

# MEMORY, SPACE, AND SELFHOOD IN TRANSITION: YIN XIUZHEN'S HETEROTOPOGRAPHIC VISION OF BEIJING

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*"There is still one of which you never speak."*

*Marco Polo bowed his head.*

*"Venice," the Khan said.*

*Marco smiled. "What else do you believe I have been talking to you about?"*

*The emperor did not turn a hair. "And yet I have never heard you mention that name."*

*And Polo said: "Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice."*

—Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

A travelogue framed by fictional conversations between Marco Polo (1245-1324), a visitor from Europe, and Kublai Khan (1260-1294), the fifth ruler of the Mongol Empire, *Invisible Cities* is known for its vivid and often fantastic rendering of fictional cities. Strikingly, and perhaps necessarily, the protagonist Polo's flights of imagination exclude any direct mention of his hometown of Venice. Indeed, the fifty-five invisible cities described in the novel serve to refract, deform and evoke the Venice embedded in Polo's memory. The above epigraph encapsulates this interplay between home and memory: the traveler's visions—reflecting the self and the past—reconstitute present experience. The traveler's home as it once existed may be absent on the map, but it remains superimposed on the site of memory—a placeless place. Meanwhile, seven centuries after Kublai Khan's founding of the Yuan Dynasty and its capital Khanbaliq, the direct predecessor to modern Beijing, Beijing-born installation artist Yin Xiuzhen is centering her ongoing art series *Portable Cities* on the relationship between individual memory and the transformation of the metropolis under globalization. Just as Polo maps and renders his invisible cities by highlighting their most iconic features, Yin reconstructs landmarks of the megacities to which she travels: the Oriental Pearl Tower in Shanghai, 2002, Berlin's Television Tower, 2002, and the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, 2003. Yin's miniature city models, sewn together from discarded and second-hand clothing and framed within suitcases, evoke Polo's autobiographical travelogues, in that they give shape to the traveler's experience of the environment, rather than the environment itself.

With the exception of the first work in the series, *Portable City Beijing* (Fig. 1), a model of Yin's hometown of Beijing, the constructed landmarks serve to distinguish the rather homogenous-looking collections of tower and infrastructure. Yin's capturing of the Beijing cityscape lacks readily identifiable features, which raises questions as to the relationship between the experience and recollection of travel and the practice of cartography. The travel destination is often mapped out according to pre-programmed itineraries, centered on designated tourist sites. Hometowns are exempt from this process: it is the only site that one experiences prior to *hearing stories about it*. In the wake of rapid transformation and expansion in Beijing's recent history, the Beijing that exists at the centre of Yin's topography of memory has become warped and deformed. This phenomenon is explored with stark urgency in Yin's previous work, *Ruined City* (1996) (Fig. 2), which re-appropriates materials taken from actual demolished Beijing homes—including bed frames and wardrobes, as well as cement powder from a construction site—in order to authenticate and preserve Yin's memory of this transient cityscape. Yin states: "In a rapidly changing China, 'memory' seems to vanish more quickly than everything else. That is why

preserving memory has become an alternative way of life.<sup>ii</sup> Yin's perpetual state of dislocation and geographical alienation becomes fertile ground for her artistic aspirations: she transforms moments into site-forms, challenging the chronological imperative to mapping history. *Portable City Beijing* was shown as a miniature cityscape of Beijing. However, most of the familiar sites in this work are already gone, an effect which has left Yin in a heterotopography<sup>iii</sup>—a place in the placelessness that mirrors and upsets its outside. This heterotopography disrupts the linear timeline by engaging dual impulses: one is a counter-site, built to preserve memory of the past and a commemoration of the ruined place; the other is an anti-site, integrating the past and present to adapt the transformation from absence into re-presence.

