

The Fabric of Modernity: Place, Memory, and Materiality in Yin Xiuzhen's *Portable Cities*

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Abstract

This article presents a comprehensive interdisciplinary analysis of Chinese artist Yin Xiuzhen's seminal series, *Portable Cities* (ongoing since early 2000s), arguing that it constitutes a critical artistic methodology for responding to the conditions of global modernity. In an era defined by accelerated mobility, cultural homogenization, and the erosion of local distinctiveness, the series—featuring miniature urban landscapes crafted from city residents' donated clothing and encased within standardized suitcases—transcends mere representation to perform active cultural work. Through the integrated lenses of media studies, formal analysis, memory studies, and place theory, this study examines the suitcase not as a passive container but as a portable heuristic device or "worldmaking" apparatus. The analysis sequentially unpacks four interconnected operations of this device: (1) functional rupture transforming the suitcase from mundane object to "thing" and mixed-media ensemble; (2) formal collision between global form and local materials generating specific narrative structures; (3) performative archiving materializing social frameworks of memory; and (4) place-making as praxis forging belonging from shared material heritage. The conclusion posits that *Portable Cities* offers a resilient model for negotiating displacement, challenging homogenizing globalization by asserting the agency of the local, the worn, and the handmade.

Keywords: contemporary Chinese art; globalization; installation art; material culture; media theory; memory studies; place-making; portable cities; thing theory; Yin Xiuzhen

1. Introduction: Materializing Displacement

In an era characterized by unprecedented global mobility, accelerated urbanization, and pervasive cultural homogenization, fundamental human experiences of place, memory, and community are undergoing profound transformation. The contemporary individual navigates a paradox: physically more connected than ever, yet often experientially adrift in a world where local distinctiveness is eroded by standardized landscapes (Augé, 1995; Lippard, 1997). It is within this critical juncture that the work of Chinese artist Yin Xiuzhen (b. 1963, Beijing) emerges as a significant material and conceptual intervention. Her seminal series, *Portable Cities* (ongoing since the early 2000s), in which she constructs abstracted urban models from clothing donated by city residents and presents them within standardized suitcases, serves as a powerful aesthetic lens through which to examine the core tensions of global modernity.

1.1 Research Problem and Objectives

The central problematic that *Portable Cities* engages is the crisis of emplacement in a world of flux. This study addresses three specific research questions:

RQ1: How does Yin Xiuzhen's *Portable Cities* series reconfigure urban perception and sensory engagement with the idea of the city?

RQ2: Through what formal mechanisms does the series organize, structure, and present social memory and urban experience?

RQ3: How does the series construct a new form of belonging or "portable place" that responds to conditions of displacement and mobility?

Based on these research questions, this study has four objectives:

Objective 1: To analyze how the suitcase in *Portable Cities* functions as a refunctioned medium that transforms urban perception from visual spectacle to multisensory encounter (addressing RQ1).

Objective 2: To examine how the standardized suitcase form collides with local material forms (clothing) to generate distinct narrative structures for organizing social memory (addressing RQ2).

Objective 3: To investigate how the series operates as a performative archive that materializes, preserves, and reenacts collective memory through fabric and bodily practice (addressing RQ2).

Objective 4: To demonstrate how the series constitutes an active practice of "place-making" that forges belonging from shared material traces rather than fixed geography (addressing RQ3).

These four objectives correspond sequentially to the four theoretical frameworks applied in this study: media and perception theory (Section 4), formal analysis (Section 5), memory studies (Section 6), and place theory (Section 7).

1.2 Argument and Scope

This article argues that Yin Xiuzhen's *Portable Cities* constitutes a sophisticated artistic practice that actively remediates the conditions of contemporary displacement. Through its innovative engagement with specific materials and forms, the series performs critical work across four interconnected domains: it reconstitutes urban perception through media, choreographs social experience through form, archives collective life through memory, and rebuilds a sense of belonging through place. Yin Xiuzhen's response to displacement is neither purely nostalgic nor merely symbolic. Instead, she engineers a tangible, portable system—a process this study frames as the *material remediation of displacement*. Her practice transforms the very agents of dislocation—the mass-produced suitcase, the discarded garment, the experience of transience—into foundational elements for constructing new modes of perception, memory, and attachment.

The scope of this study is limited to Yin Xiuzhen's *Portable Cities* series (2000–present), with focused analysis on three case study versions: *Portable City: Jiayuguan* (2008), *Portable City: Shenzhen* (2008), and *Portable City: Stuttgart* (2010). These three versions were selected for comparative analysis based on their representativeness of different urban typologies (historical frontier city, globalized megacity, European industrial-cultural hub) and the availability of published visual documentation. The study does not claim to exhaustively analyze all versions in the series but rather uses these three cases to illustrate the formal and conceptual operations identifiable across the series as a whole.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Existing Scholarship on Yin Xiuzhen

Yin Xiuzhen has emerged as a significant figure in contemporary Chinese art since the 1990s, yet scholarly attention to her work remains less extensive than that accorded to her male contemporaries such as Ai Weiwei or Zhang Huan. Wu Hung (2010), in his survey of contemporary Chinese art, positions Yin's work within a broader discourse on urbanization and memory, noting her distinctive use of worn clothing as a material that "carries the imprint of lived experience" (p. 187). Melissa Chiu (2011), writing for the Asia Society, identifies Yin's practice as exemplifying a "domestic turn" in Chinese installation art, wherein traditionally feminine crafts (sewing, mending) are deployed to address macro-level social transformations.

