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Article

Anicka Yi's Ironic Scheme of Art

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Abstract

A New York-based Korean American artist, Anicka Yi, parallels the language of pathogens with patriarchal fear of feminism expressed through excessive hygiene, by growing female bacteria that she swabbed from women in her personal and professional networks and letting the microbes emanate a pungent smell in the gallery space. Her contagious and malodorous biological materials proliferate in and colonize the audience's body as well as the air of the gallery space. In so doing, they mount a challenge to anthropocentrism and the masculine set of cybernetic art practices popularized from the 1960s in the U.S. according to art historian Caroline Jones. However, Yi's work's critical affiliation to her identity as a Korean American woman artist doesn't necessarily fit in the western feminist art history. It rather poses an ethnic irony in John Kim's term: The impossibility of reading Yi's work in isolation from her ethnic background combined with the equal impossibility of reducing the one to the other. Yi's purposeful opting-out of direct references to her own and other Asian women's life narratives ironically underpins her gesturing toward attesting to the continuity of particular life forms that survive through erasure, objectification, and essentialization, in western hegemonic representation.

Keywords : Anicka Yi, contagiousness, ethnic irony, olfactory art, postcolonial feminism

Introduction

In the dimly lit gallery space of The Kitchen, New York, the audience could catch a pungent smell before discerning the assortment of organic and inorganic materials of Anicka Yi's art exhibition *You Can Call Me F* (2015): hydrogel beads (tiny pebbles used in floral arrange-

ments that expand in water), metal bowls, dried shrimp, Styrofoam and sheets of SCOBY (Symbiotic Culture of Bacteria and Yeast) (Vogel, 2015). The obscurity of the initial viewing experience accentuated the acridity of the smell, as well as creating anxiety about losing control over the microbes that could waft around and penetrate into the audience's body. The five different installations sectioned off by patterned plastic sheeting resemble quarantine tents, which New York-based writer and curator Wendy Vogel describes as "a lab or bomb shelter," as having a "post-apocalypse" or "post-emergency" aesthetics, and referring to the recent Ebola virus epidemic (Vogel, 2015).

First recorded in Guinea and neighboring Sierra Leone and Liberia, the West African Ebola virus epidemic (2013–2016), which later spread to the U.S. and Spain through medical workers, displayed the petrifying unruliness of infectious agents as a telling issue of the era of global networking. As a result of advances in the technologies of microscopes, filtering, and analysis in the late 19th century, viruses started to be identified as parasites of living organisms. Having been discovered to contain genes to reproduce themselves while not having cells to divide, viruses still remain at the threshold of life and non-life, redolent with their previous resonance as an X factor, or as an unknown cause (Parikka, 2007). Viruses' ambiguous life form echoes the fact that more and more tightly connected human networks have become the conduits of global viral destructions (Wald, 2008). Therefore, virus and contagion, as more-than-epidemiological terms, denote a disconcerting life form contiguous to death. Echoing Vogel's imagery of post-apocalypse or post-emergency, which further animated the living art works in The Kitchen gallery, curator Lumi Tan highlighted the irony that was embodied in Yi's colony of nonhuman materials. According to Tan, these materials were "expanding and contracting, or dying and being reborn," and they required an unusual degree of maintenance, from watering the hydrogel pellets on a nearly daily basis to combatting condensation on the petri dish installation (Vogel, 2005).

Over the last decade, Yi has become renowned for use of such mate-

rials: combining fragrances, bodily scents, and biological matter such as bacteria, and other living organisms, such as ants, in her multimedia installations. These media are discontinuous, but coalesce into a coherent narrative upheld by their smelly, contagious, and microbial matter, and their correlated and anxiety-laden social connotations, especially reminiscent of contentious narratives around contagious diseases and what could be called a biological fear of political outsiders, such as immigrants, refugees, and women. Tony Sampson argues that the increased contact with political others has accompanied the rekindled anxiety concerning the spreading of contagious diseases, since permeable boundaries of the nation-state can no longer function as a colonial hygiene shield (Sampson, 2012). In other words, invisible and infectious agents, whether human or nonhuman, began to underscore and endanger the colonial binary of the self and the other, or insider and outsider. By the same token, I argue that Yi's biotic and malodorous art debunks the colonial discriminatory mechanisms that differentiate superhuman from subhuman in the forms of xenophobia and misogyny, and human from nonhuman in the form of anthropocentrism, by letting non-human biological matter unsettle the segregating relation between the art objects, the audience, and the artist. In so doing, Yi's art materials orchestrate their own form of critique against the ways in which a woman of color artist survives and even thrives in the U.S. art scene simultaneously as an object of admiration and abjection—or cast within the limbo of ambiguous self-identification.

