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ANT TRIBE

ANT TRIBE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Art

By

Yan Zhao
Shenyang Aerospace University
Bachelor of Engineering in Industrial Design, 2005

August 2012
University of Arkansas

ABSTRACT

“Ant Tribe” describes the post-80s generation university graduates who live together in poor conditions without social security in communities around China's major metropolises. They dream of a better life in big cities but struggle with low-paying jobs. These struggling “elites” have become the fourth weak social group, after peasants, migrant workers and unemployed people. The reason why these college graduates are compared to ants is that they are like ants: clever, hardworking, politically weak and living in groups.

The real world is always different from the ideal world of the “Ant Tribe” in China. They often lose their purposes in a complex society. It is more important for them to recognize the distance between the real and imaginary in order to rethink whether it is a right choice to stay in a big city and try to realize their dreams. The intention of the “Ant Tribe” installation is to explore the process and concept of changing between the real and fantasy. In the installation, I hope to portray the “Ant Tribe” phenomenon widely and deeply from an artist’s perspective. The most important thing for me is using my artistic practice to investigate the power of the media over the contemporary subject in order to activate the viewers to question some social issues regarding humanity consciousness. My artwork should be thought - provoking for them. I would like to use my visual language to convey specific social issues to inquire how far the viewers are from their dreams. I hope they think about themselves in their complex society physically and psychologically when they go through my work.

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Thesis Committee:

Professor Michael Peven

Associate Professor Marilyn Nelson

Visiting Assistant Professor Larry Swartwood

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Also, I would like to special thanks to all the interviewees in my videos. It would be impossible to create this interview installation without their help.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my husband Zhuxin Dong, who provided me with endless support and encouragement.

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I. INTRODUCTION

i. What is “Ant Tribe”

“Ant Tribe” is a term coined by sociologist Lian Si, a professor at the University of International Business and Economics, Beijing, China. He wrote a book called *Ant Tribe: A record of college graduates living in groups in 2009*. “Ant Tribe” describes the post-80s generation university graduates who live together in poor conditions in communities around China's major metropolises, such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. These struggling “elites” have become the fourth weakest social group in China, after peasants, migrant workers and unemployed people. They dream of a better life in big cities but struggle with low-paying jobs. The reason why these college graduates are compared to ants is that they are like ants: clever, hardworking, politically weak and living in groups.¹

ii. Living Present Situation and Development Tendency of “Ant Tribe”

According to Lian's survey from 2009 to 2010, there are more than 100,000 “Ant Tribe” members living in Beijing and more than one million nationwide. The promise of more work opportunities is the main reason that members of the Ant Tribe stay in big cities. Most of them come from rural China. They are generally well-educated and work in areas such as insurance marketing, electronic equipment sales, advertising sales, catering services and some temporary jobs. Their average monthly income is less than \$317 US dollars, which is lower than the average income of overall Beijing residents. Their average age is from 22 to 29 years old. Some

¹ Xing Zhao, “China's growing postgrad ‘ant tribes’ (Yi Zu)” Last modified 27 November, 2009, <http://www.cnn.go.com/shanghai/none/china-buzz-ant-tribe-460917>.

of them are jobless for long periods of time. They live in rural-urban fringes and rent small apartments, which they share with many people. This phenomenon forms a unique “inhabited village”.² They are living in poor conditions without social security. Most of them would not like to explain their real situation to their families. Their volatile emotions, frustration, anxiety and other psychological problems are more serious. They rely on the internet to relax themselves from their unsatisfied emotions. “The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security indicated that China will have about 6.6 million college graduates in 2011, vs. 6.3 million in 2010.”³ The graduates’ job expectations do not match the demand of the market. There are not enough job opportunities for them. According to the imbalance of social and economic development between urban and rural areas, more college graduates choose employment in the big cities. The number of “Ant Tribe” members will increase drastically in future years. The presence of “Ant Tribe” has aroused more attention in society.

iii. The intention of “Ant Tribe” installation

The real world is always different from the ideal world of “Ant Tribe” in China. They often lose their purposes in the complex of society. It is more important for them to recognize the distance between the real and imaginary in order to rethink whether it is a right choice to stay in big cities in order to realize their dreams. My thesis installation was inspired by Jennifer Steinkamp’s video installation form, Tokujin Yoshioka’s fiber space, and Jesus Rafael Soto’s

² Sinhua news agency, “Xinhua portrays lives of China's struggling low-income graduates.”, (London: BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific, 17 July 2011), 1.

³ “College Graduates: Too Many in China, Not Enough in America?” Chatham: Newstex, 6 July 2011, 1.

penetrable sculpture. These artists' styles clarify the artistic objective that inspired me to create an interactive video installation project. The installation consists of a 3D animation, interview videos and transparent penetrable sculpture. The intention of the "Ant Tribe" installation is to explore the process and concept of changing between the real and the imaginary world. On my work, I hope to use my artist perspective to understand the "Ants Tribe" phenomenon on wider and deeper levels. Most important for me is using my artistic practice to investigate the power of the media over the contemporary subject in order to activate the viewers to question some social issues regarding humanity consciousness.

II. ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT AND CONTEMPORARY ART INFLUENCE

i. The Technical and Conceptual Development of "Ant Tribe"

My former major and career was based in the design industry, specifically production design. I love using the computer for illustration and then conveying the visual information to the viewers. I also would like to work within the capacity of my own initiative. I prefer to take part in the whole design process, including sketching, modeling and rendering. It is interesting and exciting to use my own ideas and thoughts to communicate with people and change their lifestyles. In 2009, I came to the United States to pursue my MFA degree. I came to know many software programs, such as Cinema 4D and After Effect. I can now easily use them to create a graphic design project using my talents. I began to adjust my creative direction. I find great freedom in the ability to choose any media, format, and concept that I believe can best convey my idea or information to the viewers. It was a good challenge for me to go into a new visual design field.

When I started graduate school, I looked back at my former experience in production design and came to realize that all of my former works had been based on my client needs. My creative work now aims to address practical values in the public realm rather than the private. I care about the environment, our relationship with it, and our responsibility towards it. How to find the right balance between designer and artist was a huge challenge for me during my graduate career.

As a first-year graduate student new to visual design, I became interested in fractal graphics. Fractal geometry, which was first developed in the 1970s and 80s by the French mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot, describes objects that are self-similar, or scale symmetric. This means when such objects are magnified, their parts are seen to bear an exact resemblance to the whole, the likeness continuing with the parts of the parts and so on to infinity. Two examples are coastal lines and fern leaves. This kind of new art form gave me inspiration for my current animation work. I explored the repeating simple patterns billions and trillions of times. It always brings me many unexpected results. You never know what will happen in the next second. It is somehow surprising and yet completely pleasing. It is a bold trial and good opportunity for me to explore my ideas.

ii. The Subject Matter of “Ant Tribe”

I was born in the 1980s, during China’s population-curbing one-child policy. Mine is a generation of approximately 240 million people born between 1980 and 1990. China had never seen a generation with so few siblings and so much material desire. The character of our generation is mixed with numerous contradictory elements. We are reliant and rebellious, cynical and pragmatic, self-centered and equality-obsessed. The “Ant Tribe” greatly struggles with

employment, housing and familial pressures. They still hold a positive attitude toward life. Although their dreams are seemingly far away, they believe in waiting and hoping.

