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ART 301
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Yin Xiuzhen and the City

For the obvious reason, *Personal Suitcase* (figure 1) by Yin Xiuzhen (1963) reminded me of *Samson*, (figure 2) by Brian Goggin, which is a large sculpture located in the baggage claim area of the Sacramento International Airport. It is a humorous tower of over 700 kinds of luggage stacked on top of an immovable base that looks like a baggage cart. The unique pieces of luggage of *Samson* could easily be imagined as portraits of various travelers. In the opposite way, while the title of her work is *Personal Suitcase* (figure 1), Yin's sculpture, which opens up like a pop-up book, does not bring to mind the sense of an individual.

Personal Suitcase is a part of, or at least related to, Yin's "Suitcases" series. In contrast to her city suitcases, Yin's *Personal Suitcase* is monochromatically dark and relatively empty. In *Personal Suitcase*, there is one tall building and two smaller ones that form a bridge. Light emanates from a tunnel leading inside the suitcase, although one cannot quite see the innards of the structure. The whole thing looks like it is made out of one rather large trench coat. Compare it to *Portable City—Beijing* (figure 3). Yin clearly does not equate her personal space to the city where she lives and works, Beijing.

The city suitcases are constructed by sewing together old clothing that Yin collected from area residents, mostly friends and fellow artists. The structures seem require careful planning and painstaking construction. I assume that she uses her own clothing in *Personal Suitcase*. I particularly like her creative integration of the zippers and her craftsmanship is impeccable. Creating a city via needlework is not the most obvious choice, mostly because it seems pretty arduous. Sewing is a practice that often is

connected with domesticity and femininity, though Yin says in an interview with Ai Weiwei that she does not have a particular interest in the materials used by woman artists. Rather, she uses clothing because they are so completely associated with people's lives, and the fact that the connection is largely unconscious is even more applicable to the relationship between a city and its dweller. The suitcases are models of several major cities, which include the aforementioned Beijing, in addition to Melbourne, Shanghai, Singapore, Lhasa (the capital of Tibet), New York, Vancouver, Sydney, and Berlin. The structures are based on Yin's experiences living for each city for a period of time.

Yin puts a pause on urbanization, or the ebb and flow of development and destruction that defines the word. She (literally) collapses topography into a personal organizer. In her interview with Ai Weiwei, she stated, rather generally, that her works were "related to [her] personal experiences, and also the environment and changes in the society around me." Just by capturing the city at a certain stage, she documents a moment in time because urban life is always changing, perhaps in China more than anywhere. With the suitcase metaphor, Yin clearly identifies herself as a traveler moving through any number of spaces. In a related fashion, Yin is also preoccupied with the various forms of memory. By creating a patchwork of different articles of clothing, Yin joins together the memories from many people, creating a dollhouse of a city. The city folds up like a stage for dolls. Or like a hermit crab, the creature inside can venture outside for a while, before hiding itself away again. As Sigmund Freud says, the public self is a socially conditioned construct of the private self.

According to *Remaking Beijing* (2005) by Wu Hung, the Communist Party tried to transform Beijing from an imperial domain into a symbol of socialism via Tiananmen

Square. For example, the Monument to the People's Heroes was the regime's revised version of history, whose strength "derives from the figures' collected anonymity, not from their individual identity" (24). It was symbolically replaced with the Goddess of Democracy by the student movement in the summer of 1989, which created a new center of gravity in the Square. While the analogy is admittedly limited, by placing itself within their dialogue, *Personal Suitcase* similarly displaces the meanings of Yin's bigger city suitcases as being directly related to her body. In other words, Yin attempts to position herself as unique with respect to the shared space of the city.

Personal Suitcase is striking in that it is the skeleton upon which Yin's other city suitcases seem to have been built. Inside the suitcase, the city is a body like any other body that needs be clothed. In the second chapter of *Remaking Beijing* (2005), Wu Hung discusses the portraits of Chairman Mao by using the three meanings of face: mask, architectural façade, and signifier of spatial system. A parallel argument could be made for Yin's creation of the body of the city. She constructs both the façade and spatial systems of a city by reducing it to what she perceives as its most essential elements. Her perception of the city is that an embodied phenomenon. Architecture could not exist without the body. Her experience is a bodily experience of being in a physical world that both surrounds her and that she is a part of, because they are both made up of the same things. The city suitcases arise with the most direct relationship to her body and by shrinking the city to a manageable size, she makes the city a personal thing. Her body is still present in *Personal Suitcase* as an abbreviated "city," but it is markedly different from the other cities in the world.

It is notable that Yin makes *Personal Suitcase* into the sort of mobile home that is not exactly inviting. The toy-like suitcase cities use patterns and color to convey a sense of depth and movement typical of a living space, even if, as she says, cities are becoming more and more alike. By contrast, *Personal Suitcase* is a somber ghost town and quite separate from the vibrant metropolises. It is not the death of the individual, but it doesn't feel like the emancipation either. The desolation against the dark spires distinctly reminds me of the ancient Cathedral of Notre Dame in Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Rather than retreat in the privacy of her suitcase, Yin throws it open up and basically declares that she cannot be wholly separated from the social space. At first, I thought *Personal Suitcase* was the least political of the art exhibited in China Urban, but it turned out Yin participates at least in the *Politics* of Aristotle. After all, he does say that the individual without a city is either a beast or a god.



Figure 1. Yin Xiuzhen, Personal Suitcase.



Figure 2. Brian Goggin, Samson.



Figure 3. Yin Xiuzhen, Portable City-Beijing.