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## A Thesis Is a Product Is a Tracking

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NUMBER:

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This thesis is submitted in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Master of Fine Arts in  
Design, Visual Communications  
at Virginia Commonwealth  
University

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# I. Pre-production

This thesis book you are holding is a physical extension of my research on production and consumption, for it is as much a product as everything else in our life. It is a meditation on products and production, and a product in itself. It is its very own metaphor.

The complete production process of today is beyond one's knowledge.

This book is printed by \_\_\_\_\_

in \_\_\_\_\_

using \_\_\_\_\_ printing technology,

with \_\_\_\_\_

manufactured by \_\_\_\_\_

in \_\_\_\_\_.

The inside pages use \_\_\_\_\_ colors of ink,

namely \_\_\_\_\_

with \_\_\_\_\_ gsm \_\_\_\_\_ paper manufactured

by \_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_\_\_.

The book is then shipped by \_\_\_\_\_

from \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_

with a tracking number of \_\_\_\_\_

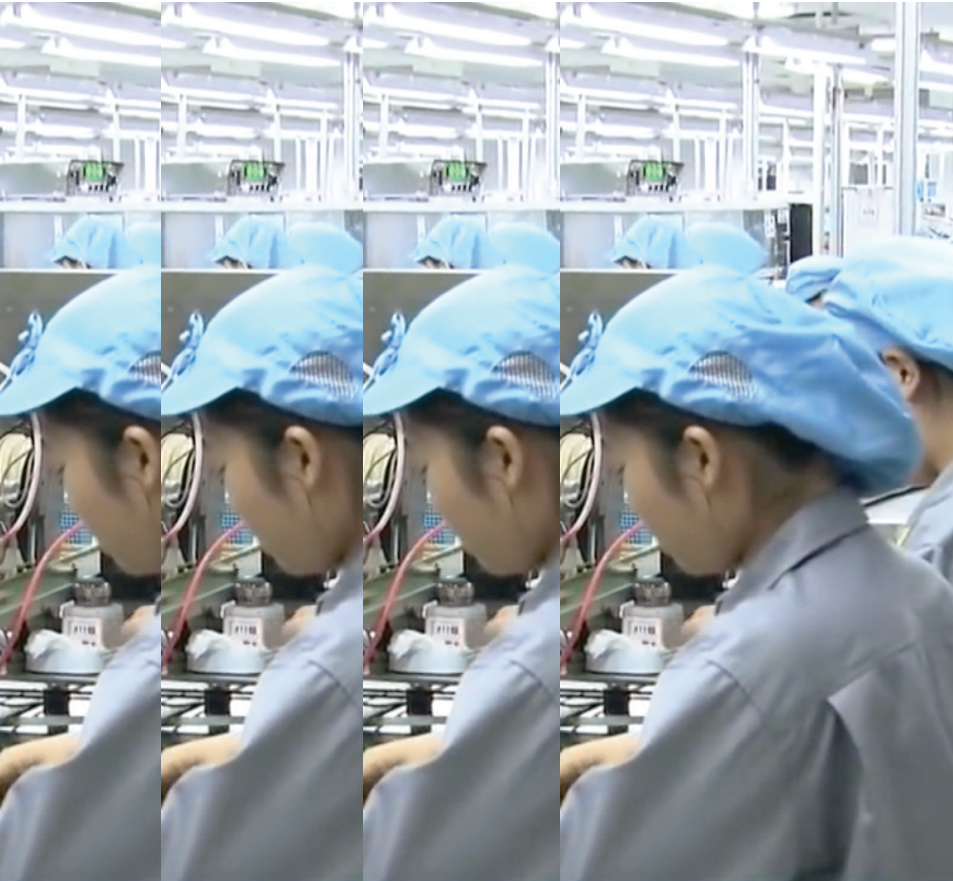
on the day of \_\_\_\_\_.

## II. Abstract



In this work, I discuss how global products/ identities are made, transported and consumed, and the inevitable 'mis-' in acts of transmission. This research ranges from the miscommunication in languages and linguistics, to the gap between production and consumption. I investigate how things and humans are misread, mispronounced, misfit and mistranslated when they traverse social and cultural borders, arriving at a place in between languages, holding on to and letting go of things that are familiar to neither and both cultures. This work explores diverse media such as publications, videos and installations, and examines how they maybe used to address such contexts as factory production, global trade, circulation and tracking of commodities as well as identities.

# III. Introduction



Moving alone from another country to the United States, I find myself easily disconnected and disassociated. I never fully understand what people are talking about for reasons of both language and culture. I have never lived in a place long enough to feel at home, or made the effort to call it home. I never had a conversation that was just about the conversation itself, because at least thirty percent of the time I had to pay attention to my grammar, pronunciation and manner of delivery. This now happens as well whenever I go back to my home country, since I have been away for so long and things outgrow me too fast. But this is not essentially bad. Not at all. It is especially leveraging, to enjoy the possibilities of the “mis-”. Feeling “not like a native speaker”<sup>1</sup>, feeling “out of place and out of language”<sup>2</sup>, living in neither and both of the countries, this dissociation grants me a chance to step outside of myself and look at my body as if this body is

1. Rey Chow, *Not Like a Native Speaker: On Language as a Postcolonial Experience* (New York: Columbia, 2014).

2. Stephanos Stephanides, “Transculturating for Wordliness,” *Transtext(e)s Transcultures*, no. 1 (2006).

3. The Sims is a series of life simulation video games developed by Maxis and published by Electronic Arts.

nothing but a Sims<sup>3</sup> character and the omniscient ‘me’ is a player. The idea that my life is just a game and I can play, misplay and unplay one or one thousand roles makes me comfortable when dealing with routine miscommunication. My disconnectedness belongs not only to me, or not even only to international students or traveling artists. Because of my personal experience of miscommunication between languages and



cultures, and my fluid position in transit, I am driven to find people and objects that share my feelings. Things that emigrate. Things that stand in between.

Of all the people and objects that possibly share my feelings, I care the most about Chinese factory workers migrating from rural areas to cities. Is this because we are both repetitively making, often underpaid and overworked, under the supervision of the manager, the director, or the client? Is it because we are both travelling away from home and are caught between global capitalism and the socialist state?

