

Art in America

YIN XIUZHEN

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By Pan Qing



New Plymouth Are international travel and burgeoning communication technologies creating a single global consciousness? What would it be like to partake of a genuinely shared mind, a borderless communal memory? Can such a mentality adequately compensate for a diminishing sense of local rootedness, family and home? *Collective Subconscious* (2007), a sculptural installation shown last spring in the Projects space of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, is one striking example of Yin Xiuzhen's long engagement with these perplexing questions of personal and cultural identity. The 38-foot-long work is an accordionlike extension of a minivan of the sort known in Chinese as a *xiao mian* ("little loaf of bread"), a symbol of family prosperity in the People's Republic of the late 1990s. The artist recalls that her sister-in-law, who owned one at that time, used it both to transport goods and to gather up fellow artists, who crammed inside to travel around Beijing.¹

To create the sculpture, Yin bisected a minivan and reconnected its two ends by inserting a stainless-steel armature, which, wrapped in a quilt stitched together from 400 items of discarded clothing, is intended as a haven for collective memory. Visitors enter the piece through a side doorway; inside, low stools are clustered into several conversation areas. Light shining through the multicolored patchwork evokes the "fabricated" dream of increasing wealth and comfort cherished by the early owners of such vehicles. For a soundtrack, Yin selected the Chinese pop song "Beijing, Beijing" (2007), a nostalgic melody with a tinge of the blues that recalls a simpler time in a more homogeneous place.

Born in Beijing in 1963, Yin Xiuzhen grew up during the Cultural Revolution, when China's central government kept an iron grip on its people, monitoring individuals indirectly through assigned groups, and holding foreign influences at bay. The Reform and Opening-up Policy, launched in 1978, replaced the country's rigid, highly centralized planned economy with something resembling a free-market system, and thereby brought greater entrepreneurship to the hitherto backward and closed state. This shift also ushered in the One Child Policy (1979), with

its attendant "little prince/princess syndrome," and an ever-widening income disparity between various regions and social groups. As a consequence, self-centeredness-in both the positive and negative senses-has drastically increased among China's citizens. Yin observes:

Those of us who lived through the Mao period always thought of ourselves as belonging to a bigger whole. We did not have the concept of an individual. All we had, and who we were, belonged to the general public or the country. Since then, individual consciousness has become more and more pronounced, and now it is almost reaching an extreme where collaboration is once again growing important.

In fine arts circles, the impact of the Opening-up was profound. Freed from stringent restrictions on themes and styles, Chinese artists began to explore myriad forms of personal expression. The half-decade-long '85 New Wave Movement (1985-90) gave rise to roughly 80 independent avant-garde groups, encompassing more than 2,200 young artists, who organized exhibitions, held conferences, and wrote manifestos and articles about their activities [see *A.i.A.*, Apr. '08]. The ferment peaked with the landmark "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition, which brought nearly 300 works by almost 200 artists to Beijing's National Art Museum of China in 1989, the year Yin Xiuzhen graduated from the oil painting department of the city's Capital Normal University.

Once released from academic strictures, Yin quickly abandoned traditional painting methods and took up installation. Since then, over the course of two decades, she has moved to the forefront of Chinese contemporary art (still an overwhelmingly male domain). Her work has been shown at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York (1998); the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2003); the São Paulo Biennial (2004); the Biennale of Sydney (2004); the Today Art Museum, Beijing (2005); the Mori Art Museum, Tokyo (2005); the Brooklyn Museum, New York (2007); the Chinese pavilion at the Venice Biennale (2007); the Shanghai Biennale (2008); and the Museum für Angewandte Kunst Frankfurt (2009). Earlier this year, three solo exhibitions appeared more or less concurrently on two continents: a survey of pieces made between 1994 and 2008, at Chambers Fine Art in New York; the *Collective Subconscious* installation at MoMA; and a show of 19 recent works at Pace Beijing.