In this essay, I take Yi's art and her own words to describe them, as well as art historical and theoretical discourse around her works, as equally vital ingredients that cultivate a mutually constitutive and challenging relationship, rather than a cohesive one. Further, I will articulate that this complex relationship serves as an ironic scheme of art, as I will explain more fully later. Irony, as a critical viewpoint and a methodological tool, helps revisit Yi's idiosyncratic incorporation of ambiguous life forms of pathogens, like bacteria, into a lively form of art, as her artistic strategy to question the systemic racial and gender biases as well as the author-centric (human-centric) view in art reading. This rhetorical

approach to reading Yi's work, using irony, also prompts a sober reflection on her life and success as a Korean American female artist in the U.S.. In this sense, irony extensively questions the essentialist tendencies in identity politics within and beyond the art scene.

Yi's employment of non-human materials has largely been discussed in light of recent feminist art history. Associating Yi with the radical cohort of cyborg-themed feminist artists spotlighted from the 1990s, such as Lynn Hershman Leeson and Judith Barry, art historian Caroline Jones identified Yi's unique challenge to the largely masculine set of cybernetic art practices popularized from the 1960s (Jones, 2018). According to American mathematician Norbert Wiener, cybernetics has a Greek root *kubernetes*, meaning "steersman," which shares the same root with the English word "governor" (Shanken, 2002). With its alliance with information theory and artificial intelligence, one of the most noted propositions of cybernetic art movement in the 1960s was to treat machines and living beings autonomously yet equally. Cybernetics established a unified information theory model to maintain "a state of operational equilibrium" in the behavioral patterns of animals, machines and humans (Shanken, 2002, p. 159). In so doing, cybernetics' bottom-line purpose was to regulate and control the behaviors of humans and machines, rather than entirely open its system up to the possibilities (Shanken, 2002). Although disrupting the human and machine binary, cybernetics didn't entirely withdraw from the body and mind hierarchy, where machine and body, as supplementary apparatuses, were believed to enhance human mind and creativity. The persisting binaries in cybernetics, between mind and body, subject and object, and the active and passive, substantiate the etymologically intimated gendered figures of "steersman" and "governor."

Although partially taking on the notion of the porous line between the human and non-human of cybernetics, Jones argues that Yi tries out cybernetics' affinities for biology but disputes the technophiles' adherence to the mind-and-body divide, borne out in the hope that machine can faithfully copy the human mind. In letting bacteria grow and die, gradually spewing fetid smells into the gallery, Yi explores the non-hu-

man and abject attributes essential to the course of life, such as biology's entropic cycles of decay, corruption, dissolution, and disorder, but perks them up with steel display cases and a refined visual presentation, for instance, in neatly arranged boxes and tools (Jones, 2018). By fleshing out the conflicting figuration of liveliness of the non-human matter, Yi corrupts cybernetics' illusion of complementing the human mind through incorporating the machine, and instigates the fear of the *self* turning into nothing but a body, a body without mind. Echoing the figure of zombies, or living dead, often portrayed in the media as a result of the contagions of viral epidemics, Yi's biological experiments endorse a political validity of fleshy but nonhuman beings.

Jones refers to the homology between philosophies of life, metaphysics, and biology that converge in Yi's works as "biofiction" (Jones, 2016, p. 91). In Jones's account, biofiction fuses "writing" (graphy) with "studies" of life (logy), expanding the notion of "bio-graphy" (writing of life). In biofiction the imaginative figuration of non-human life in the form of writing or fiction is imbricated into and makes changes to the anthropocentric spheres of philosophy, metaphysics, and biology. Jones's hybrid concept of biofiction echoes Donna Haraway's call for symbiosis between human and non-human species in her "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1985/1991), as well as Giorgio Agamben's retooling of Heidegger for an examination of animality in his *The Open: Man and Animal* (2004). With the coinage of biofiction, Jones zeroes in on the ways in which Yi integrates feminist discourses, specifically those critical of anthropocentrism, such as posthumanism and ecofeminism, into a somatic and tangible materialization of art, emphasizing the "perpetually entangled relations" of the theoretical and material spheres (Jones, 2016, p. 92). By letting the bacteria and olfactory matters live and breathe with the audience in the gallery space, Yi's art uncovers the flip side of the hegemonic notion of humanity, embroiled with gender and racist biases spilt over into the spheres of nonhuman life forms. In flustering the body and mind, and nonhuman and human dichotomies, Jones argues that the biofiction of Yi's works wants to imagine the animated relation outside

the envelope of our skin and teeming deep within it (Jones, 2016). Turning Yi's subjectivity from a fixed index of her gender and ethnic identity to a fluid and variable position of her selfhood, Jones's biofiction corroborates the innate paradox of modern subjectivity, which, according to Michel Foucault, induces "caesurae which break up the instant and disperse the subject into a plurality of possible positions and functions" (Foucault, 1981, p. 69).

Echoing Naoki Sakai's indeterminate figure of the translator in the context of postcolonial, global multilingualism, even when underscoring her own biographical narrative, Yi speaks in a "forked tongue" as if in a mimicry of her own self—as if she detaches herself partially as a translator of her own story (Sakai & Meaghan, 1997). In interviews Yi often recollects her childhood memories of growing up in a household of Korean immigrants filled with smells of Korean traditional food as a motivation for her work. However, when it comes to representing her own memories or memories of other figures in her art-making, such as Fusako Shigenobu for her perfume portrait work, *Shigenobu Twilight* (2007), Yi underscores "inconsolable memories" of the figure of an exile or a migrant (Yi, 2015, p. 10), which can only be grasped through an invisible medium, such as scent. Yi's opting-out of direct references to her and her figures' life narratives ironically attests to and vividly conjures up the continuity of particular life forms that survive only through erasure, objectification, and essentialization.

