

Amy Suo Wu, Interviewed by Ex. Design

Abridged by Howsem Huang



In CCA's undergraduate graphic design workshop, Exhibition Design, instructor christopher hamamoto gave students the opportunity to curate three separate exhibitions of three different artists and designers. Designers Menaja Ganesh, Chiao Huang, Howsem Huang, Aashi Jhaveri, and Xiaoyi (Crystal) Yang have worked as a team to create an exhibition, *Turn on the Invisible Layers*, featuring Amy Suo Wu's works. As part of the curatorial process, the team interviewed Amy, learning and discussing her creative process and the value behind the works.

Amy Suo Wu was born in China, grew up in Australia, and lives in the Netherlands as an artist, designer, and educator. Her practice often involves tactics to circumvent power as a way to protect marginalized cultures.

Ex. Design: Menaja Ganesh, Chiao Huang, Howsem Huang, Aashi Jhaveri, and Xiaoyi (Crystal) Yang, chris hamamoto.

Ex. Design: I noticed many of your works require you or the audience to physically uncover hidden messages. What is the purpose or importance of these physical actions?

Amy: Steganography is the art and science of hiding in plain sight. What's interesting about this practice is that it becomes a research method to talk about the politics of invisibility: For me, it's about a negotiation of what is invisible and what is visible.

In the steganographic fashion zine called *Thunderclap* (2017) I published the work of [He-Yin Zhen](#), an anarcho feminist from 1907. The work was conceived to evade governmental surveillance and censorship, but at the same time, I still wanted to reveal the meaning of the work covertly. I designed the work for an audience on the street that might coincidentally come across her work and thereby access it in an undercover and subversive manner.

[Thunderclap on Vimeo](#)

Steganography was employed as a way to publish her work through alternative means, for example as clothing accessories, to prevent the further erasure of her work, since that has happened once before in Chinese history. Therefore, *Thunderclap* uses the medium of fashion as a way to conceal as well as reveal her work within the urban landscape. Another work that does this was my solo show *Kandinsky Collective* (2017), which took place in a gallery at Aksioma-Institute for Contemporary Art, Ljubljana. One of the main objectives of that work was to reveal to the audience this method of steganography. I designed the exhibition as a game... What's this game called now that everyone is playing? Or maybe not anymore, but a few years ago? Where you go into a room and you try to solve mysteries.

Ex. Design: I think escape room?

Amy: Escape room! Exactly! In the exhibition, I realised afterwards that I made an escape room, which taught the audience the practice and politics of steganography. So it was an educational experience as well.

Ex. Design: Can you talk about how you started your research of using those analog methods to hide messages?

Amy: That was one of my earliest research questions when I began this research five years ago: thinking about how we could resuscitate analog, DIY tactics like making invisible ink, to bypass high-tech digital surveillance. This research took me on another path to focus more on invisibility tactics used by marginalized cultures and social movements, but indeed the research five years ago started more as a techno-political inquiry into how analog steganography may subvert digital surveillance.



Project week at The Royal Academy of Art (KABK),
The Hague, the Netherlands.

Ex. Design: What is the aftermath of the shift in your research?

Amy: Towards the end of publishing the book *A Cookbook of Invisible Writing* (2019), I had come to the realisation that I was living an embodied steganographic experience related to trauma and cultural assimilation, being a woman of color, and how that hiding had actually psychologically affected me. My research went from macro to something between macro and micro and then super micro. The process made me peel off the layers to myself, and at the end of the journey, it led me to myself.

Ex. Design: Do you feel more confident after going through that process?

Amy: Yes and no... I was more confident because my research became a psychological tool. I've always been attracted to things that I'm struggling with at that point in my life. It's this feeling that there's something you're trying to work out in your own life, and you're doing that vicariously through other subjects in your practice. There is this instinctual, intuitive draw or pull to the subjects. In that sense, I feel more confident about my research, but also very vulnerable all the time. But I think being vulnerable is also a form of courage.

Ex. Design: You also mentioned layers of the top-down surveillance power in China. What are your personal thoughts on this issue? What do you hope Chinese citizens do? Are you trying to inspire them to act against this surveillance power, or just get used to it?

Amy: That's a big question. I've always been interested in the tactics that circumvent and bypass systems that top-down powers use against you. A sociologist named Michel de Certeau thinks about how the people on the bottom—the people who don't have the power, who have to live in the conditions set by the powerful—still find a way to navigate, negotiate, and hack or circumvent these systems. It's not a sustainable mode, but it's the way we can think about agency within a situation where we don't have any.

