



(Above)
COMMUNE, 2008,
 fabric installation. Installation
 view at Alexander Ochs
 Galleries at ABC Berlin
 Contemporary, 2008.
 Courtesy Alexander Ochs
 Galleries, Berlin/Beijing.

(Bottom Right)
 Yin Xiuzhen in front of
COMMUNE, 2008, fabric
 installation, dimensions
 variable. Courtesy Ullens
 Center for Contemporary
 Art, Beijing.

(Bottom Left)
COMMUNE, 2008.
 Installation view at
 Bürgerverwaltungszentrum
 Moritzhof, Chemnitz.
 Courtesy Alexander Ochs
 Galleries, Berlin/Beijing.



The Fabric of Society

Unraveling the installations and performances of an artist who stitches together her meditations on family, migration and globalization.

By HG Masters

At the Shanghai Art Museum in September 2008, visitors congregated around the nose of a model airplane, one portion of a large, out-of-context object that dominated a ground-floor gallery. A walk around Yin Xiuzhen's 15-meter-long *Flying Machine* (2008) revealed that the sculpture is comprised of four parts: a model passenger jet, an actual tractor and a four-door Chinese Volkswagen sedan, connected by a ribbed, tent-like fuselage of white cloth. Yin's sculptural agglomeration is meant to remind viewers of the country's shifting demographics: from the agrarian life evoked by the tractor to the urban environment suggested by the sedan, culminating in aspirations to international travel embodied in the airplane.

Flying Machine was one of 20-odd artworks by a range of international artists commissioned by Shanghai Biennale director Zhang Qing to reflect on the symbolism of People's Square, the wind-swept granite plaza—formerly a racetrack—at Shanghai's center that now houses the Shanghai municipal government, the Shanghai Museum and the Museum of City Planning. Enthusiastic biennale visitors disregarded bilingual signs and warnings from museum guards to pose on the stainless-steel wings for pictures. They hopped onto the tractor's driving seat and opened the Volkswagen Santana's doors, checking to see if those vehicles were real or a scale-model like the plane. Forming a queue sanctioned by guards, visitors were permitted to climb in through a door in the plane's mid-section—the point where the three vehicles intersect—where they found



Yin took water from the Funan River in Chengdu, froze it into blocks of ice and stacked them to form a ten-meter-square cube on the riverbank.

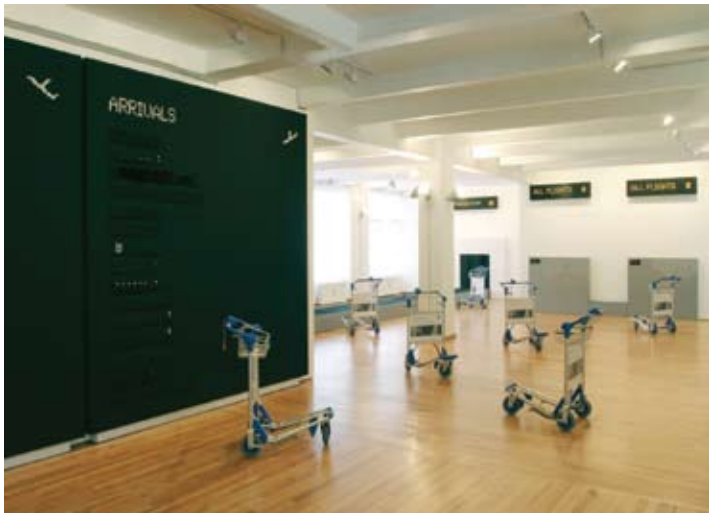
themselves inside an accordion-like tunnel of cloth stitched together from hundreds of found articles of white clothing. The covering was a patchwork of undershirts and button-down dress shirts, two articles of clothing that amplify the sculpture's repeated references to China's migrant laborers and new class of urban professionals. There, a curving steel staircase led to a circular opening, a reach-for-the-sky trope. This metaphorical passageway, however, was easily overlooked as museum guards hurried people in and out of the fuselage.

The 2008 Shanghai Biennale, entitled "Translocalmotion," was one of an ever-growing number of international biennales and exhibitions held around the world since curators Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist's landmark touring exhibition "Cities on the Move" (1997–99) first chronicled late 20th-century (and now early 21st-century) urban growth in Asia. Yin's sculpture appeared to reflect the curators' view that "Urbanization is often the result of socio-economic development as an agricultural society transitions to a modern one" and "the importance of the reform and urban development agenda to China's rise in the 21st century." In the context of the biennale, *Flying Machine* had the feel of civic boosterism, as if it were an advertisement for China's national aspirations. The car, flat-footedly symbolizing the new urban middle-class, and the tractor, symbolizing the rural farmer, on opposing sides, meet in the middle, where swaddled in workers' shirts, they are equal components of the flying vehicle.