Barbara Pollack (2010) offers one of the earliest detailed readings of *Portable Cities*, interpreting the series primarily through the lens of diasporic identity and the experience of Chinese migrants. Pollack argues that "the suitcase becomes a metaphor for the artist's own displacement, carrying fragments of home into an uncertain elsewhere" (p. 93). Claire Roberts (2012) extends this analysis by examining the series' engagement with cartographic traditions, suggesting that Yin's fabric cities function as "anti-maps" that privilege intimate, bodily knowledge over abstract spatial representation.

While these existing studies have established foundational interpretations of Yin Xiuzhen's work, they have generally focused on individual themes—migration, domestic labor, memory—without developing an integrated theoretical framework that explains how the series operates simultaneously across media, form, memory, and place. Furthermore, existing scholarship has not systematically applied thing theory (Brown, 2001) or formal analysis (Levine, 2015) to *Portable Cities*, nor has it engaged with the memory theorist Rebecca Schneider's (2011) work on performance remains. The present study aims to address these gaps by developing a multi-framework analysis that reveals the interconnected operations of the suitcase as a "portable heuristic."

2.2 Theoretical Frameworks: Integration and Tensions

This study draws on four principal theoretical traditions, each corresponding to one research objective. However, these traditions are not without potential tensions, which require acknowledgment.

Media and thing theory (Brown, 2001; McLuhan, 1964) provides the analytical vocabulary for understanding how the suitcase shifts from functional object to contemplative "thing." Brown's framework is compatible with McLuhan's medium theory insofar as both attend to how material forms shape perception. However, Brown's focus on the moment of functional rupture ("when the drill breaks") emphasizes disruption, whereas media studies often emphasizes continuity and extension of the senses. This study reconciles this tension by treating the suitcase's rupture from travel function as precisely the condition that enables its new perceptual function as a mixed-medium apparatus.

Formal theory (Levine, 2015) offers tools for analyzing how the suitcase as a "whole" collides with local material forms. Levine's insistence on forms as "political" and "social" aligns well with memory studies, but her emphasis on the contingency of formal encounters (forms "often fail to impose their order") stands in potential tension with Nora's (1989) emphasis on *lieux de mémoire* as stable, ritualized sites. This study addresses this tension by arguing that the suitcase operates as a *mobile* lieu de mémoire—its stability is not fixed location but rather the standardized, recognizable form that travels.

Memory studies (Halbwachs, 1992; Nora, 1989; Schneider, 2011) provides the richest theoretical field, but also the most significant internal tension. Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* emerged from his diagnosis of modernity as having destroyed *milieux de mémoire*—lived, spontaneous memory environments. Schneider (2011) fundamentally challenges this diagnosis, arguing that memory is never "lost" but always remains performatively available. The Stuttgart

version of *Portable Cities* (analyzed below) materializes precisely this tension: the suitcase operates as a Nora-esque site for deliberate memory conservation, yet the fabric's tactile traces and the act of sewing enact Schneider's "performance remains." This study does not resolve this tension but argues that the work itself holds it productively in suspension.

Place theory (Lippard, 1997) offers a synthesis of the preceding frameworks. Lippard's concept of "making place" as an active, material practice integrates media (place is mediated experience), form (place has organizing structure), and memory (place is memory-filled). Lippard's work is explicitly political, critiquing global capitalism's homogenizing effects—an orientation that aligns with the present study's critical commitments but distinguishes it from purely formalist or phenomenological approaches.

2.3 Positioning within Globalization and Chinese Contemporary Art Discourse

This study is situated within a broader scholarly conversation on how contemporary Chinese artists have responded to globalization. Scholars such as Wu Hung (2008), Gao Minglu (2005), and Wang Hui (2011) have examined how Chinese artists from the 1990s onward engaged with (and resisted) the art world's globalization, often through strategies of "appropriation," "political pop," or "cynical realism." Yin Xiuzhen's practice differs from these dominant modes: she neither appropriates Western icons nor engages in overt political critique. Instead, her work belongs to what art historian Julia Andrews (2012) terms "materialist memory practice"—an approach that prioritizes everyday materials, bodily labor, and vernacular experience over discursive or iconographic strategies. The present study positions *Portable Cities* within this alternative genealogy, arguing that its significance lies precisely in its refusal of both nationalist nostalgia and globalist abstraction.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Type and Approach

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology characteristic of art historical and visual culture research. The approach is theory-driven close reading: the artwork is treated as a complex visual and material text that can be analyzed through the systematic application of multiple theoretical frameworks. This methodology is appropriate given the research questions, which ask *how* the work operates (interpretive) rather than measuring *how much* or *how often* (quantitative).