I feel like my approach to steganography work has always been tactical. Whether I work in an institution or as an artist, I'm always thinking about loopholes and how I can sneak around a system. These bypasses are not sustainable, because at some point you have to confront the system. But on the other hand, you need numbers for that; you need solidarity for that; you need to work with people and movements to have meaningful impact.

Ex. Design: You mentioned mending in some of your projects. Do you see creating works with steganography as a form of mending?

Amy: Absolutely! This work with steganography became my life story. When I went to China and came back, I started to deal with a lot of identity questions that unfolded over the last three years. From 2017 to now, 2020, it's been a process of figuring out who I am and what I have run away from all this time. I think producing work in the same way as I did before meant that I was a super workaholic, just chasing assignments and briefings and going from A to B all the time. After I came back from China, I couldn't work in that way anymore because I was completely devastated. All I could do was literally mend my clothes. My mom is a seamstress, and she works to repair textile and clothing. From literally mending, I started to think about mending metaphorically, mending myself, and mending all my ruptures. All kinds of things have ruptured; from my own personal history, the intergenerational history, to growing up in the West. I've also thought about this in relation to how educational systems have upheld false divisions and hierarchies of head and heart, female and male, science and intuition, rational and emotional, art and design, craft and design, Western and non-Western... you know, all these binaries create separations that create rifts. I have been figuring a way to approach stitching them together to mend these ruptured experiences.

Ex. Design: Thank you for sharing that. It's really hard to make progress attached to your personal story and still tell people in a vulnerable condition. I would like to discuss mending, specifically in design. Is it a tool or a way of thinking for designers?

Amy: It's a good question. It can be a tool. I conceived of mending through my own teaching practice. I use this idea to think through education and what I'm actually doing with my students and how I can mend not only myself, but also my students' relationship to their own education. It's an opportunity to reflect upon the ruptures in their own education, for instance, how have they attributed value to certain aesthetic regimes and modes of thought over others? This framework has also been helpful to think through the tear between practice and theory and how we can mend them together.

Ex. Design: Knowing that you're a designer as well as an educator, how did you maintain your interdisciplinary practice? You also have a multicultural background, like our team members! Is your practice and your cultural background related?

Amy: This is a question that I've always struggled with. I have a background in graphic design and teaching, but in Australia, I studied for a general design degree, which I never finished. I have this hybrid cultural background because I was born in China, grew up in Australia, and have been living here in the Netherlands for 14 years now. A few years ago, I realised the relationship between my diverse cultural background and my diverse professional practice. When I went to school, the teachers always told me, "you have to do one thing, you have to do it really well, and you have to stick to it because you'll make your mark in the market." This multidisciplinary practice was sexy in theory, but in practice, everyone thought I was crazy or that I was not dedicated enough to one practice. I used to self-flagellate, thinking, "Why can't I stick to one thing!" After a while, I decided to accept it because I'm not going to pigeon-hole myself just because capitalist society says that I will be more successful if I do. My point is that I've embraced the multiplicity of my cultural background as well as practice.

Ex. Design: Although you were trained as a graphic designer, I noticed that you focus more on expressing your identity in your artworks than in your design works. Why is that?

Amy: I think there's a taboo in design education to put one's own personality in the work, especially if you're a commercial designer. I use design as a tool or as a research method in publishing or distributing my work, but I'm not a designer in the sense that I have clients. In the beginning, I really wanted to have a fixed stable identity, but with more wisdom and time, I'm letting go of that. I'm just understanding the layers that are there.

Ex. Design: Do you see any difference between the people who live and grew up in China and yourself?

Amy: The Chinese diaspora is not a monolithic experience. Somebody who grew up in China versus someone like me who left when I was five would have different experiences. I have a friend who grew up in Beijing and left when she was in her early 20s to come study in the Netherlands. Her experience of being Chinese is obviously different from mine. I would say that we struggle with our identity in different ways.

Ex. Design: I think those different experiences depend significantly on where you were born, where you have lived, and who your family is.

Amy: Yes, absolutely. My parents moved and left their home in Shantou to Australia when they were in their 30s, and they felt disconnected from their culture and home. They had to build up their life from scratch, while not knowing the language... they worked hard to build their business and survive—that really marks you in a deep way.

The *Alt Knowledges* exhibition series was organized by **christopher hamamoto**, Assistant Professor, Graphic Design Program.

Howsem Huang is an undergraduate student pursuing BFA degrees in both Graphic Design and Photography at CCA. His works explore political, cultural interconnection and contradiction between East Asia and Western values.



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