The similarity between Chinese migrant workers and myself—an international student in the United States—also lies in our precarious status. In 2017, Beijing government issued an order to get rid of “low-end population”<sup>4</sup> in the city, resulting in many migrant workers being driven out of their shared apartments overnight. In the same year, Donald Trump executed several acts that restrict the rights of immigrants and non-US citizens, including the cancelation of DACA<sup>5</sup> and the entry ban of nationals of eight countries. Continued with Trump Administration’s triumph in the strict immigration policies, this year (2019), the denial rate for H1B visa application, the working visa for non-US citizens, is as high as 32 percent.<sup>6</sup> For either migrant workers in China, legal and illegal

immigrants or international residents in the United States, the status to legally live and work in our destination locations is very much out of our own control, and subject to (arbitrary) changes.

This is not to say I am not privileged, even spoiled. I am lucky enough to have the freedom to travel at will, to study abroad, to pursue higher education, things that are unattainable for migrant workers. I could

4. Simon Denyer, “Mass evictions in freezing Beijing winter sparks public outrage but little official remorse,” *The Washington Post* (November 27, 2017) [[www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/11/27/forced-evictions-in-freezing-beijing-winter-sparks-public-outrage-but-little-official-remorse/?utm\\_term=.45a606506889](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/11/27/forced-evictions-in-freezing-beijing-winter-sparks-public-outrage-but-little-official-remorse/?utm_term=.45a606506889)].

5. Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals.

6. Stuart Anderson, “New Data Show H-1B Denial Rates Reaching Highest Levels”, *Forbes* (April 10, 2019) [[www.forbes.com/sites/stuartanderson/2019/04/10/new-data-show-h-1b-denial-rates-reaching-highest-levels/#203ba539797f](http://www.forbes.com/sites/stuartanderson/2019/04/10/new-data-show-h-1b-denial-rates-reaching-highest-levels/#203ba539797f)].

never be part of their community nor could they be mine. But by virtue of our sorrow, we are able to share something in common. We are not the same, yet we are comrades, colleagues and allies, holding hands in this gap created by the transitional global workforce.

Acknowledging what’s misplaced, omitted and denied in the transitional factory/identity production is a painful experience for me. It’s a chronic pain that signifies the hardship of living in between; a pain that serves as a constant reminder, a physical resistance, a precise indicator of my similarity to and difference with migrant workers and their everyday experience.

IV

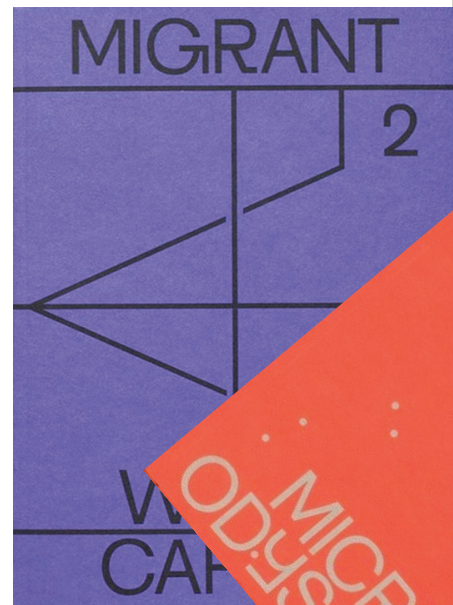
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# Investigation 1

# The Gap Between Production and Consumption



In past decades, the circulation of material goods has increased with greater speed and over greater distance, and become a topic discussed by many. For instance, *Migrant Journal*, a six-issue journal that debuted in 2016, addresses circulation and migration of all forms, including people, ideas, goods and more. However, as commodities circulate faster and farther, we are distanced from their materiality more than ever. The once regional circulation of commodities has become global, and the narrative of production turns into a myth. How is a product made and what is it made of?

1. Glenn Adamson, "Material Intelligence", *AEON* [<https://aeon.co/essays/do-you-know-your-stuff-the-ethics-of-the-material-world>] (November 28, 2018).

2. Jean Baudrillard, *Consumer Society* (London: SAGE, 1998).

Glenn Adamson discusses this in his article "Material Intelligence," in which he attributes our ignorance about physical objects to "technological sophistication and global commerce,"<sup>1</sup> and suggests that we develop our material intelligence

by attending to the physicality and craft of manufactured goods surrounding us. Yet this alone doesn't bridge the gap between production and consumption, for the gap is not only between people and objects, but also between different groups of people.

When we are faced with the myth of a consumer object, it is certainly not only its materiality that we are talking about. Consumption is, according to Jean Baudrillard, a coded system of social signs, "the equivalent of a language"<sup>2</sup> through which people communicate with each other. Highlighted by the metaphor of consumption as language is the relationship between consumers and producers, and the idea that consumption involves exchange between people. The global consumer society of today is an even more complex system, in which several languages interact and attempt to communicate all at once—both literally and figuratively. Indeed, it is now less possible for us to comprehend the process of exchange, since the production chain has extended to so many steps, and the relationship between producers

and consumers has also become mysterious in this global circulation of goods. Thus, besides asking what materials and manufacturing process are in play, an equally important question is: where, by whom, in what ways, and through which channels, are products made accessible for consumers? Due to the inherent complexity and span of economic globalization, we may assume that many things along a product's journey—from the producer to the consumer—are miscommunicated and mistranslated, and further obscured by distance.

The distance is, first of all, geographical. We can now hardly find anything that is made within a reachable distance—unless we are perhaps talking about fresh produce. But even in this case there is no guarantee of local production. Say you are making a breakfast sandwich. You may end up buying an avocado from Mexico, eggs from Canada, cheese from Wisconsin and bread from Kansas. Without your even realizing it, there is a veritable United Nations in the comfort of your kitchen. The assembly and manufacturing of our daily products can only be more international than those put in a sandwich, and their origins more confusing. Take the iPhone for example. Although it is a product that intends to bridge the distance of communication, it is also the very product that manifests it. Look at the back of an iPhone or its packaging and you will certainly find

the following line of text somewhere: “Designed by Apple in California. Assembled in China.” Yes, Chinese migrant workers in Foxconn factories assemble every iPhone in the world, along with other Apple products. What is implied in these words on iPhones is not only physical distance between the maker, the designer and the user. The text on the product is written in a language that its makers do not speak. It is a product that is not easily affordable by its makers. It has to be proudly designed in California—a product of the high technology ethos of Silicon Valley—to distinguish the fact that it is assembled in China, the world’s factory of cheap products.

