This essay considers a series of participatory works created by Yin Xiuzhen in which a typical Chinese domestic environment is re-created and restaged within an artistic context so that viewers can experience, albeit via heavily mediated means, an example of traditional form of communal life in China. Since the early 2000s, Yin Xiuzhen has travelled frequently around the world to exhibit her works in various institutions and events and, at times, make new pieces that were contextualized within those places. Her observations of life under radical social transformation in her home town, Beijing, have become a significant part of her investigations of transnational, transregional travel and exchange, which she communicates to viewers across geographical and cultural boundaries. By soliciting the viewer’s active, embodied engagement with her works exhibited in public galleries, Yin Xiuzhen not only recalls the community dwelling environment in a specific local area, but offers a fluid artistic site of provisional social cohesion, enabling intercultural, interpersonal connectedness as well as irreconcilable conflict and disagreement. This essay grounds a discussion of Yin Xiuzhen’s participatory pieces within the context of contemporary art and the exhibition-making market, which is characterized by an unprecedented interest in social participation and collaboration.

From the early 1990s, particularly with the rise of international art biennials, triennials, and art fairs, a surge of participatory artistic practices started to take place in a multitude of geographical locations, which sought to overturn the traditional relationship of the art object, the artist, and the viewer. In contrast to a one-to-one interactive relationship between the art object and the viewer, participatory art tends to construct an artistic space of embodied viewers in order to explore concepts of community, political participation, and action. For instance, over the past two decades, the Argentine-born Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija famously has made a series of participatory pieces by transforming the gallery space into a public dining hall, where he cooks vegetarian green curry or pad thai that is served to visitors at his exhibitions. With his works, Tiravanija creates a convivial atmosphere of individual subjects coming together to have a free dinner party. In his book Relational Aesthetics, first published in English in 2002, French curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud categorizes the works made by Tiravanija and others, including Liam Gillick and Pierre Huyghe, as “relational art.” According to Bourriaud, relational art elicits interactive
encounters among viewers who participate in the artwork, and so constitutes an immediate temporary social collective. From his perspective, this particular type of artistic practice presents a mode of “microtopias” in which individuals adopt a do-it-yourself approach in order to create positive human relations in the here and now.

Bourriaud’s idea of relational art was roundly criticized by Claire Bishop in her article “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” published in 2004. According to Bishop, Bourriaud’s paradigm of relational art runs the risk of precluding the meaning of the artwork as “relational” or “temporary emancipation” and thus erasing differences. On the basis of her reading of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s 1985 book Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, Bishop argues that conflict and antagonism are basic conditions in constituting democracy as an ongoing process, which continuously reveal the partiality, precariousness, and contingency of society and provide possibilities for questioning power and the dominant social order. Bourriaud’s claims for the politics of relational aesthetics, from Bishop’s point of view, are “not intrinsically democratic” since they ignore the inevitable conflict, exclusion, and lack of resolution that characterize multiple interactions among individual subjects. Viewers, of course, might refuse to participate in the artwork or engage with it differently from what the artist intended. An artwork can create a much more complex condition of participation than a simple, emancipated, and hospitable space for a moment of togetherness of individual subjects.

In this essay, I want to explore further the established debates about artistic participation and the social practice of democracy relative to Yin Xiuzhen’s socially engaged practice. I will consider in what ways Yin Xiuzhen’s series of participatory art pieces construct sites for temporary social connectedness and belonging that are fluid, while revealing instances of contradiction and rejection that are also part and parcel of attempts at collective cohesion; I will also look at how the artist practices and explores frictions and negotiations between local and global, promoting mutual understanding between China and the world, yet refusing to fabricate an illusion of harmonious reconciliation.

In 2006, Yin Xiuzhen created an installation piece titled Restroom W or Restroom (Women), which provides critical insight into the communication and collision between self and other, private and public, and individual and communal. The work was made for a collaborative exhibition with her husband, Song Dong, held at REDCAT, Los Angeles. The two artists built a white box space inside the gallery and divided it with a temporary wall to constitute two restrooms, one for women and one for men, respectively. When the piece is exhibited, viewers, whether male or female, can enter into Yin Xiuzhen’s work through a temporary door, labelled with the typical women’s toilet sign. Within the room, a tripled-tiered crystal chandelier hangs from the ceiling, with its bottom suspended at about the height of the
viewer’s head. On the far side of the space is a humble concrete structure constructed by the artist. Twelve sections of concrete slabs were placed side-by-side on the floor and along the bottom half of the wall, fixed together with mortar wiped on the surfaces. Its formal shape and its everyday materials call to mind Carl Andre’s minimalist sculpture *Fall* (1968), which consists of twenty-one L-shaped, hot-rolled steel plates lying on the floor and leaning against the wall. However, with narrow rectangular troughs evenly inserted on the surface of each slab, Yin Xiuzhen’s sculptural work is far from abstract. It resembles a shabby, squatting-trough-style public lavatory, which was commonly used in the old-fashioned, courtyard-house neighbourhoods in Beijing.

