystems (heterotopias) is a significant departure from the critical studies of Lee, Godfrey and Hsu. Rachel Lee in “Metabolic aesthetics: on the feminist scentscapes of Anicka Yi,” describes the “Life is Cheap” exhibit (fig. 3 and 4) as a critique of globalized Marxist practices — the exploitation of Asian workers and what offshore production processes (ie. Foxconn) enable in terms of western consumption and convenience (705-707). Mark Godfrey in “The Politics of Air,” ties the “Life is Cheap” exhibit to the US domestic issues of the day, particularly concepts of racialism and intrinsic racism: Trump’s divisive immigration policies, Mexican border migrant detention and growing anti-Asian sentiment. His focus was on analyzing the “Force Majeure” and “Immigrant Caucus” works which he says, “render visible the source of discomfort, anxieties and intolerance” towards Asian and other immigrant communities in the US (69-71). Hsuan L. Hsu in “Olfactory Art, Transcorporeality and the Museum Environment,” does not analyze either of the two exhibitions I have focused on, but notes in Yi’s prior works, how she questions our “tendency to stigmatize environmental risk factors by emphasizing the vital links between

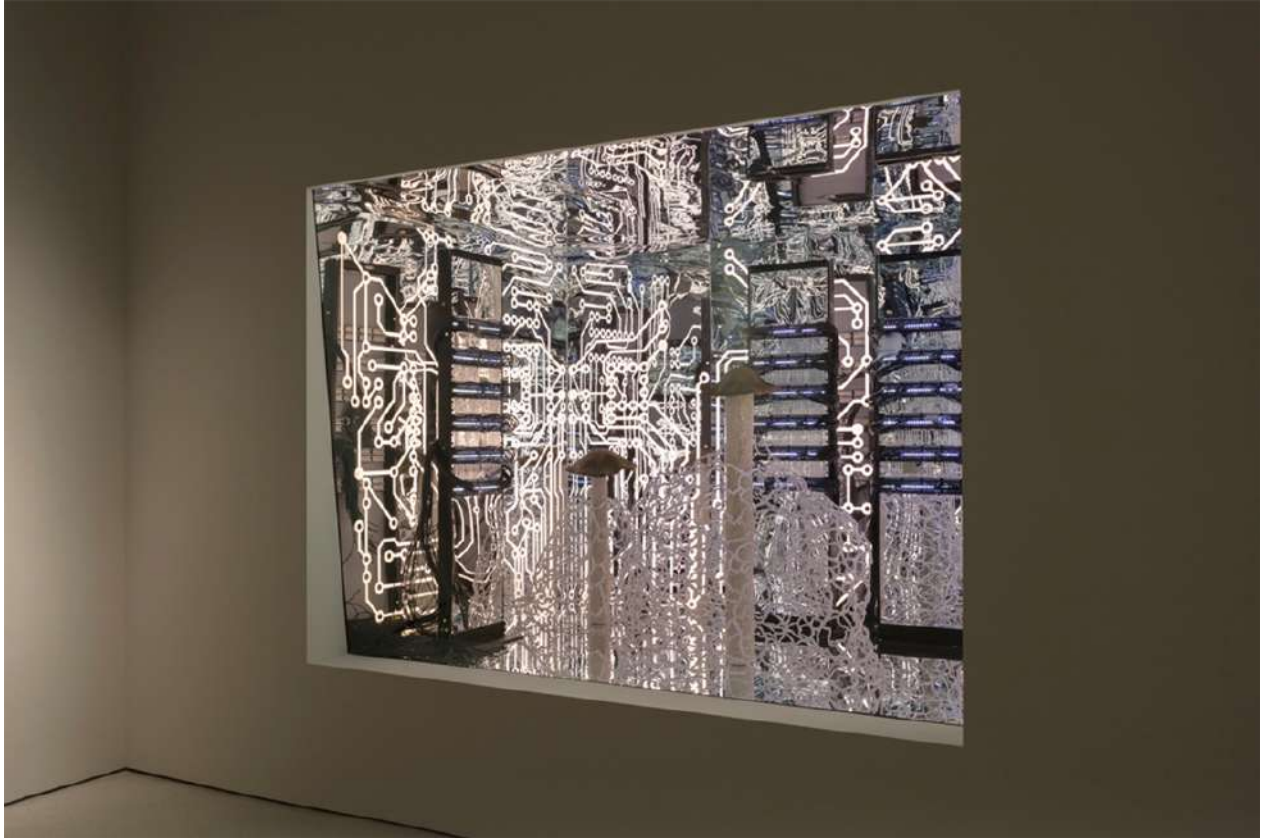


Fig. 3. “Lifestyle Wars,” “Life is Cheap,” Guggenheim New York (2017)

bacterial proliferation and human ‘culture.’” Hsu’s stance was to apply an olfactory scientific hermeneutic lens to concepts of racialism and extrinsic racism in analyzing Yi’s works. Hsu uses the theoretical concept “toposmia”; a field of inquiry concerned with spatial odours and the associations between smell and place (Hsu 3-4, 9, 13-15).

