On Crits and Games—and Crits as Games
A Conversation between Sille Storihle and KEC

Krabstadt Education Center, Sille Storihle

Abstract

A conversation between artist and educator Sille Storihle and the Krabstadt Education Center (KEC) about overlapping interests in educational models and games. Issues discussed are the role of games in education, experiences with the format of the group crit, and the question whether it is still a solid component of arts education or how it could be deployed differently. Storihle shares their work with live-action role-playing games (LARP, verb *to larp*) as an artistic method to approach filmic processes with a focus on a practical pedagogical project they did with students at the experimental film and art school Nordland Kunst- og Filmhøgskole in Northern Norway—whose geographic location is similar to Krabstadt's.

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Sille Storihle and students at Nordland Kunst- and Filmhøgskole, Gruppekritikken, 2022. © Sille Storihle

KEC: With the Krabstadt Education Center we want to think of arts education and its infrastructure in a way that allows for playful and experimental tactics and methods. Your latest film project is made using live-action role-play to construct a group critique situation in an art and film school. Our first question is: What is a "crit" for you?

SS: The crit class might be an enigma to people who have never been to art school. Put in the most simplified way, a crit is a situation in which a student shares their work and in return receives feedback from their fellow students and teacher. It is a central, and dominant, pedagogical structure in contemporary arts education. Despite it being a dominant framework for learning in art school, I find it has not been thoroughly reshaped in accordance with the current political questions crucial to educating artists today.

The history of the crit is specific, at the same time every artist-educator has their own way of conducting them, based on their own artistic practice, sensitivities, and values. Different approaches inherently linked to artists and their individual practices and sensibilities are rarely articulated and made into a common practice. There are some written accounts of what goes on in a group crit, and one of them is Sarah Thornton's *Seven Days in the Art World,* which devotes an entire chapter to the "art school crit." Thornton takes on the role of a "participant observer" in one of Michael Asher's legendary crit classes at CalArts "to gain some site-specific answers to big questions: What do artists learn at art school? What is an artist? How do you become one? What makes a good one?"[1] The author gives a detailed report of Asher's Post-Studio crit, which run from morning till late evening, and portrays the complex making of artists within a conceptual framework.

As a student I was baffled by the "group crit experience," because any discussion on *why* and *how* we do crits was absent. It was a hierarchical situation in which the professors had the power to either boost or bust students' work. The educational environment did to a minor degree help me understand my own and my fellow students' work, but the meaning was mostly created through professors' gaze. So given this entangled power dynamics, I am increasingly interested in asking "What is a crit?" prior to conducting one. This leads me to ask: Does your definition of a "crit" differ from mine, and how do you structure your crit class?

KEC: Your definition in its broadest understanding is a useful common starting point, and as one of the central teaching/learning forms used in Fine Art and Design education, conversations vary greatly depending on the method used, the style of conducting the crit, which is determined by the attitude of the teacher and participants. In terms of structure, it depends on the situation, whether it's an exam, a small group crit (max 5 people) or a bigger group (the whole class of, for example, 16 or 25 students). Given that each group constellation and the material artists bring in always differ, I would try to set up a general structure in which each crit is an opportunity to re-imagine what it is. In this respect it's very much like a game.

In "The Open and the Closed: Games of Emergence and Games of Progression" (2002), game designer and scholar Jesper Juul speaks of progression games versus emergence games. The progression games are more predetermined, with limited game play defined by the designer, while simple rules in emergence games lead to variation and often takes the form of multiplayer games without a predetermined outcome. A crit can be likened to emergent games, as in there are set conditions and rules for those participating in the crits, and it is up to how the group respects the "game contract" or the "crit contract" that allows for a meaningful or interesting interaction. What is problematic is when a crit becomes an exam where the evaluation criteria are fixed on meeting specific learning outcomes. In game language this would be the "win condition." The narrower and more pre-determined the assessment criteria of exams are, the greater the risk of losing the aims of a crit, which should lean toward cultivating a discursive ability in the participants, as well as it being a collective thinking exercise on the potential and meaning-making of art. How does this relate to your experiences?

SS: Since the crit is always centered around the students' work, I have been wary of introducing game design to the crit, unless it was entirely framed as a game, so I created a live-action role-play (LARP) called "The Group Crit" where students were given characters in which they created and presented artwork. Integrating game design and pedagogy in this way creates situations that correspond to Juul's concept of "emergence games" with an open-ended outcome. I find they also emphasize collectivity and discussion, as well becoming potential spaces to untangle underlying conflicts.