Can Yi's ironic relation to her biographic and autobiographic life representations—removing direct proof of them yet affirming them—be understood through Jones's somewhat similarly ironic theorization of biofiction? Indebted to the legacy of critical feminist science studies pioneered by Donna Haraway and feminist interventions in art writing as in 70s' new media art journal *Radical Software*, Jones grounds her reading of Yi's work largely on "white" feminist discourses. I argue that the particularities of the "living women" (Yi, 2015, p. 11) that Yi tries to animate through odorous and contagious materials don't necessarily fight against the 60s' masculine cybernetic art in the U.S. Jones's biofiction

rather actively overshadows Yi's attempt to call attention to the systemic tendency to erase the marginalized life forms, which are oftentimes caught between the multiple identificatory marks connected through a hyphen, as in Yi's Korean-Americanness. Jones's biofiction does so by replacing issues of biography with those of biology: Overriding the racist prejudices deeply rooted in the western critical theories on representing the other with emerging critiques against anthropocentrism. Yi's work in effect revisits the latter through the lens of the former. In this essay, I restructure Yi's ironic scheme, cementing it in relation to her ambivalent self-positioning within the reading of her arts. I found the discussion of Yi's indecisive self-representation has been missing in the discussions of her work in the U.S. art scene, although partially—perhaps mistakenly—recognized. Contrary to emphasizing the fictive and imaginative impulse in Yi's feminist bioart, as framed in biofiction, I argue Yi severs the fictitious and fabricated layer of "critical" U.S. identity politics and lays bare their continued proclivity to objectify, reduce, and efface the "racial violence as a systemic function, one that is internal to the workings of the social body"—as Rey Chow elaborates as a postwar phenomenon (Chow, 2002, p. 15).

In order to point up Yi's ironic scheme of identification of herself and her art, I draw on John Namjun Kim's term ethnic irony in his deconstructive reading of Yoko Tawada's writing, which oscillates between the linguistic and historical systems of Japanese and German. Strategically straddling between the two language systems, which structures the narrator's pronominal position of "I" differently, Tawada elaborates her ironic self-positioning in her writing: the impossibility of reading Tawada's novel in isolation from the historical context of Japanese migration to Germany, yet equally the impossibility of reducing the one to the other (Kim, 2010). Differentiating the culturally accrued contextual meaning of "self," or a linguistic function of a first-person pronoun "I," from the materiality of a sight and a sound of "I" in the text, Kim argues what the narrative *says* it means is not identical to what the text *does* at the moment of reading (Kim, 2010). The gaping space between the

artist, her work, and their mutable and regenerative interpretations is formulated as irony, and its complexity is singularly fostered by the muzzled ethnic particularities laden with a colonial history. Kim defines ethnic irony as "a form of irony that lures acts of criticism into seeing the aesthetic phantasmagoria of ethnicity, but with the aim of frustrating their hermeneutic desire for an optics of the 'other' by evacuating the ethnicized narrative 'I' " (Kim, 2010, p. 335). In ethnic irony, the speaking "self" remains unsettled, thereby precarious without any determinate identificatory marker. But reading about the self, the fundamentally *asocial* and non-human "thing" hovering in the text, is ironically nothing but a social act, because the seemingly "unfitting" position of self in the text yields a possibility to restructure the social system on the whole (Kim, 2010). In a similar vein, Yi's ethnic self poses irony by not being integrated into the interpretations of her work as a fixed attribute. But it also undermines the tendency to read her and her work in terms of an aestheticized state of "selfhood" that is detached from any particularity, determinate quality, or index of sociality (Kim, 2010).

Beyond its simple definition as a figure of speech that says what is contrary to what is meant, regarding its historical usage as in Socrates's irony, irony is both diagnostic and political (Colebrook, 2004). Linda Hutcheon argues that irony is in nature asymmetrical and unbalanced in favor of the silent and the unsaid (Hutcheon, 1994). Its political edge is most strongly felt in its indirect commentary on the unequal social systems, which often makes it more powerful than explicit attack, insult, aggression, derision and even malice (Hutcheon, 1994). Thus, Yi's seemingly vague self-positioning is, on the flip side, "vanguard," according to Edmund Husserl's etymological connection between vague and vanguard. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari theorize Husserl's ironic coupling of vague and vanguard as a status of being intermediary between the essence and the sensible, and the concept and the thing (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). According to Deleuze and Guattari, vagueness is neither inexact like sensible things nor exact like ideal essences, but "essentially and not accidentally inexact" or "vague yet rigorous" (Deleuze & Guattari,

1987, p. 367). They characterize the vagueness of staying in-between as being ripe with potential changes than totally obscure, thereby vagueness stretches "*itself* between things, and between thoughts, to establish a whole new relation between thoughts and things" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 408). The ironic association between vague and vanguard pertains to Yi's vague yet rigorous positioning of herself as a Korean American female artist in the U.S., since I argue that "vagueness" is the driving force to disturb the social confinements of her and her arts' identification and potentially stretches their politically and epistemically marginalized footings to something else. Both Yi's exuberant arts made of inhuman or life-threatening materials, like pathogens, and her ambivalent political bearings as a Korean American artist without a substantive ground, are ironically vague yet powerful as they stop the reading of her arts from falling into the pitfall of essentialization connected with identity politics.