Yi’s exhibitions engage with the geopolitical climate of Donald Trump’s presidency. In 2016, Trump launched an election platform based on drastically limiting immigration, proven to be an enduring stance for animating his base and securing his

presidency. His policies immediately disrupted circulation at US entry points for those with connections to several countries across the Middle East, Africa and Central America, among others. In “A Review of Trump’s Immigration Policy,” Anderson quantifies the rate at which highly skilled foreign-born workers, refugees and asylum seekers have been denied/blocked entry, and how legal immigration to the US was almost halved during his term in office without much change to US immigration law. Trump’s approach to immigration was novel; much of it was media-amplified rhetoric, while policy changes were

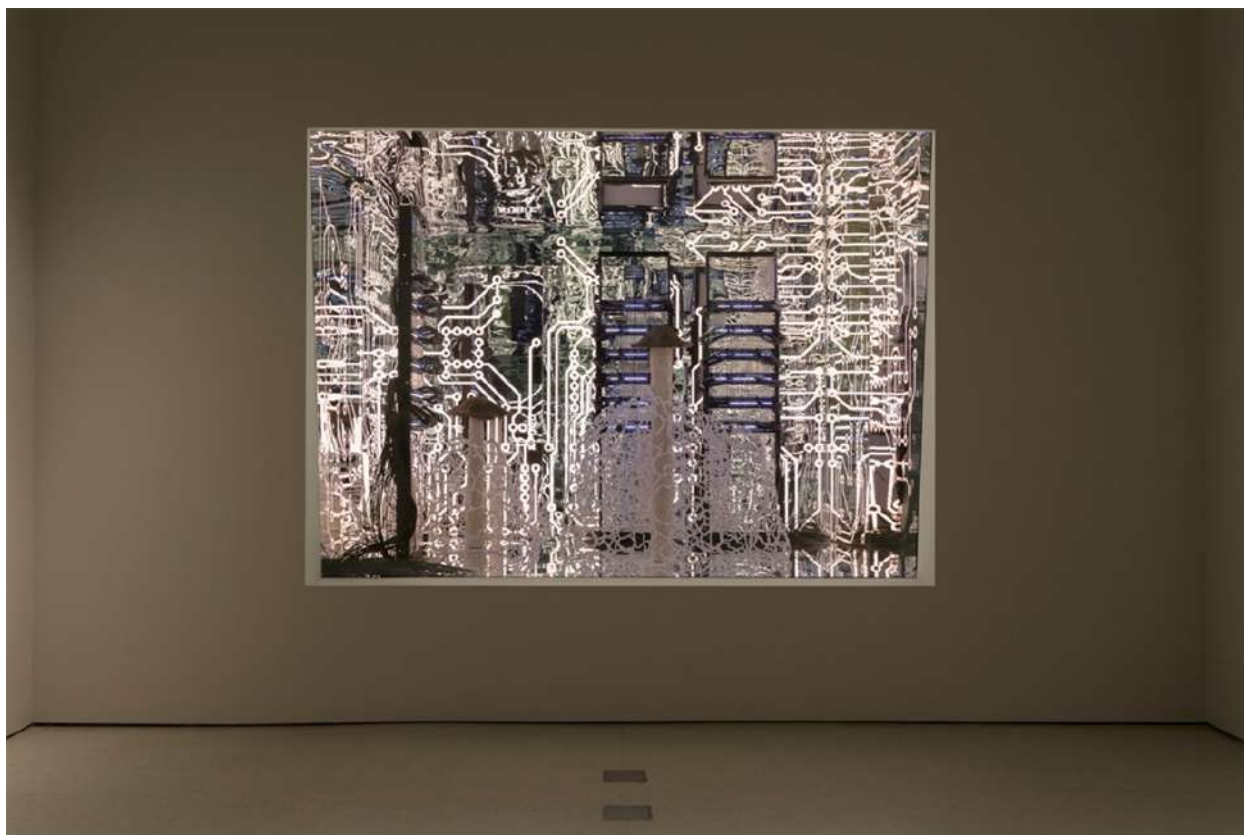


Fig. 4. “Lifestyle Wars,” “Life is Cheap,” Guggenheim New York (2017)

small, incremental, and mostly unnoticeable. This allowed his Republican supporters to deny the impact of his rhetoric. Nearly all reforms were designed to make immigrating to the US more difficult and to reduce the number of immigrants arriving (Shear). According to the “Immigration Policy Tracking Project,” a database tracking changes made to the US immigration system throughout Trump’s presidency:

... the project documents 1059 separate immigration-related changes made by the Trump administration ... [including] 163 changes to forms and

information collection; 106 official rule changes; 416 agency directives; 57 presidential orders; 301 changes in practice by agencies and their employees; 16 program terminations; 40 modifications to data and reports; 29 formal changes to the way immigration law is adjudicated; and six legislative proposals. (Guttentag, Shear)

It is throughout this time that visible minorities and immigrant communities were increasingly confronted by an invisible wall of administrative barriers amidst Trump’s media-amplified rhetoric that brought long-

suppressed racialism and extrinsic racism to the surface, and gave license for those attitudes to further proliferate across much of the western world. In 2020, the focus shifted towards the Asian community with the onset of the pandemic and Trump's confrontational stance toward China. Despite the coronavirus shifting Americans' priorities to healthcare and the economy in the last year of Trump's presidency, his rhetoric on immigration and policy shifts continued throughout 2020 (Hesson, Shear). These were felt further afield when, not only were Western countries struggling with the onset of the pandemic, but Europe and Australia also had well-entrenched immigration controversies of their own (the Mediterranean migrant crisis and Australia's immigrant detention centres), which Trump's rhetoric further endorsed. In my view, it is this geopolitical atmosphere that Yi addresses in both exhibitions.

White cubes, site-specificity and olfactory intervention

The Guggenheim (New York), as a modern art museum, houses an expanding collection of impressionist to contemporary artworks, whereas The Tate Modern (London) houses the UK's national and international collection of modern and contemporary art.

The Turbine Hall (a former home for electricity generators), is the Tate Modern's exhibition space for ephemeral large-scale art commissions, typically running annually for six months of the year. I will refer to these two institutions as 'white cube' museum gallery spaces with their own set of requirements as heterotopias (separate to those of biennale art ecosystem heterotopias). By contrast, the scale of a typical biennale, the volume of works, breadth of venues and emphasis towards entertainment bordering on spectacle, has stretched the boundaries of what an exhibition space could be, relative to 'white cube' museum gallery spaces whose boundaries remain relatively static. Large-scale biennale exhibitions create more room: rich ground for curatorial experimentation, expanded possibilities in artistic practice, etc. (Sassatelli 106-108, Niemojewski, ch. 1). The Guggenheim (New York) most closely emulates the traditional modernist 'white cube' (despite evading spatial conformity parameters the term 'white cube' implies), while the site-specificity of the Turbine Hall venue creates distance from the Tate Modern, making the space more flexible than the Tate Modern name suggests. Yet, delving into these 'white cube' institutions exhibiting Yi's works, seems to raise more questions (in terms of questionable risks) than answers.

Hsu's analysis of 'white cube' spaces reveals the level of risk associated with museum galleries exhibiting works like Yi's. In "Olfactory Art, Transcorporeality and the Museum Environment," Hsu contextualizes how contemporary olfactory art intervenes in the traditional visual order of museum galleries, how scent artists' experimentation with concepts, installations, media and materials challenge the modernist ideal of the 'white cube,' and how careful control of air quality in these spaces was an issue traditionally driven by prioritizing the conservation of works. "Because air threatens to contaminate, deteriorate or otherwise destabilize artworks, it is a crucial element in museums' conservation efforts" (1-3). Despite ambitions to transcend their 'white cube' legacies, the conservation of works (the collections they are responsible for preserving), are unlikely to be deprioritized within these institutions. This became self-evident in the development of the "Life is Cheap" exhibition at the Guggenheim, where the "Force Majeure" diorama (housing the bacterial growth) caused upset among the museum employees early in the project due to the smell, necessitating the exhibit to be housed externally (Lee 705). This was partly a risk-reduction measure and partly due to protocols. Standards in museum temperature, humidity and particulates were

established in the mid-twentieth century by a range of organizations — UNESCO, ICOM (International Council of Museums) and IIC (International Institute for the Conservation of Museum Objects). These collectively worked to elevate the conditions for preservation of museum collections, which both these 'white cube' institutions are unlikely to deviate far from. It is this contradiction inherent in the risk of scent which makes Yi's exhibitions within these institutions intriguing. Yi's work takes this risk several steps further in the "Life is Cheap" exhibition at the Guggenheim with the proliferation of bacteria and housing a colony of ants. 'White cube' institutions as heterotopias clearly have a unique set of entrenched constraints which Yi's installations have recently made malleable. Hosting the exhibition offsite is one solution, yet logistically bringing to life an exhibit which is intrinsically counterintuitive to their institutional ethos is arguably another consideration altogether.

