

Unfolding Design Culture: Practical Investigations

Abstracts

Emanuele Quinz

The Research Condition: Notes on Counter-Disciplinary Practices

Starting from the debate around the “research injunction” in the field of design, this contribution aims to explore the conditions through which experimental forms of knowledge production emerge today. Rather than focusing on research *in*, *for*, or *with* design, the contribution will address research *between* disciplines, considering the counter-disciplinary dimension as a space of tension generated by encounters between design, art, architecture, social sciences, life sciences, and other fields of knowledge and practice. The counter-disciplinary will not be understood as a rejection of disciplines, but as a way of putting their boundaries, methods, and tools to the test, thereby producing new possibilities for research. Drawing on several examples of experimental research developed at EnsadLab (Paris), the contribution will examine practices that rethink the relationship between theory and practice. These projects show that research does not consist only in theorizing practices, but also in practicing theory through conceptual, participatory, and relational devices, experiments, and processes. The counter-disciplinary dimension becomes emblematic of what can be called a “research condition”, in which experimentation extends beyond the academic framework to reconnect with social and political dimensions.

Kat Jungnickel

Invisible Inventors and DIY design cultures: How (and why) ordinary people make extra-ordinary things

How do people mis-use and re-use mundane and ordinary things to reimagine and redesign their worlds? This question has shaped my research and practice for over a decade. Drawing on STS, feminist technoscience, and queer theory, I have studied histories and cultures of invention and inventiveness; from cyclists remaking urban experiences on their bicycles to community groups building DIY versions of the internet with sticky tape and tin cans through to centuries of inventors hacking and adapting their clothing. Few are designers, yet all do design. Their undisciplined perspectives reveal innovative problem-making and solving skills and raise questions about socio-political ideas and issues long overlooked or taken for granted. This question has also shaped my own career. Like my research subjects, I too engage with design but from a different perspective - sociology. Practice research is central to my approach. I make things to make sense of things: testing, adapting, hacking ideas in different contexts. Most recently I have been speculatively sewing my research: stitching data, theory and methods from century old clothing patents (back) into three dimensional arguments. Making and wearing archives, in this way, renders knowable alternative embodied, material and digital stories hidden from history, hidden in data and hidden in design. In this talk I take inspiration from Saidiya Hartman (2019) who “writes against the grain” to capture the spirited lives of marginalised groups misrepresented or entirely erased in history. I reflect on what emerges at design’s undisciplined edges when untrained research subjects and researchers go against the grain in their everyday practices.

Nastasia Fomina

Designing Conditions for Uncomfortable Conversations

My practice begins from the assumption that design culture is not something to be analysed after design has happened but something that can itself be practiced. Rather than producing products or services, I work with workshops, conversations, object biographies, exhibitions, and a living archive as design artefacts that generate knowledge. In my current research with displaced Ukrainians, these practices create conditions for people to reflect together on memory, belonging, and everyday life. Here, design is less about intervention than about sustaining encounters, making difficult stories tangible, and creating spaces where meaning unfolds collectively. I see these practices as examples of design culture operating through care, materiality, and public engagement rather than through conventional forms of design production.

Nathaly Pinto

Sustaining Design Culture as practice: Making pictograms with Indigenous youth otherwise, over time

My practice approaches design culture as a politically immersed making practice with communities, operating at the intersection of participatory research, indigenous epistemologies, and activist commitments. Centered on a long-term collective journey of knowing-through-making pictograms with indigenous youth in the Ecuadorian Amazon (2020–present), the work treats these visual devices not as objects of analysis but as living devices — plans, entry points, and spaces that support the reactualization of knowledges and collective, territorialized action. This presentation explores what it means to sustain design culture as practice beyond the doctoral thesis and the project — drawing on firsthand experience of the continuous work of making pictograms together, adapting to shifting conditions and assemblages, and of the ways in which communities continue to mobilize pictograms within and beyond academia.