Smell Disturbs the Hierarchies

Yi's nutty and musky installations of lively fermentation strike a contrast with the manufactured sterility of The Kitchen gallery (Hsu, 2016). The centerpiece, *Grabbing at Newer Vegetables*, located at the entrance to the black box of the Kitchen's upstairs gallery, is a seven-foot-long backlit rectangular petri dish shielded by glass. It houses an illuminated culture of bacteria on agar, a seaweed-based substance used as a medium for culturing bacteria (Walker, 2015). The vitrine contains the ever-growing yogurt-like fluid of bacteria sourced from the bodies of one hundred women from Yi's personal and professional network, which she swabbed, under the condition that she had had certain physical contacts with the women for three months. Yi explains that "the idea was to engineer a 'superbacteria' between all these women's bacteria as an action of female networking in the biological realm, while paralleling the language of pathogens and viruses that links with patriarchal fear of feminism expressed through excessive hygiene" (Yi, 2015, p. 15).

These women include female gallery owners in New York City—Rachel Uffner, Bridget Donahue, Stefania Bortolami, and the artist's dealer Margaret Lee—the so-called "powerful" or "fearful" women in the New York art scene. In this way, Yi's sample set is charged both with its powerful essence and the historical marginalization of women in art (Walker, 2015).

Grabbing at Newer Vegetables is a durational work that continues to grow visually funkier and smellier. Taking the shape of a billboard or a store's signboard, *Grabbing* reads *You Can Call Me F*, with "F" meaning female, femininity, or feminist. To grow one hundred women's bacteria on this spacious petri dish, Yi collaborated with a synthetic biologist Tal Danino, whose research interests include a visual observation of the growth of bacteria and dynamic gene circuits, a biologist, Patrick Hickey, and Air Variable, a scent fabrication company founded by artist Sean Raspet in 2014. Over time, the painterly written words "You Can Call Me F" were gradually invaded by the growing bacteria with their vibrantly changing shapes and colors, which disturbed the legibility of the words. In the meantime, the agar, the medium in which the bacteria were injected and grew, produced a singular smell, as opposed to that from agar gel in its current bio-industrial use.

A few feet away from the installation, Yi pumped the scent of the Gagosian gallery in New York, in her words, "the ultimate patriarchal-model network in the art world" (Russeth, 2015), captured when one of its affiliated male artists, Urs Fischer, was holding an exhibition. Yi describes the scent of the Gagosian gallery as not having a spiky note at all, only smelling very subtly like a cleaning product. In her talk at the School of Visual Art in New York held in conjunction with being awarded the 2016 Hugo Boss prize, Yi unabashedly talked about her predetermined judgement in gender politics: "I was surprised at how much nothing I wanted to take from the Gagosian gallery" (Yi, 2016). Drawing on the olfactory-art curator and critic Jim Dribnick, Hsuan L. Hsu describes Yi's composition of the scents with "woman bacteria" and its male counterpart, the "antiseptic" smell from the Gagosian gallery

a "dialectical odor"—a complex odor that dramatizes the frictions between two ideologically opposed atmospheres as the scent of female networks invades the art world's purified, patriarchal gallery space (Hsu, 2016, p. 14).

However, Yi's exclusive access to the powerful women in the New York art scene for her collection of woman bacteria further complicates Hsu's dialectics where women are supposed to take the stance of a disadvantaged group opposed to the socially privileged class of men. It is also questionable whether the bacteria, although allegedly gleaned from women's bodies, can adequately stand as a metonym of femaleness, or as a device of feminist critique. Even if that were possible, how can the assemblage of the women's bodily substances be contrasted with the air fetched from the Gagosian gallery—"the ultimate patriarchal-model"—without any direct inclusion of men's somatic substances, to discuss the gender conflict in a binary frame? Although each element seems to refer to a heterosexual gender frame at first glance, instead of achieving a clear binary gender conflict, Yi's works tend to slide into more complex structural questions. Walking a fine line between being self-evident and enigmatic, Yi's art is ironic—in Hutcheon's words, saying *other than* and more than the said. The "ironic" meaning is not simply the unsaid, nor is the unsaid a simple inversion or opposite of the said. The said and the unsaid are inclusive and relational with each other. Spiraling the complexity in meaning-making without pursuing a clear end, irony as a metanarrative for interpreting Yi's works undermines the semantic security of "one signifier: one signified" (Hutcheon, 1994, pp. 12–13).

