

Abstract

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 design research; grounding and emergent critical frameworks in ‘change-oriented’ practise-based design research; political and ethical investments that challenge assumptions in design research, and more. 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. Building on short introductory presentations of the conversation’s framing question, ‘What are the different kinds of critical strategies that researchers pursue and how can they be conceptualised?’, participants and conveners will make inquiry-based visual / textual explorations of our ‘critical approaches’, examining how – as practitioners and researchers – we understand, shape, and become aware of ‘critical’ ideas, outcomes, processes, and possibilities in design research.

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

Keywords: critical practise; practise-led design research; positionality; engagement

1. Convenors Information

Convenors Name	Email	Affiliation
(Lead and Contact) Shana Agid	agids@newschool.edu	Parsons School of Design / New School
Sissel Olander	sol@kadm.dk	KADK
Yoko Akama	yoko.akama@rmit.edu.au	RMIT University
Tau Lenskjold	tau@sdu.dk	University of Southern Denmark

2. 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 and 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., and 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. Conversation research question

What are the different kinds of critical strategies that researchers pursue and how can they be conceptualised?

4. Set-up of your session

The conversation will be a 90-minute engagement with participants in naming and inquiring into critical capacities in and for practise-led design research. In the first 15 minutes, the discussion will be strategically framed through the key critical question elaborated by the conveners' practices, proposing different possibilities for, and locations of, 'critique' in practise-based design work. Sissel Olander and Tau Lenskjold will explore two different critical modes to investigate events, messy outcomes and taken-for-granted conditions in

the unfolding of design projects. Shana Agid and Yoko Akama will ask what is at stake in valuing the critical frameworks, and the *work*, of ‘non-designer’ collaborators through dismantling ‘western’ logics already embedded in design research as one means for accommodating alternate states and approaches for engagement. Participants will then divide into two groups for further discussion. This will set the stage and organizational framework for a 45-minute workshop, in which participants and conveners will create A6 booklets reflecting on the ‘critical’ in their work. These will form the basis of a report-out / share-back for the final 30-minutes, forming an assemblage – based in dialog and material – of argument and inquiry, which will be documented in text through live recording of the discussion by Sissel Olander and through photo documentation by Tau Lenskjold and Yoko Akama. Shana Agid will facilitate the conversation and lead out the presentation of materials at DRS and (later) transformation of these materials into booklets to be shared after the conference.

5. Type of space and equipment required

This conversation requires a space for up to 30 participants at four large tables that can accommodate up to 10 people with making space. We will use a projector and screen for framing presentations and for live-documenting the notes from the full-group conversation in the final half-hour. We will bring materials for creating books, and will encourage participants to bring or source materials of their own.

6. Dissemination strategy

The outcomes of the conversation will be compiled into a booklet and digital record documenting the provocations and participants’ own one-page books made during the conversation. It will include visual essays framing conveners’ case stories, participants’ ‘books’, and a visual / textual representation of the closing conversation with annotations and reflections from the conveners. There will be printed copies made for participants and a digital version available for sharing more broadly. Components of this that can be made available for display while the conference is in progress will be contributed to the exhibition.

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About the Convenors:

Shana Agid is a teacher, designer, artist, and activist based at Parsons School of Design in New York, US. Shana's collaborative design practise explores possibilities for self-determined services and campaigns through community-led organizing and design research.

Sissel Olander is an assistant professor at the KADK, Copenhagen. For many years she has worked with co-design, design anthropology and post-critical practises, especially related to public innovation projects in libraries.

Yoko Akama is a design researcher at RMIT University, Australia. Her Japanese heritage has embedded a Zen-informed relational practise to carve a 'tao' (path) in design. This is further constituted by working with communities to achieve self-determining process and outcomes.

Tau Lenskjold is an assistant professor at SDU, Denmark. In his work he focuses on design as a critical practise ranging from research projects around speculative prototypes and social design.