# The Junk Playground as Agora: Designing for Playful Democratic Frictions

PhD Dissertation by Mathias Poulsen


design school kolding

‘The Junk Playground as Agora: Designing for Playful Democratic Frictions’
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Design School Kolding
www.designskolenkolding.dk

**‘Immer ein Abenteuer.’**

(Said to me by an older German man, a proper runner, just before a particularly painful marathon in Hamburg many years ago)

**‘Adventure rarely reaches its predetermined end.’**

(Whitehead, 1933, p. 359)

**‘As soon as he saw the Big Boots, Pooh knew that an Adventure was going to happen …’**

(Winnie the Pooh)

Good boots are highly recommended.

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# / Summary

## *English*

This PhD project grew from my professional practice of creating opportunities to explore new ways of working, thinking, talking, playing, and living together. Upon founding the play festival CounterPlay[1] in 2014, I observed how people playing together also conducted spirited inquiries into difficult questions such as 'how can we be together, differently?'. Were they playing their way into democratic conversations? This made me consider how play might potentially inspire and enrich democratic encounters and practices. Inspired by my observations, with this project I have asked 'what happens when we understand play as a mode of democratic participation?' I hypothesized initially that play could inspire a broader participatory repertoire, which in turn might allow for more people to actively engage with democratic issues, and for new, diverse democratic imaginaries to emerge.

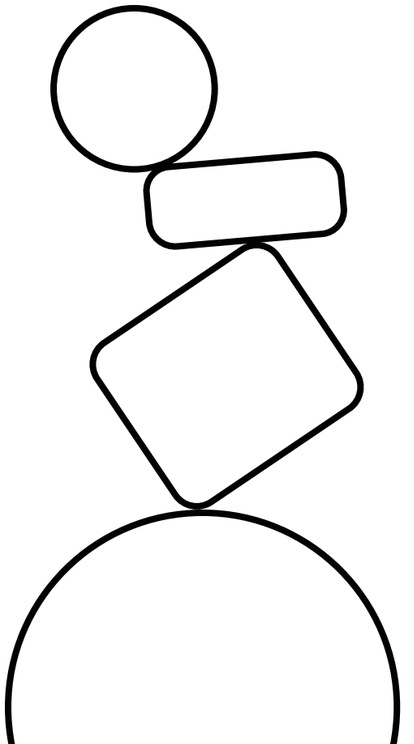
I ground the project in a relational epistemology and ontology, where I understand encounters between human and more-than-humans as constitutive of our knowing, being and becoming. From there, I develop my theoretical framework, beginning with a turn towards participatory and radical conceptions of democracy. I describe democracy as movement, and I argue that democracy is always on the move, always in the midst of becoming something else. To maintain this movement, I argue that playful participation can generate friction, which can help us challenge and dismantle what I label 'tales of necessity'. Finally, I introduce the notion of a 'pluriverse', and I argue that people playing in the junk playgrounds can 'prefigure' other worlds to experience what living in them might be like.

Methodologically, I combine constructive design research, artistic research and autoethnography to cultivate the flexibility, creativity and sensitivity required to sustain my inquiries. I develop a design research programme proposing 'the junk playground as agora' to combine the traditional notion of the agora as a democratic meeting space with the Danish tradition of 'junk playgrounds' (skrammellegepladser). To better grasp what playful democratic participation might look and feel like, I have conducted nine junk playground experiments in different contexts, involving both adults and children in bodily inquiries into matters of common concern.

Rooted in the empirical research materials generated during the experiments, I begin my analysis by exploring how people attune themselves to the junk playgrounds and the encounters with both human and more-than-human bodies. I suggest that the affective attunement and the bodily involvement can spark new imaginaries. From there, I continue by tracing rhythms and affective intensities that reverberate through the playgrounds, generating engagement, surprises, and friction. Sometimes, the friction sparks feelings of inconvenience, or even of being in conflict with one another. These experiences may remind us that despite our inherent differences, we are always entangled with each other, and that our relations may foster movement and change. While friction, inconvenience and conflict have unfolded through the project, I argue that the playgrounds have to a greater degree been animated by caring practices and a sense of collective joy. By caring for each other and for the shared play experience, the people in the playgrounds have sometimes dared to show a degree of trust and vulnerability. This has occasionally cultivated feelings of collective joy, community, and enchantment. I end my analysis by developing a framework that describes participation as a multidimensional assemblage.

[1] http://www.counterplay.org/

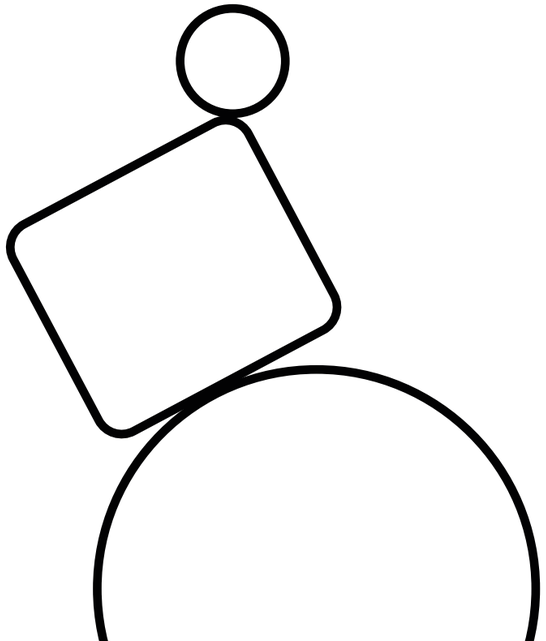




With that, I trace different dimensions of the participatory assemblages emerging in the junk playgrounds to suggest that the diversity of engagement may inspire new participatory imaginaries.