Born in 1963 in Beijing, where she still lives and works, Yin Xiuzhen came of age during China's now immortalized '85 New Wave generation, whose explosive, individualistic energy followed the decades-long repression of the Cultural Revolution and took shape in large-scale paintings and installations brimming with ironic references to Western pop culture and Chinese history. Trained as a painter at Beijing's Capital Normal University, less prestigious than Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts, Yin graduated in 1989 with her future husband and collaborator Song Dong, a performance artist best known for the daily diary he writes in water on a stone tablet. Belonging to a generation of predominantly male artists, Yin—along with Shen Yuan (born 1959), Lin Tianmiao (born 1961), Xiao Lu (born 1962), Lu Qing (born 1965) and Yu Hong (born 1966)—remains one of the few female contemporary artists in China.

After participating in group exhibitions in 1988 and 1989 at the National Gallery, Beijing, Yin showed sparingly in the years following the 1989 Tiananmen Square Incident—the Chinese government's official euphemism for its violent suppression of pro-democracy protests in Beijing's central plaza, which was coupled with country-wide purges of perceived Western influences. It was a transitional era for Yin too. She shifted from painting to making sculptural installations. In *Washing the River*, a performance from August 1995, Yin took water from the Funan River that runs through Chengdu, Sichuan, froze it into blocks of ice and stacked them to form a ten-square-meter cube on the riverbank. She then invited passersby to scrub the blocks free of the discoloring pollutants trapped in the ice while the midsummer heat melted the ice back into water, which trickled back into the river. If there were allusions to the reprisals that followed the 1989 protests—scrubbing the ice as a metaphor for the Communist Party's "cleansing" of Western influence blamed for the Tiananmen demonstrations—they are sublimated in an artwork that doubles as an absurdist community project performed far from the politically charged site of central Beijing.





Washing the River's evident futility—the water running back into the river likely wasn't any cleaner—betrays a dark-humored cynicism that vanishes in Yin's subsequent projects, which focus on two primary and interrelated subjects: her family and the rapid transformations of society under China's pro-market economic reforms in the 1990s.

Early projects include *Woolen Sweaters* (1995), for which Yin unraveled men's and women's sweaters and knit them back together again to form a single unisex garment, included in "Inside Out: New Chinese Art" at Asia Society and PS 1 in New York and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Yin's large installation *Ruined Capital* (1996), first shown at Capital Normal University, is an arrangement of destroyed objects taken from inside and outside average Beijing buildings, many of which were being torn down and replaced by concrete high-rises. Yin positioned gray roof tiles on the ground in rows and covered a bed and chairs in dust to express, in her words, "something nostalgic to the bustling modern generation." The work was shown in "Cities on the Move," which premiered at the Vienna Succession in 1997 and toured to New York, London and Bangkok.

Yin's switch to installation work in the late 1990s coincided with a growing number of international exhibitions in Asia and the West and her winning a residency in the United States in 1997 and the United Kingdom in 1998. The momentum she gathered with her solo show at Prüss & Ochs in Berlin in 2001 led to her inclusion in the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennial, the Gwangju Biennale and the Guangzhou Triennial in 2002.

The same year, Yin and Song Dong celebrated their 10th wedding anniversary with "Chopsticks," a collaborative exhibition at Chambers Fine Art gallery in New York in which the pair focused entirely on their relationship. Covering the gallery walls were enlarged photographs showing Song and Yin, seven months pregnant, on Jingshan, the hill overlooking Beijing's Forbidden City. A two-channel video showed the couple following each other around with a video camera for an hour, recording the process of recording one another. In the sculpture *United Hands* (2002), a pair of elongated arms wrapped in striped cloth rise out of two terracotta flowerpots. Each hand holds a pair of chopsticks, which grips a small monitor showing a video of the route from the suburbs to their home in central Beijing. Although the critic Wu Hung wrote in the catalog that the vernacular of their work "does not derive from the conventions of international conceptual art," nor does it "belong to the refined, elite cultural sphere" and instead comes from "the typical language of a Beijing story dweller [sic] and the tradition way [sic] of making smart conversation by 'street intellectuals' in this ancient city," the exhibition was striking in its insularity, as the artists used their marriage as a framework to describe their creative process. In doing so, Yin and Song connect labor—in their case, art-making—with family structure, while eroding the division between the public and private.