If physical distance is something we can nevertheless traverse, it is a lot harder to bridge the linguistic, cultural, and social distances that are also implicated. Indeed, there is virtually no mutual understanding between the producer and the consumer—we may also include the designer here—not only because of physical distance, but also because of the stratification of class and culture that keeps us apart. Wu Xia, a garment factory worker in China, wrote a poem in which she imagined the life of the girl wearing the dress she was making.<sup>3</sup> She fabricated a romantic love story for this imaginary girl with deep affection, just as she gently fabricated the dress. Yet she could not help but think about her sweat-soaked uniform, which she had to go home and wash

after extended working hours. As an empathetic reader, a guilty consumer and a potential candidate for that dress, I am equally curious about her life, as she is curious about mine. My reflections on this poem led me to research the life of Chinese migrant workers and to do brief fieldwork in the factory. This became a strong motif for my thesis installations.

The distance between the maker and the user, or the misconception created by distance, exists in the virtual world as well. With the ease of online shopping, we now have millions of products right at our fingertips. However, unlike the very visual and straightforward shopping experience in traditional retail, e-commerce plays tricks on our senses in many ways. In fact, it is a skewed experience fashioned by design choices in the creation of online stores, which are made specifically to shape our perception—successfully or not. Consider everything in an online product listing that is peripheral to the physicality of the product:

3. Wu Xia, “A Slip Dress”, 2015. Translated by Yixue Li. See next page for the poem.

composition in the photo shoot, photo retouching, image resolution, color profiles, product descriptions, ratings and reviews, website navigation and user interface, and order of appearance in search results. The control (or the lack of it) of the abovementioned factors could provide customers with completely different, sometimes even misleading or exaggerated perceptions of a

# Factory Worker, Art Worker

left page

right page

*A Slip Dress*  
by Wu Xia  
translated by Yixue Li

吊帶裙  
鄢霞 著  
李藝雪 譯

*A Video*  
by Yixue Li

視頻  
李藝雪 著

A Slip Dress

In the brightly-lit  
packing workshop  
The flat iron I am holding  
carries the warmth of my palm

I will first  
iron the shoulder straps  
So that it's soft enough for your delicate skin  
Then to the waist -

A lovely waist  
To fit a gentle hand  
For a quiet avenue to be  
the witness of a romance

And finally  
I will unfold the pleats  
And iron each of them

To an equal width  
For you to wait for a soft breeze  
By the lake  
on the grass

Run as you wish, but  
remember to let the pleats swing  
in an arc  
Like petals of a flower

But I am about to go home  
To wash the uniform soaked in sweat  
And the dress  
I have folded  
Packed

will leave the factory  
To a mall  
To a trendy shop

In an afternoon or evening  
Waiting  
just for you  
The girl who I don't know  
But love dearly

product, compared to seeing it directly. (This is not to imply that the user experience of traditional shopping is not manipulated or framed.)

Amazon, for example, structures its user experience in a strategical manner by allowing only one listing page for each product. This strategy makes it easy for consumers to shop in the sea of products, but also impairs the benefits of third-party sellers. Amazon has more than one million third-party sellers, most of which are small businesses. Only the best-selling seller has authority over the content of the listing and the right to be the primary seller of this product. All other sellers are nested in a tiny box at the bottom right corner of the page. However, if Amazon decides to sell the same or similar product (sometimes by forcing third-party sellers into being Amazon's suppliers), it becomes the primary seller by default, and will appear as one of the top few in a search result. By being both a player and the rule maker, Amazon hurts not only the relationship between those small businesses and customers by controlling their exposure, but also their profit margin and the possibilities for them to build their own brands. Many third-party sellers have accused Amazon of monopolizing its interests and exacting control over user data, supply chains and platforms to promote, almost exclusively, its self-owned products. In fact, rumor says that Amazon will soon launch a "One Vendor" selling system,

4. Hilary Milnes, “Bullying brands: How a consolidated marketplace helps Amazon assert more control over sellers.” (December 3, 2018) [www.digiday.com/marketing/amazon-consolidated-marketplace-sellers/].

merging third-party marketplace into the wholesale sphere strictly controlled by Amazon.<sup>4</sup> This is to say, Amazon may be forcing all its third-party sellers to merely be its manufacturers and suppliers, taking away their controls and profit

margins. During the push and pull between Amazon and its third-party sellers, it seems that the hope for manufacturers to break through the traditional OEM (Original Equipment Manufacture) model is further diminished, and the attempt of small business owners to build a relationship with customers has failed. The goal to demystify the communication process from production to consumption is made difficult by Amazon, and what is left is a flourishing relationship between Amazon the omniscient agent and happy consumers.

As we are faced with an expanded physical, virtual and social gap between production and consumption, what can we do to fill it? It is essentially a gap too geographically wide to bridge and too socially deep to fill. But as individual consumers, any of our attempts to understand the process and the people behind will make the communication more transparent. I hereby encourage the consumer to be mindful of the gap, to appreciate the labor of those who have often been ignored, misrepresented, or denied access to things we take for granted—those who stands at the opposite end of the supply chain, and frequently at the opposite end of the social strata as well.

# Investigation 2

## On Being a Factory Worker

In the winter of 2018, I went to work for a few days in a garment factory in Chengdu, China. Despite not being a truly immersive experience, it was very much a personal attempt to understand the production process and the producers of material goods. As mentioned in the previous section, I had always been on the consumer end of the communication: the girl who wears the dress. Yet I had a strong urge to get to the opposite end, and to not only guess and imagine, but to become the girl who makes the dress. I believed that this experience might create a slight rupture in the social fabric to demystify for me the narrative of the production process. Many sociologists have entered, observed and





examined factories through an ethnographic lens. Pun Ngai, for example, worked in an electronic factory in Shenzhen, China from 1995 to 1996, illuminating the struggle and the rise of “a new social body”<sup>1</sup> of women workers in China, and Michael Burawoy spent decades in several industrial workplaces in Zambia, Hungary, Russia and the United States, during which he explored postcolonialism and forms of class consciousness.<sup>2</sup> Their participatory observation in factories and among workers invigorated the research by feeling, experiencing and blending in the population they study.