Smell interestingly underscores the unsaid in Yi's art as a critical medium to signify the ironic scheme. Her stress on the sense of smell accentuates the problematic connectivity between the disparate elements of exhibition that have long been hierarchized, yet not questioned enough: the relation of the art object, audience, and artist with the air of the gallery space. Hsu argues that shifting the focus from vision to smell or to air-borne micro-organisms in the museum provokes reflection on previously less-recognized issues of maintaining and preserving air, one

of the most invisible, unnoticed, yet carefully controlled materials in the museum environment (Hsu, 2016, p. 2). In its fluidity, smell not only broaches contentious issues connected with the hierarchized structure of the museum, but can itself also become a gendered object in need of question: "smell is the sense that's most closely associated with women, and I think it's a mistake to relegate it that way" (Gregory, 2017). Smells are always an aspect of social and physical spaces, regardless of their recognition, and prior to their articulation in aesthetics. Smell's conflicting set of attributes—invisibility and omnipresence—as well as its potential fomenting of the audience's apprehension through fetidness, provides a critical window to discern the insurrectional potential of the politically invisible beings, such as gender and racial minorities, whose pervasiveness and subversiveness are more often than not eclipsed by socially imposed stereotypes.

For example, in *Immigrant Caucus*, installed at the entrance of her show *Life is Cheap* (2017) at the Guggenheim museum, Yi combined the aroma of Asian American women's sweat and the emissions of carpenter ants. The blended scent was sprayed from three industrial-style canisters sitting beside a metal-cage doorway. The pairing between Asian American women and carpenter ants hinges on the stereotypical images of both as hard-working and lacking in individuality. Yi particularly showed interests in the carpenter ants because of their intricate division of labor and matriarchal social structure, as well as the ants' structure of colony based on their sophisticated olfactory system that largely guides their behavior (Guggenheim Museum, 2017). But *Immigrant Caucus* also criticizes the ways in which Asian American women and ants are perceived complacently based in large part on racist and sexist fantasies in the U.S. When their musty and noxious smell is felt by individual museum visitors, however, as intimated by the title, the fear of the alien immigrants' bodies is evoked as an about-face of their coercively gendered and racialized image. Yi effectively lets her feminist and antiracist narratives physically percolate through her audience's body, and invites their intuitive reception of her works simply by walking and breathing

in the gallery space. In this circumstance, detecting the foul-smelling substance is more than being exposed to a new chemical and biological compound. It is to replace a sensory organ as a mere receptor of its ambience to an active participant, which uncovers the previously undisputed hierarchized relations in the gallery space. Yi describes smell as a "form of cannibalism," because to take these molecules into one's nasal passages is to take these women into one's body—to smell them is to eat them (Yi, 2015, p. 11). Far from being fixed in a predetermined form of meaning-making and performance, smell lets the otherwise invisible and stationary matters act on their own.

The Abject, Monster, and Bacteria

Passing *Immigrant Caucus* in Yi's 2017 Guggenheim exhibition, the audience encounters two large dioramas, both contained behind glass and facing each other from the opposite sides of the room, like mirrors. One side of the piece, *Force Majeure,* holds scores of shallow, square, and acrylic panels of agar stained with bacteria, which the artist sampled from sites within Manhattan's Chinatown and Koreatown neighborhoods. More than four hundreds panels, or tiles, are slotted into the grid structure of metal frames, retained in a refrigerated room lit with LED lights. The second diorama, *Lifestyle Wars,* houses a colony of carpenter ants scurrying around inside the white tubes that wind the oversized rackmount server cases, instilled in a room which is mirrored all sides. And on each mirrored wall is printed the surface pattern of a computer motherboard. The infestation of ants that navigate the network of pathways is reflected infinitely across the mirrors, evoking a massive data-processing unit in which their industrious movement embodies the flow of information (Guggenheim Museum, 2017). Between the two self-contained biospheres fills the aroma of *Immigrant Caucus,* the chemical compound of the bodily excretions of the critters from each side: Asian American women's sweat from *Force Majeure* and carpenter ants' emissions from *Lifestyle Wars*. Drenched in the funky scent of *Immigrant Caucus* that infuses

and, in Yi's words, "manipulates" the audience's visual and olfactory perceptions, much like a "drug" (Guggenheim Museum, 2017), the audience members are no longer researchers observing their objects from a distance, but themselves placed under the lens of a microscope as part of the swarming culture of microbes.