Many of Yin's early works-including *Ruined City* (1996), *Transformation* (1997), *Sunning the Tiles* (1998) and *Beijing Tiles* (1999)-focused on the "rescue" of tiles from structures demolished in China's ongoing urban renewal campaign. These building parts, representative of the vanishing Old China, were sometimes laid out in patterns on the ground, sometimes temporarily reinstalled in new contexts, sometimes combined with photographs of displaced residents.

Other works from this period were discreetly autobiographical in nature. *Dress Box* (1995) consists of clothes Yin wore from childhood to adulthood-one garment selected for each year-folded and stacked in a small trunk made by her father, which was then filled with cement, leaving only the top garment visible. The piece alludes to the traditional practice of a woman, upon marriage, packing up a few personal belongings and moving from her father's house to her husband's. A Chinese wife then retains her paternal family name, while her children will carry that of her spouse. (Yin met fellow artist Song Dong in college in 1985; they married in 1992 and had a daughter, Song ErRui, in 2002. Their home in an old hutong-lane and courtyard-neighborhood of Beijing became a gathering place for artists during the period of retreat that followed the police closure of "China/Avant-Garde" in 1989.)

Many of Yin's works created in the mid- to late 1990s were ephemeral-existing now only in documentary photographs-and environmentally attuned to a degree still rare in China. *Harp* (1995) consisted of threads tied to a bent-over tree and anchored to the ground with rocks, forming a large Aeolian instrument. Outdoors in the Tibetan highlands, Yin created *Living Water* (1996), an array of plastic sacks stocked with fresh water and mounted on wooden props resembling oversize chopsticks, as well as *Shoes with Butter* (1996), dozens of abandoned-looking shoes filled with yak butter and fitted with wicks. In her most forthrightly green gesture, she organized the performance-installation *Washing the River* (1995), inviting passersby to help scrub blocks of ice made from the water of a polluted river in Chengdu, Sichuan Province. (In those days, Western performance art was little known in China, although some artists, spurred by influences from abroad, had already taken the form to body-centered extremes, particularly in Beijing's East Village avant-garde enclave [see *A.i.A.*, Feb. '10].)

For the highly personal *Shoes* (1998), Yin cut photographs of herself at various ages to fit the insoles of fabric shoes (common in China during her youth)-an allusion, perhaps, to the step-by-step journey of life, and another reminder that items of dress, touched and molded by the body, can evoke memory, experience and history. This piece was intended to debut in the independent group show "It's Me" at the Main Ritual Hall of the Ancestral Temple, Beijing. However, in a governmental maneuver common at the time, final permission to exhibit was withheld on the scheduled opening day, depriving the installed works of viewers.

Once she began to travel abroad frequently for her work, Yin came to be identified with the material that best expresses her abiding sense of dislocation: old clothes repurposed for art. Her two best-known series, "Suitcases" (2000-02) and its spin-off "Portable Cities" (2001-present), comprise suitcases containing miniature cities made from clothes previously worn by each locale's citizens. When closed, the works look like ordinary suitcases. When opened on the floor (Yin's prescribed mode of display), they reveal pop-up cityscapes, resilient aide-mémoire sometimes accompanied by sounds recorded in the cities' public places. Evoking artists as disparate as Duchamp, Boltanski and LeDray, the two series contain many examples keyed to Yin's own travels, including *Shanghai* (2002), *San Francisco* (2003), *Vancouver* (2003) and *Berlin* (2006).

Yin frequently makes a direct link between personal displacement and larger social dynamics. *Building Game* (2000)-first shown in "Unusual & Usual," one of the now legendary independent shows surrounding the Shanghai Biennale that year [see *A.i.A.*, July '01]-offers an entire complex of vertical architectural structures, many above human height, made of sewn-together clothes stretched over wooden frames erected on the floor and lit from within. The installation's mushrooms-after-a-rain quality evokes the surreal feeling of China's startling building boom.