In my discussion, I argue that the junk playgrounds can inspire new democratic practices within existing democratic formations. Drawing on the analysis, I suggest that the playgrounds may potentially encourage and enrich democratic participation, foster creativity, and cultivate democratic communities. These discussions lead to an intermezzo, where I develop the concept of 'drifting by friction' to discuss how both I and the project have drifted and undergone significant transformations. Following that discussion, I suggest the concept of 'playful democratic friction' to argue that rather than maintaining democracy as we know it, the junk playgrounds also generate friction with existing conceptions of democracy as they allow us to experience alterity and other democratic worlds.

In the end, I suggest that I have made numerous modest contributions across the fields of democracy, design, play and research methodology. I contend that in the field of democracy, my main contribution is the concept of playful democratic frictions that I use to describe how friction can disturb and transform ontological assumptions about what democracy is and might become. In relation to design research, I suggest that the concept of 'drifting by friction' can help us to develop new design practices less confined by dominant traditions. I argue that my work contributes to the field of play studies by insisting that play must be play first, and by conducting the research in a playful spirit, mirroring the practices in the junk playgrounds. Finally, I contend that my PhD project contributes to methodological considerations on how to research fleeting encounters and affective experiences, as I emphasise my playful, experimental approach and the affective sensitivity I describe as 'goosebumps-based research'. The project does not end with convergence, answers, and clarity, but with divergence and new questions: What might happen if the junk playgrounds took place closer to established democratic institutions and practices? What would happen if we could play with different temporal horizons and sustain the experiments for longer? How might we continue to question and destabilise the ontological assumptions we tend to take for granted as axiomatic?



# *Danish*

Dette Ph.d.-projekt voksede ud af min professionelle praksis, hvor jeg har været særligt optaget af at udforske andre måder at arbejde, tænke, tale, lege og leve sammen på. Da jeg grundlagde legefestivalen CounterPlay i 2014, observerede jeg, hvordan deltagerne med legen gennemførte livlige undersøgelser af vanskelige spørgsmål som 'hvordan kan vi være sammen på andre måder?'. Legede de sig mon ind i demokratiske samtaler? Dette fik mig til at overveje, hvordan leg potentielt kunne inspirere og berige demokratiske møder og praksisser. Inspireret af disse observationer har jeg med dette projekt spurgt: 'Hvad sker der, når vi forstår leg som en form for demokratisk deltagelse?' Jeg tog afsæt i den hypotese, at leg kan inspirere et bredere deltagelsesrepertoire, som igen kan muliggøre, at flere mennesker aktivt engagerer sig i demokratiske spørgsmål, og at nye, forskelligartede forestillingsverdener kan opstå.

Projektet er forankret i en relationel epistemologi og ontologi, hvor jeg forstår møder mellem mennesker og mere-end-mennesker som konstitutive for vores viden og væren. Derfra udvikler jeg min teoretiske ramme, der begynder med deltagende og radikale opfattelser af demokrati. Jeg beskriver demokrati som bevægelse og argumenterer for, at demokrati altid er under forandring. For at opretholde denne bevægelse foreslår jeg, at legende deltagelse kan generere friktion, som kan hjælpe os med at udfordre og nedbryde det, jeg betegner som 'nødvendighedens fortællinger'. Endelig trækker jeg på begrebet 'plurivers', og jeg hævder, at folk, der leger på skrammellegepladser, kan 'prefigurere' andre verdener for at opleve, hvordan det er at leve i dem.

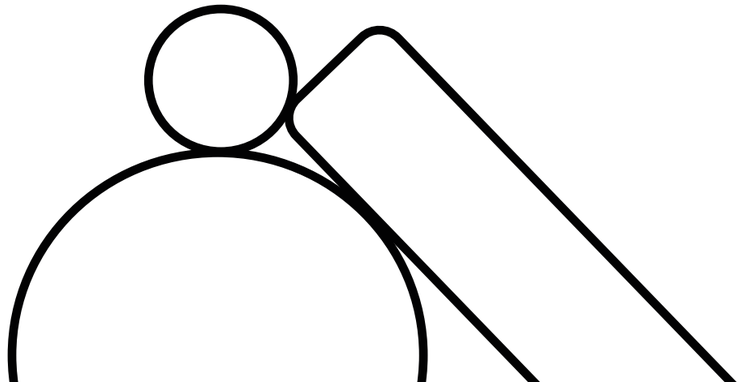
Metodologisk kombinerer jeg konstruktiv designforskning, kunstnerisk forskning og autoetnografi for at muliggøre den fleksibilitet, kreativitet og følsomhed, min forskning forudsætter. Jeg udvikler et designforskningsprogram, der foreslår 'skrammellegepladsen som agora' for at kombinere den traditionelle opfattelse af agoraen som et demo-

kratisk mødested med den danske tradition for ‘skrammellegepladser’. For bedre at forstå, hvordan legende demokratisk deltagelse kan se ud og føles har jeg gennemført ni designeksperimenter i forskellige kontekster, der involverer både voksne og børn i kropslige undersøgelser af fælles anliggender.

