Design Notes Episode 13 - Sang Mun

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Liam Spradlin:	Welcome to design notes, a show about creative work and what it teaches us. I'm your host Liam. Each episode we talk with people from unique creative fields to discover what inspires and unites us in our practice. In this episode, I spoke with a designer Sang exploring how his ZXX typeface which was born from Sang's experience and special intelligence, tells a story that helps us consider our privacy and the nature of the information that shapes our lives.
Sang Mun:	I think we are unfree in a way in this society because we're always in the realm of overloaded information that are given out from corporations to the government and I think it really impacts our freedom of thinking.
Liam:	In the interview, Sang and I also explore how accessible tools can empower users, how to approach design across a wide range of media and the practical constraints that we all face as designers. Let's get started.
Liam:	Sang welcome.
Sang:	Thank you for having me.
Liam:	So, just to get started um I always ask about the journey so what do you do now and what has the journey been like to get there?
Sang:	So, right now I'm running a design studio called YAW with two other good friends of mine and their furniture space and product designers. So, we

work on 360-degree brand designs from spaces to brandings to other collaterals and apart from that we also just started a new brand that's called band of colors and it's men's underwear and swim shorts brand so that's what I've been working on in the recent years and prior to that I was a graphic design fellow at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. After that I came back to Korea and worked as a graphic designer for this two big corporations in Korea so, once called Hanwha and the other ones on Hyundai Motor Company.

Liam: So, how did you get your start?

Sang: Actually, I studied on film and video first back from high school I guess, I guess I went into design because I used to skate online and listening to all this punk rock music, being able to adopt the album covers, two music videos, to other visual noises that I kind of got into. So, I guess uh-hmm I was always interested in the graphics and the visuals that connected with me so it was kind of natural for me to move on from film and video to graphic design.

Liam: I'm really excited to have you on today because you know the philosophy of design notes is really about finding the common threads that run through different types of design work and the ways that we approach them from each discipline and it seems like the breadth of your work is a perfect reflection of that pursuit, you've been involved in designing a lot of different types of things so, I'd like to hear about some of the projects from different disciplines that you've been involved with and the common patterns that you picked up through those experiences?

Sang: I really try to focus on telling the story and just going into the chorus and stuff what this product has to tell or what this brand has to tell or what does photography for instance, where space has to tell to the story and I just forming a bond of sympathy with the end users it's what I try to focus on the best and I think that has changed a lot comparing to the works that

I've done in the past because before I think we all designers have this ego because we just feel like we're still students at school so, after leaving school I think it was a hard transition in a way but I think it worked well in the end and I'm still trying to work more on that aspect in trying to think as a non designer, like how they would approach this outcome that I mean and how they associate it with their context.I think that's the common approach that I have in all the projects.

Liam: I'm interested in dissecting how you go about finding the story of a product and how that's formed?

Sang: So, for instance I guess I guess one of the most successful projects that I've done was the ZXX typeface, I think it told a very humane and kind of silly idea and I think it resonated with a lot of people in the way that I was telling a true story of mine in a graphic way and also you know casual but scary way and I try to input my life into those projects in the way that I tell a story for instance, on the ZXX was a story of mine where I was on special intelligence personnel for the Korean military associated with the NSA and I had an opportunity to tell that project in a story that was based with my own experience of how to extract information or special signal information.

Liam: Yeah and I can definitely see through reading about ZXX that there is that like personal story component but you also relate it to the people who are viewing it and saying like this is you know we need to make use of the difference between technological and human perception.

Sang: Right.

Liam: To keep ourselves camouflaged as much as we can.

Sang: Right.

Liam: I do want to dig into that a little more specifically as we move further into an age of machine learning and AI. It seems likely to me that technology might catch up with something like ZXX and learn how to read it. So, I'm interested to know; a, like how your thoughts about that have changed over time since the ZXX first launched?

Sang: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Liam: And then I'm also interested in discussing whether that too could be subverted, whether technology could be used to design things that full technology.