3.2 Case Selection Criteria

Three versions from the *Portable Cities* series were selected for focused analysis:

Version	Year	Selection Rationale
Portable City: Jiayuguan	2008	Historical frontier city; represents "rhythmic" formal structure; available high-quality documentation
Portable City: Shenzhen	2008	Globalized megacity; represents "network" formal structure; available high-quality documentation



Portable City: Stuttgart	2010	European industrial-cultural hub; incorporates sonic archive; extends comparative typology
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These three cases were selected to maximize comparative variation along the dimension of urban typology (historical/peripheral, globalized/central, European/post-industrial). The study does not claim these three are "representative" in a statistical sense but rather that they illustrate the range of formal operations within the series.

3.3 Data Sources and Analytic Procedure

Data sources for this study include:

1. **Published visual documentation:** Images of the three case study works, sourced from exhibition catalogues (Mercedes-Benz Art Collection, 2010), museum websites, and online archives (URLs accessed October-December 2024)
2. **Artist statements and interviews:** Published interviews with Yin Xiuzhen (Chinese and English sources)
3. **Secondary scholarship:** Peer-reviewed articles and book chapters on Yin Xiuzhen's work (see Section 2.1)
4. **Theoretical literature:** Canonical and recent works in media theory, formal analysis, memory studies, and place theory

Limitation acknowledgment: Direct, in-person observation of *Portable City: Stuttgart* was not possible for this study. Analysis of this version therefore draws on published descriptions, exhibition documentation, and the work's listing on the Mercedes-Benz Art Collection website. Where analysis of this version is based on secondary sources rather than primary visual analysis, this is explicitly indicated.

The analytic procedure followed four stages:

Stage 1 (Description): Each work was described in terms of its formal elements (size, materials, color, texture, internal structure) and sensory dimensions (visual, tactile implied, auditory where documented).

Stage 2 (Formal Analysis): Each work was analyzed for its arrangement of elements—rhythms, hierarchies, networks, wholes—following Levine's (2015) formal vocabulary.

Stage 3 (Theoretical Interpretation): Each work was interpreted through the four theoretical frameworks (media, form, memory, place), with attention to how the frameworks illuminate different aspects of the work.

Stage 4 (Synthesis): Findings from the three case studies were synthesized to identify common operations across the series and to articulate the "portable heuristic" model presented in the conclusion.

3.4 Researcher Positionality

The author is a scholar of contemporary Chinese art based in Thailand. This position enables access to Asian scholarly networks and publications but carries the potential interpretive bias of approaching a Chinese artist's work from outside both Chinese and Euro-American art historical traditions. This positionality has been managed by: (a) citing both Chinese and Western scholarship on Yin Xiuzhen where available; (b) relying on published artist statements rather than assuming interpretive authority; and (c) acknowledging where English-language documentation preferentially

privileges certain works (e.g., Stuttgart) over others (e.g., less-documented versions). No claim to "native" or "insider" interpretive authority is made.

4. The Suitcase as Refunctured Medium: Reconstructing Urban Perception

In this section, I address Research Question 1 (how *Portable Cities* reconfigures urban perception) by analyzing the suitcase's transformation from functional object to perceptual medium.

4.1 From Object to Thing: The Suitcase's Functional Rupture

Yin Xiuzhen's *Portable Cities* series provides a classic case for examining how a "thing" transcends its functionality and transforms into a "medium" carrying complex cultural meanings. The core of this transformation lies in the shift of the central carrier—the suitcase—from an everyday utensil to an art installation. This perfectly exemplifies Bill Brown's (2001) concept of "thingness" in his influential "Thing Theory."

Brown argues that the dimension of the "thing" emerges when the everyday function of a commonplace object is suspended or interrupted, causing us to see it not as a transparent, handy tool but as an entity with its own presence. He states: "We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us—when the drill breaks, when the car stalls" (Brown, 2001, p. 4). Yin Xiuzhen's suitcase undergoes precisely such a "stalling." It is no longer used for travel; the functionality of its handle, locks, and wheels is suspended. It is fixed, opened, and displayed, becoming a self-referential container. At this moment, the viewer no longer considers "how to pack it" but is forced to consider "what it means as a suitcase." This focus on the object-in-itself constitutes the critical shift from "object" to "thing."

4.2 Mixed-Media Apparatus and Perceptual Restructuring

Following functional suspension, the suitcase evolves into a dense "mixed media" installation. It integrates fabric (old clothes), sound (city recordings in some versions), lighting, and constructed forms. As Marshall McLuhan (1964) argued, "the medium is the message"—the form of mediation reshapes perception. The viewer cannot obtain a panoramic, bird's-eye view of the city model from outside; they must lean in, bend down, and gaze into this intimate, internal miniature world.

This intimate, fragmented mode of viewing subverts the macro, rational perspective common in modern urban planning. Instead, it invites the audience to piece together a highly subjective, body-based urban cognition through tactile associations (the texture of the clothing) and, in some versions, auditory memories (environmental sounds). The suitcase thus transforms the city from a visual spectacle into a multisensory, embodied field of experience.