Forankret i de empiriske forskningsmaterialer, der er genereret under disse eksperimenter, starter jeg min analyse ved at udforske, hvordan folk ’tuner’ sig ind på skrammellegepladserne, hvor de møder både mennesker og mere-end-menneskelige aktører. Jeg foreslår, at den affektive stemning og det kropslige engagement kan vække nye forestillingsverdener. Derfra fortsætter jeg med at spore rytmer og affektive intensiteter, som genererer engagement, overraskelser og friktion. Nogle gange udløser friktionen følelser af ulejlighed eller endda konflikt. Disse oplevelser kan minde os om, at på trods af vores iboende forskelle står vi altid i forhold til hinanden, og vores relationer kan udløse bevægelse og forandring. Mens friktion, og konflikt har udfoldet sig gennem projektet, hævder jeg, at legepladserne i højere grad er blevet animeret af omsorgspraksisser og en følelse af kollektiv glæde. Ved at tage sig af hinanden og den fælles legeoplevelse har folk på legepladserne til tider turdet vise en grad af tillid og sårbarhed. Dette har lejlighedsvis opdyrket følelser af kollektiv glæde, fællesskab og fortryllelse. Jeg afslutter min analyse ved at udvikle en typologi, der beskriver deltagelse som en flerdimensionel ’assemblage’. Dermed sporer jeg forskellige dimensioner af deltagelse, der opstår på skrammellegepladserne for at antyde, at det mangfoldige engagement kan inspirere nye forestillinger om deltagelse.

I min diskussion foreslår jeg, at skrammellegepladserne kan inspirere nye demokratiske praksisser inden for eksisterende demokratiske institutioner. Med udgangspunkt i analysen foreslår jeg, at legepladserne potentielt kan opmuntre og berige demokratisk deltagelse, fremme kreativitet og opdyrke demokratiske fællesskaber. Disse diskussioner fører til et intermezzo, hvor jeg udvikler begrebet ’drifting by friction’ for at diskutere, hvordan både jeg og projektet har undergået betydelige transformationer. Efter den diskussion foreslår jeg begrebet ‘legende demokratisk friktion’ og argumenterer for, at skrammellegepladserne kan generere friktion med eksisterende forestillinger om demokrati, da de tillader os at opleve andre demokratiske verdener.

Til sidst foreslår jeg, at jeg har ydet flere, omend beskedne, bidrag på tværs af demokrati-, design-, leg- og forskningsmetodologifelterne. Jeg hævder, at mit primære bidrag inden for demokratifeltet er begrebet legende demokratiske friktioner, som jeg brugte til at beskrive, hvordan friktion kan forstyrre og transformere ontologiske antagelser om, hvad demokrati er, og hvad det kan blive. Med hensyn til designforskning foreslår jeg, at begrebet ‘drift ved friktion’ kan hjælpe os med at udvikle nye designpraksisser, der er mindre begrænset af dominerende antagelser og traditioner. Jeg hævder, at mit arbejde bidrager til legefeltet ved at insistere på, at leg først og fremmest skal være leg, og ved at udføre forskningen i en legende ånd, der afspejler praksisserne på skrammellegepladserne. Endelig hævder jeg, at mit ph.d.-projekt bidrager til metodologiske overvejelser om, hvordan man forsker i flygtige møder og affektive oplevelser. Jeg understreger min legende, eksperimentelle tilgang og den affektive følsomhed, som jeg beskriver som ‘gåsehudsbaseret forskning’. Projektet slutter ikke med konvergens, svar og klarhed, men med divergens og nye spørgsmål: Hvad ville der ske, hvis skrammellegepladserne fandt sted tættere på etablerede demokratiske institutioner og praksisser? Hvad ville der ske, hvis vi kunne lege med forskellige tidsmæssige horisonter og længere eksperimenter? Hvordan kan vi fortsætte med at udfordre og destabilisere de ontologiske antagelser, vi har en tendens til at tage for givet?



# / Acknowl-edgements

They say a PhD project is a solitary affair, and as someone who love and live for the encounter and the spark of connection, I have certainly been suspended in solitude for longer than I like. There were more than a few moments of deep frustration and utter despair, where I was daydreaming of becoming a woodworker by trade. However, I would never have made it this far without all the incredible, caring people who so generously helped and encouraged me on my journey. I believe that very few things in life, if any, can be attributed to just one person, and a PhD dissertation is definitely not one of these things. You may only see my name on the front of this work, but that is deeply misleading and inherently unfair.

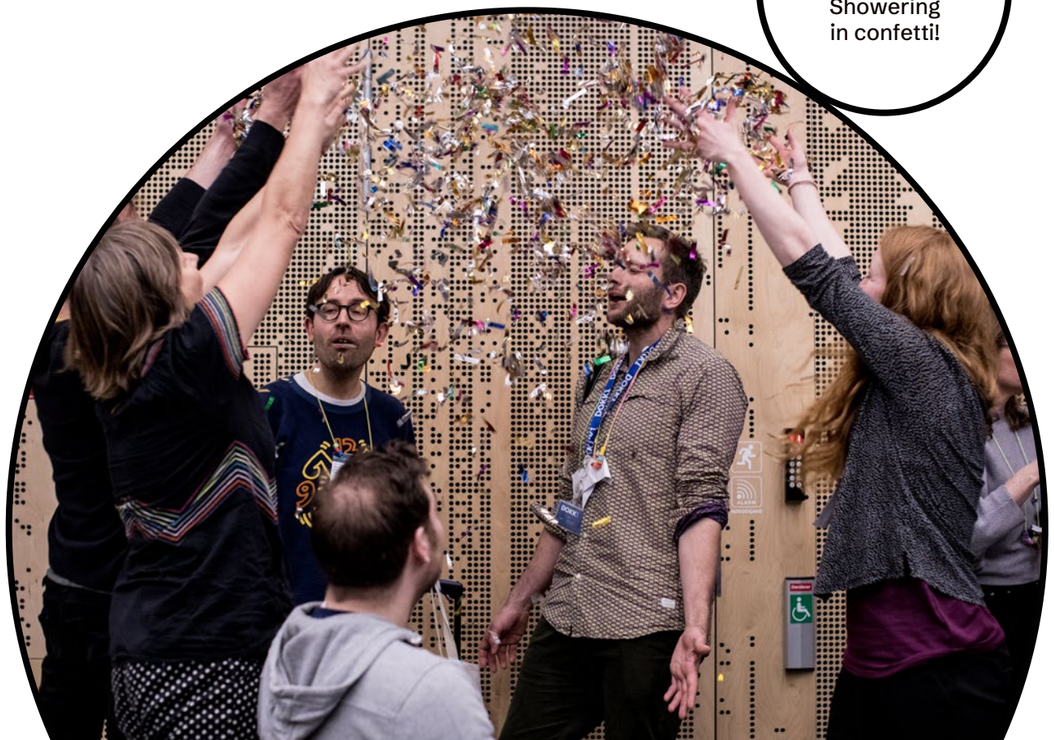
I cannot remedy the contemporary obsession with individual achievements, so how can I ever show my immense gratitude to all the people who have helped me along the way?