Artists have also intervened in factory spaces. Li Liao spent 45 days on an iPad assembly line in a Foxconn plant in Shenzhen, and left after he earned enough money to buy an iPad.<sup>3</sup> Beijing-based Italian artist Alessandro Rolandi started a residential program called the “Social Sensibility R&D Program” in 2010, which invites artists to enter Bernard Control, a French-owned factory, to create work and interact with workers in ways that don’t interfere with production. By engaging in the factory environment, artists are able to participate and tell a worker’s narrative from a different perspective.

On the factory floor, I worked on the quality control line with two other female workers. My experience in the factory was brief, but the



1. Pun Ngai, *MADE IN CHINA: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005).

2. Michael Burawoy, *The Politics of Production: Factory Regimes Under Capitalism and Socialism* (London: Verso, 1985).

3. Evan Osnos, “What is an iPad Doing on a Pedestal at a Chinese Art Museum?” (January 17, 2013) [www.newyorker.com/news/evan-osnos/what-is-an-ipad-doing-on-a-pedestal-at-a-chinese-art-museum].

constant noise, the pain from working long hours, the lack of sleep, the tedious and repetitive labor, the distance from home, the laughter and complaints, illustrate a life that is different and yet similar from my everyday life as an art student. This instilled an empathy that drives me further into researching the life of these migrant workers.

Upon returning to Richmond after this brief experience, my interest in languages, linguistics and communication has taken a sociological turn. In my studio practice, I began to explore how online

shopping obscured our sense of scale and quantity. I examined the potential for receipts to represent or recreate social scenarios. I made a video game that simulated the labor of earning money. I discussed my mistranslated identity as a migrant student, and the struggle of living in between. I created a project questioning the standards of quality control.

These exploratory projects led me to my thesis research, in which I investigate the living and working environment of migrant workers, their anonymity and loss of identity. The research is driven by basic questions about their daily life. What do they eat? Where do they live? How much do they earn? How do they look for jobs? How are they treated? What do they do in their spare time?

To answer these questions, we should first understand the limitations with which the migrant workers have to live. Migrant factory workers usually come from rural areas of China. They are administrated by the population registration system and are barred from urban citizenship, and also from many social resources. Workers usually live in the rural-urban fringe where the rent is cheaper, and have a consumption level that is much lower than that of other city dwellers.<sup>4</sup> In alignment with their consumption level is a unique rural-urban economic system, creating

a unique visual landscape that is unconsciously anti-designed. This differentiation in terms of income and social status, coupled with exploitive factories, form a limbo from which the migrant workers cannot escape.

The identity of a migrant worker is forever in transit, similar to the shipping status of the products they make. This intermediate state of identity appears on many levels. The men and women work in the city while never being full members because of their provinciality, their rural birth, and their social segregation.<sup>5</sup> They are the floating population of China's contemporary urban society, and will almost certainly return to their hometowns rather than stay in cities.

4. Li Qiang, 农民工和中国  
社会分层 [Migrant Worker  
and Social Stratification  
in China] (Beijing:  
Shehuikexue wenxian  
chubanshe, 2005).

5. Winnie Won Yin Wong.  
"Van Gogh on Demand."  
Practice (Whitechapel:  
Documents of  
Contemporary Art)  
(Cambridge: MIT Press,  
2018), 78

Workers that are not satisfied with their conditions often quit their jobs and start looking for new opportunities (usually with the illusory hope that some factories are better than others). Life can be harsh in between jobs, and especially so for rural-to-urban workers living with so many restrictions. Some may even sell their national identification cards for some fast cash. The identities the workers carelessly transfer away may take on a new life (usually a criminal one) while their bodies are adrift. In this way, the very identity of these workers becomes a commodity with its own circulation.



Life being a factory worker is certainly not ideal. However, we may find hope in the emergence a new working class who are conscious of their status, take pride in their identities and participate in social activities. For example, Xin Gong Ren Yi Shu Tuan, or “New Worker’s Art Troup”, is a performance group organized by factory workers in Beijing. They advocate rights for migrant workers via a touring band, and they have established a workers’ museum that documents the struggle and resistance of migrant workers. With a class awareness rising from within, it is promising to see a change taking place against their current living and working environment.



# V.

# Proto- types

This section introduces some of my previous projects that function as prototypes for the thesis exhibition. They are categorized metaphorically into the typical sequence of procuring goods via the internet.

In the “Research and Development” section, we considered how ecommerce strategically makes design choices to skew our perception of products. Some of my previous projects speak to this concept specifically.

Figure 1, 2

*A Pack of Ricola (2018)* is a paper installation of a giant pack of Ricola cough drops. It examines how the online shopping experience messes with our sense of size and quantity by distancing us from the material goods.

Figure 3, 4, 5, 6, 7

*Amazon Under \$1 (2018)* is a website prototype that reinterprets the presentation of goods on Amazon in the form of a new, high-end website, highlighting the absurdity of elevating basic products through design and image manipulation.

Figure 8, 9

*Ricola, A Travel Story (2018)* takes a look into the travel story of a pack of Ricola. It tracks the (fabricated) history, manufacturing process and transportation, and examines what adds to or brings down the price of a product.

figure 1



figure 2



**AMAZON UNDER \$1**  
(Including shipping)

SINGLE  
OBJECT  
VIEW

[Bryant Electric NP1AL Standard Size Nylon Wallplate, Almond, \[\\$0.77\]](#). CAP Barbell Neoprene Coated Dumbbell, Single, 1-pound, [\$0.98]. Brady 121405 B7569 Vinyl Footprint-Left, 12" Size, Yellow, [\$0.61]. Ricola Family Pack Cough Suppressant Throat Drops Honey Lemon Echinacea, 45 Drops, [\$0.72]. Parker Legris 3330 04 Compression Release Button Cover for Push-to-Connect LF3000 Fittings, Green, 5/32" Tube OD, [\$0.62]. National Hardware N223-024 3150BC Quick Links in Zinc, 1/4", [\$0.55]. Magid T129CT Simply Pastel Jersey with Knit Wrist, Assorted Colors, [\$0.76]. Wilton Red Metal Heart Cookie Cutter 3", [\$0.53]. Baby Buddy Smiley Pacifier Holder, Blue, [\$0.72]. Start 14978 Thermostat -