Brown (2001) links the exploration of thingness to the experience of modernity, arguing that aesthetic attention to "things" stems from the fragmentation of experience and the proliferation of commodity culture. Yin Xiuzhen's *Portable Cities* directly responds to this modern predicament. In the tide of globalization, urban landscapes tend toward homogenization, and personal memories face the threat of dissolution into abstract information flows. The artist rescues "things" on the verge of being abstracted or discarded and rematerializes them into a tangible, sensible "thing"—the city model inside the suitcase. This model is not an accurate reproduction but rather a "thingly" existence reconstructed from memory fragments, sensory impressions, and personal narratives. With its strong material presence, it resists the prevalent tendencies toward abstraction and dematerialization in modern experience.

5. Forms, Travel, and the Reorganization of Memory

In this section, I address Research Question 2 (formal mechanisms for organizing social memory) by analyzing how the suitcase functions as a traveling formal "whole" that collides with local material forms.

5.1 The Standardization and Travelability of Form: The Suitcase as "Whole"

Caroline Levine (2015) defines a "whole" as a form that "draws a boundary, separating inside from outside" (p. 56). The most superficial unifying form of the *Portable Cities* series is precisely the standardized hard-shell suitcase. It constitutes a physical and conceptual "whole," drawing a clear boundary for each work. Levine argues that part of sociopolitical power involves "enforcing restrictive containers and boundaries—like the nation-state, the bounded individual, and the walls of the family home" (p. 56). The suitcase is a miniature, mobile "restrictive container," mimicking and condensing the conditions of globalization wherein individual and local identities are simultaneously protected and segregated.

This form possesses strong "travelability." It traverses global cities; its globally circulating logistical nature is itself a material metaphor for globalization. As Levine (2015) uses the "daily schedule" to illustrate how social forms travel from monastery to prison, factory, and school (p. 7), the suitcase form has "traveled" from commercial travel to contemporary art. No matter how the content changes, the "whole" form of the suitcase remains constant, ensuring the series' recognizability. However, this standardized shell precisely highlights the "local" differences contained within it, preparing for a collision of forms.

5.2 The Collision and Reorganization of Forms: Comparative Analysis

Levine's (2015) most valuable insight is that forms "do not impose their order in any simple way" (p. 16). When multiple forms meet, "multiple shapes, patterns, and arrangements, overlapping and colliding, generate the complex and unpredictable social landscape" (p. 17). In *Portable Cities*, when the suitcase "whole" travels to different cities and combines with locally collected clothes, what Levine describes as "strange encounters" occur (p. 16). This collision is not simple filling but profoundly reorganizes social experience and memory.

Case 1: *Portable City: Jiayuguan* (2008) – Rhythm as Historical Solidification

Jiayuguan is a vital pass at the western end of the Great Wall, bearing national history and frontier memory. The interior model presents a compact, sturdy, even somewhat squat structural feel. Fabrics with period characteristics (old military uniforms, work clothes) are organized into a stable, repetitive, defensive "rhythm" through their colors (army green, navy blue). Levine argues that rhythm is "a form of time, interval, and repetition" (p. 53), and that institutional rhythms produce social effects. Here, the suitcase's enclosed space solidifies and encapsulates this historical, institutional rhythm. The memory organized is collective, monumental; the viewer senses weight and solitude shaped by historical periodicity. The suitcase functions as a "time capsule," preserving and sealing a defined, cyclical grand narrative.

Image 1

Portable City: Jiayuguan



Note. From *Portable City: Jiayuguan*, by Yin Xiuzhen, 2008, Sohu (https://www.sohu.com/a/546084376_12350389). Copyright 2008 by Yin Xiuzhen.

Case 2: *Portable City: Shenzhen* (2008) – Network as Pluralistic Juxtaposition

Shenzhen is a super-hub of globalization, characterized by plurality, fragmentation, and high-speed flow. The corresponding version presents a drastically different internal morphology: intensely mottled colors, materials ranging from silk to denim, building forms of varying heights lacking a clear central structure. This manifests not a single "rhythm" but the "network" form in Levine's theory—a loosely connected formation of heterogeneous nodes (Levine, 2015, p. 113). Levine suggests that understanding social reality may require "not telling a story of a succession of separate institutional forms... but attending to the multiple nodes where forms encounter one another" (p. 118). The personal stories carried by clothes donated by Shenzhen residents are juxtaposed and collide within the suitcase's limited space. The suitcase's function here is not "solidification" but "compression" and "juxtaposition." The method of organizing memory is decentralized, nodal, mimicking the social network experience of the city itself.

Image 2

Yin Xiuzhen's Portable City: Shenzhen, 2008



Note. From *Portable Cities* by Yin Xiuzhen, by iGNANT, 2014
(<https://www.ignant.com/2014/05/07/portable-cities-by-yin-xiuzhen/>).

