

Metaspore: Cosmopolitical Biopolitics and Multispecies Potentialities in Anicka Yi's Ecoart

Ludovica Montecchio
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

Abstract Anicka Yi's exhibition *Metaspore* at Pirelli HangarBicocca showcased her bioart and ecoart pieces, using living organisms and AIs to explore symbiotic relationships in the world. The exhibition used the concept of spores and mycelium networks as a metaphor for art's ability to inoculate and distribute collective intelligence. Yi's 'biopolitics of the senses' aimed to overcome sensory bias, sculpting air with fragrances and reconfiguring what it means to be human in a cosmopolitical way. By portraying the pluriverse of microbes and machines, the exhibition challenged our perception of non-human and more-than-human entities in the world.

Keywords Cosmopolitics. Ecoart. Spores. Biopolitics. Synesthesia. Speculative practices. Networks.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Attuning to the Sense of Olfaction. – 3 Flowing Through Membranes. – 4 Becoming 'Biotechnocultural' Bodies. – 5 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

In 2022, the Milanese foundation Pirelli HangarBicocca hosted artist Anicka Yi's first solo show in an Italian institution. The exhibition was a survey show that portrayed Yi's pieces from over a decade as well as new ones made for the occasion. In her work, the artist delves into the intricate connections between biological processes, technology, and human perception. Her fascination with the underlying structures of microorganisms and machines serves as a foundation for her ecoart explorations. Here, the aim is to disclose a wider perspective that encompasses "preservation, understanding, and appreciation of the earth's ecology" (Giannelli 2021).

The intersection of science and art laid the groundwork for the exhibition's title, *Metaspore*. It is a neologism that encapsulates Yi's artistic practice in two ways. Firstly, spores are the reproductive cells of microorganisms such as fungi, microbes, and bacteria. They grow in the microorganism's

filamentous structures called 'hyphae'. These formations combine and develop into a dense and intricate colony known as 'mycelium': an unending organic matrix expanded from the aerial propagation of spores. Each time a spore lands, it embodies a new node in the mycelium, enlarging this collective that resides within the soil and interlinks all elements through a "collective swarm intelligence" (Yi 2022b). Secondly, the 'meta' prefix in the title indicates the metaphorical new dimensions these spores can lead us to, beyond reality as we know it, through engagement with art. One of these dimensions stems from how Yi seamlessly integrates technology and machines as well, mirroring the Internet's role as a digital mycelium that knits together a virtual landscape. Essentially, Yi describes her practice as an intricate process of inoculation where art can "inject our minds and bodies", especially in ecoart practices that engage with different kinds of materials (Yi 2022a).

Drawing inspiration from the metabolic processes depicted in works like *Le Pain Symbiotique* (2014) and *Skype Sweater* (2010-17), a conceptual framework emerged to characterise Yi's artistic approach: I define this framework 'cultural fermentation'. Like microorganisms breaking down matter, Yi dismantles norms to inoculate and propagate fresh interpretations. The goal in Yi's project is to question the hegemony of Western culture, sparking discourse and reflection on topics filled with sociopolitical connotations, such as identity and alterity. 'Cultural fermentation' as a concept is inherently cosmopolitical due to its emphasis on interconnectedness, inclusivity, and the disruption of established hierarchical and biopolitical divisions. Indeed, within the theoretical framework of cosmopolitics, the focal point is recognising the interdependence among all entities, delving into the consequential political and social ramifications arising from these connections (Latour quoted in Vich-Álvares 2022, 35). Ultimately, the aim is to foster a more inclusive and equitable perspective on cultural and societal interactions.

In my first visit to the exhibition, I observed that the presentation of works formed a cohesive narrative exploring the interconnected relationships between humans, non-human entities, and the environment at large. For this reason, and to more effectively communicate the interconnected concepts explored by the artist, a more detailed exploration of the exhibition's themes has led me to reorganise the exposition of the artworks in this essay. By defining Yi's practice as a process of 'cultural fermentation' and engaging with rhetorical figures, my intention is to offer a more conceptually unified involvement with Yi's artworks.