The courtyard house (*siheyuan*) is a typical Chinese dwelling in which the main structure of the building is constructed around a central courtyard. Each courtyard was traditionally for one family, albeit a large one that may have consisted of two or three generations and their servants. However, since the communist takeover of power in 1949, the majority of these compounds of houses were converted, owing to the drastic increase of the urban population, into multifamily apartments with a shared inner yard. People living in the *siheyuan* usually shared the kitchen, rooms for food storage, and bathroom and toilet facilities. In this sense, the *siheyuan* could be considered an ambiguous domestic space in-between the private and the public. While, on the one hand, such a living environment might set out to produce a relatively stable communal neighbourhood in contrast to the alienated modern apartment living style; on the other, it also too easily engenders a potentially troubling invasion of individual and family privacy. Owing to destructive urban renewal in the 1990s, the *siheyuan* and the intersected narrow alleys (*hutong*), which constituted the centuries-old architectural
layout of Beijing, were mostly demolished and replaced by modern apartment buildings. Only a small number of them have been preserved by the city's historical and cultural heritage industries. Some local residents, elders in particular, still live there and maintain the communal dwelling style.

At REDCAT, through her painstaking gestures of layering, wiping, and scraping, Yin Xiuzhen constructed a model of the communal toilet traditionally used in hutong courtyard dwellings in China and exhibited it in front of American viewers. According to Yin Xiuzhen, "[T]his kind of restroom is in one sense a meeting space. People using these toilets at once relieve themselves, read the newspaper, and chat about everything from international affairs to local gossip." With this installation work, Yin Xiuzhen engages viewers in the re-creation of an old-fashioned communal living environment, recollecting a conventional collective bond. However, in contrast to her relatively idealized interpretation, which presents this type of public lavatory as an important community space and completely ignores its inconvenient and unsanitary conditions, a range of unsolved conflicts and contradictions in the formation of an immediate social collective are revealed to viewers by virtue of their own dynamic embodied interactions with the artistic site created by Restroom W.

As a non-functioning model of a primitive and austere Chinese communal lavatory installed in a contemporary American art gallery, the work is alienated from the stylish modern exhibition hall, conveying a status of displacement. Even after reading a short description of the work in the exhibition leaflet, it likely is still not easy for most American viewers to relate to Yin Xiuzhen’s minimalist, sculptural piece as a toilet. Wandering through the space, viewers can sense the uncomfortable, dazzling light and threatening heat from the 110 lit bulbs on the chandelier that hangs in the same space. The scale of this luxury item, which is more often found in a hotel lobby or other public venues, replaces the dim lamps commonly found in this type of toilet, thus evoking feelings of dislocation and inappropriate transgression. Because there are no partitions separating each trough, it appears that the most private acts must be performed in public. In this sense, Yin Xiuzhen's work intensifies the contradiction between private and public, individual and communal. Although viewers are not supposed to literally use her “toilet” in public, they are still able to feel a strong sense of discomfort and anxiety owing to the aggressive invasion of individual privacy demonstrated by the artwork.

Meanwhile, the presence of other viewers in the exhibition space might make this uneasy, embarrassing situation of social engagement even
more prominent. Within this enclosed “public lavatory,” viewers, from my observations in the exhibition, rarely talked to each other. Some of them may have even felt perplexed and awkward, when encountering one another on the site. As viewers came and went in sequence, a contingent social collective, made up of the participating individual subjects who coincidentally and momentarily engaged with Restroom W, was formed and reformed. However, instead of a friendly, shared experience, this immediate, fluid sense of social connectedness with other bodies evoked in Yin Xiuzhen’s work, I would suggest, was characterized by confusion and incomprehension about a particular culture and living situation, which can induce physical and psychic disquiet.