### **Ruined Beijing: Counter-site of Memory**

Historically, Kublai Khan's vision for Khanbaliq or *Dadu* followed the architectural framework laid out in the Confucian classic *The Rites of Zhou*, written during the Warring States period (475–221 B.C.).<sup>iv</sup> The imperial palace was located on level terrain in the capital's centre; the city itself was surrounded by a rectangular wall. The central axis of the city was positioned in a north-south direction, which endowed the core of the city with striking symmetry. The imperial palace was located in the center of the capital. The densely-walled centre was the city's powerhouse, a defensive force that became more diffuse with each walled layer extending outward. The Marco Polo of history alluded to this, suggesting that “the name itself (*Dadu*) implies ‘the city of sovereign’ ... [in] a form perfectly square.”<sup>v</sup> The capital thereby constituted a stratified socio-political space; each set of walls imbued a certain level of power/interiority, with entry granting access to realms of increasing sovereignty.<sup>vi</sup> The architectural centre of *Dadu* remained undisturbed through the course of its three dynasties—the Yuan, Ming, and Qing—well into the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, by the 21<sup>st</sup> century, through the adoption of a poly-nuclear development strategy, the city had begun to expand.<sup>vii</sup>

This expanded territory extended along the periphery of the city, housing several discrete commercial districts. What followed was the tearing down and rebuilding of the centre, the collapsing of the historical dyad of inside/outside power. In *Portable City Beijing*, the miniaturized city in the suitcase, like the structure of the city proper, is framed within a square. The periphery is lined with a ring of buildings and towers jutting outward, while the centre is sunk in a circular depression. When visitors step closer to the installation, speakers emit sounds recorded in *Shichachai* Park, located in the north of old Beijing. This is the place nearby Yin's home, where many old Beijing houses and *Siheyuan*—traditional Chinese courtyards surrounded by buildings on all sides—are the major targets to be demolished for the erection of the new city.

Grappling with this period of turbulent cultural and infrastructural change, Yin exhibited an art installation, *Ruined City*. Completed in 1996, the piece was shown in an art museum at Chinese Normal University in Beijing. *Ruined City* occupies a 300 square meter exhibition hall, through which Yin arranged almost 1400 roof tiles, taken from demolished sites near her home, along with pieces of furniture such as chairs, beds and cabinets, donated to her by family and neighbours.<sup>viii</sup> By arranging leftovers from demolished sites and re-situating them in a site-form, Yin constructs a landmark of interiority—one that stands in counterpoint to the massive demolition occurring outside the space. The structure of the *Siheyuan* house, from which the tiles are taken, is privileged for facilitating neighbourly proximity, thereby promoting a strong sense of community. However, the modern architectural style being implemented in the renovations requires the use of a new material, primarily cement powder.<sup>ix</sup> In reference to this, Yin has sprinkled powder on and beneath the furniture, submerging and defacing the pieces placed throughout the hall. For Yin, this

material conveys both a hard and soft quality: “I like to watch how dry cement changes, if you leave it there without doing anything, it absorbs moisture in the air, and gradually converts itself with harder surfaces.”<sup>x</sup> By introducing moisture to the cement powder, a chemical reaction ensues that transforms the powder irreversibly into solid cement. Sealed into the very infrastructure of the city, these traditional building materials embedded in the history and collective memory of Beijing have begun to vanish. Everywhere on the streets of Beijing, buildings are violently toppling over almost every day.<sup>xi</sup> The cement powder covers both the exterior and interior of the city, silently settling into every nook and crevice of the urban landscape.

With Yin’s introspective vision, *Ruined City* stands as a neutral and humanizing corrective to this violence. By implementing everyday materials, Yin, as Phyllis Teo highlights, departs from the conventions of mainstream socio-political art, particularly in her forgoing of direct messaging that might fix her audience’s interpretation.<sup>xii</sup> Between 1985 and 1989, Yin Xiuzhen studied oil painting at Beijing Normal University. In 1992, she began to branch away from her work on canvas; her output over the course of this decade cemented her reputation as one of Beijing’s pioneering experimental artists.<sup>xiii</sup> Despite a lack of institutional support, Yin remained committed to this new creative direction: “I experimented with certain spatial artworks connected to the environment...the use of objects to express sentiments felt direct and exciting. It was like a taste of freedom”.<sup>xiv</sup> In presenting the public with actual remnants of the process of urbanization forever altering Beijing, Yin’s piece is immersive and immediately confrontational. The absence of verbal or textual elaboration of any sonic accompaniment, save for the *Shichachai* Park recording, contrasts powerfully with the loud and intrusive noises of construction taking place outside these walls. Yin comments eloquently on the capacity of her installation to both comment upon and offer a space of silence: “...cement starts its crazy reproduction and begins to fill in every crevice of human life. Finally, however, all subsides and leaves only the deadly silence.”<sup>xv</sup> In this way, *Ruined City* cultivates silence as spatial oasis, inviting mindfulness and introspection. The name *Ruined City* (*feidu* 废都) refers to a contemporary underground novel written by Jia Pingwa, first published in 1993. In his novel, Jia describes a fictional ancient city, *Xijing*, developed into a modern consumer society. Jia deliberately portrays the psychological and moral shifts of each individual encountering this change in environment, and criticizes the superficialities of the urban culture, which finally bring the story to a tragic end.<sup>xvi</sup> Though the novel sold over a million copies in the short months since its initial publication, it was soon banned in the same year.<sup>xvii</sup> In *Ruined City*, Yin converts a radical literary voice and makes silence a core feature of her aesthetic artistic space, and thus *Ruined City* also highlights the extent to which social *aphasia*<sup>xviii</sup>—the loss of speaking ability—has come to afflict Beijing’s populace in the face of unshakeable expansion and demolition.