The artist utilises mycelium to shape new forms of thought through the attribution of new meaning. Indeed, microbes' ways of being reveal possible, alternative methods of coexistence. Yi utilises this as a language to shape new significance in our present-day collective existence. The techniques she uses in the framework of 'cultural fermentation' are similar to rhetorical figures. In particular, in this essay I will analyse how her oeuvre resonates deeply with the figures of synesthesia, metaphor, and antiphrasis.

The first section will be dedicated to a synesthetic study of the pieces *Immigrant Caucus* (2017) [fig. 1] and *Auras, Orgasms and Nervous Peaches* (2011) to see how the sense of smell can help us recentring our sensorium in a time where we rely almost solely on sight and hearing. The second section will engage with the works *Shameplex* (2015) and *Quarantine Tents* (2015), exploring ways to dissolve and flow through membranes, physical



Figure 1 Anicka Yi, *Immigrant Caucus*, 2017. Installation view, Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan, 2022. Courtesy of the Artist, 47 Canal, New York, Gladstone Gallery, and Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan. Photo by Agostino Osio

and metaphorical, to rebuild our perception on new paradigms that move past bodily divisions such as internal/external or male/female. The third and last section of the essay will use antiphrasis to delve into the pieces *Releasing the Human from the Human* (2019-20) and *Biologizing the Machine (Spillover Zoonotica)* (2022). This last part investigates the relationship between ancient organic and new mechanical bodies, looking into how these non-human entities contribute to human life.

Considering that “there are 1,000,000,000 times more bacteria in the world than stars in the sky” (Curtis quoted in Raffaetà 2023, 3), we are mistaken to think of them as a world or even as a universe. They embody rather a pluriverse, where “each territory of entities is populated by distinct possibilities, qualities, and obligations” constituting a “buzzing” dimension of ramifications (Robbert, Mickey 2013, 3). Yi extends this vision to create her own pluriverse of microbes entangled with tools, machinery, bodily fluids, fabrics, materials which “acknowledge that multiple ontologies exist” (Carbonell 2022, 187), in a cosmopolitical way. In fact, in the pluriversal canvas that is *Metaspore*, there is no ambition to portray the centrality of the human, but rather to place it as an equal component of the network of life, in a way that the “human is melted in the solution, present only in the connections” (Bourriaud quoted in Di Rosa 2022, 111). At the same time, the human dimension is of major relevance despite the lack of anthropomorphic elements. In fact, all anthropogenic elements are soaked with human values: the symbolic meaning they have is rooted in a sociocultural and political human framework. What Yi does is to project these values into a different,

expanded, and evolving microbiological horizon. This essay explores how Yi, in collaboration with her creatures, sheds new light on foundational socio-cultural values, revealing their transformative potential.

2 Attuning to the Sense of Olfaction

Metaspore opened up with an entry point to the exhibit: *Immigrant Caucus* (2017), a two-part installation comprising a metal mesh gateway and a trio of industrial steel tanks releasing a distinct aroma. During my visit, I initially mistook this installation for a permanent exhibit, and felt compelled to physically engage with its elements. My inability to immediately comprehend their function elicited an immediate sense of unease. The tanks spread a unique odour blend, a composite of human sweat samples sourced from labourers in Manhattan's Chinatown and Koreatown, combined with pheromones from carpenter ants (Aspesi, Griccioli, Leuzzi 2022).

Yi arguably connected the two smells in a simile, matching the buzzing world of the Asian-American neighbours of New York with the tunnel-digging ants. In Western societies, ants are often associated with positive attributes like industriousness and unity. Their body emissions serve as functional tools to ensure the cohesion of their social structure, allowing them to orient in space and to keep away threats. On the other hand, the contrast with marginalised communities is striking: workers from the aforementioned neighbourhoods often experience avoidance, exploitation, and neglect. Symbolically and literally, their bodies and the associated smells are pushed to the margins of social acceptance. The piece not only draws attention to these disparities but also challenges the viewer to reflect on the cosmopolitical interplay between cultural perceptions and social hierarchies.