Similar to the bacterial culture growing in *Grabbing*, *Force Majeure*'s variegated and repellent visuals echo Julia Kristeva's graphic notion of the "abject." The abject is a troubling concept with boundary issues. It is neither subject nor object, inside nor outside, and self nor the other. Signified in the images of bodily fluid, defilement and feces, just to name a few among her vivid examples, the abject is a painful reminder of life only at the threshold of death: "There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 3). The tawny agar jellies of *Grabbing* and *Force Majeure* stand for not only a kingdom of collected women's bacteria, but also elicits human skin tissues. Uncanny because of its flagrant overlap with human flesh, *Grabbing* feels monstrous, specifically in terms of Rosi Braidotti's feminist approach to monsters, as erratic hybrids originally deriving from the normative form of humanity: the "human beings who are born with congenital malformations of their bodily organism" (Braidotti, 1994, p. 77). As implied in the ancient Greek root of the word monster, *teras*, which means both horrible and wonderful, the object of aberration and adoration, Yi's works materialize an abject and monstrous figure whose radicality lies in its nature of being in between, mixed, and ambivalent—as an ontologically ironic being. Stood between *Force Majeure* and *Lifestyle Wars*, the audience is spatially and perceptually placed in the "monstrous" intermediacy between human and non-human. Being steeped in and feeling perturbed by *Immigrant Caucus*—breathing in the undetectable and potentially toxic microorganisms—the audience also directly and indirectly undergoes the viral and bacterial colonization of our culture, in Vogel's words, the post-apocalypse or post-emergency aesthetics in the postcolonial global networking.

Contagious diseases, as species-threatening events, have been *forecast* by scientists and journalists and *dramatized* in fiction and film from

the end of the twentieth century (Wald, 2008). Reading contagious diseases as a more-than-epidemiological fact, Priscilla Wald argues the narrative forms projected on the events of viral epidemics through media, film, literature, and journalism and the role of epidemiology are at once to read and to write the epidemic as a story of detection with predictive value (Wald, 2008). According to Wald, the circulation of microbes materializes the transmission of ideas, much triggered by globalization, and the physical interactions that make us sick constitute us as a community living in an increasingly shrinking world (Wald, 2008). Identifying the mutual influence between the outbreaks of epidemics as a media-formed scenario and as a scientific fact, Wald underscores that the outbreak narratives formulated through scientific journals and popular media affect the real-life survival rates and contagion routes (Wald, 2008).

Drawing on a *New York Times* article "How One Person Can Fuel an Epidemic" (April, 2003), Wald points out that the journalistic narrative of the SARS virus (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) transformed the patients from victims to agents, embodiments of the spreading infection, or superspreaders (Wald, 2008). The characterization of the SARS virus patients as superspreaders has reinforced the scenario in which healthy-looking human carriers of the latent viral infection are at the heart of the social danger. These human carriers raise a pressing question of culpability in the absence of intention, and more fundamentally of self-knowledge, throughout the world population (Wald, 2008). Greater danger lies more in the mechanically moving bodies disseminating germs without self-consciousness and the invisible routes of the infection of disease than in human will. Therefore, we are now entering a world where human beings are, regardless of their willingness or consciousness, increasingly relocated under the lens of the microscope as well as of the surveillance camera. In this world of constant surveillance, the more invisible, illegible and unidentifiable, the more terrifying one becomes.

The oblivious yet hazardous human carriers, who pose a dire peril to the national security and public health, resonate well with other forms

of social "menace," exemplarily, immigrants, asylum-seekers, and refugees, who are often believed to bring about the fundamental instability to the community by creeping in through national borders. So are women —in particular, politically vocal women or women who actively network with each other—building up a communal force against patriarchal social norms. In a similar vein, Yi's "superbacteria" engineered through her bacterial colony, made out of bacteria collected from a hundred women's bodies, was meant to stoke patriarchal fears of feminism. Treated similarly to pathogens, networking between political aliens or the socially disadvantaged is time and again believed to jeopardize the social body in a holistic sense, as a social malady.

In *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (2000), Judith Butler argues that by speaking up against the sovereign commend, or in Lacanian terms, the father's word or the super-ego, the politically active female collective debunks the vulnerability of the gendered social structure where women are, while exploited, coercively demoted as invalid, alien, and even an enemy from the outside. For this reason, in the Hegelian masculinized world view, "womankind is the everlasting irony in the life of the community" (Butler, 2000, p. 35). Directly challenging the misogynous view, Yi's feminist "superbacteria" turns this repressive conflicting figuration of women and political outcasts inside out, as a grotesque and appalling volte-face, and likens the anxiety around it to the fear of contagious diseases on account of the societal obsession with cleanliness and public health.

First Facet of Yi's Irony: Feminist Risk in Science and Art

In Yi's employment of such socially condemnable materials as bacteria and acrid smell, each sensorial element raises a situated political question by physically interacting with the audience. Although these biological factors are usually regarded as inhuman, by eliciting audience's knee-jerk reactions, such as fear and discomfort to the "foreign" bodies, Yi stresses the fact that even our intuitive understandings of these materi-

als have always already been anthropomorphized, gendered and racialized. The "foreign" bodies, however, outgrow man-made confines of their activities. Toward the end of The Kitchen exhibition, it became almost impossible to read the words of "You Can C all Me F" because of the bacterial proliferation. Can we actually call this culture of bacteria "F?" Yi's "female" bacteria over time constitute the artist narrative by rebuffing the sovereignty of the artist—literally effacing her words. In this ironic relationship with her work, Yi lets her art materials live on their own and offset the social constraints on their agency. In so doing, these matters that are voiceless from an anthropocentric perspective effectively raise systemic and epistemological questions about the binary systems between the creator and her product, the active and the passive, and legitimate and illegitimate subjects. What Yi puts forward by giving agency to her art materials is akin to a feminist "risk" in science studies as Sarah Kember elaborates, largely inspired by Donna Haraway and Isabelle Stengers's contribution to feminist science studies.