Case 3: *Portable City: Stuttgart* (2010) – Eclecticism and Sonic Archive

Portable City: Stuttgart extends Yin Xiuzhen's investigation into urban identity and collective memory. Utilizing the same formal vehicle of the standardized suitcase, the work engages not in reproducing stark political divisions but in curating an eclectic ensemble of iconic local architecture—the Hauptbahnhof, Staatsgalerie, and Mercedes-Benz Museum. As noted by the Mercedes-Benz Art Collection (2010), this miniature city is "brightly colored" and "makes no pretense of being a to-scale reproduction," prioritizing a subjective, memory-shaped impression over topographic accuracy.

Image 3

Yin Xiuzhen's Portable City: Stuttgart, 2010



Note. From *Yin Xiuzhen: Portable City: Stuttgart 2010*, by Mercedes-Benz Art Collection, n.d. (<https://www.mercedes-benz.art/en/artwork/yin-xiuzhen-portable-city-stuttgart-2010/>).

Source acknowledgment: The following analysis of the Stuttgart version draws on published documentation from the Mercedes-Benz Art Collection website (accessed December 2024) and Claire Roberts' (2012) discussion of the work, as direct in-person observation was not possible for this study.

This version reframes the concept of "memory archaeology." Instead of excavating historical fault lines, Yin collects fragments of personal life—pieces of clothing from Stuttgart residents—and sews them into new textile forms. These "souvenir textile items" become vessels of intimate, embodied memory, contrasting with the public, monumental memory represented by the architectural models. The suitcase's interior thus becomes a site where private memory (clothing) and public identity (architecture) are fused into a "not necessarily coherent ensemble" (Mercedes-Benz Art

Collection, 2010). This incoherence acknowledges that a city's identity is not a unified narrative but a layered, sometimes contradictory collection of experiences.

The Stuttgart iteration introduces a crucial multi-sensory dimension: sound. The documentation notes that "one hears the sounds of the great city rising out of the suitcase" (Mercedes-Benz Art Collection, 2010). This archival of sound transforms the work from a static, visual memory-container into a dynamic, immersive sonic archive. The boundary between inside (the suitcase's intimate world) and outside (the city's noisy reality) is perforated, making memory ambient and enveloping.

Finally, the work carries an implicit critique. The "painstakingly handmade" sculptures from old clothing stand in direct contrast to "industrial mass-produced textiles," alluding to poor labor conditions in global manufacturing (Mercedes-Benz Art Collection, 2010). Thus, the suitcase's "portable city" is not just a souvenir of Stuttgart but also a quiet monument to slow, conscientious making in a world of rapid consumption.

5.3 Summary: The Suitcase as Laboratory for Formal Collision

Through Levine's formal theory, the suitcase in *Portable Cities* is far more than a passive container. It is an active laboratory for formal collision. The standardized suitcase "whole" travels globally, colliding with local materials and the social forms they carry. Urban memory is not a pre-existing, fixed entity waiting to be loaded; it is reorganized and constructed in real-time within a specific formal container through the interaction, collision, and competition of forms.

6. Fabric as Site of Memory, Embodied Reenactment, and Reconstructed Community

In this section, I extend the analysis of Research Question 2 by examining how memory is encoded, preserved, reenacted, and reconstructed within fabric. The analysis engages three memory theorists: Halbwachs, Nora, and Schneider.

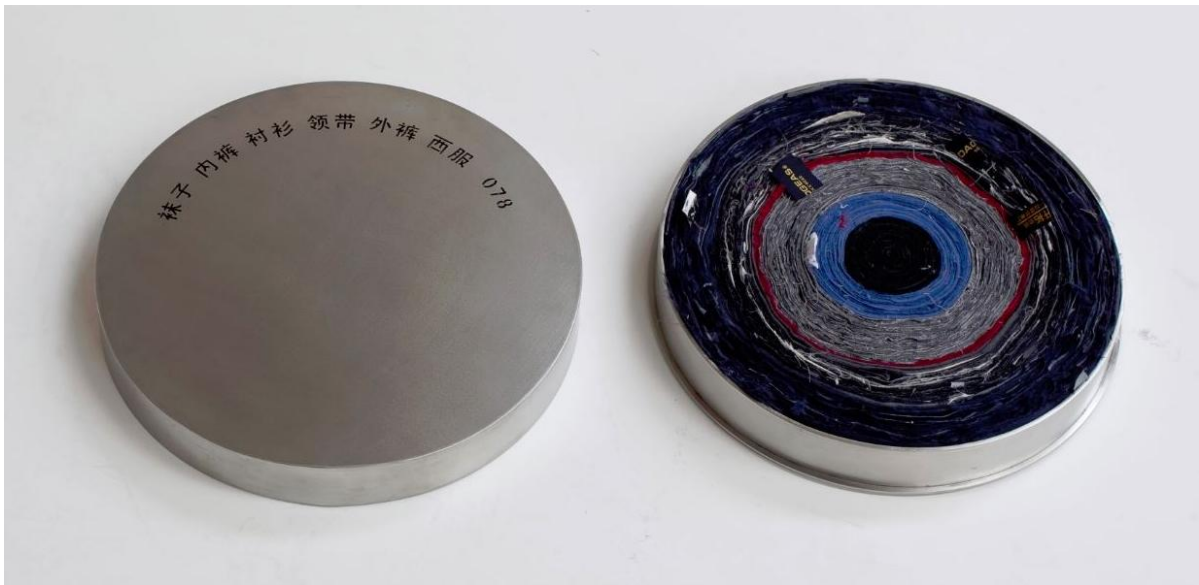
6.1 Clothing as the "Social Framework" of Memory