Extending the simile further, Yi's political critique goes deeper. The word "caucus" refers to a closed meeting of people who belong to "the same political party or faction".¹ This pairing provides an impactful opening towards a world that is moving and changing, a multispecies and trans-species dimension which advocates for a "paradigm shift" (Aspesi, Griccioli, Leuzzi 2022, 16). Indeed, Yi has stated that

Perhaps the trans-species scent could move one past the way things merely appear to us, a relative mode of reality, and instead allow us to access something more universal. (Yi quoted in Aspesi, Griccioli, Leuzzi 2022, 16)

Right after I crossed the threshold of *Immigrant Caucus*, I found myself looking at the left corner of the huge room, where stood inconspicuously the piece *Auras, Orgasms and Nervous Peaches* (2011). Barely lit and covered in black, the installation consisted of four walls, featuring an archway on one side that opens onto a white tiled floor. On the outer walls of the block were three leaky holes spewing a yellow liquid that flows on the surfaces of the chamber. There was one mediator standing right next to the piece to explain that it was not, in fact, a restroom. After spending some time on the side listening to the fluid's almost imperceptible flow, I decided to

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/caucus>.

move in front of the archway. Inside, the room looked dark and ominous, with tiny mold formations on the tiles and the yellow liquid flowing on the inside too. There came back that feeling of uneasiness from not being able to make sense of what was in front of me – could the liquid really be urine? Sight and hearing could not help me, but they prompted me to try something different. I got closer to smell the fluid and I instantly recognised it – its scent unmistakably that of olive oil. The recognition instantly transformed my perception. There, a synesthetic experience unfolded, binding different sensory modalities. Sight and sound initially provoked ambiguity, intensifying my intrigue. Yet, it was the integration of the olfactory dimension that catalysed a shift in perception. The synesthetic encounter, triggered by the fluid's scent, aligned with the initial unease, reshaping it into curiosity. The transition from discomfort to wonder showcased how our understanding can evolve through multisensory engagement. This interplay of senses underscores the importance of synesthesia in expanding interpretations, ultimately enabling us to approach different elements with greater receptivity.

With these two initial pieces, Yi wanted to alter the perception of two bodily fluids normally regarded as unpleasant. She deconstructs cultural connotations through the reconsideration of behaviors that attribute meaning to “physiological actions such as sniffing, eating and digesting” (4). While the notion of sweat may initially evoke discomfort, the tanks in *Immigrant Caucas* invite viewers to reframe their perspective, acknowledging it as an intrinsic and natural aspect of human existence. The once-unpleasant aroma now emerges as a testament to human vitality, prompting a newfound respect for the human body and recognising its complex interactions with its environment. In a similar way, the soothing auditory backdrop and the olfactory experience of *Auras, Orgasms and Nervous Peaches* intertwine and challenge our perception of urine. In fact, the sensory fusion prompts a contemplation of alternate values, dismissing the idea that urine is just a waste product. The distinctive journey offered by the liquid enables us to appreciate this bodily fluid that we produce involuntarily, to respect it as the vital function that it represents.

The closeness connected to the experience of smelling is the reason why Kant deemed olfaction as inferior to the other senses, precisely for its “intimate and involuntary nature” (Kant quoted in Yi 2022b). What Kant criticised is what Yi avenges: smell invites us to recognise our vulnerability, permeability, and most importantly our perishability, to embrace a circular and symbiotic relationship with the world.

3 Flowing Through Membranes

Turning around from the left corner and walking towards the centre of the hangar, I found myself surrounded by five rectangular transparent instalments. Made of PVC installations, this series was *Quarantine Tents* (2015). The exterior symbols on the tents recall the biological hazard sign, while in their interiors lies an array of diverse materials, entities, and fragrances. This piece reflects on two main themes adopting the same method: the metaphor.

Inside the tents, scent diffusers release a specially crafted bacterial fragrance composed of samples taken from a hundred women's intimate parts,