By the time the new urban communities were under construction, the traditional tiles became unwanted trash, scattered around the city. Yin, by collecting the leftovers and re-arranging them in an orderly manner side by side, constructs a counter-site of ruins. Not only does *Ruined City* convert the refuse of expansion into a scathing commentary on the same, but it also stands in direct counterpoint to a linear model of history; ruins do not correspond to finality, but to repetition. This is to say that Yin is making history horizontal, stretching it into a topographical landscape. “This is how one pictures the angel of history”, describes Walter Benjamin, “His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet.”<sup>xix</sup> The cityscape would like to advance, and its destruction is called ‘progress,’ through which the trash is, on the contrary, essential for history to repeat itself. Though the ruins no longer remain, the new established sites are inversely prescribed by their dissipated selves—the leftover tiles.

## Portable Beijing: Anti-site of Memory

As the urbanization of Beijing became a core feature of Yin's work, her memories of the city's traditional architecture became increasingly remote. At the same time, the city attempted to satisfy tourist demand by erecting numerous structures in the traditional style.<sup>xx</sup> The doubling of old and new is said to disrupt one's ability to see and to perceive; this was true for much of Beijing's populace. Just as the cement powder in *Ruined Beijing* stood in for the *aphasia* that was being engendered by relentless modernization, the reconstructed but deceptively familiar Beijing cityscape gave rise to a sort of *agnosia*,<sup>xxi</sup> a failure of visual recognition, in the citizenry. The experience of constant yet often indiscernible change caused Yin's home to appear increasingly strange to her: the boundary between authenticity and verisimilitude became confused. *Portable City—Beijing*, completed five years after *Ruined City*, features a ring of predominantly reconstructed buildings. The conspicuous absence of the city centre, along with the traditional homes and structures that helped to define Yin's community, is reflective of the artist's experience of spatial dislocation. As a result of Beijing's expansion, the city's centre of power has been relocated to its periphery, where it serves to prescribe the old site of absence.

The suitcase that accompanies Yin on her travels is at once emblematic of her experience of geographical and cultural fragmentation, and an anchor to her roots—her preservation of an eradicated past. "I am constantly traveling," Yin states. "I saw the baggage conveyer at the baggage claim every time. Many people waited there... Since I always traveled with a huge suitcase, it felt like I was traveling with my home."<sup>xxii</sup> Just as Yin's travel luggage serves as a private monument to her experience of home, the suitcases that house her *Portable Cities* series allegorize travel as a means of preserving cultural memory in the body of the nomadic individual in a global age. The only remaining objects in this suitcase are the clothes and the old map, left as traces of the past. Yin's cityscapes, painstakingly assembled through the weaving of discarded and second-hand clothing—what Yin refers to as "the skin of our social body"<sup>xxiii</sup> (with *Portable Cities Beijing* made from clothing once worn by Yin and her family), serve as moving challenges to unassailable progress. In *Portable City Beijing*, within the circular depression containing the city centre, Yin has affixed a magnifying lens, through which is visible a map of Beijing circa 1949. Thus, the recession and burial of old Beijing is reinforced through the protruding structures denoting Beijing's modern architecture. In negotiating the limits of her fading memory, Yin brings a verticality to her horizontal topography of memory. She endows with volume the flat materials employed in her pieces, extruding the fabric into mimetic three-dimensional cityscapes, while allowing visitors to magnify the old map with a convex glass. This interplay between past and present is recalled by the words of Pierre Nora:

*"Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived."*<sup>xxiv</sup>

Unlike conventional forms of historicization, memory merges former and present iterations of the self and endows the recollected whole with a sense of *instability*. In *Portable Cities*, the reclaiming of second-hand clothing materializes memory with tangibility and *fabricability*. In preserving memory by refiguring the skin of the social body, the cityscape is no longer untouchable nor imposing and distant, but hand-wrought, tactile and perceptibly manipulated.