That being said, the notion of defining and consenting to a contract is essential in both games and crits. Last semester I started the group crits by writing a team charter together with the students, similar to what you called

"crit contract" earlier. The team charter was introduced to the students and faculty by the coach Martin Erichsen, who held workshops at the school on "Team Collaboration." He was invited as a strategy to introduce a different terminology and knowledge production on the topic of teamwork outside the field of art, to give practical insights into how we already work and potentially improve the way we work together. Erichsen defines a team charter as a document that expands and formalizes the team's psychological contract, which is the individual team member's expectation of mutual obligations. I find the articulation of a common ground to be a necessary starting point for crits, because it challenges the hierarchical "structurelessness" that I often find to be a group crit phenomenon.

KEC: Setting up the crit framework with the students beforehand, and presenting different ways/models to talk about work is a growing demand from many students irrespective of whether they are in neoliberalized universities or in more independent art academies. In general, it's necessary to evaluate standard norms of teaching. Mary Kelly wrote a text called "Concentric Pedagogy: Toward an ethics of the Observer," in *October* 168 (spring 2019). Her approach is definitely a benchmark for many artist-teachers, since it insists on the primacy of looking at the work, since "the work of art is essentially a visual proposition," and as such it "is legible on its own terms, and the artist's verbal defense does not necessarily give him or her a voice." And in tandem with such a close looking at the work within a critique situation, she emphasizes it "as a form of listening to the artist through the work."[2]

As a student, I've been brought up in the very hierarchical and set structure of exams, where the group crit form was conducted twice a year as mid-term and end-of term final exams. The exam brief was clearly outlined, and since I expected it to not be the easiest situation, where the work is judged and one is evaluated for grades, I was fine with the framework that gave primacy to getting teachers' comments, and peer review from the group became more of a bonding experience of surviving the trial together.

I think it's impossible to escape the hierarchy in teacher-student relations in a crit situation, since there are differences in accountability and responsibility assigned to each position, but of course the asymmetry need not lead to dominance or abuse if the teacher is mindful and pedagogically oriented to create a learning environment that promotes holistic participation. What is harder to regulate and needs to be brought forth are the hidden curriculums or "monocultural identification and rationalization."[3] In a crit situation, how do you understand and define the role of the teacher and of the student? What is a situation you wish you didn't have in a crit class?

SS: When I was a student, I remember one crit in particular with a fellow student, a painter, who had made a video of two liters of tri-colored strawberry-vanilla-chocolate ice cream slowly melting. The professors spent the entire crit talking about the French Revolution, but it was obvious the student hadn't thought about it at all. So in crits, the meaning can be projected top-down onto students' work by the faculty.

Ideally I think a teacher is a facilitator in the group crit. Someone who enables the group to unpack the work presented. It is easy to perform a voice of authority and expertise when you teach. I think I probably fail at being a good facilitator when I am too fast in my engagement with the students' work. Rather than focusing on the individual student who is presenting their work, I want to foreground the process of looking and reading a work by the students as a group. In the text by Mary Kelly you mention, she unpacks I believe for the first time in writing "the method" focusing on looking as *a form of listening*. In her revision of the "crit," she describes encountering Asher's crit sessions at CalArts in 1987, and how that made her more conscious of her own pedagogy's relationship to feminism. Kelly's emphasis on looking as a form of listening is very relevant in my

everyday experience as an artist who teaches.

To forefront the listening is crucial, because group crits tend to become about the articulation of artistic intent of the student, leading to students defending the work and upholding the intention as the answer of what the work is and does. This leaves little space for the group to look at the work on its own terms. There are so many things that can go "wrong" during a crit class, but I find that the biggest letdown is when nothing happens. A lot of vulnerability and trust is at stake in a good crit, and if there is a lack of engagement or a lot of defensiveness the group gets nowhere with the artwork. The group crit is as much a learning situation for the students who are not presenting their work, as it is for the one whose work is being shown.

KEC: It's important that the students understand that they're as much part of making it a pedagogical space. While the teacher has the overall responsibility, the students also need to put in the pedagogical labor of staying within the established "contract," as you mentioned above, and to peer-regulate if the atmosphere gets too defensive or combative in a way that closes down thinking and conversation.

What is the value and viability of crit classes to foster critical thinking or the ability to analyze and develop discursive reasoning in students?

SS: To me it is a matter of *how* crits are conducted. Crits are merely a situation in which we look at a project and talk about it. Art education must provide opportunities to practice ways of seeing in order to nurture critical thinking. When I got involved in doing more curatorial work, I started looking at art differently, because I became partially responsible for the reading of other people's work. I had to understand what the work was "doing" in a different way, and how curatorial decisions I made would influence the reading. Everything from where the work was placed in a room, the adjacent works, the title of the show, the language of the press release, and so on. I cherish the group crit format as a space dedicated to the artistic work and practice, where the maker is present. It is a rare situation for most artists or filmmakers once they have left school. What would you say, what role do crit classes have in developing a viable learning structure?