sometimes their vaginas (Thaddeus-Johns 2022, 4). Simultaneously, motorcycle helmets diffuse a smell created from air samples collected at the Gagosian Gallery in New York, a patriarchal symbol of the “art world’s traditional manliness” (4). The two aromas carry heavy metaphorical meaning. On the one hand there is the feminine, embodied by the ‘natural’ scent of female bodies in their intimacy, on the other hand is the masculine, embodied by a place representative of a status symbol. The former recalls how the female body, despite whatever environment it is placed in, is often objectified and stripped of sociocultural values; the latter does quite the opposite, removing all natural connotations of the male body and representing it solely through the rhetoric of power. The sense of this juxtaposition is not immediate to understand, hence it induces discomfort. It is exactly in that discomfort that Yi portrays transformative potential. Unpleasant feelings like “disgust, astonishment or empathy” make us “rethink [our] categorial characteristics and cognitive limits” (Kerbe and Schmidt quoted in Vich-Álvares 2022, 43). In a graceful and subtle way, Yi is able to create a cognitive dissonance in the discourse, and through that small disruption new meaning leaks into our brain flowing across “materialities, but also across knowledge, disciplines and theoretical frameworks” (Pevere 2023, 11).

From the exterior of the tents is clear how the piece evokes “contemporary fears surrounding hygiene and contamination” (Aspesi, Griccioli, Leuzzi 2022, 11), in fact it was designed at the outbreak of Ebola. The epidemic changed the functioning of our own bodies, limiting “movement and interaction of living beings” (Yi quoted in Aspesi, Griccioli, Leuzzi 2022, 12). Through a complex metaphor, Yi questions our habit to divide and create boundaries. I believe the tents to be metaphors for bodies in a state of isolation from each other.

No matter how isolated though, these bodies still end up communicating with each other through scents navigating in the air. In the same way, the fusion of ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ scents allows the creation of a new, communal one that can even out the unbalance between the two and attune to a global vision. In such way, Yi challenges the arbitrary schism that splits interior and exterior, or the female and male body. She argues that this idea is artificial, and is built through “anthropogenic projections of boundaries” (Thaddeus-Johns 2022, 3).

Right next to the tents was the piece *Shameplex* (2015). It is composed of seven glass tanks disposed in two parallel rows, looking like both graves and incubators. The inside of each box is coated with phosphorescent green ultrasound gel scattered with iron pins, all illuminated by the glow of LED lights. Because the tanks are open, the pins are subjected to a perpetual process of oxidation, where they transfer their iron particles onto the gel and create new spots, colours, and shapes [fig. 2].

Yi stated that the ultrasound gel in the tanks is a metaphor for the constrained female body that incubates life “vis à vis to the oxidizing patterns that stain the process” (Yi quoted in Aspesi, Griccioli, Leuzzi 2022, 14). Similarly to the metaphoric scent created in the previous work, *Shameplex* reflects on the biopolitics of control performed on feminine bodies when they are “overstepping their containers” (Thaddeus-Johns 2022, 4). In fact, “the feminized body, like feminized nature, was enclosed precisely so that it could be penetrated” (Wilk quoted in Thaddeus-Johns 2022, 4). To break free from this boundary constriction, women “have become expert at boundary dissolution” (4).



Figure 2 Anicka Yi, *Metaspore*. Exhibition view, Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan, 2022. Courtesy of the Artist and Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan. Photo by Agostino Osio

Shameplex holds great significance as it not only symbolises the liberation of the female body from constraints, despite the challenges that such liberation entails, but also extends as a broader metaphor encompassing all bodies. This exchange of matter and value transcends the conventional heterosexual paradigm of penetration. Consequently, the artwork becomes a cosmopolitical metaphor for being human, seamlessly intertwined with the environment in its essence. As a matter of fact, “on a microbial level, all bodies are a mess of teeming borders” (4).

4 **Becoming ‘Biotechnocultural’ Bodies**

In her cosmopolitical pluriverse, Yi gives agency to technology as well, in a way that machines and AIs are “intended to be neither servants nor enemies, but kin, a companion species” (Yi 2022b). These beings simultaneously become biological, technological, and cultural—“biotechnocultural” (Bates 2018, 9). This paragraph will avoid discussing the works in olfactory terms, it will rather question prevailing mindsets that emphasise divisions between bodies, particularly those between the ‘natural’ and the ‘artificial’.

Releasing the Human from the Human (2019-20) serves as the most compelling exploration of our interaction with technology within the exhibition. Composed of a kelp derivative, this installation features six globular lamps. Each lamp is internally illuminated and encloses animatronic insects that move within the spherical space. Due to the lamps’ transparency and the

internal light source, the presence of these insects is made evident solely through the auditory buzz of their metallic wings and the play of their shadows upon the kelp surface.

