

Critical Activism

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Abstract

Anab Jain is co-founder with Jon Ardern of the foresight and design organisation Superflux, based in London. This is the edited transcript of a conversation that took place at the First Futurological Congress in Berlin, hosted by the Dubai Future Foundation, on 20 July 2018.

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Stuart Candy: How do you situate your practice in relation to futures and design?

Anab Jain: I think we are situated somewhere in the middle. We have a two-pronged approach. We do foresight and horizon scanning – that big, meta-level stuff – but we simultaneously ground it with material explorations, ethnography, research, prototyping.

Obviously we come from a design/art background more than futures. Our schooling was often about what the implications of a certain technology on society might be. And over the years, we've studied the more traditional futures methods a bit, not quite as much as a futurist would.

SC: What do you think you've gained over time from engaging with futures?

AJ: I suppose it's also what science fiction writers talk a lot about. We hope that through the lens of the future, we are able to reflect better on the present, on the decisions and the actions we take today, on where we want to be.

And to understand that the future is old. The future is actually ancient. It's not this thing that's going to suddenly happen to us then; it's now. It's really happening all the time. That awareness is what we've found really rewarding.

SC: What are some projects or initiatives that you've been involved in that you consider exemplary of your approach?

AJ: Our approach has changed a lot. We often used to work around a technology, so we would pick something like quantum computing or optogenetics, and try and understand what its potential is, but also poetic implications that the scientists or the technologists might not have explored.

And we've moved from that to thinking more socially, politically. We're very interested in the implications of living with climate change, so for a recent project, *Mitigation of Shock*, we really wanted to understand how to bring that future that is so abstract around climate change - especially in the Western part of the world - making it real and conceptually visceral, but also not dystopian.

SC: So you've been at it...

AJ: Nine years.

SC: I'm interested in how you imagine the work that you're doing against the backdrop of an increasing number of people operating at this intersection. If there is a "you are here" point on a map of bigger activities going on, where do you locate yourself?

AJ: Oh, that's a good question. We keep asking that ourselves.

"Speculative design" has become popular, the term; although we have never actively used that term so far. We are afraid of labelling the work we do within a specific discipline, because for us it's changing all the time, and we want to have the freedom to change. So we just call ourselves designers, or artists even.

Where people are interested in our work, or want to commission us or hire us, they are not thinking about us as speculative designers or critical designers either. They're thinking: "We need to think about the future, but we don't know quite how to make it visceral enough to get people to understand the consequences."

Outside of the world of design, not so many people care whether we call what we do speculative design or not. Some people call us a think tank, some people call us a research unit, some people call us artists.

SC: What are you grappling with in relation to these practices at the moment?

AJ: Lots! We've gone from being tiny to growing quite a bit, and then, recently decided to consider more carefully where we go next, and stop just producing project after project after project. I think we are trying to understand what meaningful change looks like for us.

We keep getting emails from people, and we know that the work affects people and gets them to think differently, but how can we materialise it without using this language of evaluation and impact and measuring? Because these are not things that can be instantly measured. Something that you've done to provoke people could affect them and get them to think differently after years — but how do we begin to surface that?

I see it as a form of slow critical activism. If our work becomes a catalysing force for people to imagine things they would not have been able to imagine otherwise, that's powerful. But then what? We are at that stage right now.



Figure 1. Image from *Mitigation of Shock* installation at CCCB (2017)

SC: It sounds like you’re trying to figure out to what extent “then what?” is a question that you have to answer, or one that you put to the people that you’re reaching with the work.

AJ: You’re right. I mean, we see how people receive the work, and we see how it affects them. And then we don’t see anything.

Currently I think our work is moving in two directions: one, with people whose idea of the future we may not agree with personally, but who have a lot of power and influence to affect change at a large scale. Our work (Figure 1) with them focuses on helping them consider broader, unintended consequences by enabling them to think differently and more broadly. Secondly, we work in the public sphere, triggering public imagination.

Organisations who have power and influence and can actually affect decisions around climate change or education, are so outcome driven, that their key question around any futures always seem to zoom in on: What are the outcomes we get, and what’s the impact, how will this affect our strategy?

SC: And what do you tell them?

AJ: We don’t really have a clear answer. We can say, okay, we did this with the UNDP, and that led to the opening of this completely new department where they’re thinking about alternative financing (Figure 2). Or we did this, where it affected a decision or policy change. Examples are few and far between where there is a clear, linear, obvious trajectory of “impact”.

People want concrete stuff, and the thing is, there isn’t a concrete answer. There isn’t a concrete outcome, to be honest. The outcome is the process by which you will start shifting your thinking.



Figure 2. Image from *Mūtō Labs*, created for FundForum International finance exposition (2016); restaged for UNDP Innovation Summit (2017)

SC: What do you think are the most important things for people who are interested in this area of work to be aware of?

AJ: One of the questions I always get is, “How do you actually make money, and who are your clients?” and it’s like, it doesn’t seem plausible that we could even be doing work and be paid. We’re not set up to be making profit, but we are alright!

We could earlier this year have gone easily from eight to twenty people. But we realised that scaling in numbers is perhaps the wrong way of thinking about “growth” for our studio, and the scale lies in the nature and ambition of each project, and the way it can influence a decision or change perception. The bespoke nature of our work (Figure 1, Figure 2) means we cannot adopt a cookie cutter approach to our services. No brief is ever the same. And having a flexibility of staff and overheads to support such work is very important. We might have big ambitions, but it’s not dependent on the scale of our practice.

SC: So what then does success mean?

AJ: It’s funny, you know ten years ago, if you’d asked us, I think we’ve achieved what we set out to do in many ways: to be able to run a successful practice, to align increasingly our interests with paid work, to get recognition for it, to be financially sustainable. We’re kind of there now.

We can now turn down projects that we know are neither going to be well paid nor intellectually stimulating, and we would not have done that before. For all these years, Jon would make websites, I would go into film editing, using our skills, barely taking any salary. All of that has led us to a point where now – to say no is a huge privilege.

For a designer, it’s so tempting to have 20, 30, 40 employees, to become “the office”. It is in the model. I am often asked: “How big are you? How many employees do you have?” And they will actually decide whether to give us work or not based on my answer. So yes, sometimes it’s tempting to scale because scale is seen as a visible sign of success.

SC: I really like this unwillingness to settle for an inherited definition of success. Instead it's striving for a certain quality of impact, or a certain kind of cultural presence.

AJ: We tried it, and we're both not managers. Well, we do have to now, but we really enjoy the actual craft of storytelling, making, building, designing and all of that. So we want to find a way we can continue our practice.

SC: Have you ever done a futures process for your own organisation?

AJ: No! We should, shouldn't we?

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