ABOUT

□□□□  
□□□□  
EVERYTHING  
VIEW

figure 3



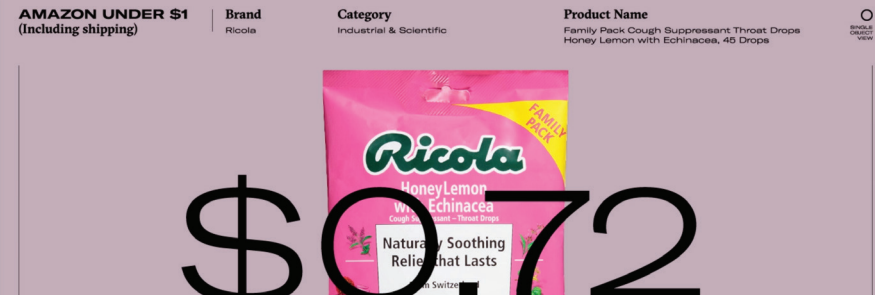


figure 7

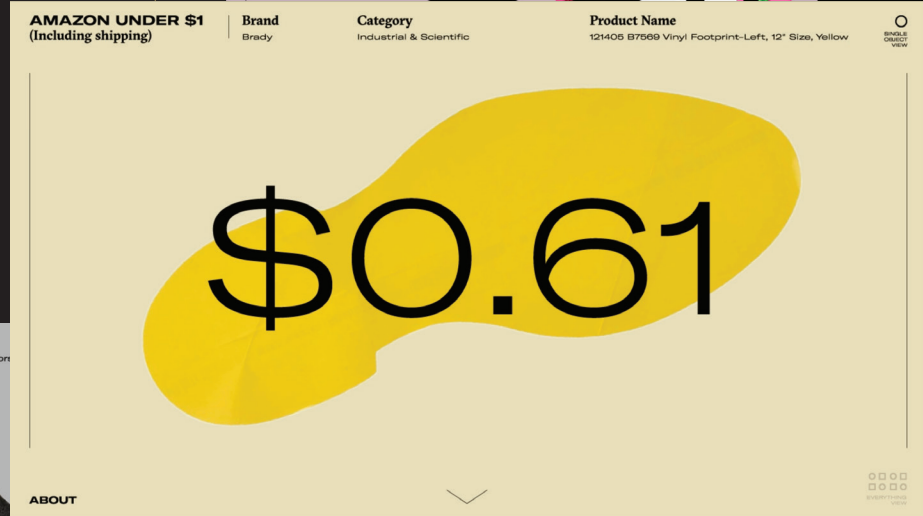


figure 6



figure 5

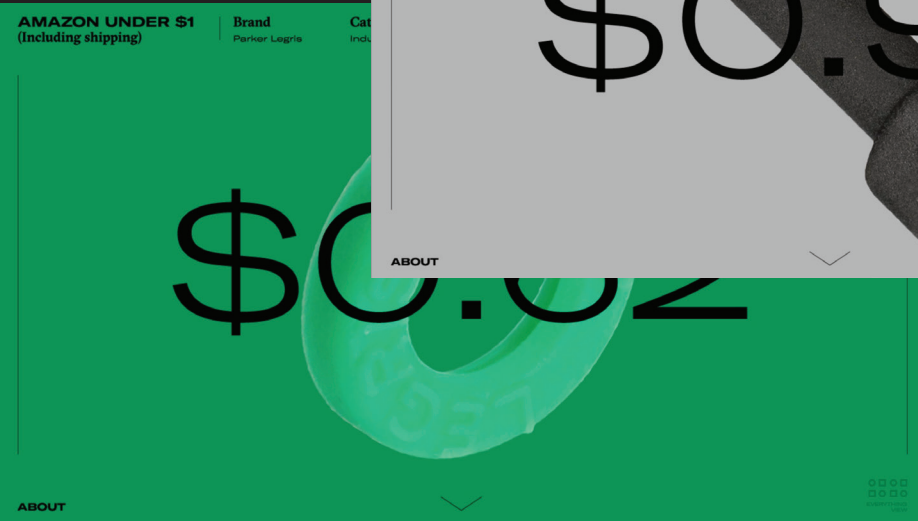


figure 4

# mystical



# herbs



figure 9

# MASS PRODUCTION

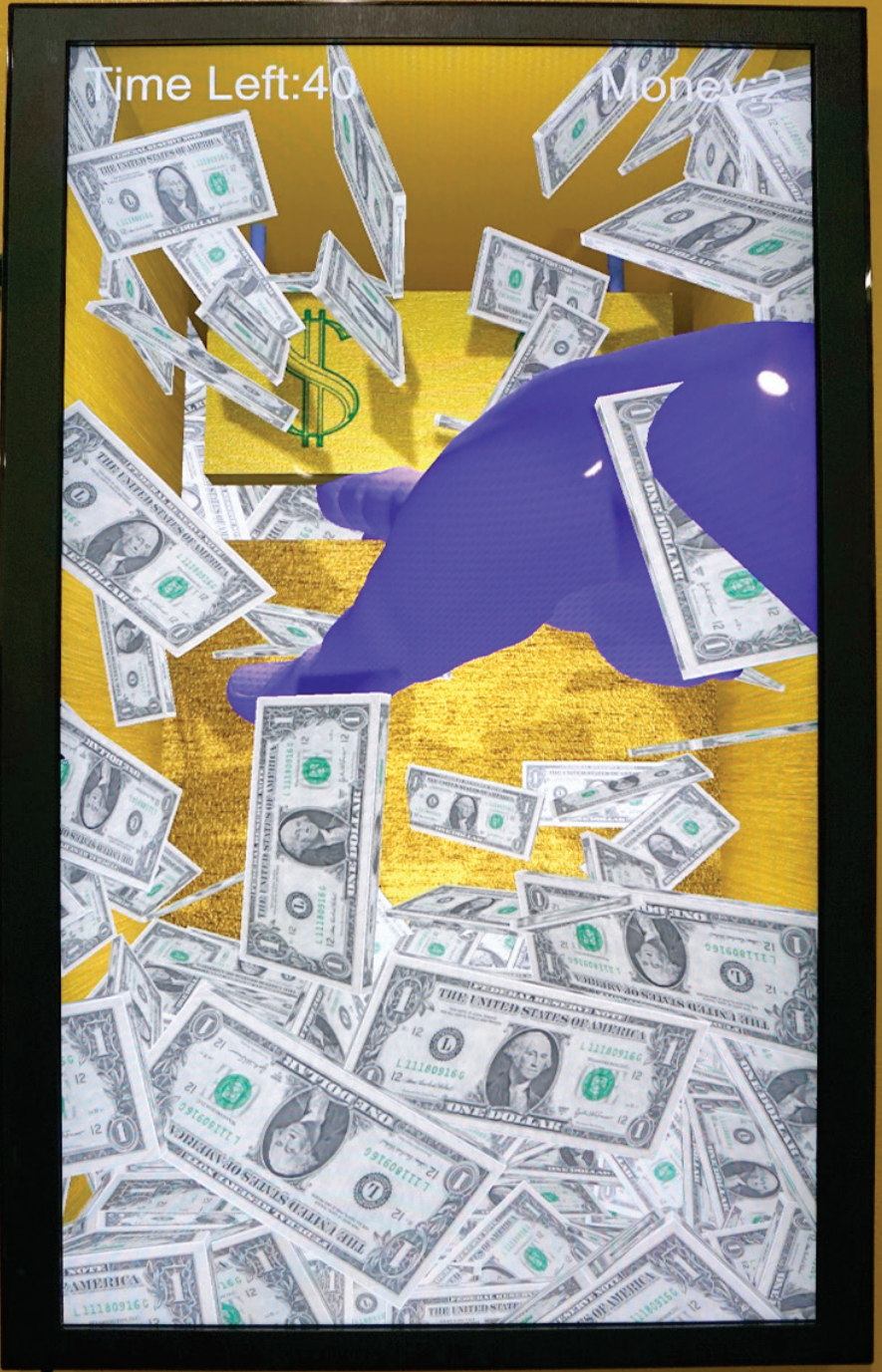
Online Shopping

Prototypes

Factory workers in China make about 500 dollars per month. The gap between the salary they earn and the value they create is an obvious indication of how much they are exploited, languishing between the forces of capitalist consumerism and the socialist state. However, it is also the very reason that the jobs are outsourced to China. Accordingly, the gap cannot be bridged today—if workers in these factories were paid rationally for their labor, their jobs would be taken away and moved to counties with “more affordable” labor pools.

Figure 10, 11

*Money Maker (2018)* is a game I created to simulate the labor in exchange for money, in which the players have to use their bodies physically in order to earn money.