## *CounterPlay*

There is no one right place to start, but I will begin where this project began – with CounterPlay, the play festival I proposed back in 2013. I want to thank everyone who supported me and CounterPlay from the very humble beginnings, everyone who kindly shared their ways of playing, everyone who came to the festival over the years, and everyone who stays in touch. There would have been no CounterPlay without you crazy, playful souls, and without the play community, it would never have crossed my mind to pursue this PhD-project. Basking in your loving generosity feels like showering in confetti. I miss you all and I hope to see and play with you again before too long.

A scene from CounterPlay: Showering in confetti!



Thank you to the people in the junk playgrounds!

## *The People in the Playgrounds*[2]

Next, I want to thank all the people who made the project come alive by playing with me in the junk playgrounds. You are the beating heart of this project, and you are still with me. I admire your courage for stepping into something none of us knew what was or could become. Thank you to the brave group of Design for Play students who joined me in the very first experiment. Thank you to the wonderful staff at Mølleskolen in Ry for turning my initial insecurity into a deep sense of collective joy. Thank you to Søren and everyone who came to that amazing summer party in Hjortshøj. Thank you to Ole for reaching out and to your dedicated students for playing along. Thank you to the great people at Redux for bringing the junk playground to the recycling community. Thank you, Anne-Lene, "Grusgravens Venner", and everyone who played with us in the amazing gravel pit. Thank you, Christian, for all the conversations and for bringing the junk playgrounds to Nicolai. Finally, I want to thank everyone who played with me in Melbourne and Canberra.

[2]When I refer to "the people in the playground", I take inspiration from Iona Opie's "The People in the Playground" and I share her intention to 'call up the sensation of being surrounded by the kaleidoscopic vitality of the eager, laughing, shouting, devil-may-care people in the playground' (Opie, 1993, p. ix).



Thank you.

**Australian Friends**

This project took several important turns during my research stay in Australia. At no time did the project - or I - change as much and as fast as during those three months in Melbourne and Canberra. Everyone I met deserves a great thank you!

**Melbourne**

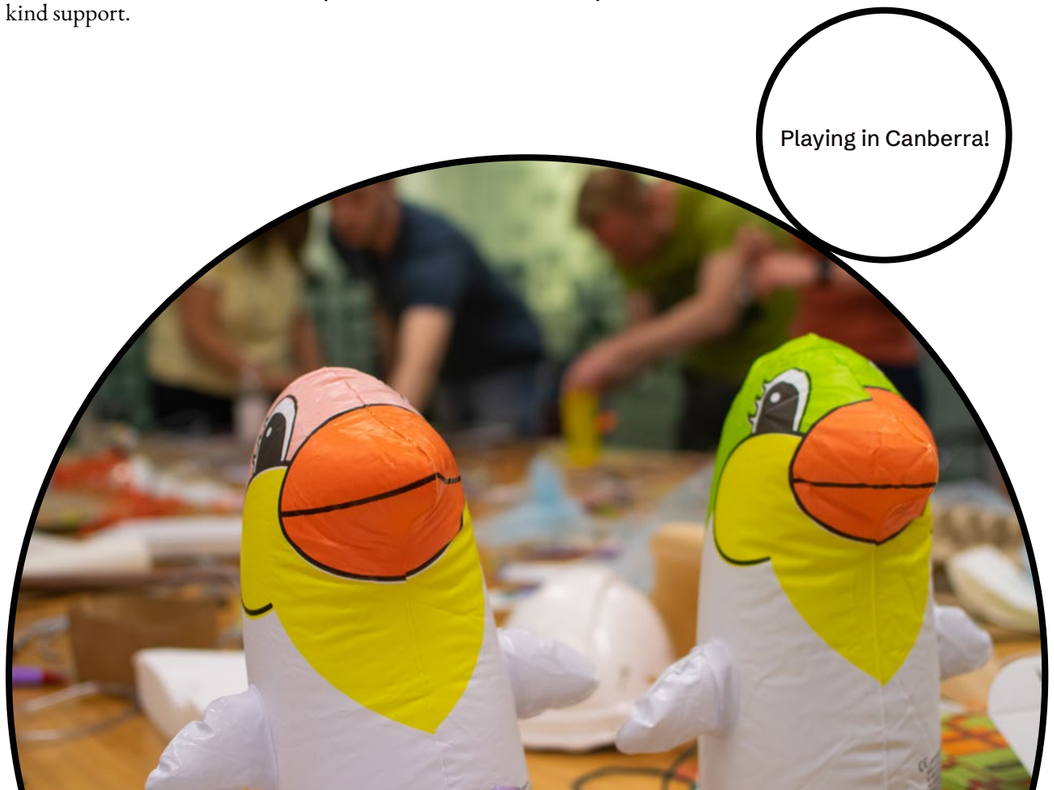
Thank you to Lisa, Shanti, and Stacy for playing with us online during the "Wandering Feast", and for making us feel so incredibly welcome in Melbourne and at Monash. And thank you, Robbie, for great company, and for driving around Melbourne in a ute with me to pick up discarded materials for yet another experiment.

