The Fabric of Society: Yin Xiuzhen, Beijing and Urban Identity

The BBC News has recently announced that China has the world’s fastest growing economy, and is currently undergoing “a second industrial revolution.”¹ This growth requires construction as well as destruction; the new is built on the foundations of the old. People are forced to relocate, packing their lives into boxes and suitcases. As housing becomes homogenized, so do identity and memory. Everyone becomes a series of letters and numbers, a statistic. Consequently, relocation and construction/destruction have become major themes in the art of contemporary urban China. Beijing artist Yin Xiuzhen has proclaimed her interest in these themes, often using the detritus of the processes of urbanization and industrialization as her materials. Since her work is so closely linked with the loss of individuality that occurs during the process or urbanization and technological advance, I will discuss her work in the context of Jean Baudrillard’s essay “The Ecstasy of Communication,” which considers the homogenizing effect of technological advance on society.²

Yin Xiuzhen’s Portable Cities series is the work that best demonstrates her views on these issues. In particular, I will consider Portable City – Beijing 2000 (fig. 1). The work is a model of the city, rendered in brightly covered fabrics and housed in a large suitcase. The bottom half of the suitcase is filled with foam with green and blue fabric stretched over it, on which rests the urban landscape. The center of the plane is left open; the buildings, which are made of fabric, crowd each other around the outside edge of the green and blue plane, which is uninterrupted except for a hole in it near the front of the suitcase. The only recognizable landmark is the CCTV
tower, which is at the back of the arrangement, standing at least twice as tall as the other buildings. The interior side of the lid of the suitcase is covered with green and brown fabric, resembling cultivated fields and creating either a background (if the lid is at a 90° angle to the bottom half) or a view of the outskirts or rural alternative to the urban city (if the lid is not supported, as in fig. 1). It is, then, exactly what its name suggests: a portable city.

The premise of the ongoing Portable Cities project is, as described by Britta Erickson, that Yin Xiuzhen “shapes the dominant features of the cities she visits – including Beijing, Lhasa, Singapore, Minneapolis, and Paris – out of clothing donated by local people.” The first question, then, is where is the Forbidden City? If the CCTV tower is used as an orientation point, along with arrangement of the buildings around the edge of the suitcase, alluding to the city’s ring roads, the Forbidden City should be at the center of the composition. The hole in the green plane could possibly be Beihei lake; if this is the case, then Beijing’s most “dominant feature” has been left out altogether.

It is difficult to point conclusively to the meaning of this absence, though I might argue that for Yin Xiuzhen, the Forbidden City is simply not a part of contemporary urban life. It is possible that the city’s ancient landmark has been replaced by the CCTV tower, which might point to the nature of Beijing’s transformation from a real to a portable city. If urbanization forces individuals to squeeze their lives into something portable, the choice of what they bring with them is an important one. If Yin Xiuzhen has chosen the most striking and important
parts of her city to carry with her, one cannot ignore the absence of the Forbidden City.

In this work, Yin Xiuzhen is clearly concerned about the identity of urban individuals. By using donated clothing, the artist is reinstating the worth of personal objects; these cloth relics stand in for the people to whom they belonged. In this light, the city is literally made of the individuals who inhabit it. The suitcase is reminiscent of a voodoo object in its construction from personal possessions. Amiee Chang has characterized these personal items as being “imbued with a sense of history and experience; as sculptural documents of memory, they give her work a "spirit nature."”iv She is forming a representation of the city using her own memory as a guide, and her materials are the physical manifestation of the memories of its inhabitants.

Yin connects the importance of memory with the homogenization that occurs in cities during the process of urbanization. “Cities nowadays,” she says, “are more and more alike, so I started to use clothes to make cities by putting them in a suitcase….I think collecting other people’s clothes is like collecting everybody’s experiences; I put everybody’s experiences together to make an artwork.”v She seems to be fighting against the decline of human individuality and experience as noted by Baudrillard in his Ecstasy of Communication. The modern human, Baudrillard states, is “…living no longer as an actor or dramaturge but as a terminal of multiple networks.”vi Stripped of the agency to perform one’s own life, one becomes simply a hub in the new communication system, a conduit for the transmission of advertisements. This affects not only the power of individuals but
the city as well. “No longer limited to its traditional language, advertising organizes
the architecture and realization of super-objects…”

This effect is present in *Portable City – Beijing*; the most recognizable structure
is the CCTV tower, the origination point for communication and advertising. Since
the 1990’s, the CCTV has received less and less funding from the government,
forcing the company to pursue the advertising industry as well as the consumers of
TV for resources. The broadcasting company needs viewers, because the more
viewers there are, the higher the price for advertising on the TV stations. It has
clearly succeeded in making itself known; when Yin Xiuzhen thinks of her home city
and creates a caricature of it, the main landmark is this tower of communication, this
monument to advertising. One might see *Portable City – Beijing* as the ultimate
realization of Baudrillard’s nightmare; the clothing of a person, which becomes a
relic of that person and stands in for him/her in the work, is used to create the apex
of the communication network, the CCTV tower, thus (though a couple steps
removed) the person becomes the building block for this network, effectively losing
all individuality and, arguably, humanity.

I would argue, however, that rather than furthering the death of the
individual through urbanization, Yin Xiuzhen has made a step towards
counteracting it. Baudrillard complains that “This is the time of miniaturization,
telecommand and the microproces­sion of time, bodies, pleasures. There is no longer
any ideal principle for these things at a higher level, on a human scale.”
Yin accepts the miniaturization as inevitable, but reclaims it for the fight for
individuality. By shrinking the city to a portable size, she makes it personal again.
The miniaturization that Baudrillard speaks of is detrimental to the individual experience, removing reality and bodies from the human scale and context, but this change in scale seems to be exactly the remedy for the unnaturally rapid expansion of the city. Since humans are becoming nomadic again, in order for them to feel at home in the city, the city has to be miniaturized and packed into a suitcase. This is true not only metaphorically, but literally as well. Britta Erickson explains that the artist “finds herself traveling much of the time, rarely touching ground in Beijing. The suitcase works continue her interest in cityscapes, but in a new ready-to-travel, peripatetic-artist mode: instead of crating and shipping her work, she simply checks her luggage.”

She recreates the city without judging its current state, allowing the CCTV tower to dominate the landscape physically in the work as it does metaphorically in reality. The fact that the Forbidden City is absent points to its absence from urban culture and thought. But she doesn’t allow the city to remain impersonal in the model as it is in reality. The urban body of the city becomes the human body, the buildings clad in human clothing. The fabric of society is literalized. Baudrillard predicts that “we will have to suffer the new state of things, this forced extroversion of all interiority, this forced injection of all exteriority that the categorical imperative of communication literally signifies.” But Yin Xiuzhen reclaims interiority and the private sphere by turning the city into something completely private – the clothes inside one’s suitcase.
Figures

Fig. 1: Yin Xiuzhen, Portable City – Beijing, 2002. Mixed media, 85.1 x 127 cm.