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DESIGNING FOR UNCERTAINTY
Interview with Anab Jain. Issue No. 2, 'Returns'. Published October 2013.

Responsible design requires thinking ahead, outside of the realm of today's definition of normalcy, and vravely facing the risks head-on. Anab Jain of Superflux shares her curiosity for the near-future, superdensity and the power of suspended disbelief.

Welcome to postnormal times. It's a time when little out there can be trusted or gives us confidence. The espiritu del tiempo, the spirit of our age, is characterized by uncertainty, rapid change, realignment of power, upheaval and chaotic behaviour. We live in an in-between period where old orthodoxies are dying, new ones have yet to be born, and very few things seem to make sense. Ours is a transitional age, a time without the confidence that we can return to any past we have known and with no confidence in any path to a desirable, attainable or sustainable future. It is a time when all choices seem perilous, likely to lead to ruin, if not entirely over the edge of the abyss. In our time it is possible to dream all dreams of visionary futures but almost impossible to believe we have the capability or commitment to make any of them a reality. We live in a state of flux beset by indecision: what is for the best, which is worse? We are disempowered by the risks, cowed into timidity by fear of the choices we might be inclined or persuaded to contemplate.[1]
—Ziauddin Sardar

Not the happiest of statements but it drew Anab Jain's attention. Later, presenting at *The Global Design Forum*, she wanted for people, especially designers, to take notice of coming trends. Instead of the period-constrained 'post,' she titled the talk "Designing For The New Normal." The talk received quite a bit of attention and was revisited at *NEXT Berlin* last spring.

The talk reviews a number of 'oddities,' trends to paint a portrait of this 'New Normal,' many of these trends are pointing to what strategic designer Scott Smith might call "a 'moment of superdensity' where chaos, uncertainty, rapid change and realignment of power are becoming the new operating parameters." Jain's design practice, *Superflux*, "work[s] at the intersection of emerging technologies and everyday life to design for a world in flux." It's interesting that this world Sardar portrayed, which might seem like something strategists, futurists or environmentalists might tackle, is approached in such innovative ways through the lens of design but it also makes perfect sense. She notes:

You can argue that things have always changed—fair enough. But I think there's something to be said about the pace at which this is happening and the way it is happening that seems different. It's quite a critical time for us as designers to take notice and to not just assume that I am a designer, designing products, I will keep designing products. The idea of what a product means is changing rapidly.

According to Jain, Design for the New Normal works in two ways; “uncloaking the ‘strange now’ and extrapolating current trends to present the sheer breadth, of, often unsettling, future possibilities that lie ahead of us.” In the first instance, it means to break through established narratives, busting out of what Venkatesh Rao calls the ‘Normality Field’[2], to find ways of revealing elements of the strange now that we tend to glance over, as Rao explains:

[W]e live in a continuous state of manufactured normalcy. There are mechanisms that operate—a mix of natural, emergent and designed—that work to prevent us from realizing that the future is actually happening as we speak. To really understand the world and how it is evolving, you need to break through this manufactured normalcy field.

In the second, it entails a form of futurism, thinking about what could happen, working on plausible scenarios and creating ‘fictions’ to introduce the viewers/users to this possibility.

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When talking about the New Normal, examples often tend towards makers, the effects of connectivity and open source technology, to a form of democratization in the use and proficiency of technology. There’s also a view—presented by Jon Evans and Marc Andreessen among others—where we are sliding towards a world in which most of the wealth goes to a small ‘technocratic class’ and everyone else scrapes by. It can feel as though it’s two different futures. Do you believe more in one or the other, or are they just two facets that both require consideration?

I think it’s pretty much the second bit, and also on a case-by-case basis, it changes. In this way we shy away from calling ourselves ‘futurists’ or ‘futurologists’ and insist on the simple title of ‘designers.’ We are not in the business of predicting and we do not want to even attempt to do that because it’s not a worthwhile exercise. It’s about prototyping. Using our design tools. Asking how we can use our design tools to create the conceptual frameworks that will help people engage with these multiple worlds. That’s what we’re interested in.

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You’ve mentioned the changing relationships between designers and products. Could you tell me more about that?

Traditionally if you want a product, you have to go and buy it from a shop. It has been made somewhere else and involves a big process that you’re completely cut off from. These new technologies are allowing people to start tinkering and make their own products. It’s a peripheral trend, and I’m not suggesting by any means that it’s the same as going to a shop and buying a product—but what I’m suggesting is that it’s becoming easier to make your own stuff. The technologies and the techniques and the materials that were once part of a factory or in a research lab or science lab are now increasingly accessible to people on the street. It’s a democratization of technology. The tools and the resources are now widely available to a range of people who would not have had access to them before, that’s the key thing. This doesn’t necessarily mean that we will all be buying 3D-printed products. It’s a wave and there are a lot of things to still think about.