Gathering discarded materials from the streets of Melbourne.

Thank you, Annette, for the inspiring conversations and for letting us stay in your gorgeous home. Thank you, Troy, for reminding me that CounterPlay lives on and for inviting me to all these amazing play events!

**Canberra**

Thank you, Hans, for making contact, for so generously inviting me into a fantastic academic community, and for encouraging me to hold on to the idea of playful democracy. Thank you to everyone at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance, Selen, Nicole, Friedel, Anne, Wendy, Jordan and so many others. There would have been a lot less talk about democracy in this thesis were it not for your kind support.




**Colleagues**

If the idea for this project would never have been hatched without CounterPlay, it would never have come to fruition without Design School Kolding and my brilliant, caring colleagues there. Nowhere in my professional life have I felt more at home, surrounded by curious, playful people always eager to experiment and push boundaries of what can be done, made, experienced, written or thought.

Thank you to Anne-Lene for the walks, conversations and for playing in the gravel pit. Thank you, Sofie, Jess and Stine, for thought-provoking and insightful comments on my writing. Thank you, Lotte, for all the great conversations on trams in Melbourne (and in general). Thank you, Alexandra and Maria, for being wonderful writing friends in "Søhøjlandets writing circle". Thank you, Sune and Christina, for cultivating a PhD school and community on trust, kindness, and curiosity. Thank you, Ornella, for taking care of the impossible job doing graphic design for a thesis that was never quite done.

More than (almost) anyone, I want to thank my wonderful supervisors, Eva Brandt and Helle Marie Skovbjerg. I remain in awe of how you have remained curious, patient and supportive in the face of my silly ideas, my reluctance to follow rules and conventions, and my periods of deep frustration and apathy. Without your guidance and support, there would have been no thesis. Thank you!

**Family**

Thank you to all my dear family members, who have been unreasonably sweet, patient, and supportive through this. Thank you to my wonderful parents, who instilled in me the confidence to play.

Finally, the biggest thank must go to Camilla. I will let you in on a little secret. Working alone is not something I do particularly well, and I need to talk to someone regularly, to tell them what I am thinking. As if my thoughts are not real before my vocal cords have been activated. Most of the time, that someone has been Camilla. We have been joking that she's my not-so-secret shadow supervisor, and that's not half-wrong. More importantly, we have been laughing a lot, and laughter is what kept me going.

Meet our playful friends, Snow, Bertha, Pony, Løffi and Pingo.

Is this where I mention that she had help? That our small friends have been playing with us, too? Do I tell you that they have their own voices and strong opinions? That Løffi, as a proud lion, has almost escaped his latent toxic masculinity, that Pony is a bit of an alcoholic, and that Pingo is obsessed with disco and astrophysics? Or is that too silly?



Camilla, I love you more than I love the trees.

Thank you, all of you. I am wildly grateful for your involvement in this project. However small or large, it has made differences, and I couldn't have made it without you.

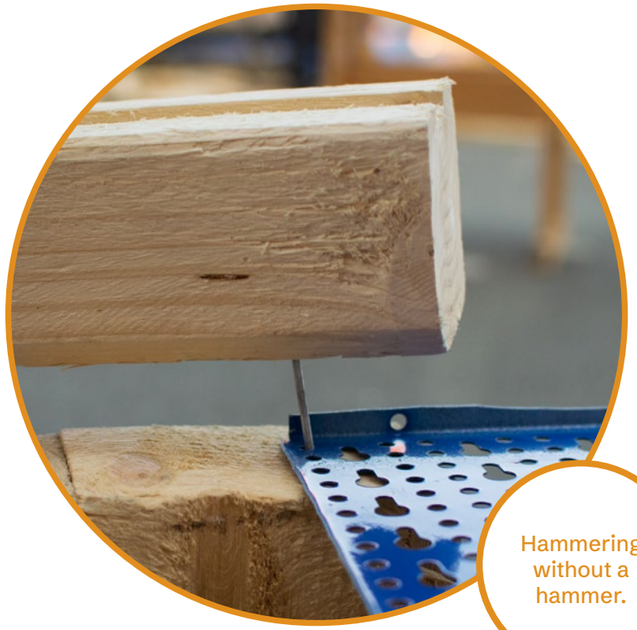
# 1. Welcoming



## 1.1 Welcome to the *playground*

Where's the hammer?
WHERE'S THE HAMMER?
I don't know, maybe there's one down there?
...

Oh, you found...some kind of hammer, it seems.



Hammering without a hammer.

I'm sorry about the wait. It's funny, no matter how many hammers we bring out here, it's just never enough, but apparently a lack of hammers makes people creative. Anyway, welcome to the junk playground! Let me give you a short tour around the site, which might seem a little chaotic and overwhelming at first.



I'm the caretaker here, and you might notice that I walk or sometimes even run all over the place. I go where I feel like I'm needed, where people might require a little bit of help or a gentle push, or simply where I am drawn towards intriguing spectacle.

Me, the caretaker, taking care

Let's begin right here, by the heart of the junk playground: the materials. I can tell you, it took quite some effort to collect and bring all these things up here: the pallets, boards and beams stacked up over there, the worn tyres, all that rope, these tubes, that fabric. It may not look like much, this pile of discarded stuff, but I assure you, these materials are vibrant, full of life, questions, stories, and intentions. They have already sparked numerous ideas and adventures, and I'm confident that they will both help you and challenge you on your journey, as they simultaneously support and resist your intentions. If you think you will be always in control, you are probably in for a surprise. Oh, good, your hands are curious, they have already started touching and exploring. I'm sure you will feel right at home here.