KEC: They are a feasible teaching tool as well as a learning tool! Lately I've seen different occasions, during which it became a site of discord that created situations of unbridgeable differences that became too difficult to untangle. There is talk about removing it or replacing it in the curriculum, which is why I became interested in looking more closely to understand the why and how of crit classes.

I do understand those students that don't see the (use) value of crit classes; their attention is often compromised because long crit classes can be hard, requiring a long attention span for colleagues' works and the benefits of the investment are not always clear, nor immediate. I wonder if we need to advocate or "market" the crit class more and what such marketing would look like. To claim that it has been a central part of art pedagogy may not be convincing enough for future artist–students. At KEC we are currently preparing the Crit Class marketing poster for prospective students outlining to them why the long crit classes are salubrious, building the foundational digestive flora for the longevity of their artistic careers.

In recent years, I have experienced students on Bachelor level needing more structure, mediation, and guidance to participate in crit classes. The conventional structure, where a student is expected to communicate their artistic intent and then enter into discussion with peers, tutors, and professionals is questioned, since the specificities of *who* is participating in the discussion is given greater emphasis and importance, as well as preventing misuse of power that such a "performative space" like a crit class implies. While both teachers and

students recognize the pedagogical need for crit classes to be effective learning situations, there has been a lot of resistance to the format among student groups, and a critique of the crit class. Is this phenomenon familiar to you within your teaching practice/school?

SS: There are often discussions regarding the pedagogies of the school I currently teach at, but I think any "healthy" art education will have to involve a discussion on "how-to-crit." Most of the teaching I am currently involved in is with students who are in a rural context, which produces a different way of being together than what I had experienced at art school. Most of our students work in collaboration with each other, with a high level of dependency in order to realize their projects. They work interchangeably, shifting positions, generating new teams for every production. From what I see, they have a lot of trust in each other, which I think influences the crit sessions and their ability to give direct and respectful feedback.

I often have to remind myself that art education differs from any other educational structures the students have experienced prior to being accepted to an art school. Most of us enter art school after having been taught in educational structures that teach you "if you do X, you will get Y," but there is no such linear learning progression in art school. You fail, you fall, and you get up again. Maybe you learn more from your perceived failure than the project everyone seemed to "like." What is different today from when I studied is the attention economy and the demand to be present on social media, a culture where you have to be endorsed through "likes" to exist. Maybe I am romanticizing a pre-social media era, but I do think that a "like-based" culture is affecting the students' sense of self-worth and generates a fear of "messing up" and puts a lid on experimentation. But going back to the crit as an educational format, do you have the feeling that the "critique of the crit class" has improved them?

KEC: There is a better understanding of the form and how it can be used. I'm wondering whether the use of social media exacerbates the condition of snap judgments: in a crit class the responses to the work come almost immediately, especially if it's "offensive" and the time allotted to looking at the actual work is almost too brief. The idea of a "scripted" crit class becomes interesting in terms of exercising or understanding what it means to look closely at the work, and to differentiate between what is a quick opinion, an informed opinion, and making an informed judgment based on analysis. One could argue that if students act within prescribed character-based roles, it might be easier to get some distance to their "own selves," and therefore break the circuit of snap judgment. Does the era of social media require that teachers adjust the crit classes because contemporary subjects prefer to act out a certain version of themselves? At KEC students frequently post selfies after really tough crit classes and we believe it helps to keep the format alive. It's questions like these that are raised in your film project *The Group Crit* that originate from a workshop with students at Nordland Kunst- og Filmhøgskole. The school you portrayed in your film there seemed to be satirical and even dystopic. Can you tell me more about the process of making the film?

SS: *The Group Crit* is a LARP I created for a specific group of students, which was set in a fictional art school where everything could, and maybe should, go wrong; a school where the "quality" of the artwork presented was insignificant and served as a way of generating discourse and fuel group dynamics. The workshop was conducted over a two-week period and the students were given pre-written characters, based partly on aspects of their practice they said they wanted to develop further, such as "being a director of photography," or "working with masculinity." One group of students played incoming first-year students having their very first crit, the other group were graduating third-year students making a critical film about the group crit as a pedagogical structure. What has now become a film is all captured through the gaze of the film crew. One of my central interests in working with LARP as a filmic process is to experiment and expand various forms of diegetic documentation as a part of the game design.

The game design elevated some of the well-known conflicts at the school into an environment where we could play them out with humor and intensity. It was definitely designed along the lines of what Juul describes as a "game of emergence," as I mentioned earlier. The game had endless potential developments through the various characters, and it was up to the players, in this case the students, to develop their own stories. In LARP terminology people speak of *steering,* which is "the process in which a player influences the behavior of her character for nondiegetic reasons."[4] A central idea to the game was that it would enable a space in which the students could gain experiences they would not otherwise have as themselves. Of course, steering in a game may be hard if you have no prior experience with larping, but I think many made good use of the opportunity and I was amazed by how the group gave each other so much trust.