The first person who created the “ant tribe” concept and used this term “Ant Tribe” to describe this generation in China is Professor Lian. He published the book “*Ant Tribe I*” in 2009. After “*Ant Tribe I*”, Professor Lian and his team extended the area of their research to all of China and produced a report based on their study. In 2010, he published “*Ant Tribe II*”. This book consists of many realist stories. When I read these two books “*Ant Tribe I*” and “*Ant Tribe II*”, I first thought of whether I can use my own art to do something for these people. I considered using the camera to record their faces and voice or directly interviewing them to know their feelings. At that time, the original idea of the “Ant Tribe” interview installation came about.

iii. Jennifer Steinkamp’s Video Installation

Jennifer Steinkamp is an American installation artist, best known for her large scale video installations. She used abstract video animation and new media style to explore her ideas in architectural space. *Einstein’s Dilemma* (Figure 1) is an interactive installation that was made as a response to the world situation between Iraq, the United States and England. The viewer’s motion can trigger the explosion’s animation images. Therefore, the viewer is compelled to consider his or her own influence on the artwork and by extension on the political situation of the time. Steinkamp’s work questions the role of science and technology. She presents a complex view of humanity’s potential for a life of equality and peace. Her artwork simulates the boundary between philosophy and technology.

This expressionistic style influenced me to make an interview video about “Ant tribe” in China. I was inspired by her large scale projected works on the building and walls, which gave me an idea about projecting my interview video on big walls.

iv. Tokujin Yoshioka’s Fiber Space

Tokujin Yoshioka is a Japanese designer. His works emphasize the balance, movement, and the sensibility of the human body. He focuses on making people feel something rather than on making something. According to Tokujin Yoshioka, “Design is something you feel, and that is why it is enjoyable”.⁴ His work is poetic and naturally demands a deep emotional response. He is good at changing his art style from form to feeling.

Tokujin Yoshioka x Lexus L-finesse -- Evolving Fiber Technology (Figure 2) in Milan (2006) inspired me to think about the question of how he combined design and material to express the visual space. He transformed the gallery space into an immense lens, which is constructed from more than 700km of transparent fibers hanging from the ceiling. The evolving fiber lens draws the viewer’s eye towards the sculptured model of the fourth generation Lexus LS flagship sedan, which sits in the center of the installation. This installation creates a unique dynamism based on the visual contrast between the purity of simplicity and the depth of elegance. Seamless anticipation gives people a sense of time to L-finesse design, creating a personal and individual

⁴ Tokujin Yoshioka, Hashiba Kazuo, and Medda Ambra. *Tokujin Yoshioka*, (New York: Rizzoli, 2010).

experience for each viewer.⁵ The light also changes people's perspective to experience a new sensation when they go through this optical transparency space.

This installation inspired me to think about the issues of material and how the light can change people's perspective to experience a new sensation when they go through this optical transparency space. I began to use optical fiber to test whether it can transfer the light from a projector and convert my graphic image into a vector ray image. Although I failed at this experiment, it inspired me to find another material to explore my idea. Saul Bass said: "Design is thinking made visual." I believed that designers or artists should never confine themselves to a single endeavor or idea. They were eager to experiment, even if doing so risked disappointment.

v. Jesús Rafael Soto's Penetrable Sculpture

Jesús Rafael Soto was an optical and kinetic artist. His *Penetrable* (Figure 3) sculpture questions viewers about what is real and what is imaginary in perpetual suspension space. Soto created a yellow cube with a mass of nylon strings. The spectators can actual touch the strings. He made metal lines to create a transparent frame through which spectators can see the sky. One nylon string hangs from each hole, which is drilled into each line of metal. The spectators could enter and feel the vibration that exists in the space. His visual perception has been turned into a physical experience. At first, the spectators had participated in his work merely by observing it. Later, the spectators became one with the space in which they entered. The spectators are placed in the middle of the wires or vertical strings, making the viewers a part of the work. The viewer's

⁵ "Tokujin Yoshioka x Lexus L-finesse – Evolving Fiber Technology," Toyota Motor Corporation, last modified February 14, 2006, <http://www.worldcarfans.com/10602157752/lexus-design-exhibition-at-milan-design-week>.

movement interacted with the work's movement. Thousands of simple strings surround participants, blurring the line between the real and imaginary.

Soto eliminated the boundaries between form and space and transformed the viewer into a participant. According to Soto, "The function of any work of art is to stimulate reflection; its interest is highly conceptual, although the artist must resort to sensorial means to make his concepts clear."⁶ Soto's emphasis shifted to the spectators and then to the nature and public space, which became the part of his optical work.⁷ Soto's concept and his understanding for the space and the viewer's participation inspired me to explore my concept about "Ant Tribe" in China and to think about how to use my artistic perspective to reflect some social issues clearly.

III. THE CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT OF "ANT TRIBE"

At first, my "Ant Tribe" work focused on modeling an abstract ant (Figure 4). I dealt with two primary metaphors, the ant and the reflective faceted surface of precious cut stones. These metaphors correspond to my generation in China, who continues working to achieve a better life. A cut precious stone is formed at high-pressure and high-temperature conditions. It is often the hardest and most precious natural material known. The idea of my geometric ants came from the special physical and structure properties of carbon atoms. I applied the characteristic of precious and rare material to the common and tiny ants. The geometric and unique ant is made up of many different reflecting facets. The biological properties of ants are replaced by the dazzling surface corresponding to the complicated reality of the contemporary society. They are enlarged and

⁶ Jesús Rafael Soto and Ascanio Oscar, *Soto: Space Art: October 4-November 3, 1985*, (Miami: Trustees of the Center for the Fine Arts-Miami, 1985).

⁷ Jesús Rafael Soto, interview by Claude Louis Renard, Paris, 1974.

integrated with buildings, streets and other urban environments. The dazzling ant and city building reflect each other. This kind of multiple reflection visual effect allows people to think about themselves and their surroundings.

I explored different media to enhance my project, such as the poster, sculpture, and animation. I created a 3D ant model in Cinema 4D and made an animation in After Effect (Figure 5). I also tried to use ABS plastic to process in a 3D printer and use paper net to tape them together in my paper sculpture. My purpose of using these materials is not focused on the ants but the ideological theme of inequality and unfairness elicited by the metaphor of the ants. Every ant is unique and precious, just like every single person in the human society. Nobody can ignore his existence. I hope that the "Ant Tribe" can get more courage and confidence through my work, and rethink their positions in the society. They are not losers but just on their way to success.

Later, I started to work on the interview video and computer animation to explore my ideas about the "Ant Tribe" in China. I extended my research beyond the "Ant Tribe" to the post-80s generation and attempted to push understanding the "Ant Tribe" phenomenon wider and deeper. My works are no longer confined to the "Ant Tribe". Instead, my aim is to reflect the confusions, anxiety, anguish and dreams of this entire generation of young people in China today.