BUT FIRST LET'S GO



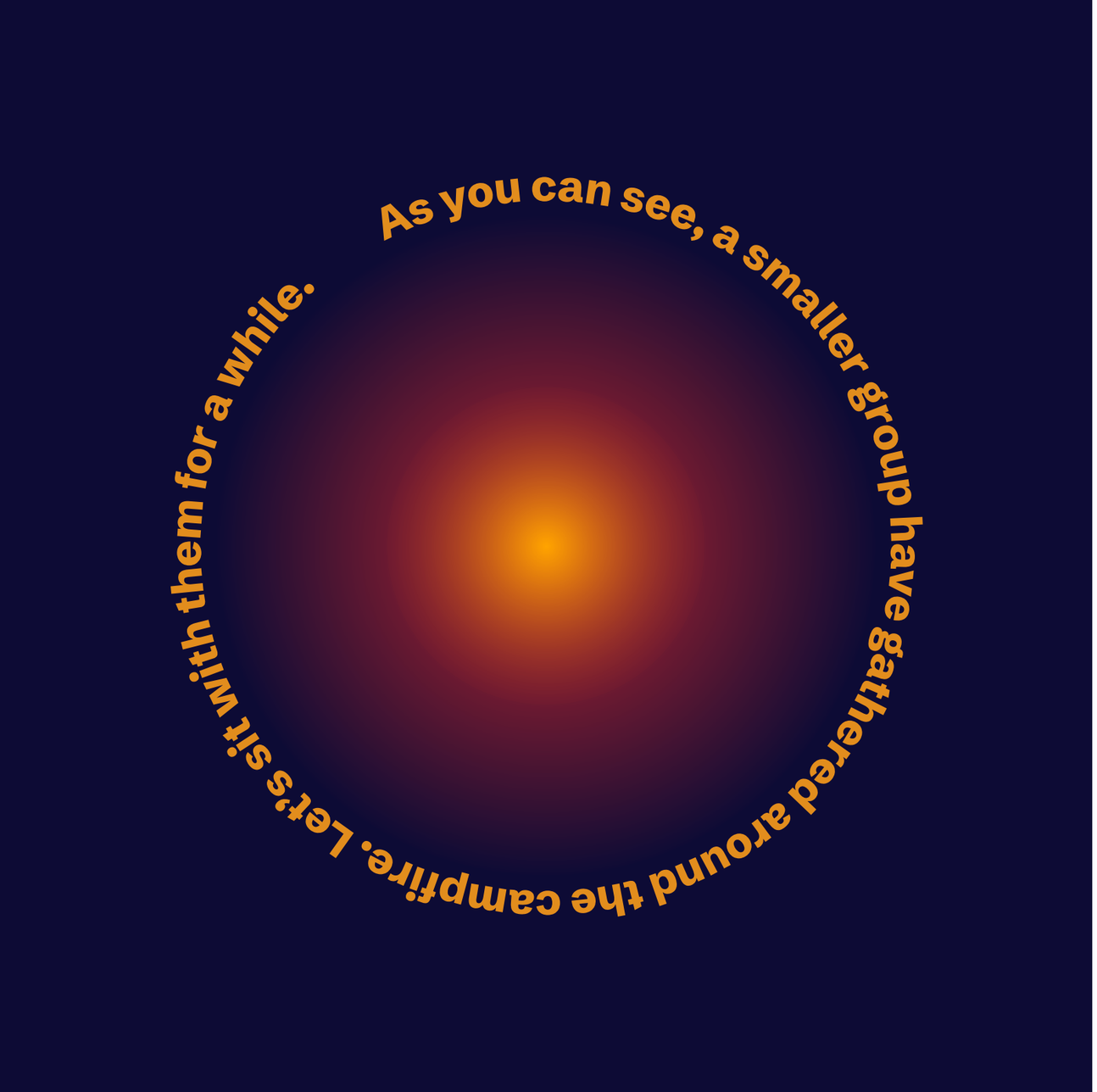
OVER HERE

As you can see, a group of adults have found some funny-looking wheels they are cutting with an angle grinder. Who knows what they're doing, but it looks a little dangerous, so maybe we should keep this between us?'


Angle grinders are fun!

**Do you see that steep slope? Yes, that one.
The children love dragging things up, almost as
much as they enjoy running, sliding and tumbling down.
Watch out, it's quite slippery and hard to climb.**

Someone must have built this, but I don't quite know what it is – a junk playground totem pole, perhaps? Did some mystical ceremony take place here, I wonder?





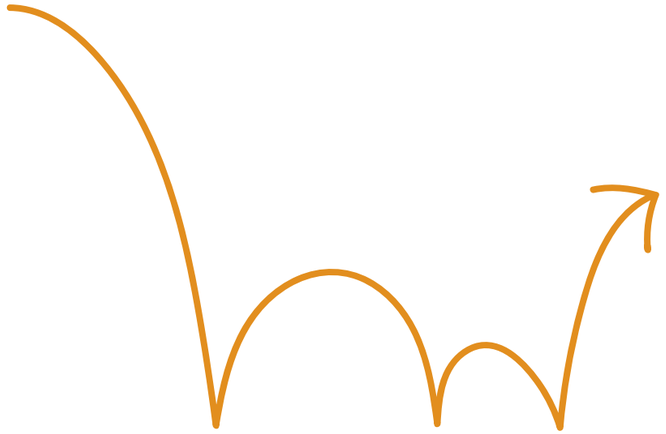

Listen! I have grown quite fond of this soundtrack. Just now, I can hear a woman humming, that kid is drumming on old tin cans, someone is shouting, and I faintly hear several people laughing. Over there, a rather heated discussion is going on. Maybe it's the familiar debate about who gets to use the hammer. Then there are the sounds of tools. A hammer hitting – or, just as often, not hitting – a nail. A rusty saw slowly cutting through a wooden board. Tearing of duct tape. Oh, did you hear that sound? Something fell over.