Ulises Navarro Aguiar

Thinking/practicing DCS by problematizing value

What can design culture studies (DCS) learn from valuation studies? Although design is often framed as a ‘problem-solving’ practice that ‘creates’ or ‘adds’ value in concrete situations of use or participation, practitioners and scholars of design have long struggled to articulate and convey the value of design (research) work to organizations, stakeholders, funders, and other publics. This has led to widespread efforts to account for the value of design (research) in various ways, ranging from initiatives focused on quantifying its economic and financial value to initiatives foregrounding its social and environmental benefits. Whatever the case, design (research) is nowadays uncontroversially framed as a practice at once guided by, and productive of, ‘values’. In this sense, there is a form of value psychosis underlying these efforts, which ultimately betrays the predominance of a fundamentalist theory of ‘true’ value. That is, despite their varying emphases, all these efforts are preoccupied with the same thing: establishing a proper foundation from which to

account for the 'real' or 'true' value of design and dispel 'spurious' or 'false' values. By contrast, DCS, as an intellectual and practical project, explicitly positions itself as having no stake in advocating for the value of design itself. However, for the DCS practitioner, fundamentalist temptations abound and they risk finding a way to creep in unless the very notion of 'value' is problematized, maybe even done away with altogether, at least as an analytic category. In this respect, DCS could draw some lessons from the field of valuation studies.

Lucy Kimbell

Policy uncertainties and design practices

The expansion of and investment in design capabilities in public administrations in the past decade in Global Minority countries raises questions that design culture studies is particularly well-suited to ask and answer. Using design methods and approaches, and presence and participation of professionalised designers in governments and public policy, can be investigated through the lens of genealogies of design practice, legitimacy, consequences and legacies. Design culture studies offers critical and contextual lenses on such design practices, at the same time as having an orientation to their re-configuring.

Harun Kaygan

The inward turn in design: Five embodied metaphors for design practice

Design tools and methods serve to operationalize specific conceptual models and realize explicit practical agendas. They also build on and reproduce assumptions about both design activity (e.g. its cultural, institutional, technological conditions of existence) and its objects (e.g. representations of use and users). Some of these remain tacit: I argue that one can do design cultural research by engaging in design studio practice, employing design's methods and tools, not necessarily to develop practice itself but to produce a situated critique of the underlying assumptions.

Emilia Tikka

Design as Intercosmological Practice. Collaborative Imaginaries for Postcolonial Technosciences

Indigenous knowledges and technosciences are often perceived as entirely separate knowledge cultures, with the former associated with "nature" and the latter with science and technology, including within design discourses. This talk challenges this division by exploring how collaborative design imaginaries can help mitigate hierarchies between different knowledge cultures. The research presented is based on long-term artistic collaboration situated within the reindeer-herding cultures of the sub-Arctic Sápmi region and engagements with bioscientists. The talk demonstrates how Western understandings of nature come to dominate discourses on designing contemporary technoscientific worlds,

while others are disqualified as merely cultural beliefs. As Martin Savransky argues, what remains absent from many postcolonial discourses is "decolonizing the plural." While Indigenous knowledge systems may be recognized as equally valuable as Western sciences, their cosmologies—and, consequently, their understandings of what is or can be real—often remain excluded. Drawing on Isabelle Stengers' and Bruno Latour's notion of cosmopolitics, the talk explores design as an intercosmological practice. Central to the method is the goal of collaborating in divergence, whereby cosmologies and their nature–technology relations retain their complexity rather than being reduced or translated into one another. The talk contributes to the symposium's theme by exploring the making of collaborative imaginaries as a non-solutionist mode of knowledge production that extends beyond what is conventionally understood as design practices and artefacts. Finally, the talk discusses artistic design research as a methodology for imagining technoscientific worlds beyond the hegemony of a single cosmology.

Enya Moore

FieldPress: A mobile printmaking device for relational practice

My contribution explores *FieldPress*, a mobile printmaking device developed through socially engaged printmaking practices in Australia and Ireland. I approach *FieldPress* as a form of mobile creative infrastructure that enables situated, relational ways of engaging with communities. Rather than addressing predefined problems, it creates conditions for people to gather, make, and think together through collective printmaking and independent publishing. This raises questions about how design artefacts can operate as relational devices that support shared inquiry, multiple ways of knowing, and locally situated forms of knowledge production.

Elise Simonssen

How can a Podcast Function as a Research Tool and a Source of Data that Combines Design Practice and Research?

In a context of design culture studies how to research a contemporary practice of a creative society that holds a century old industrial art heritage within? A podcast can provide a platform to melange practice with research. It functions as a concrete project of the creative society while it becomes a research tool and source of data. A podcast can create a specific space for the researcher to participate, discuss, and through analyse and articulation phase critically approach prior (tacit) knowledge.