I created an enclosed space and used four projectors to project my video and animation on three different walls (Figure 6). The video of the middle wall based on the interviews with 60 post-80s college graduates displays many Chinese faces accompanied by their voices (Figure 7). They talk about their feelings and their stories as the post-80s generation in China. The images gradually change from small to big, from weak to strong, from general to specific and from

negative to positive. This kind of visual effect will let people contemplate their directions in the society.

The bilingual text animations on the both side of the walls (Figure 8 – Figure 9) are the most common phrases from their talking, which consists of hundreds of specific letters. They are floating and overlapping each other in the infinite dark space that becomes the metaphor for the feelings, hopes, and dreams of the post-80s generation. The first part of the background music come from their real voice and their working and living environment in China. At the end of the video, I created a group of red particles, which move across the whole walls (Figure 10) and imply everybody's chance of opportunity will be coming soon. The “Ant Tribe” should be patient and wait for something to change.

All of my former works gave me more confidence to make an interactive installation, which is filled with many media forms, such as animation and sculpture. It is a big challenge to combine different media forms together very well and work them into harmony.

IV. THE ANALYSIS OF “ANT TRIBE” INSTALLATION

i. “Ant Tribe” Trailer

The “Ant Tribe” trailer is a basic introduction about the subject matter for the viewers, which contains my former works about the concept of “Ant Tribe”. People are able to gain a general idea about the “Ant Tribe” background and see some real interview videos. Since 2011, I interviewed more than 60 post-80s college graduates and 20 from an older generation in China. Some of them are my friends in China; some of them are strangers. I contacted them online and recorded their videos. They talked about their feelings and stories as the post-80s generation in

China. I translated 12 interviewee's stories and created a multiple layer effect by using the face of the interviewee, the translated text words and photography, which is from their personal living environment (Figure 11). Below are excerpt from two interview videos:

“My name is Fan Zhi. I came to Shanghai right after my graduation, because this city provides the grads of Industrial Design with a better chance and environment. Thus, I joined a big design house as a designer and I liked this job very much. My current situation in Shanghai is okay, I cannot say it's pretty good but still satisfied. More efforts are needed. I have been making progress for years but it has not reached my expectation yet. I'm willing to keep doing it with efforts as gains can be seen day by day. In my opinion, the reason why I'm in Shanghai is to do things in which I'm interested. I can live quite well in my hometown, but have to live a different way. Shanghai is the place where I can realize my dreams, although to survive in such a city as Shanghai needs to overcome a much larger pressure. I don't enjoy a life without any pressure and I think my life must be becoming better and better through my efforts and insistence.”

“Hello everyone, I'm Wang Fei, 25 years old. I'm originally from a village of Xifeng County, Liaoning Province. I went out of my hometown and begun to work before I was 20 and so far I have been working in Shenyang (Capitol of Liaoning) for more than five years. I'm currently working as a real estate sales representative. Let's briefly review my past life. At the first beginning of my life in this strange city, I was only with ¥2,000 to start with and stayed overnight in a temporary bed which cost ¥150 per month. Gradually, my living condition became better and better as I was working. Also, I taught myself a degree of accounting from a junior college. Afterwards, I owned a house myself after compensating the loan. Later on, I had another apartment unit using one-off payment. So, I'm very happy with my current situation as I started far behind the others in the city. Recently, with the money I earn, I was able to complete that accounting degree from the University of Shenyang Broadcast and TV. In the future, I'll keep doing this job and hopefully be able to get a promotion opportunity. The factors that are pushing me forward include organizing a family with my lover and kids, no need to worry about losing a job or loans or lack of money, visiting places of interests and eating whatever I like. That's the life I'm looking forward to, which is actually simple.”

ii. Text Animation

After I finished interviewing 60 persons, I realized that knowing one person's story from a book, and talking to them face to face is totally different. I also noticed another detail. Even

though their stories are different, they have some commonality. Some phrases appear many times from their stories. These high- frequency words inspired me to create the bilingual text animation. The hundreds of specific letters and Chinese characters are floating and overlapping each other in the infinite dark space that become the metaphor for the feelings, hopes, and dreams of the post-80s generation. All kinds of things mixing together create more imagery to the viewers.

The dark space represents the big city, which is filled with challenge and mystery. Everyone has many chances in this infinite space. But the younger Chinese will be puzzled and will not find their purposes. Sometimes the contradictive feelings will conflict with each other, so I think there is more and more psychological pressure on them.

iii. Abstract Particle Animation

I used the computer to make many abstract particle animation of the interviewees faces (Figure 12). The interviewee's face is made up of thousands of particles. They change from one specific face into an abstract obscure image and change back again. The face is changed from one person to another person at the same time.

The particles are floating and moving slightly, sometimes changing from small to big and then changing from big to small, which became the metaphor for the interviewee's feelings. I used this kind of effect to express a sense of freedom. The concept of real and imaginary also can be applied to this animation effect by the changing from one specific image to a blurry image. These particles become a metaphor for the new opportunities to improve their life. "Ant Tribe" can realize the value of their lives through these changing particles. The big city is full of passions, but sometimes impulsiveness. It is easy to lose oneself and forget one's original

dream. I tried to express their deep emotional thought through the changing of these abstract particles.

iv. Transparent Penetrable Sculpture

I also created a transparent sculpture, which was inspired by Tokujin Yoshioka's fiber space. I began to think of whether I can project my interview and text animation onto a transparent sculpture rather than walls. I did lots of experiments to test which material is better to absorb the light of the projector, such as nylon, fiber and plastic sheet. I chose different videos and animations to project on different material surfaces. Some of them cannot reflect the light very well. At last, I chose PVC plastic as my base material because of its transparent property. I cut PVC transparent plastic sheet into strips and placed them in a row, which look like curtains and hung them from the ceiling of gallery. The 25 pieces of transparent plastic are placed in an equal distance apart, which creates an enclosed space.

The whole transparent space, which is made of thousands of one-inch width transparent strips represents the big city, which is filled with challenge and mystery. The reflection on the strip surface gives people a kind of dazzling feeling (Figure 13). People cannot figure out what is the real image and what is the imaginary image. The reason why I cut them into many strips is that I would like people to penetrate it in order to experience the space physically.

v. An Interactive Video Installation

I used two projectors and one transparent sculpture to create a combination installation in this exhibition (Figure 14). I set up 25 layers of transparent strip curtains in the center of the gallery and placed them in an order in order to create a rectangular enclosed space. I placed the two

projectors at an angle of 90 degrees to each other and separately projected the abstract particle interview videos and the mixed abstract animation onto the transparent penetrable sculpture.

The first animation video is made of the particle image face, which is projected on the curtain surface. The image reflected on the surface of the plastic strips is blurred layer by layer because of the change in focus (Figure 15). The face image changed from clear to unclear throughout the whole layers, which created a metaphor for the distance between the real world and the ideal world. When people walk through my penetrable installation, the reflection of the light mixes with the blurring images. They can understand the complex feeling from “Ant Tribe” by their own participation. They are involved with the “Ant Tribe” world to rethink their own position in society and the cultural environment. This feeling should be thought - provoking for them.