The Anthropocene, a term coined by ecologist Eugene Stoermer in the 80s, denotes the human epoch, when human activity has significantly transformed the earth's geology and ecosystems. The Anthropocene "at once centres and decentres the human"—centre of attention, holding sway over non-humans (mute, malleable, merely human-controlled

elements), in an epoch connoting the proliferation of anthropocentric worldviews (Stalpaert 1-2). Posthumanist theory attempts to disentangle human worldviews from anthropocentric privilege, by challenging them, re-articulating what the human is, and dissolving barriers between human biology, non-human species and our environment, often through re-imagining/ re-envisioning aspects of our worldviews with the use of technology (Stalpaert 2, Callus 146). Yi's work calls out barriers specific to biology, gender and space in alignment with posthumanist theory in her works, proposing a dissolution of those barriers through experiences mediated by technology. The "In Love With the World" exhibition reimagines an ecosystem with more equitable interactivity amongst life forms on earth—machine or otherwise. Through her "aerobes," Yi questions the trajectory of AI development and anthropomorphism in autonomous machines as a default aspiration.

The exhibit's programme thus describes the aerobes: "The hairy, bulbous aerobes are planulae. The aerobes with tentacles are xenojellies ('xenos' is Greek for 'foreigner' or 'stranger'). Combining forms of aquatic and terrestrial life, Yi's aerobes signal new possibilities of a hybrid machine species" (Hyundai). There are 18 "aerobes" in circulation throughout the space, all

characteristically foreign to each other, possessing individually unique senses and using high-frequency radio waves to communicate with each other, to map out the space and to use thermal imaging to sense visitors. With AI embedded, the behaviours of the aerobes individually and collectively evolve over time in response to changing elements in the ecosystem: people, scents, heat, movement, other aerobes, etc. (Airstage, Yi "Hyundai"). I posit that Yi's work suggests there is a parallel in terms of equilibrium/more equitable co-habitation within the space, with themselves and with humans. Yi also proposes machine self-determination and evolution as a potential independent life form on earth. Their unpredictability—mostly self-determined flight paths, behaviours between themselves, humans and their responsiveness to atmospheric conditions, changes, and movements in the space—offers a more utopian narrative of co-existence than perhaps we have become accustomed, while immersed in a largely dystopian COVID pandemic. This dovetails with Yi's scentscapes, designed to evoke various aspects/eras in the site's history: marine, coal, manufacturing, vegetation, spices believed to counter the Black Death, etc. ("Hyundai"). According to Hsu, "[w]e can voluntarily shut our eyes or ears, [however], life's dependence on breath makes it

impossible to shut out smells for more than a span of a breath” (7). Yi comments on her use of air in the Turbine Hall space: “The scents ‘sculpt’ the air ... the space is not empty but filled with the air we all share, and on which we depend” (“Hyundai”). There is thus a sense of harmoniousness within the “In Love With The World” installation. The atmospheric conditions of the Turbine Hall space are central to the “aerobes” means of managing co-existence, of regulating their behaviours and interactions with their ‘others.’ Throughout this installation, Yi implies that a shift in perspective, from shared space to shared air, can lead to shifts in behavioural norms in a more equitable direction as well. Humans can consciously re-evaluate their approaches to co-existence and learn how to live more harmoniously together, with other beings, machines and with our surroundings.

In conclusion, despite defying traditional parameters of ‘white cube’ museum gallery norms, with works exploring media/materials typically considered risky for the institutions themselves, these institutions have, nonetheless, chosen to exhibit Yi’s work due to the manner in which she explores timely geopolitical issues, using scents, bacteria and approaches, including ephemeral and conceptual art, few artists use. The interwoven issues Yi touches on are the zeitgeists of our

time, the geopolitical issues of mainstream concern, using technology, human reversals versus universals, arguably building resonance with audiences that transcend national boundaries. Of particular note is how she addressed the racial divisiveness of the Trump administration, the ongoing immigration barriers erected during his term and the tensions exacerbated by the pandemic. These are appealing to corporate sponsors (Hyundai and Hugo Boss were affiliated with the exhibitions analyzed), who are keen to create associations and garner the halo effects on their global brands.

While ‘white cube’ museum galleries, as heterotopias, have well-entrenched environmental constraints around the preservation of their collections, Yi’s exhibitions show that the parameters have become malleable where her works were concerned, particularly with her 2017 Guggenheim exhibition, “Life is Cheap” (scentscape interventions, bacterial growth and ant colonies). In her “In Love With The World” exhibition at the Tate’s Turbine Hall, Yi proposes a vision of a contemporary posthuman moment which fuses biology and technology. Through her “aerobes” she questions the trajectory of AI development and anthropomorphism in autonomous machines as a default aspiration. Yet, Yi’s use of technology

to remediate a re-articulation of human co-existence (with others, other species, machines and our environment), creates a more harmonious picture of what co-habitation could be like. In proposing air as a sculpture we all inhabit, a timely and central concern to

everyone globally during a pandemic which we continue to grapple with, Yi posits a paradigm shift that could lead to a much needed behavioural shift in how to live more harmoniously, rather than anthropocentrically.

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