In addition, behind the large column located at the corner of Restroom W lies a life-sized, wax sculpture of a new born baby boy, covered in artificial blood, whose right hand clutches a pair of scissors, as if the umbilical cord has been just cut from his body. His crouching, helpless posture might recall the Freudian infantile anxiety that occurs when the child is first separated from the body of the mother and is exposed to the outside world. This wax sculpture was created in response to a horrific event—the attempted murder of a boy baby in a countryside communal toilet in China just before Yin Xiuzhen’s exhibition at Los Angeles. This “abandoned” baby boy, as Yin Xiuzhen indicated in an interview with the Los Angeles Times in 2006, is aimed at challenging a stereotypical assumption about China constructed by American mass media, which has often reported that in the Chinese countryside male children are more highly valued, and some parents abandon their female babies. Rather than simply essentializing a communal living environment in China, Restroom W, I suggest, creates what Bishop calls “the terrain of antagonism,” again, where the boundaries of the different binaries discussed above remain unstable, and open to challenge and potential change.

The conventional Chinese courtyard dwelling always takes the central position in Yin Xiuzhen’s artistic exploration of social collectivity and public engagement. Unlike her amusing but slightly disturbing Restroom W, the series of participatory works Beijing Opera, which she started in 2000, present a different view of the collective living situation in the courtyard housing area in Beijing. The work is composed of three major parts—huge sheets of inkjet photographic wallpaper, wooden stools, and sound recordings. The sheets of wallpaper are derived from a group of
photographs taken by the artist in the Houhai Lake district, located in the northwest of Beijing, where old hutong, courtyard buildings, and historic palaces are concentrated. Her photographs feature the collective quotidian activities of ordinary people, elders in particular, who live around the area. According to the size and location of each site the exhibition has been presented in, the choice of wallpaper and the particular placement of the stools have varied. By using and reusing her old photographs and wooden stools, Yin Xiuzhen continuously incorporates new events and relationships with human activities and places them into the narrative of Beijing Opera.

My discussion focuses on the version of Beijing Opera Yin Xiuzhen made and displayed in 2001 for a group exhibition, Living in Time, held at Hamburger Bahnhof Contemporary Art Museum, Berlin. Inside the spacious gallery room, huge photographic sheets of wallpaper were pasted all over the walls. The back right corner represented different groups of male elders sitting on stools around low round tables in a public courtyard and playing Chinese chess (xiangqi). A few people stand behind and watch the game with bamboo
fans in hand. Beside this scene, most of the central space of the wall on the right hand side is taken up by another sheet of wallpaper depicting a group of elderly people who are performing Beijing opera. While an elderly man is standing and singing, four other men sitting around him are either playing traditional musical instruments or simply tapping out the rhythm with a folded silk fan. There are several passers-by sitting or standing at the back enjoying the performance. Whereas the enlarged image on the front wall presents people casually sitting on stools or squatting on the curbs while chatting with each other and enjoying the beautiful scenery of Houhai Lake, the one on the left-hand side features a group of elders who are just ready to go back home after a traditional leisure activity, liuniao—which means individuals sitting together every morning in a public courtyard or along small streets to observe and talk about their birds in cages.

Each of Yin Xiuzhen’s enlarged photographs provides a view of people engaging with one another in a specific shared activity, emphasizing a sense of community and belonging. They persist in their habitual ways of life and enjoy their collective leisure time. Their slow, relaxed daily routines of singing, sitting, chatting and playing games preserve local cultural traditions and sustain the meaning of home and local community. In this sense, these images communicate a strong feeling of nostalgia, recollecting a past that is disappearing—an idealized, conventional mode of community existence that is being gradually lost in a rapidly evolving China due to the destructive process of urban modernization and the unprecedented intrusion of foreign cultural influences.
Thirty-two small wooden stools are scattered in groups around the room. Viewers are invited to sit on them and look at the artist’s huge images pasted on the walls. These humble wooden stools can be perceived as metaphorical symbols of a stable and grounded collective life; they are the most common objects on which people sit as they chat with neighbours or family members on a daily basis. The placement of these stools brings to mind a specific collective experience during the time of the Cultural Revolution when people living in neighbouring areas would bring their own stools and sit together in the open cinema to watch propaganda films. Accompanied by the chant of Beijing opera coming out from a loudspeaker located at the far right-hand corner of the room, Yin Xiuzhen’s work seeks to create a visually and aurally affective space in which viewers can participate in an immediate, contingent community life by sitting together on the stools and watching and contemplating various collective activities presented on the wallpaper.

