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Expert Insight

Yanwen Hang on Human-Centered Innovation, Healthcare Design, and the Synthesis of Emerging Technology and Visual Art

Yanwen Hang

Interviewed by Elizaveta Akimova

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Abstract

This interview explores the dual-track career of Yanwen Hang, a prominent visual strategist bridging elite typographic scholarship with enterprise-scale brand leadership. The text examines her specialized design methodologies, specifically the "Outside-In" Empathy Method and the "Algorithmic Vitality" framework, which synthesize math logic with organic design. Furthermore, it investigates the critical role of typographic excellence in global communication and the strategies behind directing visual continuity during multi-billion dollar corporate mergers.

Keywords: Brand Strategy, Typography, Algorithmic Vitality, Type Directors Club (TDC), Experiential Design, Outside-In Empathy, IBM, HashiCorp, Visual Architecture.

Yanwen Hang is an internationally celebrated brand designer, visual strategist, and experiential design leader. She holds a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) and an MFA from the Art Center College of Design. Currently driving brand innovation at IBM, she previously served as Visual Lead for HashiCorp, where she masterminded experiential design for HashiConf (10,000+ global tech leaders) and engineered the multi-million dollar AWS re:Invent Diamond-level activation, directly influencing \$63.39M in strategic pipeline. The great-grandchild of traditional Chinese landscape painting master Lu Yanshao, she is a multi-year winner of the Typographic Excellence Award from the Type Directors Club (TDC 66 & TDC 68), Grand Winner at the NYX Awards, and multi-Platinum recipient at the Muse Creative Awards.

1. Artistic Heritage and Design Decision-Making

Yanwen, your philosophy of art is based on a great artistic heritage, as you are a great-granddaughter of the legendary Chinese landscape painter Lu Yanshao. How does this tradition of fine arts affect your decision-making processes in creating visual systems of modern tech companies?

My great-grandfather viewed painting not as a mere replication of the physical world, but as an expression of internal vitality and the flow of energy (Qi). Inheriting this tradition deeply reshaped my understanding of graphic design. I do not see the visual system as a commercial problem-solving exercise; rather, I see graphic design as a "vessel" for human consciousness and perception. Instead of treating graphic design as a static arrangement of text and images, I treat the canvas as a living ecosystem. I place immense value on the negative space, structural weight, and the rhythmic transition of visual elements. This allows me to elevate graphic design from a functional utility into an evocative visual language, one that balances structural rigor with emotional resonance,

inviting the viewer to not just read the design, but to truly feel and inhabit it.

Figure 1. HashiConf '25 Keynote Entrance. Immersive large-scale spatial entry using dynamic ambient architectural lighting and layered vertical louvers.

2. The "Outside-In" Empathy Method

You invented the Outside-In Empathy Method to build connection between automated computer software and human perception. Would you please elaborate on the mechanisms of this method?

The Outside-In Empathy Method is a design framework explicitly built to view physical environments entirely through the eyes and psychology of the attendee, rather than the ego of the designer. When humans enter a massive event activation, they are often hit with a chaotic wall of noise and heavy cognitive overload. The core mechanism of this method is to dismantle that friction, transforming the brand identity into a completely seamless, immersive environment rather than just crudely plastering printed graphics onto flat walls.

Graphic Layout: We eliminate decorative distractions and let the core content dictate the architecture. By using expansive, open grid systems embedded directly into the physical space, information becomes clear and uncluttered.

Color Systems: We reject flat, harsh printed graphics. Instead, we extend the core brand colors into the environment by embedding them directly into diverse physical materials, lighting, and textures.

Typography Hierarchy: Fonts are integrated into the environment's human scale. Monumental typographic structures establish a confident sense of place, while tactile, eye-level text treatments act as a warm conversational guide.

Figure 2. HashiConf '24 Generative Art Plotter. On-site generative art activation featuring a precision mechanical pen plotter drawing continuous, interactive linework.

3. Typography as Global Intercultural Communication

Twice you were nominated to the Typographic Excellence Award by Type Directors Club (TDC 66 & TDC 68). Why does typography become such an effective tool of global intercultural communication?

Typography is the ultimate tool for global intercultural communication because it sits precisely at the intersection of logical text and emotional image. When my projects No U Turn and Cyberdada were recognized by the Type Directors Club, it proved that even if an audience cannot read a specific language, they can instantly read the emotional and cultural energy embedded within the letterforms. Typography translates abstract mindsets into a universal visual language that connects with human perception across borders. Intensive exhibition activity in highly curated, academic spaces acts as a vital creative laboratory. This academic validation elevates a designer's authority and allows me to bring uncompromised artistic rigor back to commercial clients.

Figure 3. Vintage Printer Setup at AWS re:Invent 2025. Functioning vintage computer terminals and live dot-matrix printer generating personalized ASCII art.

