

# Art in America

## Sean Raspet: "What's that Smell in the Kitchen? Art's Olfactory Turn"

Written by Wendy Vogel

April 8, 2015

Smell is rarely utilized in the realm of contemporary visual and performance art, but that wasn't always the case. In the 2007 anthology *The Senses in Performance*, dance historian Sally Banes pegs the waning of aroma in theater to the turn of the 20th century, a time period marked by public hygiene campaigns and a turn away from religion in the West. "Perhaps the deodorization of the theater was in some ways connected to the scientific ambitions of naturalism," Banes writes, "to an idea of the theatre as a sanitized laboratory." Anicka Yi's solo show at the Kitchen in Chelsea (through Apr. 11) reverses Banes's proposition. Here the laboratory functions as high theater, complete with a pungent stench. Yi is not alone in her olfactory preoccupations.

The Kitchen's associate curator Lumi Tan, who organized Yi's show, describes its aesthetic as "post-apocalypse" or "post-emergency." Visitors entering the pitch-black gallery first encounter a 7-foot-long spotlighted rectangular petri dish shielded by glass. "You Can Call Me F," the show's title, is painted along the dish's length in bacteria. Beside the words sprout expressionistic red splits and black mold spores, which occurred naturally and have multiplied since the show opened in early March. In the exhibition's larger gallery, five installations sectioned off by patterned plastic sheeting resemble quarantine tents. These contain groups of materials that would find a more likely home in a lab or bomb shelter: hydrogel beads (tiny pebbles used in flower arrangements that expand in water), metal bowls, dried shrimp, Styrofoam and sheets of SCOBY (an acronym for Symbiotic Colony of Bacteria and Yeast, known popularly as the stuff from which fermented drinks like kombucha and kefir are made).

Yi's sculptural choices build upon a vocabulary the artist has been crafting for years, explains Tan. "All these materials that she is constantly gathering have their own life." Yi refers to the metal bowls, for example, as "stomachs" where metabolic reactions take place. "The materials are expanding and contracting, or dying and being reborn," Tan adds. The show thus requires an unusual degree of maintenance, from watering the hydrogel pellets on a nearly daily basis to deploying what the curator calls "space heater robots" to combat condensation on the petri dish installation.

And the unusual scent perfuming the air? The story begins with one the most elaborate materials spawned for the exhibition: bacteria synthesized from samples donated by more than 100 women in Yi's social circle. Yi had wanted to chart female networks and the public's fear of them for some time, but the idea of creating a powerful collective bacteria came to her when she started an artist residency at MIT last year. (Her time in Cambridge will conclude with an exhibition at the MIT List Visual Arts Center in May.) There she teamed up with the synthetic biologist Tal Danino to create the substance.

Yi painted the petri dish in the entrance gallery with the bacteria and used it as part of the perfume housed in diffusers placed within the tents. The artificial scent blends the human odor of the bacteria—described by Tan as "nutty and musky"—with the "antiseptic" smell of Gagosian Gallery's Madison Avenue location. Gagosian's scent was gathered with the help of fellow artist Sean Raspet's chromatography machine, a basketball-sized hissing contraption that analyzes the scent in the air of a given space. "It's really sinister," Tan says. "You'd think it was putting something into the air, not sucking it in." Yi and her assistant had to distract a suspicious gallery guard for the three minutes it took to register the scent.

The subversive nature of Yi's trip to Gagosian lines up with her feminist intentions for working with odors. "My interest in smell is very political, critiquing the regime of vision our society imposes on us, re-thinking how art should work on us, questioning the value judgments placed onto the senses," Yi wrote in an email. She cited art historian and MIT professor Caroline Jones's book *Eyesight Alone* (2005), which "takes Clement Greenberg as subject and victim of this repressed attitude toward all other senses that weren't in the service of the ocular." Yi's restoration of scent to art responds to a phallogocentric privileging of the eye as the organ responsible for knowledge and domination. It is also a way, Yi says, to counteract the collective loss of the olfactory sense, beyond the recognizable odors found in commodities like expensive fragrances and cleaning products.

Scent is gaining momentum in young artists' practices, pointing to a desire to re-engage with the body at a moment of technological change. At this historical juncture odor can act as a substance to combat alienation, to bridge distances. Raspet, one of Yi's collaborators on "You Can Call Me F," created a scratch-and-sniff distillation of the scent in Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco for an exhibition in 2014. Raspet's installation effectively updates the gestures of first-generational institutional critique that exposed the myth of the gallery as a neutral space; Hans Haacke's *Condensation Cube* (1963-65), for example, tracked the gallery's humidity. Capitalizing on his experience and chromatography investment, Raspet recently launched a scent creation service for artists called Air Variable.

Video artist Rachel Rose and painter Sophy Naess have also made works with a scent component. For a recent installation of *A Minute Ago* (2014), Rose produced an odor based on how she imagined Philip Johnson's Glass House would smell when the architect was living there, blending together notes like whiskey, sweat and smoke. Naess, while living in a studio without a shower and "hyperconscious" about hygiene, began a series of soap works based on the compositions of the abstract painter Hans Hoffman. She wrapped them with a text containing quotes written by her, the male artist and the feminist art historian Griselda Pollock. Naess says that her scent pieces assert the importance of physical presence when viewing them, "which feels like a significant and pro-social thing to do, transgressing the dislocated ocular dominance of the iPhone screen through which so much art is viewed nowadays." Recently Naess collaborated with Mary Walling Blackburn on "♂ Anti-Fertility Garden", for which she contributed soap crafted from ingredients claimed to cause sterility in men. The work, she says, is in line with the narrative, symbolic character of her projects. Other artists broach the question of fragrance as commodity and memory. Olfactory "characters" figure in Nico Muhly's *Green Aria—A Scent Opera*, which he created with a perfumier and composer in 2009. Man Bartlett's recent *Scent of Man* (2014) was concocted by a flower essence practitioner based on information provided by the artist's social media accounts.

While some artists worked with smell decades ago—consider Lygia Clark's pioneering therapeutic installations with scented components, or the British performance artist (and Throbbing Gristle member) Cosey Fanni Tutti's 1976 performance *Women's Roll*—Tan mentions a pertinent connection between artists today with practitioners addressing the first wave of digital technology. For his *Befriending the Bacteria* (2001-02) project, social practice artist Daniel Bozhkov created yogurt out of bacteria mixed with his own DNA. The two-part exhibition "Sensorium" at MIT's List Center in 2006 and 2007, which featured artists exploring senses beyond vision, also proves an important touchstone in contextualizing this recent wave of olfactory production. The work of Sissel Tolaas, a Norwegian artist and scientist, is especially resonant. For the MIT show, Tolaas created a scratch-and-sniff wall installation, infusing paint with an artificial smell of human sweat based on samples given by frightened men. Though she is an obscure name in contemporary art, "she's still very active as an artist, and her scent archive is even supported by International Flavors & Fragrances," Tan said.

Whether scent will prove to be a long-lasting or fading artistic device depends partly on institutional support. But with a growing shift toward art-as-experience (and spectacle), it seems likely that more art organizations may take a chance on olfactory art. (See the Tate's upcoming exhibition, where visitors can "taste" famous paintings.) And yet the characteristics of scent—its complexity, its intimacy, its evanescence, its inability to be contained—remain at odds with the art world's dominant values. It is this terrain where Yi's project to reorient the senses gains the most traction, and where artists today can put their noses to the grindstone.