Before fleshing out on the notion of feminist risk, let me hark back to Kim's "ethnic irony," the concept to expound the ironic relation between a non-white artist's life story and her ethnic background mediated through her work: the impossibility of entirely detaching the author's presence in her work from her racialized identity and the equal impossibility of reducing the one to the other. The notion of feminist risk, which I will discuss shortly, is based on the combination of object-oriented ontology and feminist science studies. And the feminist risk critical of anthropocentrism—which Jones would endorse in line with her hybrid concept of biofiction—demonstrates only one facet of the ethnic irony in Yi's work: the impossibility of reducing Yi's marginalized identity to the reading of her work. After explaining the feminist risk as one of the two prongs of Yi's ethnic irony, which in and of itself can't be ironic—thereby not accounting for Yi's ironic criticism of the U.S. contemporary art scene through her success—I will move on to examining the other prong of the irony, the impossibility of divorcing Yi's selfhood from her work.

Kember argues that what feminism in science risks is "the complacency of a secure, well-rehearsed oppositional stance" that relies on using biological explanations in analyzing social phenomena. And it risks "entering a dynamic dialogic relationship which, like the strange attractor in chaos theory, is infinite, complex and will not reach equilibrium or closure" (Kember, 2003, p. 176). Feminism's risky move in science concerns the long history of philosophy as well. By not striving to reach equilibrium or a harmonious conclusion in narrative, the feminist risk in science does what the majority of epistemologists do not want to accept and would judge as irrational: "the possibility that it is not man but the material that 'asks the questions,' that has a story to tell, which one has to learn to unravel" (Stengers, 1997, p. 125).

By having non-human materials like bacteria take a leading role in her art works, and admitting her own limitation in representing the life of bacteria that grow in a unique format for the first time in the museum, Yi not only challenges the anthropocentric structure of art practice but also her own authorship as an artist: Yi says, "The work mutates a lot" (Gregory, 2017). In her interview-based article in *New York Times* four months before Yi's Guggenheim exhibition *Life Is Cheap*, New York-based journalist and critic Alice Gregory recalls Yi's hesitation in telling what would happen in the exhibition. Gregory reads Yi's hesitation less out of a devoted performance of privacy, than based on her "genuine sense of not knowing" (Gregory, 2017). Yi's voluntary withdrawal as a vocal agent in her art-making echoes Stengers's conviction about the way to learn how to ask the "right" questions in science. It "involves the dissolution of the conscious self, an opening that "lets the material come to us," but that signifies at the same time the abandonment of all the explicit intellectual procedures that enable epistemologists to construct models of rationality" (Stengers, 1997, pp. 125–126).

Yi's artist statements are sprinkled through many different venues across textual, audio, and video forms, such as art blogs, magazine articles, interviews, a podcast (*Lonely Samurai* in 2014) and public talks. And they aren't necessarily explanatory of her works. As Gregory argues,

Yi's wall texts in particular read more like "an alien shopping list" than an informational label. Although instructive, the wall texts and materials listing bear their own aesthetics departing from the expository appreciation of the actual works. For example, Yi's 2011 work *Convox Dialer Double Distance of a Shining Path* was made of "recalled powder milk, abolished math, antidepressants, palm tree essence, shaved sea lice, ground Teva rubber dust, Korean thermal clay, steeped Swatch watch, aluminum pot, cell-phone signal jammer and electric burner." By the list itself, it is almost impossible to envision the work that the text represents. Instead, the list has its own aesthetic form, where the rhythmic sound of a series of the cryptic words being read stands out more than the meanings of the words. Art critic Ben Davis reads this part of Yi's configuration of wall text as a response to a recent trend in which new materialist philosophers show in their attempt to formulate their object-oriented ontology (Davis, 2017). In a quasi-parodic passage, philosopher Andrew Cole identifies the trend of reeling off of the names of seemingly incomparable objects—"names, characters, objects, and of course, quirky lists of things, like aardvarks, baseballs, and galaxies; or grilled cheese, commandos, and Lake Michigan"—"Latourian litanies," named after French philosopher Bruno Latour, known for his critical intervention in the field of science and technology studies (Cole, 2015).

Cole argues that this rhetorical style of writing positions objects and humans on the same level and implies that objects are in fact subjects. In other words, object-oriented ontology expands the human into all relations of things, raising serious political and ethical questions along the way, but never answering them (Cole, 2015). In radically enlarging the parameters and risking the privilege of philosophies and sciences revolving around humanity and its intelligent excellency, Yi's artistic materialization of the Latourian litanies further elaborates on the penetrable lines between the philosophical binaries of subject and object, and human and inhuman, as well as the political lines between the racially or sexually marked and unmarked. Yi's edifice of organic and inhuman materials lets them make a claim, in their own terms, on the discursive tension around

the cognitive hierarchy between human, active, and masculinized beings and nonhuman, passive, and feminized beings.

