

H We were wondering if you could give us an elevator pitch. How would you introduce yourself to someone who doesn't know you?

T The elevator pitch itself changes depending on who I'm talking to, and that might even start to introduce a theme about my practice as a whole because it's like a chameleon that shape shifts depending on who I'm talking to. If I'm talking to creatives — people who already understand what design is — I say, "I am a designer and coder and I run a branding and technology agency. And what we do is we use coding as a medium to create new possibilities for design, both in form and function, as well as in meaning and impact." For example, graphic design up until now has been made by tools that were designed by other people, like Adobe, Photoshop, and Figma, and we use code to tap into things that are not possible in any of those things like making design interactive, making design automated, making design data driven, and making design adaptable.

But the second part of it is beyond just the new possibilities in form and function. It's understanding how you channel those new possibilities and form and function into work that creates more meaning and impact for the design itself. That is the part that asks the question — 'why would we want to make something interactive?' Maybe to evoke empathy or make the design more relatable. 'Why would we want to make a design driven by data?' Perhaps to make the design always relevant, always evolving, always connected. So it really does create all these new possibilities for design.

H We're also curious what a day at your studio or of your work might look like and how that setting has changed since founding Cotton?

T Every day is super busy from before I wake up to after I go to sleep. We have clients in California, we have clients in Europe, and all over. In terms of what we do, I run a team of two people, both of whom are also designer-coders. What's interesting there is that whenever we introduce them, people are always amazed because yes, they're both designers and coders, they're one and the same.

In terms of the day to day, There's a lot of meetings, there are a lot of client calls, a lot of frantic preparations for a presentation. There's a lot of new calls with new prospective clients. There's a lot of creative direction, a lot of coding. I would say it's run like any other studio with the exception of the types of the conversations that we have, the types of the critiques that we have. It's looking at and analyzing the code output and really trying to break it apart and understand how to make it better, how to make it work, how to make it beautiful, how to make it not glitchy, how to make it lean into the glitch even more.



FIG. 1

Every day is a learning experience. Honest to god, every day is really exciting and really fun. Everyone who works here just has such a good time on a day to day. We listen to music. We have a policy where you cannot work late—I push them out and yet still sometimes they want to continue to work on things which blows my mind.

E On the topic of your studio and what it's like, we're wondering if you can describe your experience starting Cotton and departing from Pentagram. How have you been able to push your creative liberties when you are running your own independent studio?

T So, I'll back up a little and I'll respond to the Pentagram side first. When I was at Pentagram, I was in this rare position where I was working for two teams, where both of the partners, Michael Beirut and Giorgio Lupi, gave me my own autonomy for the projects that I was running. I think the only reason that they were able to do that is because I had something that neither one of those partners had been trained on: coding — the ability to add coding to data and to branding. As a result, for all the projects I led, I had my own creative freedom. In doing that, it allowed me to build confidence to know that I could run these projects, be client facing and that I could do it from start to finish over and over and over again.

In terms of starting Cotton, one of the things that I like to talk about in starting a business is that it's not hard to start the business. It's not hard to get the LLC, find an accountant, or find a lawyer, and because I work in branding, I know how to play all those cards. Things

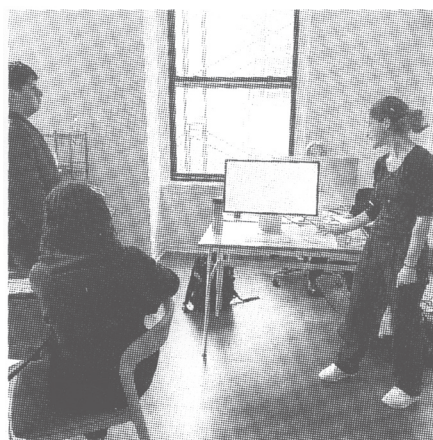


FIG. 2

got really different about half a year in when I started hiring, building, and getting an office. With projects, it's a lot of the same types of projects that I was working on at Pentagram. The only difference now, which is so much better, is the team. I have people who I'm working with and every single one of the projects that we are doing, we can add code if we want to and if it makes sense, we can ignore it if we don't want to ... but it's the fact that I'm able to build this culture of people who get to do what I love to do and what they love to do. And it's hopefully going to continue to grow in that direction.

E You spoke about how creating an LLC and talking to lawyers was the easy part. What would you say was the hardest part in starting your company? What was the steepest learning curve you've had to overcome in the process?

T I think the hardest part is a combination of things. To be a good designer and to get to the position where you have that confidence to start a studio, so much of the design process is understanding how to talk to very specific people. That was something that I saw a lot of when I was on Michael's team. He is the best person in the world that I've ever met who can understand how to talk to a person in the room. You can dial up a certain personality of yours and dial down another and there's definitely a skill that comes to it.

Recently, something that's been really difficult is some unintentional gender stereotyping. And what that comes down to is, simply put, there are not that many agencies or studios that are run by not just women, but a solo woman factor. There are a lot of partnerships

● If you have a mastery of what certain visual things do and how they communicate, and also a really deep understanding of what needs to be communicated, that's the golden intersection where the magic happens. ●

FIG. 1	Cotton interactive logo.
FIG. 2	Talia hosting a class at the Communication Design Dept at CityTech, CUNY at the Cotton office.