Yin Xiuzhen's insight that old clothing serves as a person's "second skin" addresses the social nature of memory. Maurice Halbwachs (1992) fundamentally challenges the notion that memory belongs purely to the individual psychological sphere, observing: "It is in society that people normally acquire their memories... The collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past, adapting the image of ancient facts to the beliefs and spiritual needs of the present" (pp. 38, 40). He further elaborates: "Memory relies on a 'framework,' constituted by the various social groups to which we belong" (p. 53).

Each collected garment in *Portable Cities* is a miniature, concrete "social framework." The artist deconstructs and recombines frameworks from different individuals—a worker's uniform, a housewife's scarf, a student's jacket. This process illustrates Halbwachs's core argument about memory reconstruction: "The collective memory is not a given, rigid framework, but a continuous process of reconstructing the past... always evoked and rebuilt in the present" (p. 40). Individual traces do not vanish but are integrated and encoded into a new collective narrative sequence guided by the artist as the present-day "organizer" of memory.

Image 4

Yin Xiuzhen's Portable City: Stuttgart, 2010



Note. From *Yin Xiuzhen: Portable City: Stuttgart 2010*, by Mercedes-Benz Art Collection, n.d. (<https://www.mercedes-benz.art/en/artwork/yin-xiuzhen-portable-city-stuttgart-2010/>).

6.2 The Suitcase as a "Site of Memory"

Pierre Nora (1989) proposes the concept of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory). In traditional, slow-paced *milieux de mémoire* (environments of memory), memory was "lived, spontaneous, unself-conscious, always present" (p. 8). However, the acceleration of modernity has shattered this environment: "We speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left" (pp. 7, 12). Consequently, memory must be deliberately preserved and located: "Memory is no longer lived; it can only be housed in sites" (p. 13).

Each suitcase in *Portable Cities* constitutes a miniature, standardized *lieu de mémoire*. Nora points out that the nature of these sites is "mixed, hybrid, mutant, bound up with life and death, with time and eternity" (p. 19). The suitcase embodies this hybridity: it is both the most intimate, ordinary travel tool and a display case encapsulating an abstract city model. When viewers bend down to gaze into the urban landscape within the suitcase, they perform a modern memory ritual, attempting to anchor a vanishing sense of "place" amidst flow and dispersal.

6.3 The "Performance Remains" of Fabric and the Reenactment of Memory

Rebecca Schneider's (2011) theory provides a crucial dimension for understanding the agency, materiality, and corporeality of memory in Yin Xiuzhen's work, supplementing the potentially static tendencies in Nora's theory. In *Performing Remains*, Schneider challenges the document- and static image-centered view of archives, proposing that memory can be retained and transmitted through bodily, gestural, and material repetitive behaviors—"performance remains." She asks: "What if we consider historical reenactment itself as a form of remains?" (p. 2).

Tension acknowledgment: As noted in Section 2.2, Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* and Schneider's "performance remains" stand in potential tension. Nora emphasizes deliberate, ritualized sites for conserving memory in an age that has lost organic memory environments; Schneider argues

that memory is never lost but always remains performatively available. The present study does not resolve this tension but argues that Yin Xiuzhen's work holds it productively in suspension. The suitcase operates as a Nora-esque site—a deliberate container for memory—yet the fabric's traces, the act of sewing, and the viewer's embodied engagement enact Schneider's performance remains.

Yin Xiuzhen's creative process materializes this theory. First, the act of sewing itself is a profoundly embodied, repetitive reenactment of memory. Schneider (2011) posits that reenactment is "not about going back in time but about how time crosses, how the past touches us in the present" (p. 31). The artist's actions of touching, unraveling, washing, and sewing each piece of fabric are not merely "making" art but reenacting the bodily memory of care, connection, and collective labor inherent in weaving. This constitutes "a transmission of body to body across time" (Schneider, 2011, p. 35).

Second, the old clothing itself is "performed matter"—the direct trace of bodily acts. Schneider writes: "Performance remains... suggest that acts can leave traces, and these traces can be reactivated by further acts" (p. 100). The wear, mends, and fading on garments are precisely the "traces" left by the body in the long "performance" of life. Yin does not attempt to repair or conceal these traces but preserves them as core aesthetic elements. When she sews a piece of fabric worn through at the elbow into a miniature building's wall, she "reactivates" this bodily trace.

