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Expert Insight

Yefan Liu on the Intersection of Social Activism and Spatial Design

Yefan Liu

Interviewed by Elizaveta Akimova

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Abstract

This expert insight features a dialogue with spatial designer Yefan Liu, exploring the critical convergence of social activism and environmental design. The discussion analyzes how spatial structures serve as catalysts for social change and the role of the designer in addressing contemporary systemic challenges. By examining the methodology behind Liu's practice, this article contributes to the ongoing discourse on the ethical responsibilities of design in the public sphere.

Keywords: Spatial Design, Social Activism, Contemporary Art.

Yefan Liu is a distinguished multidisciplinary designer and researcher whose work bridges the gap between industrial design and social activism. Currently a Product Designer at iSpring Water Systems (North America), she also founded an independent design studio focusing on animal-related narratives and sustainable material exploration. Her career is defined by a commitment to "emotional sustainability" — creating objects and environments that foster deep connections between humans and their surroundings. Her professional excellence has been recognized with awards including Red Dot Award (Brands & Communication Design), IDA Gold Award, DNA Paris Design Awards, London Design Awards (Gold & Silver), and Muse Design Awards (Platinum). Her academic and professional journey at the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) has positioned her as a leading voice in human-centric design.

1. Evaluating International Talent

As a guest juror for our "Light & Shadow" exhibition, having reviewed international submissions, what was your overall impression of the talent pool? Was there a specific work that challenged your perspective?

I was genuinely impressed by the diversity and emotional range of the submissions. Many works demonstrated a strong understanding of how light and shadow can function not only visually, but narratively. One piece that left a particularly strong impression on me was "Winter Magic." The work uses a striking black-and-white contrast to explore the relationship between light and shadow, while the artist's refined technical skill beautifully renders the texture of skin and fabric. That balance between emotional atmosphere and technical mastery felt both restrained and deeply moving, and it reminded me how powerful subtlety can be.

Figure 1. A Christmas Letter to Our Homeland by Yefan Liu.

2. Curating Excellence: Technique vs. Big Idea

What is your personal philosophy when it comes to curating excellence? With your IDA Gold and awards in Paris and London, how does that experience change the way you judge others?

I strongly believe that technique and creativity are mutually reinforcing. Exceptional technical skill alone can sometimes feel intimidating or distant, while ideas without sufficient craft risk feeling hollow. In my experience, as technical understanding deepens, more meaningful creative ideas naturally emerge. For that reason, I value humility and steady growth. When designers commit to refining their skills step by step, strong concepts tend to surface organically. As a juror, I look for work where technique supports intention, and where ideas feel earned rather than forced.

3. Problem-Solving Art vs. Aesthetic Contemplation

Your work sits at the intersection of design and social activism. Do you believe that contemporary galleries should move more towards problem-solving art, or should they remain spaces for pure aesthetic contemplation?

I see galleries as inherently pluralistic spaces. Some artists are driven by problem-solving and social engagement, while others focus on beauty, emotion, or aesthetic exploration. There is no absolute hierarchy between these approaches. What matters most is that galleries remain open and unbiased platforms — allowing different voices, intentions, and methodologies to coexist. Their role is not to prescribe what art should be, but to ensure that diverse artistic outcomes are seen, experienced, and respected.

Figure 2. Thermal Animals — a thermochromic interactive installation by Yefan Liu.

4. Engineering Precision and Artistic Creativity

In your work, you balance engineering precision with artistic creativity. Is it difficult to switch between those two modes when developing a new project?

For me, this tension is actually where the joy of design lies — dancing while wearing constraints. Design is never only about visual expression; it must respond to real-world factors such as cost, manufacturing, printing, prototyping, and transportation. These limitations force constant decision-making. Sometimes compromises lead to regret, but more often they push me to search for better solutions. That ongoing negotiation between reality and imagination is what keeps my practice evolving.

5. Specialists vs. Generalists

As a multidisciplinary designer — designer, artist, social activist — do you think the future of the art world belongs to specialists or generalists who can cross these boundaries?

I often think of designers and artists as containers. A container must first have a function — like deciding whether it is a vase or a bowl. The next question is what it holds. The richer and deeper the content inside, the more adaptable and inclusive the container becomes. Cross-disciplinary ability grows naturally when one continuously fills that container with knowledge, experience, and reflection. In that sense, meaningful generalists are often built from deeply informed foundations rather than surface-level versatility.

Figure 3. A Calendar of Love Letters by Yefan Liu.

6. The Designer's Role in the Climate Emergency

In your opinion, what is the role of the designer in the current climate emergency? Should we be focusing more on creating new sustainable materials, or on changing human behavior?

Designers need to be proactive experimenters. This means testing new materials, but also critically reassessing existing products and systems — questioning whether they can be improved, replaced, or responsibly phased out. Progress is rarely immediate. Many attempts may fail or show no visible impact for a long time. But meaningful change requires persistence, courage, and a willingness to continuously experiment until shifts begin to appear.

7. UN Sustainable Development Goals in Design Practice

How do you integrate macro-level objectives like the UN Sustainable Development Goals into the micro-level details of your design projects?

I believe it's essential to first understand and acknowledge global standards such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals. At the same time, their real impact happens through everyday decisions — choosing more responsible materials, considering longer product lifecycles, and designing with durability and reuse in mind. Sustainability is not a single gesture, but a series of conscious choices embedded into daily practice.

8. Advice for Emerging Artists

You have built an impressive collection of international awards. What is the number one piece of advice you would give to artists who want their work noticed on a global stage?

Design is both subjective and rational. Before a product or artwork enters the world, the only thing you can rely on is intuition. That intuition, however, must be supported by continuous learning. I believe in staying humble, constantly acquiring new skills and knowledge, and treating oneself as a container — producing work that reflects the values and fields you choose to engage with. Through that process, meaningful contributions naturally emerge.

Editorial & Review Credits

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Featured Expert: Yefan Liu

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Art strategist and award-winning designer (Miami, USA). Recipient of the Presidential Award and expert juror for international platforms, including Apexart (USA). Author of the AI-Art & Design Flow methodology.

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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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