Sang: Right. So, there's been a lot of political changes in the Korean society where our democracy has been really a challenge with the corruptions of all like for instance, the National Intelligence Service getting into political and private life and kind of all turning the mindsets of the citizens. I guess I haven't really been working more on these kind of projects but I think it's always stayed in my mind to tackle this project or tackle this events in a different way and after the ZXX.

Sang: I think people are kind of pent up with the status quo and the way that they don't think they could really do anything to keep their privacy private in a way and I think there has to be more of a like fun approach to be able to make them use these tools because what I've seen so far is that ZXX has been used only through the creative fields or the people who find what's funny about it or what's really working about it but for the just regular people who are outside of the design field it's hard for them to relate to it so trying to push and pull between that creativity and finding easier way for them to use the tools might be a good way.

Liam: And is that something that design could accomplish? I think we know about the direct impact that design can have on someone's experiences or ideas but using design to empower people in a more indirect way.

Sang: For sure because for instance like with the tools that Google's giving out like all this free apps that you guys have just for instance like, the translators or other free resources that are out there. When is easy for a regular user to be able to approach it and use it in their daily life, I think it is the power design and it's the power of the technology that could reinforce them to be more private in a way so, I think that's the tool that design can really change.

Liam: I'd also like to dig into one of the things, when I was reading about ZXX that you said was about articulating our own freedom. I'm interested if this idea has manifested more in your work since then.

Sang: Not to the extent that I really wanted to because I was working on version 2 of ZXX, which was growing more in depth where right now the camouflages and the other 14 leaders were it was a one dimension typeface but I was working on making two and three dimension typeface that could really create an endless permutations but that kind of failed so but but I do keep thinking about this articulating our unfreedom and I think I got inspired by George Orwell's 1984 and the Newspeak dictionary. How when you start shrinking the diction's that we can use with then I think it really alters with the mindsets so, I think we are unfree in a way in this society because we're always in the realm of my overloaded information that are given out from corporations to the governments and I think it really impacts our freedom of thinking.

Liam: I'm interested in the concepts behind ZXX 2.0. You mentioned two-dimensional and three-dimensional...

Sang: Right.

Liam: Typography. What would that look like?

Sang: So, the idea was to when you type in a letter A, the letter A would pop up and then with the algorithm like a random layer would go on top of it and if you want to go more than another layer or go on of it. So, it's kind of challenging the way that humans could still recognize it as a letter A but as you said the machine would not be able to keep learning what this letter is because you're giving it different random layers on top of it and I found out that this was possible to do with talking to other engineers but it's a lot of work (laughing).

Liam: Yeah (laughing) but that does kind of get it the idea of using technology to kind of subvert technology in new ways.

Sang: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Liam: I'm also interested in again in the idea of the power of human perception versus machine perception and I think that that's something that's still continuing to rapidly evolve but have you developed any further this idea in a more broad sense of encoding thoughts and ideas into design that is only perceptible by humans?

Sang: That'd be really interesting. I'm always interested in challenging the visuals that the humans could encode and decode and one of the other projects that I was working on was like decoding a JPEG so working with codes that are encoded in it and then just changing the different layers of the information to make it extract another JPEG, which keeps evolving and just telling you the way that we perceive an image. I didn't really had the chance to further that study yet but I did think about recently. I saw a vocal app which was presented in the Adobe Conference and it's really scary because it encodes a human voice and then you could really alter the way that the voice could make any sounds that you want and I think right now we're moving from an image based or editing an image to moving images to voice now with all the AIs and voice recognition

software that are really getting crazy right now. So, my interest has kind of evolved from image torching software's to voices these days.

Liam: Yeah. I guess that's a good point because as this technology continues to develop removing not only to a place where it's important to distinguish between the visual capabilities of humans and machines to perceive things but also whether the things we perceive are actually authentic. So, switching topics a little bit, I'd also like to know about band of colors.