Thus, Yin is not merely representing urban transformation, but constructing individualized sites of memory.

Clothing has long served as a source of inspiration and a creative tool in Yin's artworks. Growing up during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), all of China's citizens, regardless of age or gender, were made to dress soberly, eschewing self-expression. Yin recalls the resentment that this produced in her as a child: "individuality and personality were suppressed as we grew up."<sup>xxv</sup> Yin's mother, a garment factory worker, often made clothes for her daughter from leftover scraps of fabric.<sup>xxvi</sup> Since the end of the Cultural Revolution, the culture of China has been sizeably transformed. Individuality and self-expression are more readily tolerated. For Yin, the second-hand clothing she appropriates inscribes—and is inscribed with—memory: "these materials with their experiences and histories, as well as many traces of life can 'speak' for themselves...to have their own voices" (Hou 2015, 15). However, Yin does not identify her work with the 'readymade' tradition: "when we reuse materials that come from people's experiences, we come to a new recognition of the concept behind 'readymade'... I reuse these 'experienced materials', it becomes a starting point for recapturing value".<sup>xxvii</sup> Readymade, a term coined by artist Marcel Duchamp in 1915,<sup>xxviii</sup> corresponds to an artistic movement in which mass-produced objects are selected, repositioned or signed by the artist, thereby imbuing them with an intentionally contentious artfulness. This tradition universalized the possibility of art-making and undermined the artist's elevated status. However, experience is individual and cannot be duplicated; through Yin's artwork, the readymade, with its universalizing properties, is exchanged for something intimate and familial—clothing as personhood but also connection, love, and communal experience.

Though *Portable City Beijing* is largely devoid of identifiable structures, it does feature the tallest building as Beijing's Central Radio and TV Tower, which was constructed in 1992. As is the case with several subsequent entries in the *Portable Cities* series, Yin depicts the television tower as being among the city's most dominant structures. For Yin, this represents a contemporary approach to mapping the modern urban landscape, one that highlights the centrality of media dissemination in establishing and maintaining structures of power. The TV tower does not need to be situated centrally to function as a sovereign site. This spatial diffusion of power departs from the traditional Beijing model, in which the centre operates as the sovereign core. Thus, Beijing has become homogenized, in the manner of many other comparably-sized metropolises.

With rapid and persistent transformations gradually effacing Beijing's former character, the spatial perceptions of the citizenry are in constant flux. How then, does one maintain an attachment to individual history, to the sites of memory that define one's experience of *home*? Residents of Beijing are frequently in a process of displacement and dislocation; Yin, as both observer and subject of this era of transformation, constructs a counter-site as a place of individual remembrance, as well as an anti-site that merges old and new Beijing. The fact that non-locals will not be able to identify the sites depicted in *Portable City Beijing* is very much to the point: this is Yin's vision of heterotopography—a cartography bridging city and memory. In her radical presentation of a ruined and portable Beijing, Yin stakes an ideological claim against the urbanization of her hometown in that the leftovers are essential—the centre is peripheral. Yin's work facilitates her ability to confront her own experience of placelessness. Faced with the gradual effacement of her cognitive cityscapes, Yin, with her introspective vision, strives to reconstitute concepts of home, memory and the self.

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1: *Portable City: Beijing*, 2001. Installation. © 2019 Yin Xiuzhen, courtesy of Pace Gallery.