As Yin began to travel more for exhibitions—in 2004 she exhibited in nine countries on five continents—her peripatetic lifestyle began to inform her work. Her ongoing series "Portable Cities" (2003–) consists of open suitcases in which Yin sews a miniature model of a city with fabric fragments from clothing worn by that city's residents and accompanied by sounds recorded in public places. *Portable Cities: San Francisco* (2003),



(Top)
Installation views of Yin Xiuzhen's "International Airport Terminal I" exhibition at Alexander Ochs Galleries, Berlin/Beijing, 2006. Courtesy Alexander Ochs Galleries, Berlin/Beijing.

(Bottom)
COLLECTIVE SUBCONSCIOUS, 2007, minibus, stainless steel, used clothes, stools, music, 1420 x 140 x 190 cm. Courtesy Beijing Commune, Beijing, and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Sydney.

(Center)
FLYING MACHINE, 2008, cloth, stainless steel, planks, 1592 x 1220 x 353 cm. Courtesy Beijing Commune, Beijing, and Alexander Ochs Galleries, Berlin/Beijing.

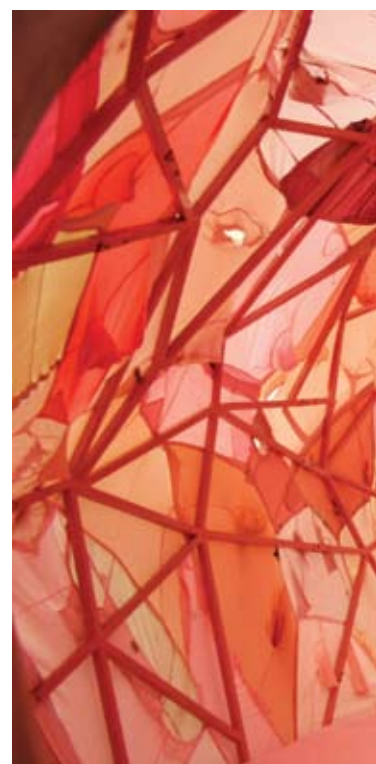


for example, is a red-yarn reproduction of the Golden Gate Bridge and fabric recreations of the buildings in downtown San Francisco wrapped in a white cloud of cotton stuffing, representing the city's afternoon fog. For *International Airport Terminal 1* (2006), shown at Alexander Ochs Gallery, Berlin, in late 2006, and *Quality Street* (2007), shown at the Fine Art Fair, Frankfurt, Yin sewed together found clothing culled from her acquaintances to create an entire, full-scale replica of an airport terminal, an homage to the German capital's famous Tempelhof airport, which the city was planning to close. The installation included passport-control desks, a baggage-claim conveyor belt, a duty-free shop, a VIP lounge and even security-check equipment such as metal detectors.

In these works, Yin carries over an idea from her China-specific projects: that found materials—whether part of a building, a machine or discarded clothing—carry an authenticity in their ability to evoke a place. Yin uses objects as physical embodiments of past experience or memory, implying that things can represent collective history. Yet, these objects fail to tell any particular stories, leaving viewers with a familiar if vague symbol of the past. Such objects reflect a nostalgia that implies a broad, favorable perspective, overlooking salient details about history—for example, that Hitler's architect Albert Speer designed Tempelhof as the gateway to the Third Reich, or, in the case of the tractor in *Flying Machine*, Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward (1958–61), an economic program that turned farmers into steel-makers, and led to a widespread, devastating famine. Representing San Francisco simply as a cluster of corporate high-rises and the Golden Gate Bridge blanketed in fog is a way of neglecting to speak about the history of the city or how its numerous communities inhabit and experience it.

Yin connected with city residents in a more direct manner in the German city of Chemnitz in the large-scale installation *The Commune* (2008). Chemnitz, known as Karl-Marx-Stadt under the German Democratic Republic until the reunification of Germany in 1990, has a long history as a center for textile production and held symbolic importance in the history of socialism as a stronghold of the left-wing, working-class Social Democratic Party in the early 20th century. In March 2008, Yin organized a collaborative, community-orientated project in which residents were asked to donate clothing to Yin and a team of two-dozen volunteer, unemployed local seamstresses, who stitched together a multicolored striped curtain that hung from a circular metal frame, ten meters in diameter and suspended five meters above the ground. As the vertical stripes of fabric were added during the course of the project, the workshop, located beneath the frame, was gradually concealed from view. The workers thus became enveloped in the artwork, but like removing pollution from river water in *Washing the River*, the redemptive exercise here—employing former seamstresses—becomes a symbolic gesture of defiance in the face of international market forces that move skilled factory jobs abroad.