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That's a big shift in power and roles for all the players in society. Which challenges and opportunities do you see for designers specifically, but also the society at large, and for the educational space? I assume we will need a very diferent kind of skill set in this New Normal?

Take designers who today are sitting in their studios, designing products. I know someone who is running a company designing sex toys. It's becoming increasingly popular to 3D print sex toys. So what happens to his company if there is someone with a great idea who starts printing 3D-printed sex toys and puts up the files online? If 20 people buy it, it may not seem like a competition to start with, but it could potentially be one. Sex toys are not the main thing, but they are a good example because these are the kinds of things that people will want to make with 3D printers. Not lamps or shoes.

For us designers it's a tricky situation because on one side we want to support open democratization of technology. On the other hand, our own role seems to be a bit uncertain. As designers, it's not just the way we design things that changes. We need to be in a slightly different space. We need to be in a space where we are working alongside organizations, governments and research labs to actually start defining these new spaces. We need to be able to have the tools that can call people to action, to start playing with the risks and uncertainty instead of pushing them under the carpet.

At Superflux we say we design for uncertainty, we design with risk and I think that even though in the end our outcomes are often products and experiences, our starting point is often thinking about the near future—even the far future—and mapping out risks to face them head-on. In that sense we want to be ahead of the game rather than continuing in the same role that we are in right now.

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As a service company, how do you find clients for this kind of design job, how do you approach other organizations to co-design stuff, or do you prefer to work on projects on your own?

All three scenarios work. It's really tricky for a large organization to come and say "Hi Superflux, we want to take some risks. We're gonna hire you." It's always a dialogue, it's always incremental steps. You might start with a project or a workshop, and then incrementally work with the stakeholders to show them the opportunities that can come up if they are willing to take some risks. It's a real battle, I'm not denying it.

We would never suggest to organizations to take large risks at large costs of resources. But it's about taking risks conceptually. To be able to open your mind, to see the potential and to be able to let go for a couple of days and allow for some prototypes to emerge, to allow that process to happen. If you are able to successfully do that, that's a great win.

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Besides consciously taking risks, what would be your survival tips and your strategies for both fellow designers and for larger organizations?

To be able to bring to the table the political, economic and social implications of things that we are designing and to be able to tell your client the context within which that product or service is going to be in, not just today, but five years from now—if they want it to be a long-term investment. It's our responsibility as designers to be able to do that. We shouldn't shy away from it.

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What are some of the big challenges and opportunities that keep you awake at night?

I suppose it's more about dream projects. Working on a certain kind of project gets me excited. For instance, we would love to work with the organization called *Planetary Resources* who is doing asteroid mining. We are interested in understanding the implications of what it means to go to space and mine asteroids. What does it mean to our economy? An organization that's so deeply invested in doing that... it would be great to be able to see where their investment goes, how far it goes and what it means in terms of white collar jobs today.

To work with space projects of that kind is extremely exciting. At the same time I'm quite interested in working with prolific science fiction authors like Margaret Atwood. It would be a dream to work with her on a project where we can actually make tangible near-future gadgets that will allow people to experience some of these things that we think about in the industry. These are just dream projects. Things that keep me up are also things like the political situation in Britain, how we can get rid of the Tories, and how DARPA [The Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency] can get away with crowdsourcing militarization. It's horrifying, but fascinating.

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Science fiction as a whole is getting challenged a bit as some feel the writers are not inventing the future as much as they once did. Neri Oxman, for example, in her work goes to the past instead, to mythology. I was wondering where your inspiration comes from, where you do your research to get ideas to design the future?

That's a very valid point. I've grown up in a tradition of fantasy and mythology, so I suppose somewhere in the back of your mind that does play an important role in how you cultivate an attitude towards suspended disbelief. You're more open to things that are outside of the normalcy field.[3] That's one thing. More importantly, in terms of our research and work, we are inspired by looking at the present. We're looking at the newspapers. When we talk about the future, it's mostly, actually designing for the present. All of the weak signals, things happening at the periphery and trends that may not be visible but are already happening. There comes all sorts of inspiration then we try to see how we can probe them further and design possibilities that may dissect our lives in ways that lustrous, shiny, glossy futures tend to avoid. It's the idea discussed at the NEXT conference, 'Can we use this way of thinking to connect the raw weirdness of our times?' I think a lot of science fiction was a way of talking about the anxiety of the present.

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It's tinted with the present of the author, yes. So you're identifying, or finding within the present, little bits of the future and scaling it up to how it's going to look when it's civilization-wide?