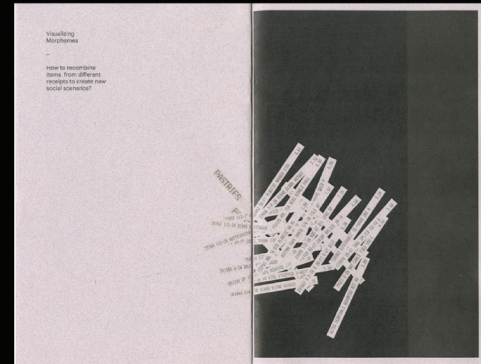
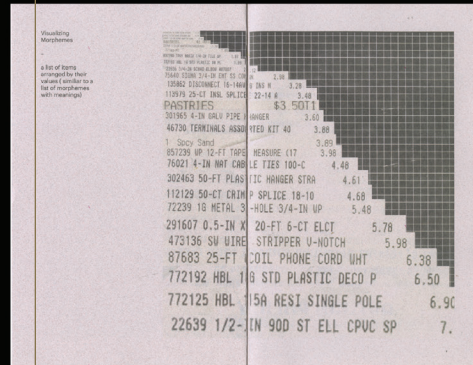
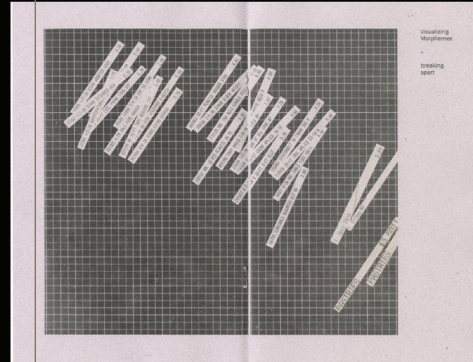
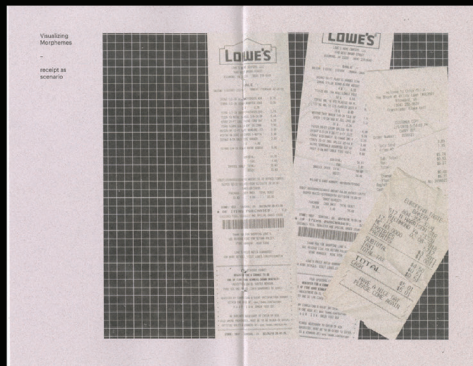
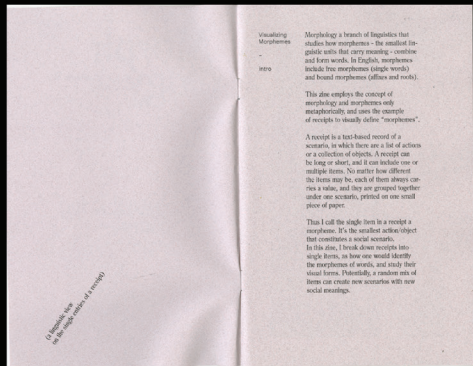
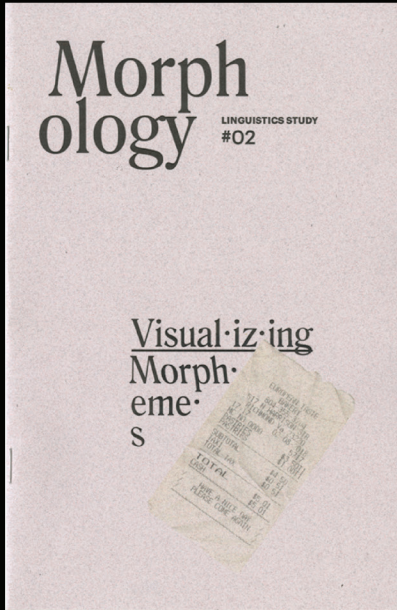
A receipt is a proof of exchange in a consumption process. It is also a printed record of a social scenario, in which there is a list of actions or a collection of objects. A receipt can be long or short, and it can be broken down to one or more items. No matter how different the items may be, each of them always carries a value, and they are grouped together in a certain time and space, printed on the same piece of paper. It's a proof of one's daily encounters.

Figure 12, 13


*Visualizing Morphemes (2018)* is the second of a 5-issue publication on linguistic topics. This issue discusses specifically about the function of receipts.

Figure 14

*Ephemera (2018)* is an experiment to print out my personal daily narratives on receipts with a thermal printer, in an abbreviated language that is distinctive to receipts.