In 2001, the German conglomerate Siemens commissioned Yin to create a large-scale sculpture of an airplane made from the clothing of their employees. This work was completed on Aug. 10, 2001, and hung from the ceiling of a Siemens office in Beijing. Just one month later, the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in New York shocked the world and shattered many people's sense of security. Yin was very touched by the commemorative effect that *Clothes Plane* now had for the Siemens employees. Thereafter, she began to make more planes, and the resulting "International

Flight" (2002-present) became an ongoing project, prompting viewers in many different locales to consider both the pleasures and anxieties of air travel today.

A similar ambivalence is implicit in *Weapons* (2003), composed of long horizontally hung poles that, lancelike, appear to have skewered various globes and disks. The assemblages, wrapped in bright cloth, evoke broadcast towers turned not only mentally but physically intrusive. The heavens, too, seem vulnerable to mass-media penetration by *TVT-Rocket* (2005), a frame-and-fabric piece that stretches dozens of feet into the air in three freestanding variations of Shanghai's futuristic, tripod-based Oriental Pearl Tower broadcast facility-with cloth booster rockets attached.

Since completing the *Collective Subconscious* minibus, Yin has made a number of works that express her ever-growing regard for communality. In 2008, she hired unemployed workers from the city of Chemnitz, in the former East Germany, to join her in creating a large performative installation tellingly titled *Commune*. The workers took clothes donated by visitors and sewed them together into one large multicolored circular curtain. The cloth was then suspended around a work station at the city's Public Management Center, creating a productive space that people share both physically and in spirit. Yin's inspiration came from childhood memories of her visits to the clothing factory where her mother worked. There she first grasped a communal sense of large-scale industrial work, still one of the major social organisms of Chinese society. Likewise, her roughly 50-foot-long *Flying Machine* (2008), shown at the Shanghai Biennale in 2008, invited visitors to participate in China's journey toward modernization by clambering about in an installation that merged a tractor, a Volkswagen sedan and a passenger jet.

Recently, as evidenced by the works in the "Second Skin" show at Pace Beijing, Yin has taken a new turn in her exploration of the boundaries between internal and external, individual and collective. *Skin Cube* (2009), a roughly 6½-foot-wide block of "human skin" made from undergarments and punctuated by viewing portals, presents a detailed cross section of layers complete with hair follicles. *Introspective Cavity* (2008), using material normally worn outside of the body to construct a version of an organ from inside the body, is, in effect, a giant womb. After entering the nearly 50-foot-long expanse, one can recline on the padded floor and, bathed in the pink light filtering through the fabric, meditate while lulled by an ambient soundtrack of gently running water.

But the piece that attracted the greatest audience participation at Pace was *Thought* (2009), a massive, blue-fabric brain that visitors crawl into, metaphorically entering what is arguably the most intimate space of another person-his or her mind. Once inside the 16¾-foot-high chamber, viewers were awash in gentle shades of blue, a hue chosen for its links with restfulness and inner peace.

Whatever the results of Yin's long search for communality, one thing is certain. Throughout her career, she has been able to draw inspiration from mundane objects and to express concepts that deeply connect to Chinese tradition but also respond to profound changes in social reality.

1 All statements attributed to Yin Xiuzhen are from her conversations with the author in Beijing, March-April 2010.

“Yin Xiuzhen: Works, 1994-2008” was on view at Chambers Fine Art, New York, Feb. 2-Mar. 20.

“Projects 92: Yin Xiuzhen” appeared at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Mar. 14-May 31.

“Yin Xiuzhen: Second Skin” was shown at Pace Beijing, Mar. 18-May 8, 2010.

Currently On View “China in Four Seasons: Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen,” at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand, through Sept. 12. Works by Yin in the group exhibitions “Larger Than Life—Stranger Than Fiction,” Fellbach, Germany, through Oct. 11, and “Popping Up: Revisiting the Relationship Between 2 Dimensions and 3 Dimensions,” Hong Kong Arts Centre, Sept. 18-Oct. 22.

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