4. Building a \$63.39M Pipeline Through Experiential Design

At HashiCorp and IBM, you designed the Experiential Brand Design and organized the multi-million-dollar AWS re:Invent activation, which exceeded expectations by 105%. What techniques are needed for building an exhibition booth that creates \$63.39 million executive business pipeline?

At premier gatherings like AWS re:Invent, generating a \$63.39 million pipeline requires designing a "theater of engagement" tailored entirely around the attendee's sensory and psychological journey. Cloud infrastructure is inherently abstract, so we created a fully immersive spatial environment where deep-tech concepts became tangible, memorable tactile experiences.

The Interactive Keyboard Wall: A massive, responsive interactive wall embedded directly into the physical structure, transforming a cold tech concept into an intuitive, playful spatial experience.

The Vintage ASCII Art Printer: A live vintage printer generating custom ASCII art on-site, giving attendees a personalized piece of tech-art that sparked curiosity and long lines.

Custom Keycaps: Premium mechanical keyboard caps designed as swag, creating a permanent, high-value visual connection to the brand.

Figure 4. Cyberdada Poster Series. Exhibition layout exploring human psychology and evolutionary logic within automated systems.

5. Academic Exhibition and Commercial Practice

Your art is recognized through major exhibitions and publications, including archiving on Fonts In Use, presentation at the Changwon National University International Arts Festival, and inclusion in the global top 100 by Creative Quarterly. How does representation in academic spaces impact your commercial practice?

Immersing myself in highly academic and curated spaces is essential for pioneering forward-looking commercial strategies. These platforms represent a realm of uncompromised creative exploration where design principles can evolve entirely free from short-term corporate constraints. Corporate branding is highly prone to rapid homogenization. By channeling advanced conceptual frameworks — marrying scientific, objective mathematical rigor with dynamic, organic evolutionary logic — I can introduce bold, defensible visual systems that stand out. Pure art spaces provide the deep theoretical foundation needed to design brand environments that are not superficial decorations, but inimitable, future-proof assets that build profound user trust and market differentiation.

Figure 5. Oh Fructose Cover Design. Conceptual publication emphasizing strict mathematical layout where content entirely dictates form.

6. Visual Integration During Multi-Billion Dollar Mergers

You had the task to preserve brand identity and integrate it into the visual system during the multi-billion dollar acquisition of HashiCorp by IBM. What are the main difficulties faced by a visual strategist integrating two different brand identities?

During a multi-billion-dollar merger, a visual strategist faces the monumental task of maintaining emotional and visual continuity. The primary difficulty lies in balancing the preservation of existing brand equity with the alignment of a future corporate ecosystem, all while managing the anxiety of the user community.

In deeply technical open-source communities, users possess immense tribal loyalty to the brand's visual identity. Any abrupt or superficial change can instantly shatter user trust. My approach is to act as a "stabilizer" — diving deep into the visual DNA of both organizations to find shared structural principles. By building an integrated communication framework where the heritage of the acquired brand is structurally woven into the new parent environment, we assure the community that their ecosystem is evolving rather than being erased.

Editorial & Review Credits

Editor-in-Chief & Interviewer: Elizaveta Akimova

Featured Expert: Yanwen Hang

Peer Review Board:

Xinyue Hope Shen

Award-winning, Cornell-trained landscape architect and design critic with global project experience at SWA Group. Recognized by the National ASLA, IDA, and MUSE Design Awards, and a guest lecturer and critic at UNLV and the University of Houston.

"Yanwen Hang's work demonstrates a rare ability to transform typography, brand strategy, and spatial experience into a unified language of perception. Her practice stands out for bridging fine-art sensitivity with enterprise-scale visual systems, showing how design can preserve cultural depth while creating measurable impact in complex global technology environments."

Yumei Feng

Award-winning product designer, artist, and AI innovator specializing in human-centered design and healthcare tech. Recognized by the Red Dot and UX Design Awards, with work exhibited at NYCxDESIGN and the Louvre.

"Demonstrating a compelling exploration of how experiential design transforms technology and typography into immersive systems of perception, bridging global brand strategy with deeply human-centered ways of seeing and feeling space."

Zhijiang Shan

Architectural Researcher specializing in Sustainable Design; member of ASC and IIDA, recipient of the 2025 "World's Best Architect" award.

"This paper presents an in-depth design interview of interdisciplinary research value, integrating traditional Chinese landscape aesthetics with the visual identity systems of cutting-edge technology brands. It comprehensively presents two exclusive original design frameworks, featuring a complete theoretical system backed by actionable commercial case studies. The article clearly dissects core industry issues such as typography, immersive spatial design, and post-merger visual integration, offering a fresh Eastern perspective for contemporary experience design and global brand visual communication."

This article has undergone an editorial review process by members of the Curatone.art Editorial Board.

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Research Context & Expert References

This interview is a foundational part of Curatone.art's ongoing research project: "The Impact of Contemporary Art and Design on Global Social Structures."

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