# Visualizing Morphemes

—  
intro


LINGUA #2

Morphology

LINGUA #2

This zine employs the concept of morphology and morphemes metaphorically, and uses the example of receipts to visually define “morphemes”, the smallest unit.

I view an item on a receipt as a morpheme. It’s the smallest action/object that makes up a transaction.



Morphology

4




Visualizing Morphemes

A receipt is a printed record of a social scenario, in which there is a list of actions or a collection of objects.

A receipt can be **long** or **short**, and it can be broken down to one or more items.

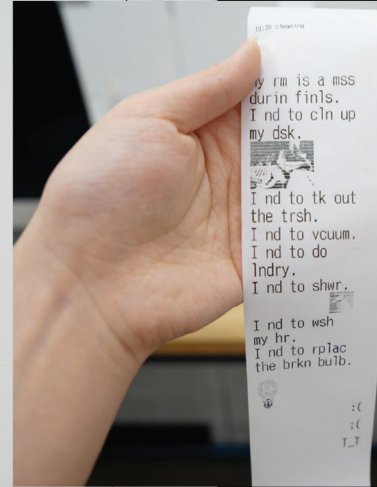
No matter how different the items may be, each of them always carries a value, and they are grouped together within the same time and space, printed on the same piece of paper. It’s a proof of one’s daily encounters.

5



morphemes (affixes and roots).

3



A product is in transit when it leaves the factory to its supplier and when it is shipped to the customer. As an international art student, I find myself floating in the transitional state where there is no arrival ahead. I created several projects that discusses my identity in transit, and the discomfort that comes with it.

Figure 15, 16, 17

*Mistranslation Statement (2017)* is a video installation that explores the incapability to translate my mind into languages and into art practice.

Figure 18, 19, 20

The light painting techniques I learned from this project led me to teach a workshop, *In Darkness We See Languages*, at Tasmeeem 2019, a biennial art and design conference in Doha, Qatar.

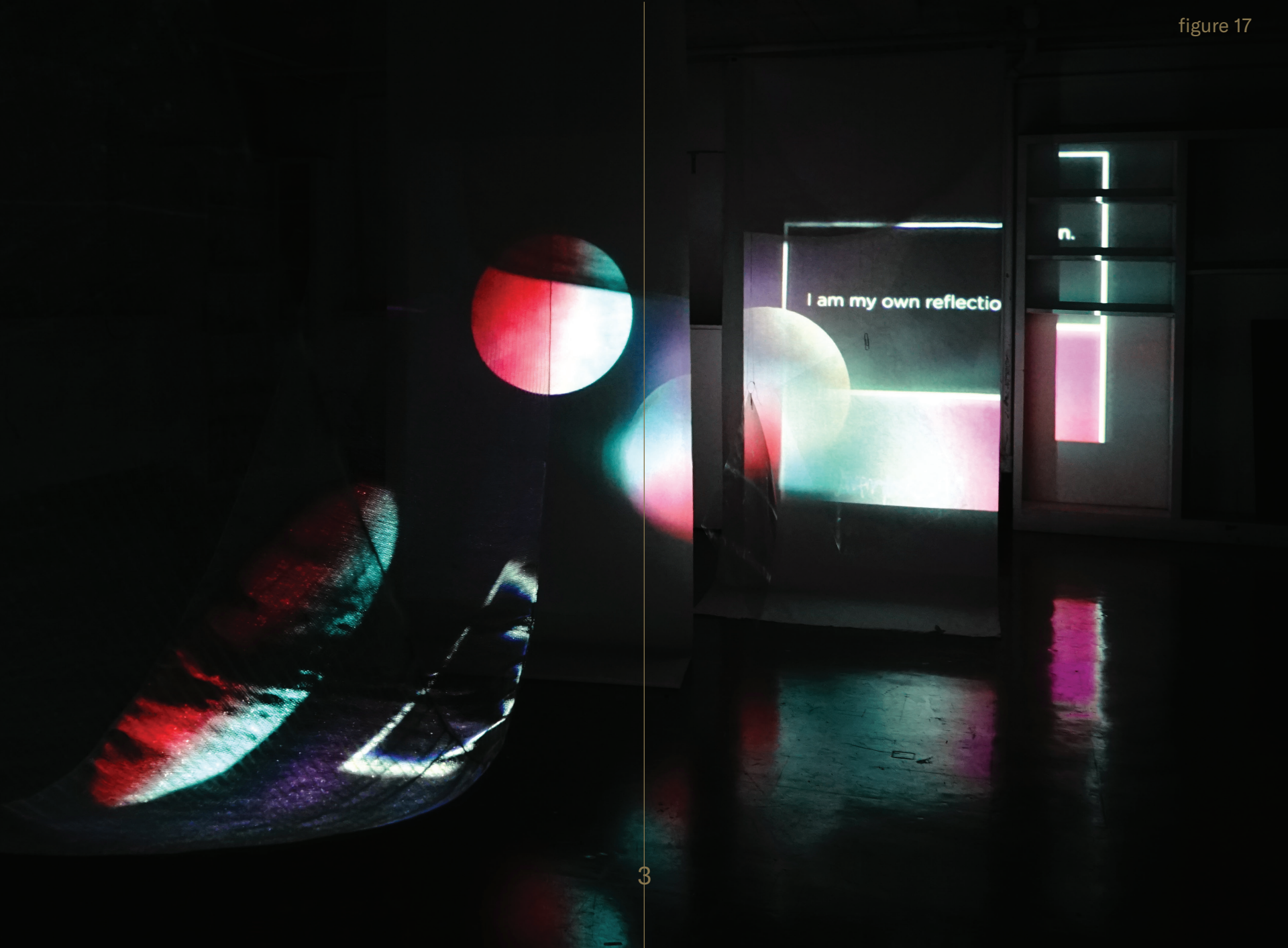
Figure 21, 22

*Everything That Fits, Or Not (2018)* explores the limitations with which we have to work and the space we sometimes force ourselves to fit.