There is a therapeutic and restorative aspect to Yin's projects, particularly for ways of life in China that have been lost in the country's breakneck modernization. *Collective Unconscious* (2007), a white minibus bisected by a ten-meter-long tent-like section of white shirts and supported by dozens of tiny wheels, resembles a mechanical caterpillar. The vehicle (together with a separate version incorporating a blue



(Top Left)
PORTABLE CITIES: SAN FRANCISCO, 2003, suitcase, clothes, city map, light, audio, 32.3 x 28.4 x 11.8 in. Courtesy Chambers Fine Art, New York/Beijing.

(Top Right)
UNITED HANDS, 2002, mixed media, 78 x 50 x 16 in each. Courtesy Chambers Fine Art, New York/Beijing.

(Center Left)
WASHING THE RIVER, 1995, set of 4 color photographs, 120 x 180 cm each. Courtesy Chambers Fine Art, New York/Beijing.

(Center Right)
INTROSPECTIVE CAVITY, 2008, interior view of multimedia installation, dimensions variable. Courtesy Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing.

(Bottom)
THE UNBEARABLE WARMTH, 2008, 1,000 scarves, 365 x 25 cm. Courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery, Sydney, and Beijing Commune, Beijing.

Found materials—whether part of a building, a machine or discarded clothing—carry an authenticity in their ability to evoke a place

minibus and multicolored fabric shown at Beijing Commune gallery in early 2008) recalls the illegal taxis that were ubiquitous in China before cars became widely affordable. Viewers can enter the van through the side door and sit inside the elongated bus on wooden stools while a contemporary Chinese pop song, “Beijing Beijing,” plays. Shown at Alexander Ochs Gallery and in “Facing Reality” at the Museum Moderner Kunst in Vienna, Austria, in 2007–08, *Collective Unconscious* provides an audio-visual space for recollection and reflection on the changes taking place in Chinese society, though Yin remains silent about how she views this recent history. Instead she emphasizes the potential for communal reflection on past experience rather than privileging the memories of any one person, including the artist.

In August 2008, during Beijing’s Olympic frenzy, Yin exhibited a new object at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA). If *Flying Machine* is a paean to China’s industriousness and economic development, *Introspective Cavity* (2008) is its rejoinder. Made of a translucent patchwork of pink shirts, the cave-like installation filled the gallery space, and its singular, tunnel-like entrance suggested a womb. Viewers were invited to step inside, lie on pink cushions and listen to the restorative sounds of gurgling water.

Introspective Cavity is emblematic of the increasingly sanguine tone of Yin’s artworks since her cynical responses to pollution and demolition during the mid-1990s. *Flying Machine* reminds Chinese viewers of where the country has come from and where it may be headed, encouraging them to keep striving with its metaphorically loaded staircase to the sky. *Introspective Cavity* serves to advise viewers-cum-workers—Yin conflates the two categories—to take a break, for collective well-being. The fond, warm sense of familiarity pervading the works at Yin’s 2008 Beijing Commune exhibition and the respectively motivating and recuperative messages of *Flying Machine* and *Introspective Cavity* reveal a congratulatory satisfaction and an uncritical view of China’s unrelenting modernization.

In their assumption of collective nostalgia, Yin’s works assume a social unity that may not exist. Though the Beijing Olympics elicited broad enthusiasm and nationalist pride, the world’s economic turmoil is revealing fractures in China’s civil order. By early February, the Agriculture Ministry reported that as many as 25 million migrant workers had returned to their rural homes due to lack of work. Reports of protests and labor disputes by Western media outlets were also on the rise.

Yin started 2009 in February at Sydney’s Anna Schwartz Gallery, where she displayed several large-scale sculptures. In *Engine* (2008), a bulbous object tapering to a single narrow opening and covered in bright-red shirts stitched together, Yin pushes the human-organ motif even further: *Engine* resembles the human heart (with only one valve) and numerous small openings from the shirtsleeves and collars. With its pulsating red hue, *Engine* is a metaphor for China’s powerful economic muscle. However, in the context of 2009, the small openings in the shirts suggest leaks in this deformed one-valve heart. A similarly dark undercurrent runs through *The Unbearable Warmth* (2008), a tightly rolled, circular mass of 1000 scarves stitched together and placed on the floor, the scarves forming rings like the cross-section of a tree trunk. Rather than evoking comfort, the massive, tightly wound coil suggests that too much comfort can be suffocating. Yin’s sculptures for the Year of the Ox strike a new cautionary tone.