The second mixed animation video consists of my former text animation, interview video and particle animation. The video is projected on the other big wall. The light goes through the plastic transparent sculpture in another direction. The shadows of the plastic strips are shown on the wall. When people face the wall to see the animation video, the video images are also shown on their bodies (Figure 16). This kind of multiple layers and shadows create a complex visual effect, which can inspire the viewer to think more about their participation. The shadow of the viewer can be experienced physically in relationship to one’s movements through the space. The viewer’s shadow becomes part of the image as the person passes through the projection. They are partially disrupting the image and breaking the illusion. The viewer can understand the images by using their own mind.

V. CONCLUSION

Because of my study about the “Ant Tribe” in China, I would like to extend my research beyond the “Ant Tribe” to the post-80s generation and use my work to reflect their confusions, anxiety, anguish and dreams of this entire generation of young people in China today. I would like to use my visual language to convey specific social issues to inquire how far the viewers are from their dreams. They can think about themselves in the complex society physically and psychologically when they go through my work.

It is hard to choose a social subject to convey something to people, but I found a simple and direct way to let more people know about this group generation in China. Artwork should be expressed on many levels. It should be accessible and interesting to the audience, as well as to the social culture level. It is my greatest challenge to create artwork in complex ideas.

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Figure 1. Jennifer Steinkamp, *Einstein's Dilemma*, 2003.



Figure 2. Tokujin Yoshioka, *Tokujin Yoshioka x Lexus L-finesse—Evolving Fiber Technology*, 2006, Milan.



Figure 3. Jesús Rafael Soto, *Penetrable*, 1990.

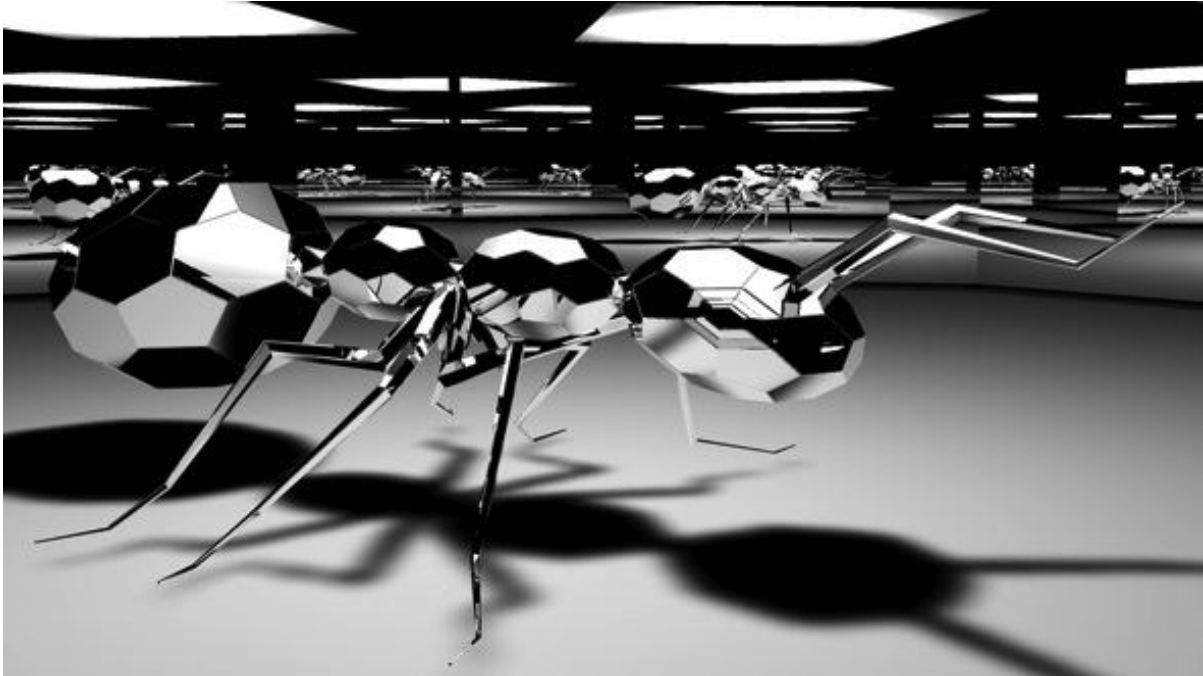


Figure 4. Yan Zhao, *Abstract Ant*, 2010.

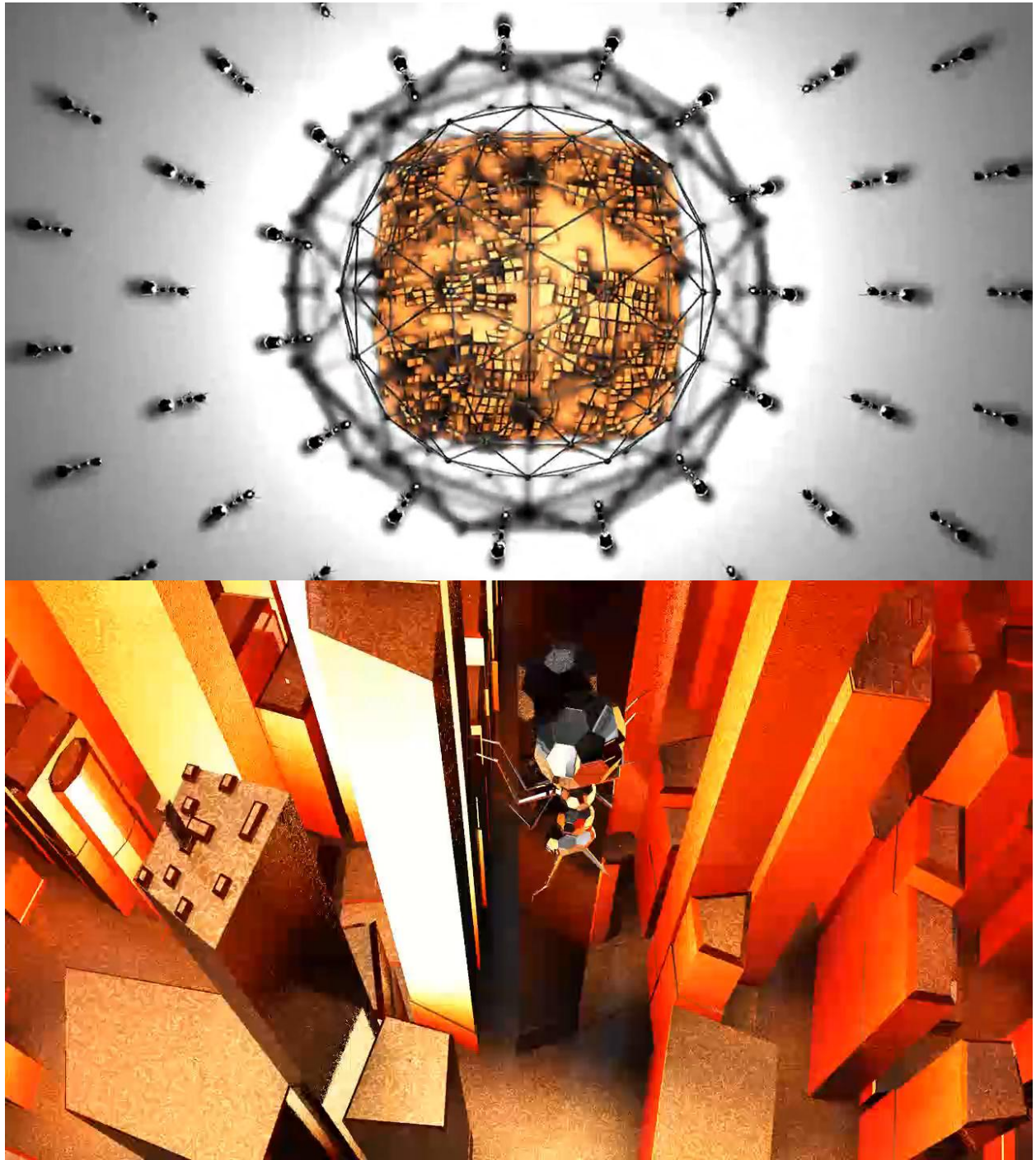


Figure 5. Yan Zhao, Abstract “ANT TRIBE” Animation Video Details, 2011.