Viewers, even those who are willing to become engaged with her work, do not always feel obliged to do what the artist expects, however. It is undoubtedly not particularly comfortable to look at such huge images pasted on the wall from a low perspective, when sitting on the short wooden stools. Indeed, for many Western viewers, it might not be easy to participate in and restage moments of communal life in China simply on the basis of the limited, unfamiliar narrative unfolding in Yin Xiuzhen’s wallpaper. As the feminist philosopher and social theorist Iris Marion Young has argued in her discussion of democratic communication, storytelling is an important vehicle for speaking across differences and promoting the understanding of people’s experience in a different social situation. Although storytelling is unable to assume a complete mutual understanding, it encourages communication, resulting in reasonable disagreement. To some extent, Yin Xiuzhen’s artwork can be understood as an artistic vehicle that tells
of real life stories in China to viewers in the West without the expectation of achieving complete agreement. With strong references to a particular cultural background, her artwork reveals problems in introducing the local into a global context. A lack of understanding of the communal living situation in China can hinder the viewer’s involvement with the artwork. Different from the intimate interactions of people depicted in the artist’s oversized images, viewers, who momentarily encountered her work in Berlin, are in a sense rendered estranged outsiders. This disparity between Yin Xiuzhen’s invitation for viewers to participate by sitting on the stools and looking at the wallpaper and their actual engagement with the work provides a distinctively critical insight into contemporary participatory art practices. An artwork that tends to create a hospitable communal environment for immediate, interactive public engagement might give rise to a totally divergent experience of participation marked by confusion or exclusion due to the deficiency of intercultural understanding when exhibited in different social and geographical contexts.

While *Beijing Opera* might be read differently by Chinese viewers, who have a better knowledge of the collective living situation in China, they, too, may feel embarrassed or reluctant to squat on the low wooden stools in such close proximity to other visitors they are not familiar with. Some of the stools are placed extremely close to each other. Given the tiny size of these stools, it is quite difficult for viewers, when sitting on them, to retain a polite and comfortable distance to other bodies. Some viewers, if they are with family members or friends, might prefer to sit together as a small group. Detached from the actual neighbourhood they are referencing, these wooden stools, now placed in the *Beijing Opera* installation in Berlin, can only recall, but never genuinely evoke the similarly casual and relaxed experience of communal life in old Beijing as it is shown in the wallpaper. Yin Xiuzhen’s practice, in this sense, conveys her own anxiety and helplessness in maintaining and preserving local cultural tradition and collective life.

Different from Bishop’s account of social antagonism in contemporary participatory artistic practices, which especially investigates the artwork’s capacity to provoke conceptual unease and emotional disturbance that destabilize favourable communal relationships, Yin Xiuzhen’s participatory piece creates a conflictual and unstable-collective engagement in both psychic and bodily terms. Rather than simply restaging an idealized, harmonious scene of community life, the artist, through *Beijing Opera*, not only sustains the tension of cultural difference, but also induces anxiety and discomfort on the basis of viewers’ immediate bodily interactions and the inevitable collision and disagreement that mark interpersonal and intercultural communications.

Yin Xiuzhen continued her use of small wooden stools in *Collective Subconscious (blue)*, which was first exhibited in 2007. In the late 2000s, she created a set of participatory works constructed from scrapped transport vehicles. Assuming the form of both public transport and an architectural...
shelter, these works invite viewers to physically explore the interior space, representing pathways and meeting points of individual subjects within an art object. Collective Subconscious (blue) was constructed from an old, bisected minivan. After detaching the front and the back of the vehicle, Yin Xiuzhen installed an accordion-like, foldable steel structure set upon rows of tiny wheels that connects the two separate parts and then wrapped it with a colourful patchwork of four hundred items of used clothing collected from a range of people who reside in Beijing. In this way, an efficient minivan was dramatically transformed into an overgrown “caterpillar.” The fabric membrane consists mainly of thin, translucent summer shirts and undervests; thus the gallery lighting penetrates the interior of the artwork. Looking from within, the fabric walls of the work appear like stained glass windows. The interior flooring is paved with steel planks upon which the artist placed a group of wooden stools along the two lengthwise edges of the space. The arrangement of these stools also, to some extent, recalls the collective dwelling situation in the Chinese courtyard, although they have been placed in a completely different context to the works discussed earlier.

