

On putting in the time and thought



Artist and technologist Angie Fan discusses their hopes for a better internet, cuteness as a reflection of our world, and remembering that it doesn't have to be so serious.

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As told to Pola Pucheta, 1722 words.

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Your work has a quality of pulling the reader or viewer inside of it. Is that something you think about intentionally, or does it just happen?

That's such an interesting way to describe it. I feel like when I write, it's an encapsulation of my own thought processes. It's sort of my little mark to say, "Hey, I was here. I'm out here. If you see me, let me know." I think that has to do with so much of my foundational creative come-up being on the internet. The old internet felt much more like a place where you could carve out your own little world. People would leave little treasure troves around that you could find. I love getting to see into other people's minds, into other worlds that they've created. That always felt so special to me. I think that's something I'm still reaching for in my own work, whether it's my writing or websites. They are little transmissions I'm putting out there.

I've always loved the "message in a bottle" nature of digital environments. There's a certain thrill to thinking about who might find what we share and how they will engage with it. That process can also be turned inward: one breadcrumb of a project or an idea can lead you to the next. When you look at your body of work, can you see a trail that you've left for yourself?

Absolutely. I think there's a constant thread through everything I do, and I find myself coming back to the same things over and over again. I've always been obsessed with technology as a means of transmission, as a means of communication. The internet and the computer are where I found my own voice. It's also where I've made so many of my friends and connections. I think things come back to me again and again until I acknowledge them and try to give them a form.

How do you know the difference between going in circles with a project versus actually going somewhere?

I think looping and iteration are very much a part of the creative process. Often I find myself starting with a feeling or an idea. I know I want to get to a place and then it's just a matter of putting in the time, the thought, and the effort until I get there. You can be looping and looping, and then sometimes you'll have a conversation with a friend, or you'll encounter new ideas about technology while you're working, and that's what kicks off new ideas. Maybe you're running a lot of loops simultaneously and they're all informing each other—so it's not so much a closed, but expansive system. I don't think of loops as a trap. In data theory and the theory of transmission, sending a signal is about sending transmissions over and over until you're able to pull something out—until you get enough resolution to make sense of the signal. It can be obsessive.

What are you obsessed with?

I think one big one would be cuteness. I felt strongly enough to dedicate two years of my thesis to researching it—both publishing research and creating a virtual reality experience around cuteness. Cuteness is such an interesting container for understanding the world around us, including how humans interact with technology. It encompasses so many frameworks and ideas. Cuteness is an aesthetic—you can see a puppy or a baby and think, “Wow, that’s so cute.” But cuteness also elicits certain behaviors. It’s almost physiologically built into the way we perceive the world as a biological factor. Cuteness is a driver or a catalyst for the way we actually live our lives and the decisions we make.

Even though my work is meant to be about cuteness and our relationship to it, it’s also meant to be observing cuteness. When you’re interacting with cuties, it’s reflecting back to you. It’s almost a blank canvas. It’s cute enough that you’re biologically going to engage with this creature, but then what happens in that space is up to you. You can hug them, pet them, care for them—or some people decide to box with them, punch them, throw them off into space, generate them and then absolutely destroy the horde. Those interactions say a lot more about the person who’s interacting with the cuties than about cuteness itself.

Do you think there’s something about technology that our bodies sense but that our minds haven’t caught up to yet?

I think humans are very willing to suspend their disbelief, and I think a lot of technology takes advantage of that. Our brains are created to fill in the blanks. We want that complete experience, that embodied experience... We like to have that complete picture. There’s so much research around how technology is hijacking our attention, how technology has created systems—maybe inadvertently—that control our behavior or shift the way that we act in an antisocial way. One of the things I wanted to explore with Applied Cuteness Research is to try to break us out of that loop and say, “Hey, do you see how a few design and aesthetic choices can change the way you’re perceiving this technology, the way you’re engaging with it, the way you’re behaving?”

Or it can change the way you are feeling. Can you talk about a time in your creative life when technology hurt your feelings?

I’ve become more frustrated with the direction that online ecosystems are going, especially with generative AI technologies and the way that slop is seeping into every corner of online media. Even a year ago, it was possible to go online with the expectation that you are engaging with individual voices—that what you’re seeing is reflective of one person’s thoughts or world. But now when I log on, I log on with the expectation of AI slop. And that really offends and upsets me when I think about it.

It’s clear from the work you’ve done with communities and building platforms like Kinfolk or Community Bread that individual voices are something you value deeply.

The discovery that I could use a computer and write my own code, and make a website and then people would see what I made, was so freeing. Creating websites were my first acts of agency as a child. I loved the amount of freedom and personal power it gave me. When I see the ways technology is being used now—especially when it comes to the platforms, and infrastructures, and systems being built by big tech—it makes me so angry. And I think that anger drives me to do the work I do in community. I see what’s happening and I have this sense of justice. Technology is supposed to help people. It’s not supposed to control them or force them into systems they didn’t sign up for. I really believe that technology should be built to free people, to support people, to help us live better lives. If you’re seeing that this is not happening, you have to be the one who does it.

In the process of deciding to do the work, I found out there are other people thinking about this. That’s where the community emerges from. That’s where the power emerges from. I think what I share in public makes it seem like I am this dedicated strategist or organizer, but I really feel like I fell into this role because the things I want in this world are not happening. I just have to do it. It’s not a natural positioning for me. I much prefer to be behind the scenes, working deep in the server room where the mechanisms are. But I realized that work’s not going to happen if people aren’t also pushing it forward and putting it into the public imagination.

I am intrigued by the idea of surrender in your work. What does that look like?

Surrender is something I've had a reckoning with in the last year. I've realized that surrender is an important part of the process. I've been forced to surrender in many ways when it comes to my own art practice because I've been dealing with a massive bout of burnout. Back in 2023 I wrapped up the cuteness research, the virtual reality experience, and published research on it. And I realized that I pushed myself too hard in that process. I hate failing, so I pushed myself really hard. The last three years have been about me trying to figure out how to reframe the way I approach my work, my art, how I'm building—and learning that I have to make space for myself. I have to cherish my own health and body, because if that's gone, I can't do anything. It hasn't looked like producing in a traditional sense, which doesn't mean that nothing is happening. A lot more of my work has been internal. I've created spaces for myself to continue being creative, but I haven't pressured myself to be public about it. Sometimes I log off work and just stare at a wall.

What role does fantasy play in your work? And what is the fantasy? Is it cute?

Fantasy is an extension of my actual surname, which is Fan. It's also a reference to the fact that what you're seeing online is a sort of persona. What you're seeing of me as an artist, what's being presented, is real, but it's also slivers of what I'm choosing to share. Fantasy as a vehicle is so interesting because it can carry so many things. You can treat fantasy as a sort of archetype. But fantasy also establishes a space for exploration, for absurdity. Even though I sometimes think and talk about serious topics, I also like to make fun of myself. I like to use humor as a way to remind myself that it's actually not that serious in the end.

Angie Fan recommends:

Staring at walls

Keeping an album of cute animals

Ryukin, a virtual goldfish app by Masataka Hakoziaki

Ursula M. Franklin's lecture on "The Real World of Technology"

Hexas, a graphic novel by Ben Ross Davis

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