Xavier Acarin Wieland

The city is a museum, designing collective forms

In 1911 Patrick Geddes presented the *Cities and Town-Planning* exhibition, as a study of the evolution of western urban forms. His curatorial strategy was to create an info-sensorial environment, filled with maps, images, graphs, models and plans, with the intention to stimulate the visitor in considering its immediate surroundings and act on them. Geddes's

unfulfilled dream was to create a network of Civic Museums, dedicated to specific city-regions, that could continue and expand an exhibition and research practice oriented towards an eco-social transformation. Geddes's work was the inspiration for the 1916 *Civic Construction and Common Habitation* exhibition organized by Cebrià Montoliu at the Social Museum of Barcelona. Following a similar intention, this exhibition unfolded a material reading of the city, trying to identify those forms that could best serve a civic impulse connected to a specific local style. One hundred and ten years later, Barcelona has become another gentrified city and a mass-tourist destination, whose material specificity has been replaced by a generic and ubiquitous architecture and design landscape. By tracing the work of Geddes and Montoliu, this project looks to practice an expanded version of their curatorial perspective, while articulating a critical reading of Barcelona and its socio-material relations departing from a failed Garden City project included in Montoliu's exhibition.

Delphine Rumo

Thinking with soils and rocks – design culture as a practice of material inquiry

My practice of Design Culture Studies approaches design through the sustainability imaginaries, technocentric agendas, and human-environment relations enacted by innovation cultures. Writing from a designer's perspective, I attend to the material and spatial conditions through which strategies, systems and things are made, circulated and reconfigured within construction economies. Yet I do not mobilise design knowledge as a problem-solving framework. Instead, I use it as a critical mode of inquiry. My work explores visual, sensorial, and speculative practices, including participatory interventions, drawing, video-making and creative writing, to illuminate affective, embodied and unfinished forms of knowing. In this sense, my work enacts a politics of research practice: a way of thinking and engaging otherwise, with effects that remain ambiguous and open rather than predetermined. By staying close to the earthly matter of construction—soils and rocks—I question the promise that technocentric design innovation can 'solve' the dominant ways of thinking and doing that sustain extractive capitalism. To study design cultures, then, is also to study governance: who decides what is made, how, for whom and with what consequences.

Tomás Criado

Probing in the dark: collective speculations in a field of shades

The climatic mutation of extreme heat has plunged modern cities into their greatest design crisis in centuries. This mutation challenges our cultural conceptions of urban habitability and demands a profound shift in our conceptual and political institutions. What could be the role of design anthropology in this context? My recent ethnographic work seeks to reverse the technocratic trend of seeking quick designerly techno-fixes to the problem of climate adaptation. In an era of urgency, how can we prioritize collective thinking, when reflection is often dismissed as a hindrance to decision-making? How can we shape the design of future urban spaces without imposing a singular vision, accounting instead for the multiplicity of human and non-human life? As I see it, we must reclaim experimental approaches to probe

in the dark and reimagine future habitability. One such space is the Department of Umbrology, a speculative institution for the study of and intervention in the urban life in the shades. This project unites Barcelona-based partners across humanities, architecture, arts, and environmental sciences: the CareNet and DARTS groups (UOC), Arquitectura de Contacte, Nusos Coop, and the Laboratorio de Pensamiento Lúdico. Beginning in June 2024, since 2026 the Department has received devoted funding to unfold diverse collective forms of speculation in the shade: through a series of seminars, multimodal workshops and a festival the project wishes to work out the 'darkness' of the present, highlighting intergenerational and interspecies knowledge to reclaim the popular climate sovereignty of shades and our self to self-make our protections from the scorching heat.

Sini Rinne-Kanto

Designing a self-run space: pragmatism, opportunism and reflexivity

This talk reflects on her work as the Co-Founder and Head Curator of The Community, a collective-run, non-profit multidisciplinary art institution based in Paris. Founded in 2016, The Community exhibits and fosters critical discourse and work of artists and creatives in different forms – through exhibitions, events, concerts, performances, conferences, and talks – and across various disciplines, from art to fashion and music to publishing. The space had a multidisciplinary ethos and focused on collaboration and 'community thinking', seeking to propose an alternative model to established institutions for hosting exhibitions and artists. I would like to reflect on the tensions experienced by someone who analyses, comments on, and reflects on a concrete project — thus engaging in hybrid and pragmatic activities. Design is seen here as a tension between the ideal and the real.