You could say that. It's also to show the complexities, in our case, of technology and its development. How can you look beyond what is one view and a singular vision of the future which is created largely by marketing hype and sensationalist headlines? How do you show the more messy and complicated world in which any technology will actually live? We find all of the visions of technology that are presented and accepted more universally because of their seductiveness and gloss to be equally fiction. It's just creating a possibility for people to think outside of what is fed to us and to create alternate visions of the future. At the end of the day our interest is in many possible futures not in that one future that we are told about.

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No one knows anyway.

Exactly. Absolutely.

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At NEXT you said that schools aren't teaching the current world, that we need to teach how to innovate, how to create, how to invent and that then the kids can find out what they want to learn and go learn it. How does that relate to a world that is more technological and maybe does need a certain form of training.

What I was trying to say was that the sort of curriculums in these top-down educational systems that we have, are very much out of touch with what's going on. There are new sets of tools and things that the near-future generations will need to cope and exist that haven't been given thought, by a rather large part of this stream of people who just go through the system like you were doing 30—40 years ago. It was more of a comment on that. There are different sets of arguments with regards to whether it's better to instill creativity and see what kids come up with, or whether it requires more direction. I don't think it's one or the other but sometimes you need to let the kids go and explore, sometimes you need to show them some directions.

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It's more about fnding a balance between the two.

Yes, it's about breaking the silos of education systems that bracket everyone into learning in a similar fashion, to be learning maths and algebra and language in a way that is perhaps insignificant.

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The transdisciplinary or anti-disciplinary type of discussion.

Maybe. Maybe it means having some classes in programming that are slightly different, some classes in making, not always having exams in the way that they're structured today where how fast you write is the way you are judged. It's several things. The type of tool sets or skills sets and the engagement with a world every day... I think education needs to be a bit more provocative. It's sort of been conformist.

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Especially to engage kids who have so much access to so many things now. I'm thinking of my two year old, wondering with everything he's going to see by the time he's in highschool how you'll be able to challenge him.

You met my one year old, by the time he goes to college we're going to be in the hardest, deepest climate change issues that serious scientists are pointing to. It seems like "Ah, no... it'll be fine", but it's not. The thought of him going to the same sort of school system that I went through where you show up and do your exams to get good grades and everything is fine, it just doesn't seem appropriate.

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It's not going to be very helpful, no. One of the things we're seeing is the growth of DIY bio and synthetic biology. Of course it has people very excited and very nervous, what are your thoughts?

I think the good part about it is the access to tools and technology which were once the territory of scientists and experts. That there is an active engagement with the tools is brilliant. We're working on a project at the moment that is quite far into the future, we're imagining a world where germline gene therapy becomes a common practice. It's not exactly synthetic biology,

but it's sort of a genetic synthetic biology combination. What happens when designed genetic material makes its way into our bodies, and what are some new laws and healthcare models that will evolve. People will have genes and genetic material in their bodies that is patented by corporations, so [at that point] are you owned by corporations? What are the consequences? We are at one level very interested in this, as we are with other sorts of new technologies, but it's not just thinking about new products and services that come out but also what are the ethical, legal and political implications of these. It's important for us to think about because nothing sits in isolation. One day you may happily say you've designed augmented-reality glasses, or Google Glass, the next you may read in the paper about the privacy implications when that same technology gets into different hands. People get a whole new perspective on it. It's that sort of thing. That's one level.

Another thing that concerns me is the approach to synthetic biology that is reductively compared to the computing evolution, how you could put digital and electronic bits together and make things. It's compacted as 'you can combine genetic materials, DNA, RNA, proteins, etc. in a LEGO-like fashion,' that you can edit organisms from scratch. That is the sort of understanding around which all of the *iGEM* [International Genetically Engineered Machine] competitions happen and a lot of DIY bio things. *'Hey, I can take the fluorescent gene from that bacteria and insert it into this fish and make a glowing fish!'* What happens when this fish enters the waters of the Pacific Ocean and starts breeding and creating a lot of unhealthy effects in the biodiversity of the ocean?

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It's an analogy with information technology that is used to convey the potential, but it doesn't convey the thinking of ethics and repercussions.

Absolutely, and also, digital bits and electronics do not mutate. There's not the same degree of predictability. Yes, we've reached a point where we are now programming algorithms that are out of our control, but by and large, it's something that we can control. While with nature, this is all based on large amounts of speculation that the genetic material we mix will mutate as expected. They target a selection of cells with certain amount of genetic material and hope that there will be some kind of mutation but there could be completely something else. And sometimes unexpected mutations are great for evolution. If there was no mutations we wouldn't have evolved to be who we are.

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It reminds me of when people say we're killing the planet. We're not killing the planet, we're killing our living conditions. The planet will go on just fine. There might be mutations, but not the ones we want.

Exactly.

Anab Jain is a designer with a passion for creating opportunities and building tools that can lead the world towards new and desirable futures. She is the founder of Superflux, a collaborative design practice that works at the intersection of emerging technologies and everyday life.