I hope nobody got hurt. Now that we're sitting somewhat comfortably by the fire, and while you're roasting your marshmallow, allow me to give you a little guidance. I don't know you yet, as we have just started playing and I can only guess what your expectations for this experience might be. Whatever you think will happen here, I hope you can allow yourself to be surprised, just like I have been, time and time again. I always stress that playing is voluntary, and that you can stop and step out at any point. Do you feel a little anxious, did someone step over your personal boundaries, or are you simply tired? If so, step back, sit down, grab a cup of hot chocolate by the fire and watch from a distance for a while. There is no wrong or right way to play along.

The second thing I always mention is that here, the materials have their own voice, agency, and desires. It's not merely a trick, a tall tale I tell to lead you astray, but simply an observation. When we encounter the materials, perhaps especially the larger ones, we cannot be completely in control. Rather than trying to think or talk your way through this, try following your hands and body as they engage with the materials. See what happens. It's an adventure!

What I want you do to?

Well, I don't want you to do anything, really. I rarely tell anyone what to do, and to be honest, I like it better that way. Are you ready to get started? Let's go back to the materials and have a better look with our hands. I'll leave you here for a bit. Let me know if you need my help, just don't expect me to tell you what to do.



## Stepping out of the story:

What I'm trying to say and show here is that this thesis is not merely *about* junk playgrounds as spaces for democratic participation and that we are not at a safe distance, far removed from the action. The thesis seeks to be *like* the junk playgrounds, to evoke affective experiences mirroring those of the playground, or better yet, to *be* a junk playground. When I say, for instance, that I'm the caretaker, that describes both the role I have most often had in the playgrounds, and the role I aspire to embody in my writing. In my dreams, this thesis is a sustained experiment, an ongoing inquiry, where a great number of materials – letters, words, spaces, figures, images, colours and so on - are combined and reconfigured to raise questions, to see things anew and to generate frictions.

This short excursion is a composite of my design experiments and an attempt to begin our journey close to the empirical roots of this project, the junk playground. However, before I further unfold this proposition, let us take a few steps back.



# 1.2 Crises of *democracies*

Through this thesis, I will talk a lot about democracy, but what I am really interested in is *the difficulties of living together*, for humans and more-than-humans[3] alike. This is what drives me, but I believe that democracy is probably the best way to explore and create better conditions for our shared lives on planet Earth.

In this view, which I will elaborate later, democracy is not primarily an institutional affair where 'the role of the people is to produce a government' (Schumpeter, 1943/2003, p. 269), but rather a moment (Wolin, 2016), a process, a conversation (Koch, 1945/2023), an unstable assemblage (Asenbaum, 2023a) of conflicting hopes and desires, and a ceaseless, experimental inquiry into possible ways of living together. In short, I will talk about democracy as *movement*. This movement is perpetually spurred on by the friction between the passions and dreams of people with all our infinite differences, as well as our numerous encounters with more-than-humans. When I describe democracy as movement, it is not intended to be an all-encompassing definition, but merely a seed for the experiment I am conducting, a way of framing democracy that might generate some friction and push us to move a little. I pursue this idea in response to the many, many voices that talk about democracy as being caught in a state of crisis (Dryzek et al., 2019; Ercan & Gagnon, 2014; Przeworski, 2019). The rhetoric is harsh and sometimes it seems as if it's already too late, as if we are

**'Democracy is the best form of political regime because it is the kind of political arrangement that best permits humans to care for one another, for other animals and things in the world, and for the world itself'**

*(Tronto, 2013, pp. 155–156)*

[3]There are many terms to describe everything that is not specifically human – non-human, posthuman, multispecies, other-than-human etc, and they all have their own flaws and limitations. In this thesis, I use the notion of "more-than-human" (Bellacasa, 2017; Light, 2023; Price & Chao, 2023). I agree with Sophie Chao that it "invokes a counter-ethos of humility" (Price & Chao, 2023, p. 180) and it may remind us that "collaborative survival requires cross-species coordinations" (Tsing, 2015, pp. 155–156). When I refer to the more-than-human, it includes both what we might consider living beings and what we have traditionally understood as inanimate matter.

beyond the edge and all hope is lost. One can easily be overwhelmed by despair. Ten years ago, Donatella della Porta asked 'can democracy be saved?' (Porta, 2013). While she offered a cautiously optimistic answer, she also insisted that it would require 'changes in conceptions and practices of democracy' (Porta, 2013, p. 189). David Runciman offered even bleaker prospects in "How Democracy Ends" (Runciman, 2018), where he argued that 'democracy could fail while remaining intact' (Runciman, 2018, p. 3), before he described contemporary democracy as 'zombie democracy' where 'the people are simply watching a performance in which their role is to give or withhold their applause at the appropriate moments' (Runciman, 2018, p. 47). Some scholars have talked of 'democratic backsliding' (Bermeo, 2016; Waldner & Lust, 2018) to describe 'the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy' (Bermeo, 2016, p. 5). Others have described a 'democratic disconnect' where citizens are 'increasingly attracted to alternative regime forms' (Foa & Mounk, 2016, p. 16), often leading them in more authoritarian directions.