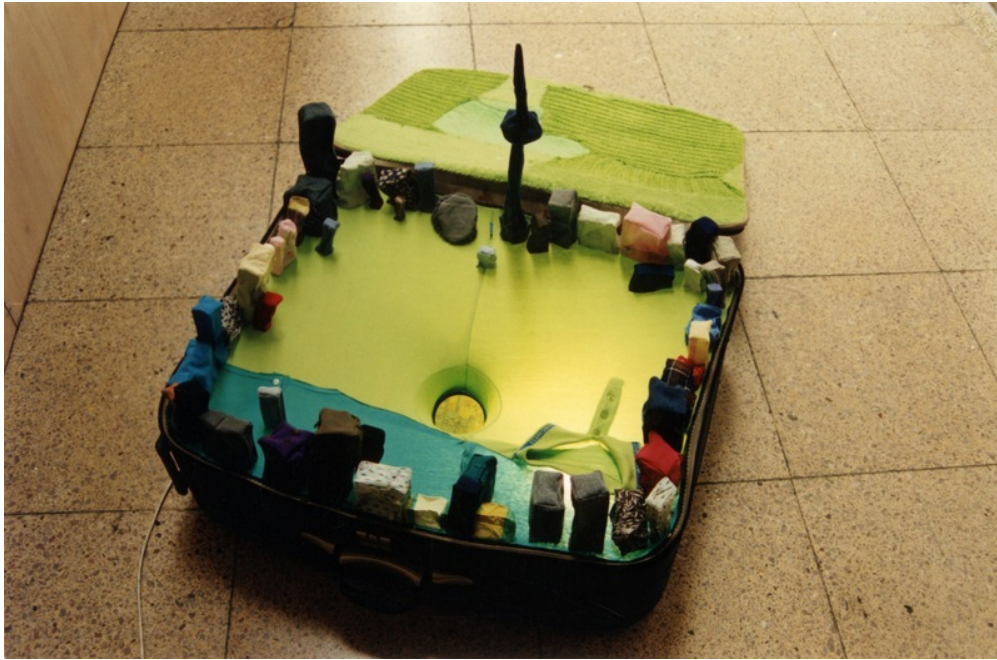


Fig. 2: *Ruined City*, 1996. Furniture, cement powder, tile. Installation. © 2019 Yin Xiuzhen, courtesy of Pace Gallery.



## NOTES:

- i Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (London: Vintage, 1997), 86.
- ii “Yin Xiuzhen,” Pace Gallery, accessed December 16, 2018, <https://www.pacegallery.com/artists/520/yin-xiuzhen>.
- iii The idea of heterotopography is inspired by the notion of heterotopia, elaborated by Michel Foucault, who refers to it as worlds within worlds, mirroring and yet upsetting the outside, in Michel Foucault, “Of Other Space,” *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité* (October 1984): 3, <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf>.
- iv While Kubilai Khan took over the location of the city where the site was already built as one of the capitals of the Liao dynasty and then of the Jing dynasty, he built from scratch the new city of Beijing in a slightly different location that became the foundation for Ming and Qing Beijing. For further descriptions on the city plan of historical Beijing, see Nancy Shatzman Steinhardt, “The Plan of Khubilai Khan’s Imperial City,” *Artibus Asiae* 44, no. 2/3 (1983): 137-158.
- v Marco Polo, “The City of Tai-Du,” in *The Travels of Marco Polo, the Venetian*, trans. by William Marsden (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1908), 170-173.
- vi For more information on the gates of capital Beijing as a symbol of authority, see Wu Hung, *Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 167- 68.
- vii Wu Liangyong, *Rehabilitating the Old City of Beijing: A Project in the Ju’Er Hutong Neighbourhood* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 28. For a further description of the urbanization of Beijing, see Gregor Jansen, *Totalstadt: Beijing Case: High-Speed Urbanisierung in China* (Köln: Walther König, 2006), 166-204.
- viii Peggy Wang, “Dis/placement Yin Xiuzhen’s City Installations,” *Yishu*, vol. 4 no.1 (March 2005): 88-90.
- ix On the materiality of cement powder in Yin’s work, see Lin Xiaoping, “Beijing: Yin Xiuzhen’s the ruined city,” *Third Text*, no.13: 48 (June 2008), 45-54.
- x Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 122.
- xi Yin talked about her experience in the interview, saying “Sometimes when I would ride my bike to work I would hear a sound, and look around to see a house fall down. Everywhere you looked you could see the charter chai (tear down) written on buildings. Sometimes you would go out in the morning and see the character on a house, and come back in the evening to find the house already gone,” in Ai Weiwei, ed., “Interview with Yin Xiuzhen,” *Chinese Artists, Texts and Interviews: Chinese Contemporary Art Awards (CCAA) 1998-2002* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Ltd.), 130-131.
- xii Phyllis Teo, *Rewriting Modernism: Three Women Artists in Twentieth-Century China: Pan Yuliang, Nie Ou and Yin Xiuzhen* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2016), 201-205.