Third, the work's invitation to embodied audience participation completes the social cycle. In works like *Collective Unconscious* (2007), viewers are invited to enter inside. Schneider (2011) views participation as a crucial historical methodology: "To reenact is to engage in a historical mode of knowing that is embodied, haptic, and proximate" (p. 40). The experience challenges linear, singular historical narratives, allowing the past to entangle and converse with the present through matter and body.

Image 5 and 6

Yin Xiuzhen's Collective Unconscious, 2007



Note. From *Yin Xiuzhen's Collective Unconscious*, by Public Delivery, 2024
(<https://publicdelivery.org/yin-xiuzhen-collective-unconscious/>).

6.4 Summary: Fabric as Memory Theater

Through the triple lens of Halbwachs, Nora, and Schneider, Yin Xiuzhen's fabric art emerges as a multi-layered, active memory theater. Following Halbwachs, she confirms that "society in each era reconstitutes its past according to its dominant currents of thought." Responding to Nora's diagnosis of the disappearance of the *milieu de mémoire*, she creates a portable *lieu de mémoire*. And through Schneider, she activates the traces in fabric as "body archives" through embodied sewing labor and viewer participation. Memory is neither a static archive nor a purely mental construct; it is a continuous, material, bodily-participatory social practice.

7. Portable Places: Local Materials and the Re-creation of Belonging

In this section, I address Research Question 3 (how the series constructs a new form of belonging) by analyzing *Portable Cities* as an active practice of "place-making."

7.1 Theoretical Lens: Lippard on "Making Place"

In *The Lure of the Local*, Lucy R. Lippard (1997) offers a diagnosis of "placelessness" under globalization and a prescription for art. She states that "sense of place" is "a feeling of belonging to a place, a sense of attachment to the visible markers that root you, that connect you to the environment and thus to history" (p. 7). However, "global capitalism has produced a homogenized landscape in which local distinctiveness is systematically erased in the name of development" (p. 5). Lippard refuses to view "place" as a static, romanticized object of nostalgia, instead understanding it as a dynamic, political field that can be actively constructed.

She makes a crucial distinction: "Space is abstract, place is concrete. If space is a place that can be measured, place is a space that is filled with meaning" (Lippard, 1997, p. 10). Meaning is generated through layered experience: "Place is a mixture of experience, memory, and desire. It is the latitude and longitude of a life map, filled with human history and memory, both personal and social" (p. 10). Lippard calls on artists to "make place" through deep engagement with specific contexts, leading to "different collective visions of place" that are open, participatory, and that "care about, challenge, involve, and consult the audience" (p. 285).

7.2 Practical Analysis: *Portable Cities* as Triple Action of "Making Place"

Portable Cities exemplifies Lippard's art of place-making through three sequential actions.

First, the ritualistic collection of old clothing as samples of a place's "strata." Yin rejects ready-made construction materials or standardized maps, turning instead to residents' worn clothing. Lippard emphasizes that "knowledge of place is specific, sensory, and experiential" (p. 33). Old clothing absorbs the wearer's physique, occupation, habits, and even the city's climate. It is the direct product of long-term interaction between body and local environment. The artist's process of residency and collection in each city constitutes a form of anthropological participation—a sampling of that place's social fabric.

Second, the critical reconstruction of local form within the suitcase. Collected local fragments are not displayed in their original state but undergo deconstruction and re-suturing. Yin's use of the standardized, globally circulating hard-shell suitcase as a container visualizes the tension between the global and the local: the homogenizing shell of globalization envelops unique local content. The act of sewing imposes order and meaning; the artist does not replicate the city's physical appearance but



weaves heterogeneous fabric fragments into a new, perceptible whole. This echoes Lippard's (1997) view that "artists can reveal the hidden layers and latent meanings of a place by selecting, isolating,

Third, the interactive activation of a sense of place for the viewer. Lippard (1997) argues art should create "a situation in which the audience can shift from being passive consumers to co-producers of meaning" (p. 286). When viewers bend to gaze into the miniature landscape, the fabric's texture and familiar colors may trigger their own memories. This process of recognition and association constitutes the viewer projecting their own experience into the work's network of meaning. Through this interaction, *Portable Cities* successfully connects its place-sense—originating from a specific city—with the broader, fluid experience of contemporary individuals, fulfilling Lippard's vision that "the best local art is at once rooted in its specific context and able to speak outward, touching universal human experiences... about memory, loss, identity, and belonging" (p. 288).

7.3 Summary: Anchoring Belonging in Motion

Through Lippard's lens, *Portable Cities* is not a nostalgic emotional outburst but a cultural practice of genuine critical energy. It offers a new imagination of belonging for a "multicentered," fluid era. At a time when the physical "hometown" is increasingly blurred, *Portable Cities* suggests that belonging can be built upon the creative transformation and sharing of a common material cultural heritage. The suitcase filled with a fabric city becomes an emotional anchor—a new type of place-attachment that is flexible, elective, and forged by emotion and memory, capable of accompanying the individual through physical dispersal and migration.