One of the most crucial parts for me was that the students had to create a work in-character, which meant that the group crit dynamics could be examined and played with in a way otherwise not possible. The "normal" group crit format is often defined by students' close identification with the artwork presented. A critique of an artwork easily becomes personal. I wanted to remove the delicate center of a "normal" group crit, by giving students the possibility to create work in character and then conduct group crits with these works in the center.

KEC: What was the situation/experience that led you to focus on the crit class as a situation for creating a live-action role-playing game?

SS: From 2019 to 2020 I was part of a program called The Interdisciplinary Art and Theory Program, run by Avi Alpert and Meleko Mokgosi in New York. We focused on "Aesthetics and Pedagogy" and I had a chance to be in a classroom-like context without being a teacher. At the same time, I was working on live-action role-playing games, but the pandemic put many of my LARP plans on hold as they required traveling and human contact. I decided to leave New York and realize my ideas to design a game at the school I teach at centered on the group crit. *The Group Crit* is the first game I designed, and I decided on the group crit as "a situation" because I know it well, both as a student and a teacher. And I knew it was a situation which could generate play. It was crucial that the players (the students) were familiar with the crit format and that the game could provide a "parallel world," adjacent to their school life. I find relatability crucial for me in games I play, and this was important when thinking of the students as players.

KEC: The students in the film, are they re-enacting previous experiences? In other words, is this a form of teaching they are familiar with, or is it something that comes from your world and your schooling?

SS: The students have all experienced group crits as students at the school. And of course, it does not play out like it does in the film. I do not find "re-enactment" to be an appropriate term as it relates to performing or acting out a specific past event. Re-enactments remind me of Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001) and other projects realized in the 2000s; but my interest in larping is quite different. The game I developed for the students did not set out to recreate a crit, but to use the situations as a way of investigating the group formations of a crit. There were certain conflicts and potential for play within the game that were related to current discussions at the school, which was part of my interest in creating the game.

One example is how the students build their teams. Very often female students complain that male students are asked to take positions in their productions that require a specific set of technical skills, such as being the director of photography. I therefore decided to build this potential conflict into the characters as something that could emerge during the game, and in a rather complex way it did. The way the conflict developed was all up to the group through the different players and their characters. The underlying question of the experiment was:

Can a fictional universe provide a way to examine the group crit as a pedagogical format/structure specific to the educational context? And will the filmed experience function as a film outside the player environment?

Going back to Krabstadt, is its Educational Center a kind of game? Since you create a universe, and you are asking people to perform within it, it really touches on a lot of issues relating to game design and participation?

KEC: Yes, KEC aims to explore the on/offline educational prospects. It touches on game design, and we are currently exploring that our main concern is not to fall into the trap of gamification of education but to use the education center as a way of thinking about overlaps between games and pedagogy.

We know you teach in Lofoten, which is not far away from Krabstadt. If you were to work as a teacher at the Krabstadt Education Center, what classes would you suggest, given your recent experiences in larping, group crits and making the film? Most people believe group crits are best conducted in person; do you think it's possible to conduct them also online, at least for KEC?

SS: As I understand gamification of education it is often related to motivation. Immersion seems to be portrayed as the antidote to the problem of attention. Since Krabstadt is a community of unwanted people and problems from various demographics, I am certain that many have experienced a lot of inflammatory, irrelevant, and offensive comments online, so I would like to design a LARP about trolling. When it comes to group crits, I definitely prefer them to happen in person, but a trolling LARP would have to happen online. There is a long tradition of online games, and during Covid a lot of new games and ways of gaming surfaced. I have limited experience with online games, but it is something I am interested in developing if it fits the content of the school.

KEC: We have a lot of unemployed and unmotivated trolls in Krabstadt, so we could definitely find some funding for an online trolling LARP!

Contributing students/players: Emilie Vibeke Aagensen, Arjun Acharya, Ingeborg Augunset, David Haugaard Bohl Andersen, Lise Ulvedahl Carlsen, Rebekka Christophersen, Emil Engesnes Bråthen, Gustav Oliver Gunvaldsen, Ali Jabaly, Thomas Lafuente, Haakon Midtsundstad, Simen Anthony Samuelsen, Sanjey Sureshkumar, Amalie Magdalena With Vedelsby, Ellen Vikström.

Footnotes

1. Thornton, Sarah. *Seven Days in The Art World*. London: Granta. 2008. p. 69.
2. Kelly, Mary. "Concentric Pedagogy: Toward an Ethics of the Observer." *October*. No. 168. Spring 2019. p. 44.
3. Mulholland, Neil. *Re-imagining the Art School: Paragogy and Artistic Learning*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 2019. p.19.
4. See https://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Steering (accessed 2022–05–04).