<sup>xiii</sup> On experimental art in the 1990s, see Wu Hung 巫鸿, *Guanyu zhanlan de zhanlan: 90 niandai de shiyan yishu zhanshi 关于展览的展览：90年代的实验艺术展示* (*An Exhibitions About Exhibitions: Displaying Experimental Art the 1990s*) (Beijing: Zhongguo minzu sheyingyishu chubanshe 2016), 10-50; From 1990 to 1996, experimental art exhibitions were marginalized and mostly exhibited in a private space, which features a sense of individuality and intimacy, termed as “apartment art.” See Gao Minglu, “Inside and Outside Public Walls: The Living Space of the Chinese Avant-Garde,” in *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art* (Buffalo Academy 2005), 30-59.

<sup>xiv</sup> Hou Hanru and Yin Xiuzhen, “Hou Hanru In Conversation With Yin Xiuzhen,” in *Yin Xiuzhen* (London: Phaidon, 2015), 9.

<sup>xv</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>xvi</sup> Jia Pingao 贾平凹, *Feidu 废都* (*Ruined City*) (Nanjing: Yilin chubanshe, 2012), 269-410.

<sup>xvii</sup> The novel *Ruined City* was banned for its sexually explicit content as well as its reactionary features, and it was republished after sixteen years with a cut and revised version.

<sup>xviii</sup> Yin viewed her artistic gesture as a way of reflecting social aphasia, saying “what they demolished wasn’t just an outward appearance, it was...the conscience of the people...we felt it was a shame, but we felt helpless as well. We had no power to preserve these precious things and experience, and so we could only use artistic methods to describe this sadness and indignation, to shout it out,” in Hou and Yin, “Conversation,” 15.

<sup>xix</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On The Conception of History,” In *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940*, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 251-283.

<sup>xx</sup> Hou and Yin, “Conversation,” 10.

<sup>xxi</sup> The study of *agnosia* was initiated in clinical accounts, and later on, art historian Jonathan Crary investigates *agnosia* in visual culture. Crary describes *agnosia* as a symptom bound up with modern reconfiguration; it was characterized by an inability to make any conceptual or symbolic recognition of an object. As Crary explains, it is “a condition in which visual infuriation was experienced with a kind of primal strangeness.” For further description, see Jonathan Crary “Unbinding Vision: Manet and the Attentive Observer in the Late Nineteenth Century,” in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, ed. Leo Charney and Schwartz Vanessa, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 54-64.

<sup>xxii</sup> Christophe W. Mao, ed., *Chopsticks* (New York: Chambers Fine Art, 2002), 70.

<sup>xxiii</sup> “Yin Xiuzhen ‘Second Skin,’” Pace Gallery, accessed December 16, 2018, <https://www.pacegallery.com/exhibitions/11305/yin-xiuzhen-second-skin>.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory*, no. 26 (Spring 1989), 8.

<sup>xxv</sup> Hou and Yin, “Conversation,” 18. For a critical account on self-beautification practices on the clothes during the Cultural Revolution, see Hung-Yok Ip, “Fashioning Appearances: Feminine Beauty in Chinese Communist Revolutionary Culture,” *Modern China*, 29, no. 3 (July 2003): 329-361.



<sup>xxvi</sup> Hou and Yin, "Conversation," 22.

<sup>xxvii</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Although the concept of "readymade" in an artistic account of Duchamp was originally inspired by the clothing industry from 1915, Yin, by her usage of second-hand clothes differentiates from the original approach of readymade art. For more accounts of readymade and Duchamp, see Matthew Gale, "Ready-made," Oxford Art Online, accessed September 7, 2019, Grove Art.

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- . *Guanyu zhanlan de zhanlan: 90 niandai de shiyan yishu zhanshi 关于展览的展览：90年代的实验艺术展示*(*An Exhibitions About Exhibitions: Displaying Experimental Art the 1990s*). Beijing: Zhongguo minzu sheyingyishu chubanshe, 2016.
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