The primary strategy Yi employs to interrogate the roles and hierarchies governing human and non-human entities involves an engagement with different timescales. Yi chose to use algae because they are among the oldest life forms on Earth. They are vital for human survival as they contain the cyanobacteria that generate the oxygen we breathe (Yi 2022a). While still evoking the metaphorical flow of substance through membranes analysed in the previous paragraph, Yi engaged with one more rhetoric figure here. By antiphrasis, *Releasing the Human from the Human* expresses an idea of freedom through the portrayal of physical confinement, its opposite.

In considering that the microbial agency of cyanobacteria operates on a geological timescale, we recognise the peripheral role humans play in the planet's history and survival. Simultaneously, the presence of animatronic insects within the lamps could serve as a representation of our potential future. However, for the observer, these bugs might easily be perceived as organic organisms. Once again, drawing from the conventional divide between organic and artificial, Yi reinforces how the realisation that the bugs are machines does not negate their reality or impact, making them all the more real.

With this project, Yi gives agency to more-than-human forms of intelligence to show how we are all part of a massive and symbiotic web of relations (Yi 2022a; 2022b). This piece clearly states how Yi engages with an entanglement of "microbiome, AI, and animal and plant consciousness, which sweep away the ideas of human exceptionalism" (Aspesi, Griccioli, Leuzzi 2022, 18).

Right next to it stood the most recent work by the artist: *Biologizing the Machine (Spillover Zoonotica)* (2022). The parenthetical subtitle combines 'spillover', indicating adverse consequences, with 'zoonotica', derived from 'zoonosis', which refers to the transmission of infectious diseases from non-human entities to humans.² The name's evocation of what happened with COVID-19 here is rather explicit. But Yi never fails to bring wonder and value even to an experience that was as traumatic as the pandemic [fig. 3]. The title portrays how she does so through antiphrasis: despite the negative repercussions implied in a spillover, in this work of art the contamination is harmonious, and highlights the creative potential of microorganisms cooperating with machines. The audience cannot but be captured by the wonderful colours contained in the seven glass and metal-made sheets hanging from the ceiling.

The panels hold soil samples from Milan collected by the Milano-Bicocca University. The soil was inoculated with different microorganisms such as soil bacteria and algae (Aspesi, Griccioli, Leuzzi 2022, 19), cellulose, and sulphuric acid (Yi 2022a). This constituted a Winogradsky culture that grew on-site and was then relocated in HangarBicocca, creating "a tableau of locally sourced soil" (Yi 2022a). The piece represents "the minute complexities of the local environment, its genetic, bacterial, and geological profile" (Aspesi, Griccioli, Leuzzi 2022, 19). The unique composition of the piece

² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/zoonosis>.



Figure 3 Anicka Yi, *Biologizing the Machine (spillover zoonotica)*. 2022. Installation view, Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan, 2022. Commissioned and produced by Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan. Courtesy of the Artist and Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan. Photo by Agostino Osio

continues evolving after its displacement. Even the culture's smallest reactions with air, light, and temperature cause changes in colours, textures, and patterns (19).

To monitor all the oscillations of the culture, a specific technological device was designed - the 'machine' from the title. On the top right corner of each panel is an electronic board that monitors the variations. When microorganisms grow, stay still, or decay, they produce different quantities of hydrogen sulfide. The device monitors these changes over a period ranging from one hour to one week, essentially acting as a microbial life heart-beat detector (Yi 2022a).

The microbial species live in fragile and agitated symbiosis with each other, all the while being perceived by the electronic system. These panels gesture towards a future of more complex [...] multi-organism and machine hybrids. (Aspesi, Griccioli, Leuzzi 2022, 19)

5 Conclusion

Anicka Yi's *Metaspore* offered a powerful example of how art can contribute to the urgent task of reimagining our relationship with the planet and its inhabitants. Through a cosmopolitical approach and a "decentralized gaze" (Di Rosa 2022, 105) that emphasise the interconnectedness of all beings and

objects, Yi's work challenges us to think beyond the narrow confines of traditional human-centred perspectives.