Figure 6. Yan Zhao, MFA Candidate Review Simulate Gallery, April 2011.



Figure 7. Yan Zhao, “ANT TRIBE” Interview Video, 2011.

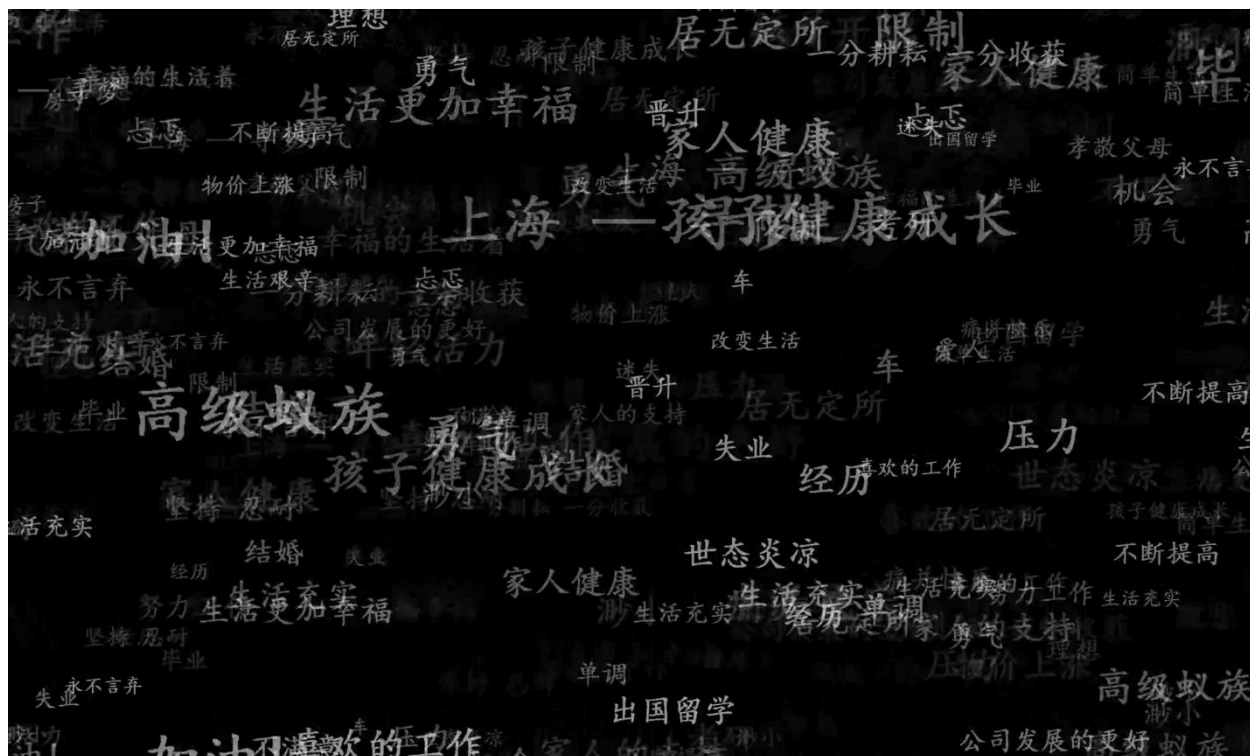


Figure 8. Yan Zhao, Chinese Text Animation, 2011.

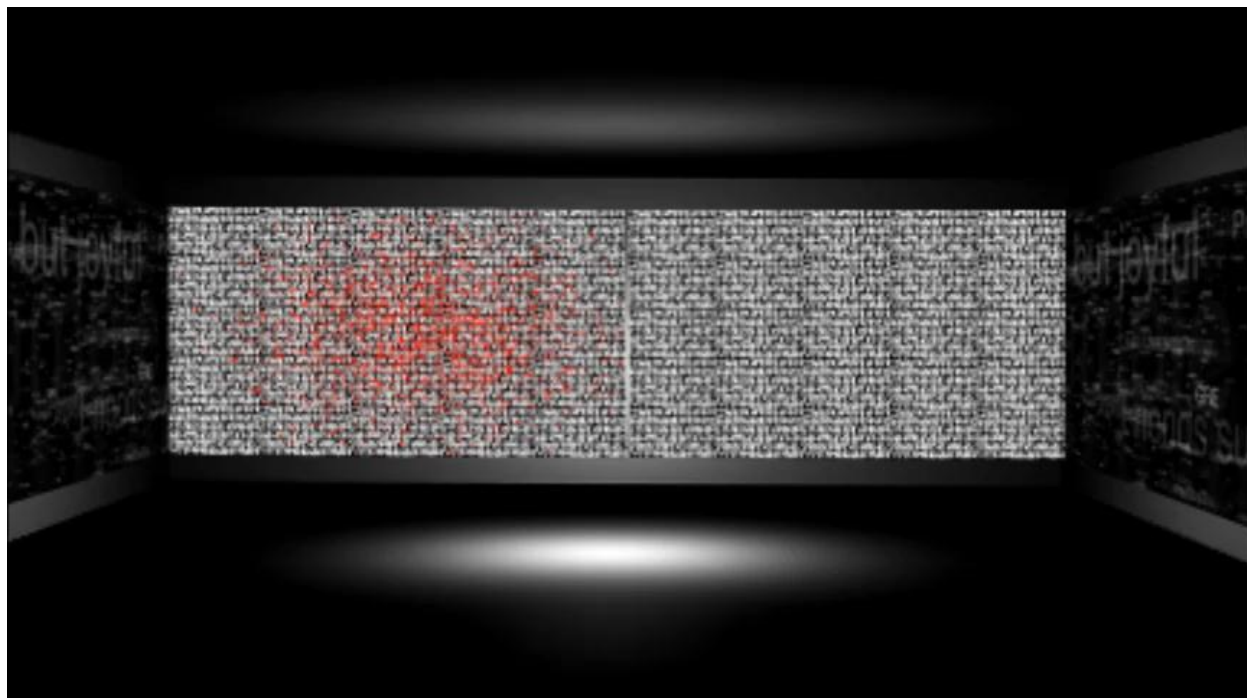


Figure 10. Yan Zhao, MFA Candidate Review Simulate Gallery Details, April 2011.