Yi's Ambiguous Identification as the Second Facet of Her Ironic Scheme

Yi's subversive attempt to forgo her authoritativeness as an artist still points to her lived experiences as a Korean American female artist—the ineluctable basis that she cannot alienate herself from. In this sense, Yi's tactic of evacuating her authorship departs from Marcel Duchamp's masquerade behind his female alter ego *Rrose Sélevy* (1920), a photograph taken by May Ray, where Duchamp is eloquently dressed in drag and wearing makeup as a refined middle-aged woman. Duchamp also launched a perfume that used a cropped image of *Rrose Sélevy* in the form of medallion with a label that reads "Belle Haleine/ Eau de Voilette (Beautiful Breath: Veil Water, but Duchamp is also playing on the terms Belle Hélène and Eau de Toilet, referring to his 1917 work *Fountain* made of a porcelain urinal)" (Cros, 2013, p. 75). Both Duchamp and Yi play with an ironic dissemblance of their authorship as artists and employ smell as a critical medium. However, while Duchamp jocularly leaps across a heterosexual gender line, treating the gender divide as no more than a figuration of social gender roles, Yi tries to flesh out the tangled relation between them. Instead of switching the roles between man and woman, as if they are on a horizontal relation, Yi broaches a more problematic power dynamics between them, which produces ill-founded identificatory categories and social hierarchies.

As a Korea-born U.S. citizen, Yi often speaks about being invisible as a Korean American in American society (Yi, 2015, p. 12). Refusing to identify herself as a "Korean Korean," but as a "Korean American" and feeling much affiliation to Japanese culture, Yi stretches the scope of discourses on the "margins of power and history" (Yi, 2015), especially within the framework of gender politics and racism in the U.S. In their interview during Yi's residency at the MIT List Visual Arts Center (2015),

Jones askes Yi about what the "Japanese Woman" signifies for her, since one of Yi's first works, *Shigenobu Twilight* (2008–2011), she made with architect Maggie Peng, was a perfume "portrait" of Fusako Shigenobu, the founder of the Japanese Red Army who is currently serving time in the Tokyo prison (Yi, 2015). Jones's question comes from a western view of the "complex" historical relation between Japan and Korea. In response to Jones's more inquisitive than introspective approach to international relations among the Eastern Asian countries, Yi illustrates the "complex" historical relation through her "ambiguous" feelings about the question:

> As a .5 generation Korean American, my relationship to the Japanese is complicated. [···] So, in a sense, the impulse to portray Japanese women through fragrance is a way for me to simultaneously address these tropes of aspiration, power and myth in the larger fragrance narrative while *ambiguously critiquing this Japanese cultural baggage in relation to my own less articulated cultural identity*. After all, there's more mobility, in a way, speaking from the margins of power and history, *speaking from a political ambiguity as a Korean American rather than a "Korean Korean."* [···] *The question is unresolved for me* (emphases added) (Yi, 2015, pp. 12–13).

In the beginning of her answer, Yi seems to express her admiration for Japanese culture. However, she immediately admits that her admiration of Japanese culture is largely based on the trope of "myth." And, at the same time, she "ambiguously critiques" this Japanese cultural baggage in relation to "her own less articulated cultural identity." By acknowledging the groundlessness of her own identity from the onset, Yi debunks Jones's unspoken bias that unquestionably props her, in effect, racist question. Driving a wedge between the personal experiences and racial and gender stereotypes, Yi's intentional ambiguity in the identification of her works upholds her strategic essentialization of her identity as a

Korean American. Yi's feminist work, where her authorship "ambiguously" engages with her art objects, can be understood as an ironic space, in which the more "ambiguous" her voice sounds, the more urgent the political message it delivers. Yi's strategic ambiguity in her identity politics feeds her ironic impulse in art making.

Conclusion

Yi's amorphous art and her "ambivalent" self-positioning in relation to her art shape an ironic scheme as a political gesture: Yi's olfactory art made up of growing microorganisms, such as bacteria, and bodily fluids, such as sweat, and her tactful opting-out of her autobiographical narratives in her art effectively attest to the marginalized, effaced, and essentialized life forms, such as those of immigrants and women. Invisibility and obscurity, as reflected upon Yi's choices of art media and self-representation, constitute the flip side of the survivals of the people whose lives are more often than not readily eclipsed by the political and cultural stereotypes. Yi's art, using smell and bacteria as key media, greatly inspires Anglophone feminisms that criticize anthropocentrism, but I found that any discussion of Yi's voluntary removal of personal life story is lacking here. I argue, Yi's art can't be fully appreciated without considering her political self-positioning in art-making, which makes her feminist and anti-racist views more solid. Moreover, Yi's art induces fear to the audience with its funky smell, comparable to the currently more and more intensifying fears over contagious diseases and political outcasts as the "major carriers" of the diseases, such as immigrants, refugees, and gender minorities. The fear, incited by breathing in the potentially life-threatening germs—knowing that the source of the smell is the "female" bacteria—makes the audience realize that even their intuitive understandings of the microbes and the political minorities have always already been anthropomorphized, gendered, and racialized.

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