Sang: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Liam: How did that come about or what's the, what's the story behind that?

Sang: So, band of colors was kind of a random project coming out from three designers whose background is graphic designer, product designer and furniture designer and we were always interested in doing a business together and we just thought about expanding our studio culture and trying to challenge ourself into creating a commodity that hasn't been challenged or that could be disrupted at this point especially in Korea and we found out that all the designers were only focusing on commodities that could be war or used in these outer layers.

Sang: So, like first dimension visuals but we want to create something that could be fun in a way, that not many designers are tackle so random and that's how it came about and while researching about the market we found out that it was a huge huge market that hasn't been challenged for my decades where this old corporation still owned 60% of the market share. So, that's how it came about and I think also we wanted to create something that could enhance the daily life of every man and not just make a crazy-looking graphic design or design commodity but then something that could kind of be timeless and just could be kept in their wardrobe.

Liam: Something I was going to ask about too is kind of where the patterns and prints come from…

Sang: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Liam: For band of colors. So, it sounds like the material creates some of those constraints as to like what can be done in terms of design?

Sang: Right and the design is so I think we have more than like 400 designs and we sketched and yep just just like you mentioned because of the restrictions that we were facing with the manufacturing process, we had to deselect the best designs that we wanted to make and then kind of compromise within the fields.

Liam: Just because this endeavor seems fairly different from most of your other work, I want to know how you would compare this work to kind of your other creative pursuits?

Sang: It's, I think it's really crazy that (laughing) I mean seeing the outcomes right now and knowing the journey that we were taking I think the main difference is that as a design studio we always had clients and we always had the design brief that came from outsource but for band of colors we were our own clients so we had to work on the finance, work on the marketing budget, work on all these other parts that were outside of design and also with having three designers from different disciplines we had to really come to a consensus of what this product had to look like and I think that was a real challenge that we were all facing because we just had different mindsets.

Liam: So, just kind of speaking to the difference in both visual style and process in band of colors compared to your earlier work. I'm interested in looking at the complete timeline just to wrap up. How your creative process has

changed over time across all of your projects and also where you see it going in the future?

Sang: Mm-hmm. So, before I was working for different clients and when I was a student you had a lot of time to really tackle and research and try to study the contents to the fullest amount that you can but I think the process had to change when I was working for real clients because there was always limited budget to limited time so yet really dissect the amount of research to sketching, to designing and to production. So, I guess they really changed the mindset of how I approached design now and also it changes from designing a logo, to typeface, to space, to photography, to websites. I'm always thinking about the budget and the timeline and the audience that it has to meet. That kind of changed in the way that I design things right now.

Liam: And so how about in the future and you see that kind of evolving past now?

Sang: So, in the future I think I'm still gonna be challenged with the budget issue especially talking about the Korean clients because they always come in with the really limited budget that is always challenging and being able to challenge them back to make them use more passion in creating the best contents for them to be able to be different from the other competitors. It's always a challenge for our studio and I think that's one of the biggest challenges that we always have to face for other you know young designers that are going to emerge into the real design fields because if we don't challenge the clients of today right now then the younger generations are going to suffer it again. So, I think we keep pushing the clients to meet like 50-50 consensus instead of them really over ruling our creativity.

Liam: Yeah. I think that's a good point and I think as designers a lot of times we think about our challenges with clients, being around things like having a

consensus on being creative vision but actually something very practical and utilitarian like budget…

Sang: Right.

Liam: Kind of has this ripple effect across all of the functions…

Sang: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Liam: That you do as a designer…

Sang: Right.

Liam: So, that's really interesting point but yeah. Thank you again…

Liam: For joining me on Design Notes.

Sang: All right. Thanks for having me.

Liam: Keep an eye on design dot google / podcast so you don't miss our next episode with independent designer Ryan Snelson. In the episode, we explore the relationship between product strategy and design execution. The history of the design of MySpace and the unique aesthetics Nelson has developed with projects like flashback sticker attack.

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