Imagining critical practises in practise based design research: What is your ‘critical’ approach?

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The idea and concept of ‘criticality’ in design research has emerged as a contestation over the sites, forms, methods, and capacities of and for design. These debates are influenced by social science inquiry, cut across design fields, and are explored through different approaches to and investments in design research. These include ‘critical’ and ‘post-critical’ orientations in constructive, speculative, and co-design
Conversation Research Question
What are the different kinds of critical strategies that researchers pursue and how can they be conceptualised?

Context of Conversation Topic
The idea and concept of ‘criticality’ in design research has emerged as a contestation over the sites, forms, methods, and capacities of and for design (DiSalvo, 2012; Dunne and Raby, 2013; Suchman, 2002; Ward & Wilkie, 2009). For many, critique in constructive design research is mostly associated with projects related to traditions of critical and speculative design (Malpass, 2012). But the question of critique has also been part of discussions in co-design and participatory design, especially as influenced by descriptive-analytical traditions in the social sciences (Latour, 2004, 2008), which have led to understandings of design as a network-based phenomenon (Lenskjold, Olander & Halse, 2015; Pedersen, 2016). One approach to this has been to explore ‘post-critical’ dispositions, refusing to know in advance how emergent configurations of humans and non-humans may lend themselves to issues of power and critique. At the same time co-design and participatory design research are often more focused on procedures of representation, processes for engagement, and the design of infrastructures and democratic possibilities than in the design of discrete objects and of technologies as critical objects (Binder et al., 2015; Björgvinsson et al., 2012; Karasti, 2014). Practise based design researchers with a change agenda may also draw on feminist epistemologies of embodied, relational, and collective knowledge making in design engagements and design(ing) infrastructures (Light & Akama, 2012; Lindström & Ståhl, 2014). Here, the prospect of the ‘critical’ is shaped through political and ethical orientations that ground design research (Agid, 2011), through the introduction of theoretical frameworks that challenge assumptions in design research (Akama, Stuedahl, D., & van Zyl, 2015), or emerges as a kind of excess that overflows a research engagement situated in less overtly ‘critical’ venues, for example, public innovation projects (Olander, 2016).

Beginning with the presumption that ideas of and investments in ‘criticality’ in design research are contested and worth exploring, this Conversation will engage conveners and participants in asking how the notion of the ‘critical’ shapes our practises, approaches to practise, and the knowledge, action, proposals, or ways of working related to them. The discussion and activities will engage the critical positions, possibilities, and concerns of practise-based design researchers working across a range of fields, including participatory design, co-design, service design, speculative design, and more. Building on the framing question, which will be further explained by each convener in two groups, participants will look to their own practises and investments to examine how – as
practitioners and researchers – we understand, shape, and become aware of ‘critical’ ideas, outcomes, processes, and possibilities in practise-led design research. The goal of this Conversation is to explore and construct conceptions of role(s), form(s) and articulations of the ‘critical’ across design fields that engage complex social and cultural issues with non-academic partners and ‘non-designers’ and are oriented toward ‘change work’, situated and articulated in a range of ways.

3 The Conversation

Working from the assertion that critical practices in design are constituted in so many different ways, responsive to people and contexts, the session was programmed to avoid abstracted discussions and attempts at narrowing down definitions of critical practices. Instead, we focused on the interactions with generative constraints to explore the diversity of critical practices that blend provocation, dialogue, reflection, creativity, and making. By means of making and working through 1-into-8 booklets, the aim was for the participants to trace and manifest articulations, individually and in groups, of their own stories of critical approaches materialised through the booklet format (see figure 2).

After a short introduction, the convenors presented six keywords (conundrum, chance, reliable, ambivalent, messy, diagnosis) and gave brief anecdotal accounts of critical approaches relating a keyword to their own practices. For each of the six keywords participants were instructed to think of an anecdote from their own practice in which they had engaged the same idea/feeling/experience in a way that resonated with their understanding of “criticality”. From these instructions, participants
wrote/illustrated/mapped out their own experiences in their designated 1-into-8 booklets and presented their work in groups (see figure 3).

Following on from group conversations, participants were prompted to pick only one word. This could be either from those given or new words spun off from their first book or the subsequent conversation. From here they were asked to develop a second book taking into account a broader network of references, such as theories of practices and criticality or specific commitments related to the chosen word and its accompanying story. Some groups decided to develop the second collectively while others would continue to work on their own books (see figure 4).

In order to make the most of the limited timeframe (90 min), the session was programmed to allow participants to concentrate on working through the booklet format, interspersed with conversations...
within their groups, rather than allocation of time to plenary discussions, feedback or final assessment of outcomes. Consequently, the participants would work on their booklets right to the end of the session and either leave their books with us on their way out or wait just long enough for us to photograph their works.

This format, we believe, enables a deeper and more engaged discussion among group members all the way through the session, and therefore this format was chosen over a more classical workshop plenum debate.

4 References

Agid, S. (2011). ‘How can we design something to transition people from a system that doesn’t want to let them go?’. Social design and its political contexts, Design Philosophy Papers, (3), pp. 1-11.


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