Metaspore was an ecoart exhibition that enticed an ecologic perspective able to cultivate "the connections destroyed or marginalized by a linear logic, control, and conscious intentionality" (Bateson quoted in Formenti, Luraschi, Cuppari 2022, 357). In fact, Yi argues that unexplored realms of elements that would chemically not bond nor mingle can be explored when the explorer is free "from utility and function" (Yi 2022a). In this regard, the 'cultural fermentation' I attribute to Yi's practice resonates with the rhizomatic model articulated by philosophers Deleuze and Guattari. Analogous to mycelium, the rhizome possesses the capacity to traverse established boundaries, spreading through unconventional extensions and links that are initially underground, rationally unpredictable, and unjustifiable (Deleuze, Guattari 1987, 6-9). As we have seen in Yi, the rhizome is inherently cosmopolitical for its diverse, inclusive, and anti-hierarchical approach which challenges cultural codes and is based on ethics of care and interaction. It aims to go beyond anthropocentric perspectives and recognise how relevant is the agency of more-than-human entities in shaping the world. This approach is exactly what defines ecology in a cosmopolitical sense (Stengers quoted in Robbert, Mickey 2013, 1).

In Western contexts, there tends to be a sensory hierarchy that privileges vision and hearing. Yi refers to this as the "biopolitics of the senses", a framework that contributes to human desensitisation and a distancing from tactile and olfactory engagement. To counter this, Yi foregrounds olfaction, and more broadly the entire sensorium, in an effort to challenge sensory hierarchies and facilitate closer interspecies connections. Similarly, a scientific approach inspired by 'cultural fermentation' can engender rhizomatic relationships that invite us to re-engage with biology and the broader scientific realm, thus disrupting its traditional biopolitical function as a tool of control.

In a world where science is attributed legitimacy with blind faith, what needs to be recovered is a reconnection to it - "to re-interpret it as close, as it surrounds and affects everyone: to question, to mature, to pay attention to it" (Vich-Álvares 2022, 44). Because art is participatory in nature, it can be the connective tissue between top-down and bottom-up approaches, uniting science and politics, going beyond the ideological divisions of the Anthropocene (36-8). Being the result of both scientific research and intuitive artistic creation, Yi's pieces are able to transport the body of the audience to an impactful pluriverse of senses.

Yi's portrayal of life as unity recalls the theory of the holobiont mentioned by Haraway (2016, 60), where the host organism and its microorganisms form one body, questioning the concept of a separate individual. In the essay, I emphasised how Yi's art achieves this sense of interconnectedness through rhetorical figures. This interconnectedness transcends the traditional divide between human and non-human entities, highlighting the complex relationships that define our existence. However, while my analysis acknowledges this interconnectedness, it also recognises the cultural and societal frameworks that have historically separated humans from non-human entities.

The seeming 'polarisation' between human and non-human aspects is not intended to reinforce divisions, but rather to engage with the existing cultural context. By acknowledging these distinctions, we can better understand how Yi's art challenges and reconfigures these divisions, ultimately showcasing how interconnectedness allows us to attribute sociopolitical

significance to seemingly disparate elements such as smells, machines, and bacteria. In this sense, the exploration of distinctions serves to underline the transformative power of Yi's art in bridging these gaps and transcending conventional boundaries.

Therefore, the intent is not to perpetuate separation but to explore how art can navigate within the existing societal constructs while also questioning and reshaping them. The goal is to emphasise that, despite these distinctions, the essence of Yi's work lies in revealing the underlying unity and symbiotic relationships that define life as a holobiont. This recognition of interdependence allows us to view the seemingly isolated components as interconnected parts of a larger whole, fostering a cosmopolitical perspective that promotes inclusivity and care for all beings and objects.

Metaspore portrayed the importance of nurturing and sustaining unity with an approach rooted in care, where thinking with care means to “question unilateral and exclusionary bifurcations of living, doings, and agencies” (Puig De La Bellacasa 2017, 188). Art does it by definition, and ecoart takes this idea to another level with its cosmopolitical approach. Through its speculative and pluriversal perspectives, *Metaspore* inspired us to imagine alternative futures and world-making practices that challenge dominant narratives, offering a more hopeful vision for the future: a future where we get rid of our obsession with boundaries and confinements, which is nothing but a “hangover from modernism” (Yi 2022b).

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