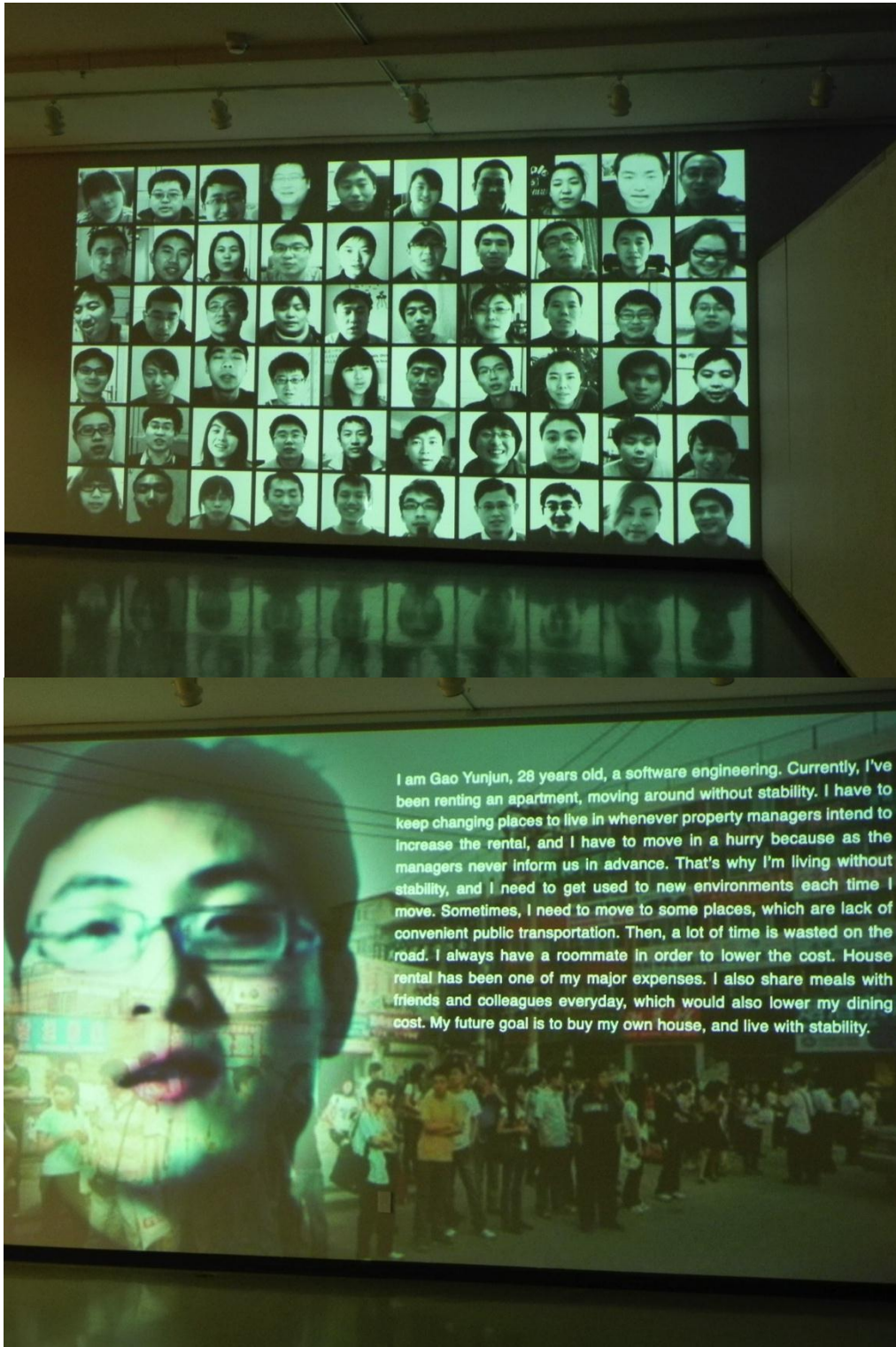


Figure 11. Yan Zhao, Interview Trailer, 2012.



Figure 12. Yan Zhao, Abstract Particle Animation, 2012.

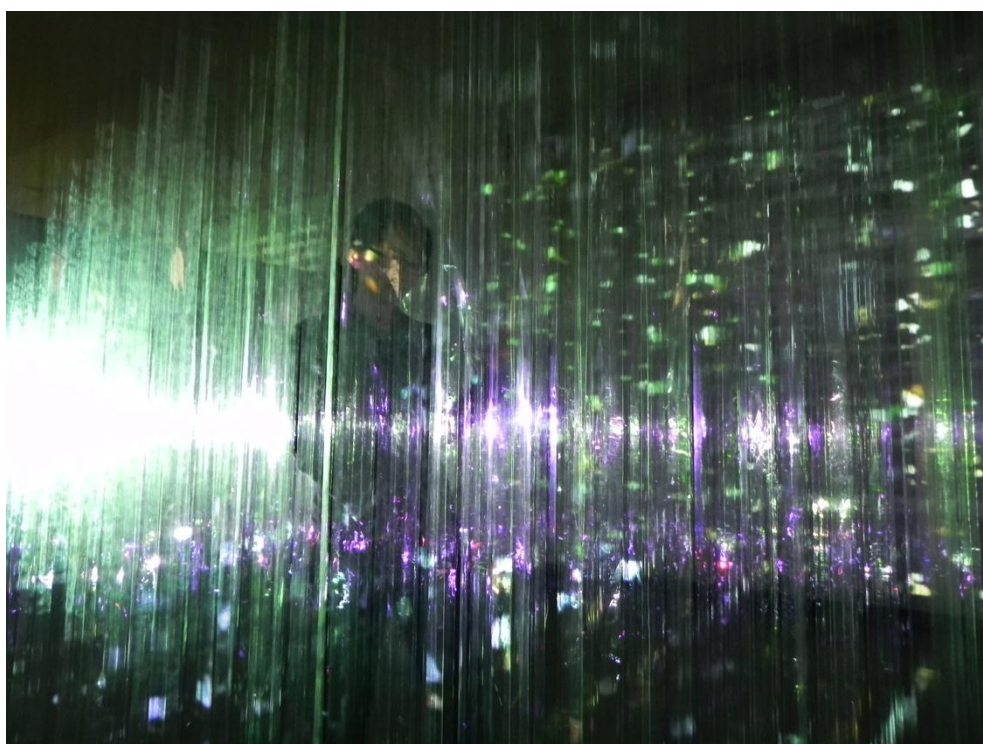
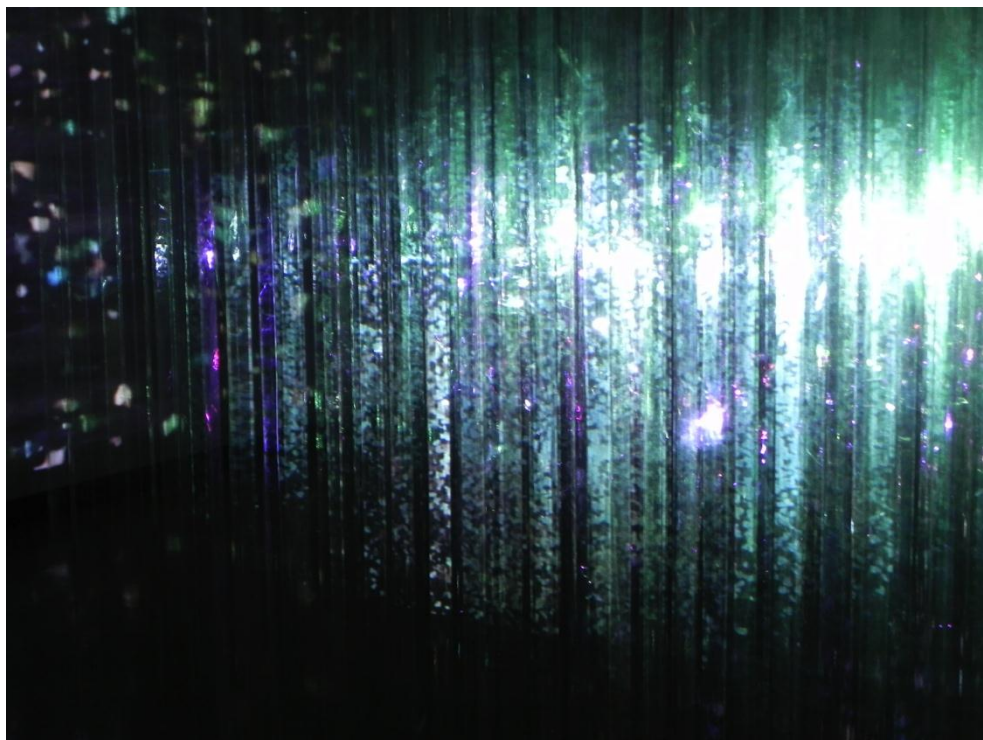