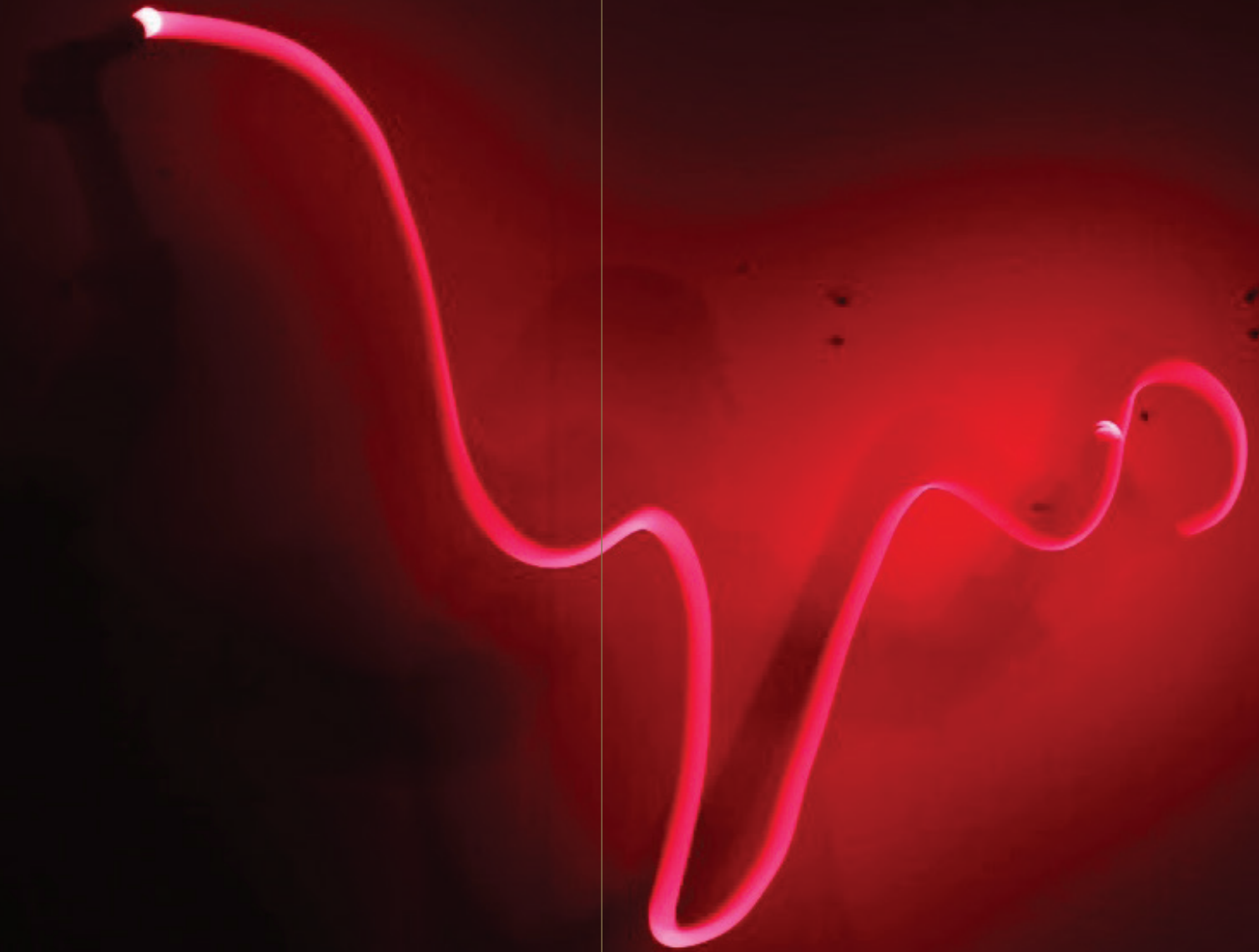
2



3



4



5









VI

PRO  
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TIO  
N

# Production (Thesis Exhibition)

What's the ecosystem of visual and textual language around industrial spaces in China? How does the language speak about the absurdity in the living conditions, working environment, and male-centered patriarchal perspective of the job market? How does it reflect the objectification of women in the low-wage workforce?



These are some questions I began to think about during my thesis research into the chains of production and the examination of the living and working environment of migrant workers in China. My research was inspired by a poem written by Wu Xia, a garment factory worker in China. (See R&D section.) I examined the languages used in a Sanhe, a labor marketplace in Shenzhen. It is one focus point out of several that address the social and economic gap between people who produce products/ languages and those who consume them. I hope to observe and translate the daily experience of the so called, ironically, “Sanhedashen”, or “gods of Sanhe”, namely

youngsters looking for low-wage day jobs. From there I worked on a first iteration of the research and tried to project the three-dimensional demographics and experiences of the workers onto a two-dimensional surface. I used wheat pasting to mimic the visual environment of job and ad posting around factories.

In the first iteration, the government sign of “Selling your ID will lead you to a road of no



return” became the center of the discussion. I then began to think about the transference of identity, and how workers could gain imaginary new social status through selling identity cards. Without IDs, their physical bodies are grounded, but their names and information entered into a different circulation. It is a decision as metaphorically dangerous as selling one’s soul to the devil. Here is an incomplete list of possible buyers of migrant workers’ identity cards:

1. criminals at large
2. illegal immigrants
3. underage teenagers who live in net cafes
4. people having affairs and not wanting to present their real ids at a hotel front desk
5. money laundering companies that need a legal person representative to transfer risks
6. another worker who has sold/lost the id and now needs a new one to register for a new job



Another way to gain imaginary new status and self-esteem is through window shopping.

At night the place is crowded with factory workers who can only afford window shopping. Indeed, shopping, and most of the time not buying, was the favorite pastime of my coworkers. Production and consumption were the two aspects of city life that provided dreams and promises for the Chinese workers to live up to an age of modernity.

- Pun Ngai, *Made in China*, 2005











# Future Directions

Moving forward with the idea of the thesis book as a product, I intend to document its manufacturing process. The book will be sent to be printed in China and shipped back to me, and I will cover as much information in its journey as possible.

The following questions will be addressed to decipher the production process of the thesis book.

Who printed the book?

Who manufactured the printer used to print it?

Who made the paper?

How was it shipped it to me?

Materials and content included may be: email correspondences between me and suppliers, the printing order, receipts, tracking numbers, locations the book has been to, the working environment of people involved in the making and transportation, information on the printer and paper manufacturers, profiles and interviews of people involved (if accessible), photos of me designing and printing, news reports about the factories, advertisements, etc.

Readers will be able to find the tracking information (to be made available in late 2019) on the following website: [www.thesistracking.com](http://www.thesistracking.com)

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