8. Conclusion: The Suitcase as World — Synthesis and Implications

8.1 Synthesis: The Operative Logic of the Portable Heuristic

The analysis demonstrates that *Portable Cities* functions through an integrated, fourfold logic:

Media-Thing Refunctioning (Section 4): The standardized suitcase shifts from functional object to contemplative thing (Brown, 2001). This refunctioned medium restructures urban perception from distant spectacle into intimate, multisensory encounter.

Formal Collision and Choreography (Section 5): The suitcase acts as a traveling "whole" that captures and stages collisions between forms (Levine, 2015). It actively choreographs the social and mnemonic logic of each city—rhythm for Jiayuguan, network for Shenzhen, eclectic ensemble for Stuttgart.

Performative Archiving (Section 6): The collected clothing constitutes a performative, tripartite memory model: clothing materializes Halbwachs's social frameworks; the suitcase institutionalizes Nora's *lieux de mémoire*; and the acts of sewing and viewing enact Schneider's performance remains.

Place-Making as Praxis (Section 7): The series culminates in a Lippardian act of "making place" through ethnographic collection of local matter, critical reconstruction of form, and participatory activation of meaning.

These four operations are not sequential steps but simultaneous, interdependent forces. The suitcase-as-thing enables formal collision; collision organizes performative archiving; archiving supports place-making; and place-making returns us to the suitcase as a meaningful thing.

8.2 Core Contributions

Artistic Model for Negotiating Displacement: Yin Xiuzhen's work offers a materialist strategy for the diasporic or mobile condition. It rejects both rootless abstraction and passive nostalgia, proposing that identity and belonging can be actively assembled, carried, and repaired through the careful stewardship of mundane materials that bear social traces.

Challenge to Dominant Narratives of Globalization: The series critiques the homogenizing narrative of globalism by insisting on the stubborn particularity of local clothing embedded within the global form of the suitcase. The global experience is shown to be one of incessant negotiation, collision, and re-suturing at the level of everyday life and personal memory.

Expansion of Memory and Archive Frameworks: By centering the worn garment and the act of sewing, Yin Xiuzhen's practice challenges text- and document-centric archival models. It advocates for the body, the trace, and the gesture as legitimate sites of historical knowledge and transmission.

8.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged.

First, the analysis is limited to a single artist's series. While the "portable heuristic" model developed here may be transferable to other artists working with materials of displacement (e.g., Doris Salcedo's furniture sculptures, Song Dong's *Waste Not*), the study does not empirically test this transferability. Future research might apply the fourfold framework to comparative case studies.

Second, the study relies primarily on published visual documentation rather than direct, in-person observation of all works. As noted in Section 3.3, analysis of *Portable City: Stuttgart* draws on secondary sources. Future research with direct access to the work might extend or revise the analysis presented here.

Third, the study focuses on the *Portable Cities* series (2000–present) but does not examine Yin Xiuzhen's broader oeuvre, which includes works such as *Collective Unconscious* (2007), *One Sentence* (2011), and *Trojan* (2010–2011). Whether the fourfold logic applies equally to these works remains an open question.

Fourth, the study does not address reception. How do viewers from different cultural backgrounds—Chinese, German, American—respond to the Stuttgart version? Does the work's meaning shift depending on the viewer's own experience of displacement? These questions require empirical audience research beyond the scope of this interpretive study.

Fifth, the study does not engage with the economic dimensions of the work's production and circulation. Yin Xiuzhen's works are collected by major institutions (MOMA, Mercedes-Benz Art Collection); how does this institutional framing affect the work's critique of globalization? This economic question merits future research.

8.4 Final Reflection: The Agency of the Soft and the Slow

In a world that often privileges the new, the hard, the fast, and the virtual, *Portable Cities* asserts the agency of the soft, the old, the slow, and the handmade. The power of the work stems from its commitment to the secondary, the discarded, and the time-intensive labor of care (stitching). In doing so, it performs a subtle politics. It suggests that resistance to alienation and displacement may lie not in grand opposition but in the meticulous, caring acts of recollection (gathering), re-composition (sewing), and portable stewardship (carrying).

Ultimately, Yin Xiuzhen's *Portable Cities* series provides not only an analysis of contemporary life but a proposal for living within it. Each suitcase is a compact theory of resilience, demonstrating that worlds can be built from fragments, that places can be woven from stories embedded in cloth, and that home is not merely a location to which one returns but a practice one carries and continually renews. The suitcase, therefore, is not just a world in miniature; it is a manual for world-making in an age of flux.

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Appendix: List of Works Discussed

Work Title	Year	Medium	Dimensions (approx.)	Location/Collection
<i>Portable City: Jiayuguan</i>	2008	Used clothing, suitcase, sound	Variable	Artist's collection
<i>Portable City: Shenzhen</i>	2008	Used clothing, suitcase	Variable	Private collection
<i>Portable City: Stuttgart</i>	2010	Used clothing, suitcase, sound	70 x 50 x 25 cm	Mercedes-Benz Art Collection
<i>Collective Unconscious</i>	2007	Used clothing, wood, metal	Variable (bus-sized)	Multiple exhibitions
<i>One Sentence No. 53</i>	2011	Used clothing, thread, spools	Variable	Mercedes-Benz Art Collection