Figure 13. Yan Zhao, Interactive Video Installation Details, 2012.

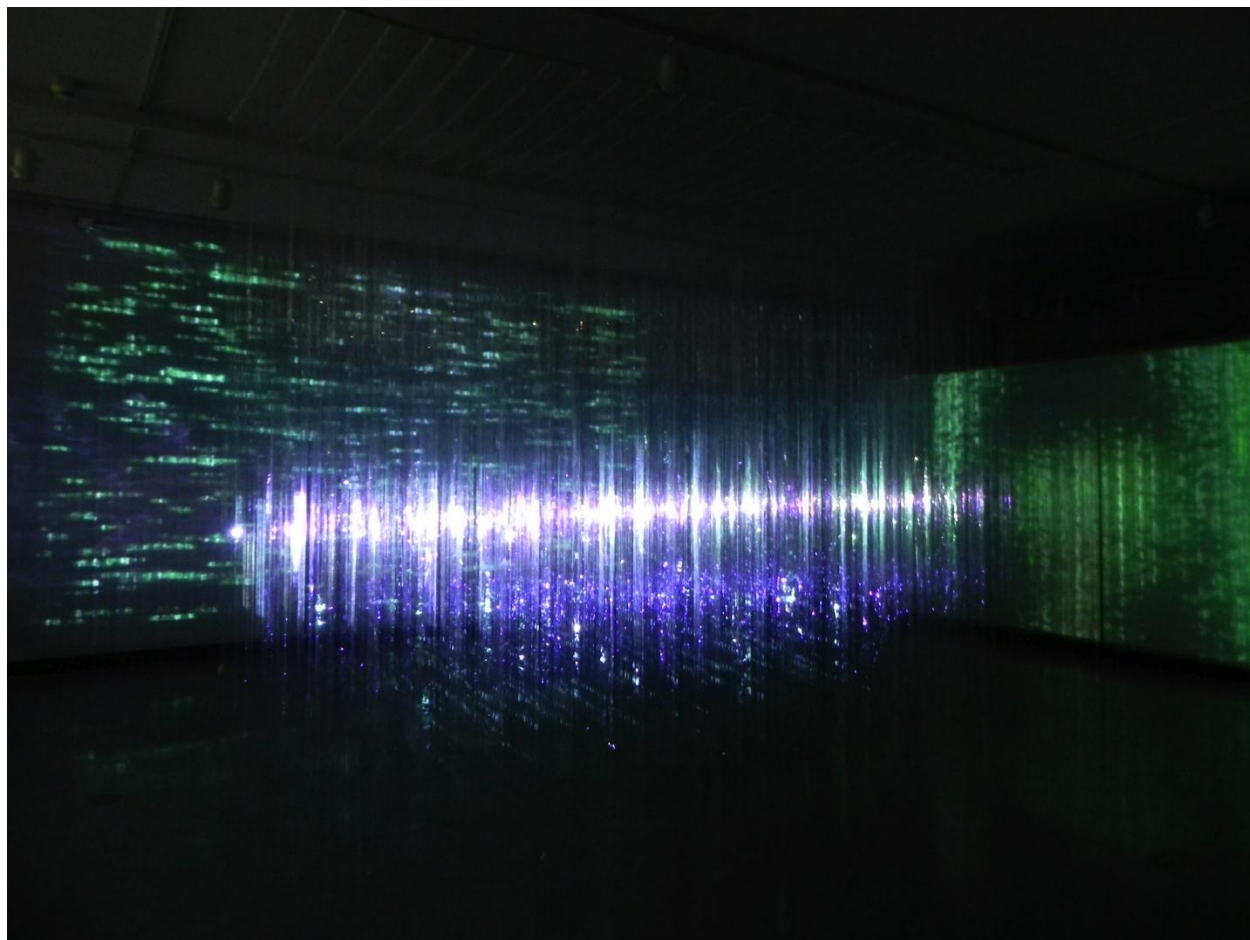


Figure 14. Yan Zhao, Interactive Video Installation, 2012.