The minivan was widely used in Beijing in the 1990s—a decade characterized especially by rapid urbanization and progressive economic development. As increasing numbers of courtyard houses in the old centre of Beijing were demolished, thousands of families had to move into modern high-rise block buildings erected in the suburbs of the city. In this situation, the minivan was employed by many as an inexpensive alternative to a standard taxicab for daily commuting. In the minivan, people from diverse backgrounds boarded for the same destination. Small wooden stools were commonly placed on the aisle when there were not enough seats for all passengers. These crowded conditions within the minivan did not produce an enjoyable

communal experience, but, rather, discomfort and embarrassment since within this confined space, one had to sit among strangers at very close proximity. This compressed and uncomfortable situation is also revealed to the participating viewers of Collective Subconscious (blue), particularly when they stepped onto the shaky interior ground of this long narrow structure and squat on the low wooden stools close to one another. Similar to her Beijing Opera pieces, this work evokes an uncomfortable mode of “togetherness” through the viewer’s engagement with the art object.

Meanwhile, since the early 1990s, due to the development of the global trade network, foreign investment began to pour into a few major Chinese cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, as well as some eastern coastal regions. Huge amounts of surplus rural labour started to flow into these developing areas to pursue better job opportunities and living situations, becoming a significant floating labour force. Accompanied by a wistful ballad Beijing, Beijing that captures the mood of the time, this extended minivan can be also understood as a temporary site of repose marked by endless passages and accidental encounters of
moving human bodies, articulating the longing for belonging as modern nomads in contemporary metropolitan cities.

When the piece is on display, viewers who wish to enter Yin Xiuzhen’s minivan usually queue in front of the sideway door to wait for their turn to climb into the artwork. Ideally, they are expected to sit on the small wooden stools, roughly arranged into two uneven rows, face to face, and to strike up conversations. A number of viewers may find themselves talking to people sitting around them or perhaps make friends after meeting each other coincidentally within the artwork. However, there are others who may be uncomfortable or reluctant to talk to people they have just encountered for the first time. Yin Xiuzhen’s works cannot always instigate favourable and effective interactions among participating viewers; instead, inside Collective Subconscious (blue), they are compelled to negotiate with both the space and the other viewers. The interior of the artwork is quite compressed even with a small number of viewers. Most of them have to bend over as they go through the structure, and, at times, if it is crowded, one needs to sidle along the stools and squeeze through other bodies.

Following her reading of social scientist and geographer Doreen Massey, Marsha Meskimmon proposes that place can be perceived as an event, “where place is not a fixed and stable marker of identity or power, but is a site of perpetual negotiation.”18 Through her labour intensive yet creative re-appropriation of old vehicles, clothes, and wooden stools, Yin Xiuzhen’s artwork also has been constructed into an ongoing artistic event akin to that described by Meskimmon, one that is marked by multiple trajectories and the insistent negotiations of viewers engaging with her artistic space in a specific time and place. With her extended minivan, the artist materializes a mediated space in-between past and present, local and global, self and other, as well as individual and communal, in which these opposite terms, in Bishop’s analysis, are presented as neither reconciled nor totally separate spheres.19

Yin Xiuzhen’s works might provide an alternative perspective to reconsider the notion of social collectivity and the formation of human community in a transnational, transcultural context on the basis of a viewer’s immediate experience of the art object and the contingent interactions with other participatory viewers. However, this cannot be simply understood as an effective, ameliorative approach to establishing positive, benign social relations. As shown in her works, the artistic form of participation can be unstable and disquieting; it even fails, when visitors to the exhibition refuse to be implicated in the artwork. Yin Xiuzhen’s practice demonstrates a contradictory situation of contemporary participatory artworks. So-called participatory art, which generally endeavours to constitute a hospitable, artistic mode of socially interactive human community, is, here, in my mind, confronted with inevitable disagreement, conflict, exclusion, and uncertainty.
I would like to thank my PhD dissertation supervisor Jo Applin for her help and support in the preparation of this article. A shorter version of this article was presented at the 2015 Association of Art Historians Conference, University of East Anglia, Norwich. Many thanks to the convenor Kelly Rae Aldridge and all the participants of the session The Aesthetics of Invitation: Art at the Threshold of Hospitality. I would also give my special thanks to Steven Kolsteren, Caspar Martens, and Rob Dijkstra at the Groninger Museum, Groningen, who provided me with images and other primary resources on Yin Xiuzhen’s exhibition in 2012; and Sohrab Mohebi at the REDCAT, Los Angeles, for his generous help for my research on Yin’s Restroom W. Thank you to Yin Xiuzhen and Pace Gallery Beijing for their support and correspondence. Finally, I would also like to thank Universities’ China Committee in London, who awarded me a research fellowship during the time when I completed this article.

Notes