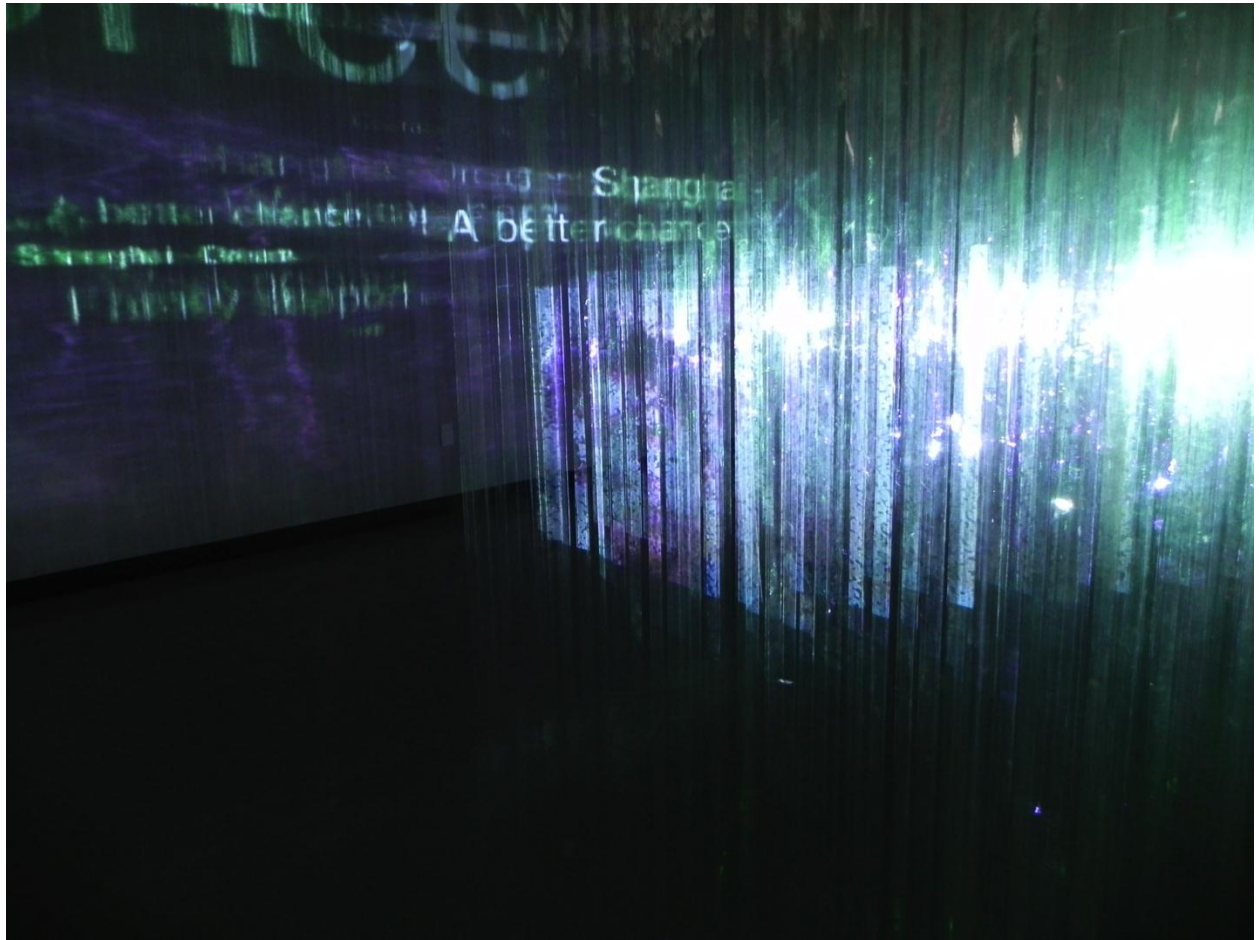


Figure 15. Yan Zhao, Interactive Video Installation Details, 2012.

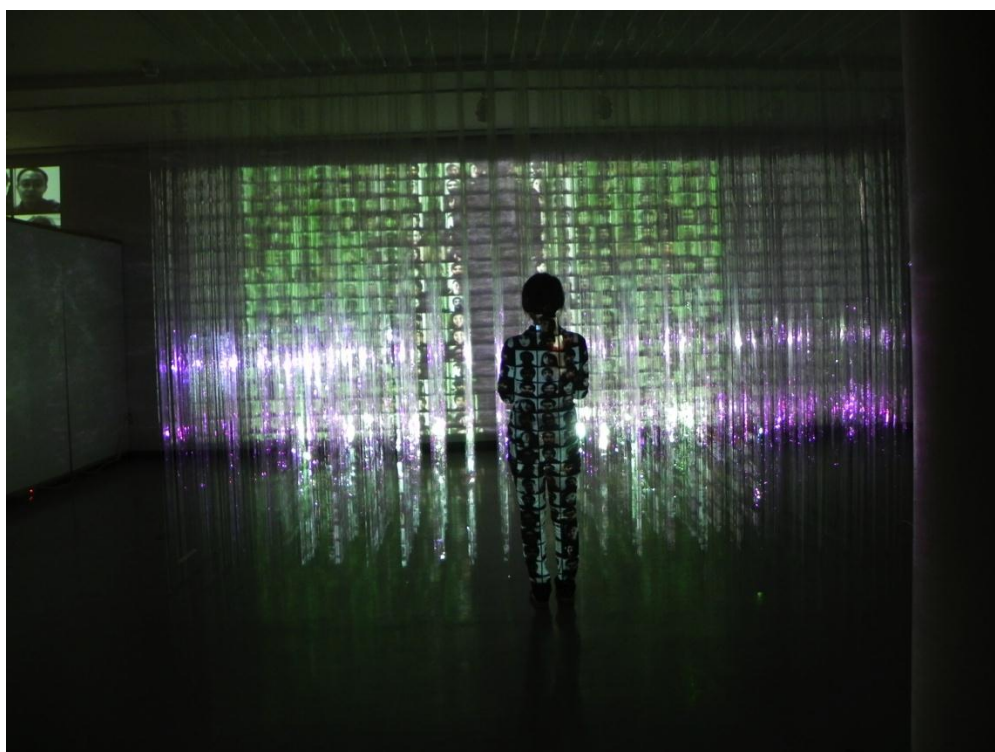
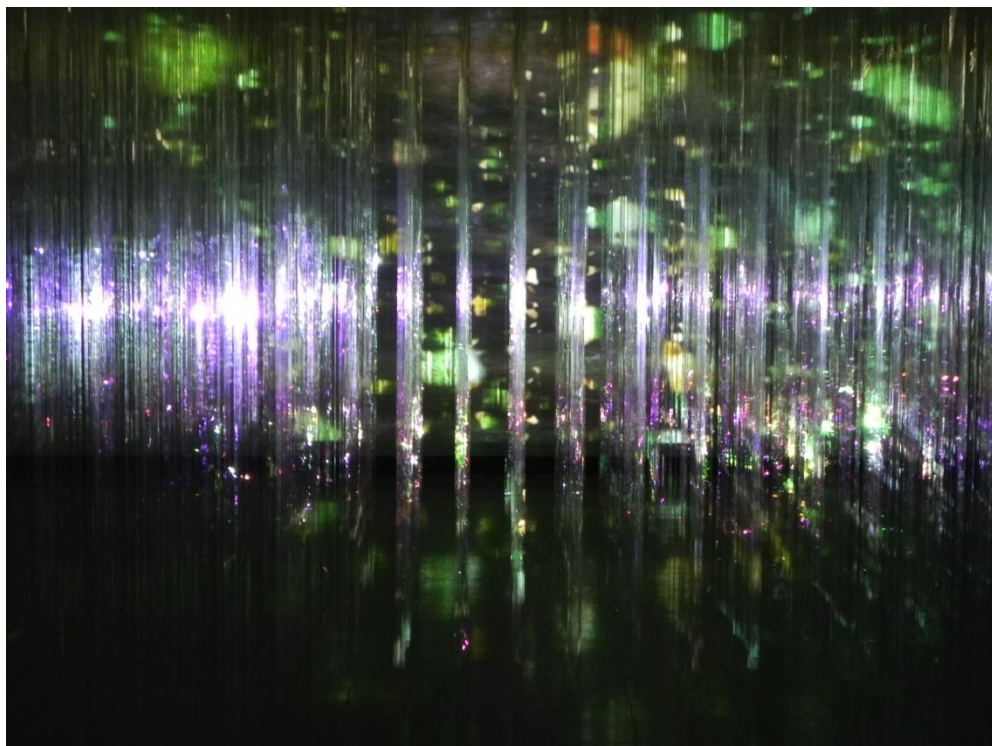


Figure 16. Yan Zhao, Interactive Video Installation Details, 2012.