Turning to my native country Denmark, a Democracy Commission has asked 'is democracy in crisis?' (J. K. Sørensen & Jensen, 2020). While the members concluded that the Danish democracy was not in a 'systemic crisis', they also emphasised a series of 'worrying tendencies' (J. K. Sørensen & Jensen, 2020, p. 12). Even more recently, a study showed that 53% of young people have low democratic self-confidence, making them less inclined to participate in democratic events and conversations (Epinion & DUF, 2023). If the young people in Denmark, allegedly one of the healthiest democracies in the world[4] , have a diminishing belief in their own capacity as citizens, then there certainly seems to be room for improvement.

All these examples can be taken as symptoms of democracy in crisis. Yet it might be more appropriate to say that they are symptoms of democracies in crises, plural, because I think it's the case that multiple democracies are in multiple crises. Furthermore, despite all these ailments and shortcomings, I maintain the belief that what we are seeing, in so many different guises, is less a crisis of democracy *as an idea* and more multiple crises emanating from the many different interpretations and enactments of that idea. As Stephen Elstub and Oliver Escobar argued, 'we live in a time where the ideal of democracy is widely loved, but its practices are broadly criticised' (Elstub & Escobar, 2019, p. 1). Similarly, Temma Kaplan insisted that 'despite democracy's many failures, it remains a stirring dream' (Kaplan, 2014, p. 3), and Zizi Papacharizzi claimed that 'people have faith in democracy but little faith in elected officials, the media, or technology' (Papacharissi, 2021, p. 12).

While I am deeply concerned by issues such as democratic backsliding, democratic disconnect, disenfranchised citizens, and the kind of democratic disenchantment I also feel myself, I do not refer to these matters as problems because I do not mean to suggest that they can be solved once and for all. Instead, I follow those who, like Bonnie Honig, reject 'the fantasy that the

[4] See for instance https://www.democracymatrix.com/ranking .



right laws or constitution might some day free us from the responsibility for (and, indeed, the burden of) politics' (Honig, 1993/2023, pp. 210–211). The issues we face are more like perpetual paradoxes and dilemmas inherent to democracy that we can never do away with completely, but we can approach them differently, look at them differently, talk about them differently and, in turn, we can *do* democracy differently.

Difference and divergence will thus become central dimensions of my inquiry, and I agree with feminist scholar Iris Marion Young who has made compelling arguments for a 'politics of difference' (Young, 1990/2011, 2021), where difference, not sameness, should be considered the heart of democracy. Similarly, I am inspired by Luce Irigaray, when she insisted that if we only 'speak sameness', then sameness is all we ever get:

> **If we keep on speaking the same language together, we're going to reproduce the same history. Begin the same old stories all over again. Don't you think so? Listen: all round us, men and women sound just the same. The same discussions, the same arguments, the same scenes. The same attractions and separations. The same difficulties, the same impossibility of making connections. The same . . . Same ... Always the same. If we keep on speaking sameness, if we speak to each other as men have been doing for centuries, as we have been taught to speak, we'll miss each other, fail ourselves.**
>
> *(Irigaray, 1983, p. 205)*

We can also hear echoes of Audre Lorde's famous dictum that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house [...] they will never bring about genuine change' (Lorde, 2018, p. 19). I did not anticipate this turn, but I am now convinced that there is no meaningful way to repair or reimagine democracy from the Minority World, that 'democracy cannot exist in the imagination of the West only' (Papacharissi, 2021, p. 11). While the project and I remain entangled in the traditions of Western Modernity, I have tried to loosen those bonds, to challenge my own ontological assumptions, to move into pluriversal 'borderlands' (Anzaldua, 2015; W. D. Mignolo, 2011) between the world I grew up in and worlds I am only coming to know.

I will do this because I believe that contemporary democracies are bound by 'tales of necessity', often dictated by Western Modernity and neoliberal capitalism. Reiterating Donatella della Porta's claim that we need 'changes in conceptions and practices of democracy' (Porta, 2013, p. 189), I will suggest seeing democracy as 'less of a known or settled object and more as a recurrent aspiration that has been – nearly perpetually – on the run' (Schlosser et al., 2019, p. 37). My aim is to conduct experimental, playful inquiries that might disturb the 'tales of necessity', shaking them and turning them upside down, simply to see what might happen when we interrupt their dominance and loosen their hold on us and our democratic imaginaries. In this, I have taken inspiration from Pierre Rosanvallon's definition of democracy as 'the regime that must ceaselessly interrogate its definition of itself' (Rosanvallon, 2018a, p. 37). If democracy is not only constituted by institutions, governments, and elections, but is perhaps better understood as fugitive moments, processes, differences, and divergence, if it is always on the run and in discussion with itself, what might that look and feel like?

## 1.3 The Junk Playground as *Agora*

This question brings us back to the junk playground we visited earlier, because it has been my lively laboratory for doing democracy differently. Just like democracy is a malleable, flexible concept, play is equally ambivalent, and it makes little sense to offer an all-encompassing, universal definition. I will instead embrace the inherently ambiguous nature of play (Sutton-Smith, 2001) to suggest that play is 'paradoxical because it displays one quality and the opposite of that quality at the same time' (Henricks, 2009, p. 1). Play is slippery, and more than being defined by any one quality, it is constituted by its many shifts, its constant movement, and its inherent paradoxes and tensions. Play can be different things to different people, and that's exactly why it can be a companion throughout our lives, why it can effortlessly adapt to vastly different contexts across the globe, and why 'no matter how hard people try, play finds its way through—banana time is always with us, even in the operating theatre or on death row' (Schechner, 2004, p. 42).

Before play takes shape as an activity in the junk playgrounds, bounded by time and space, I understand play as an existential phenomenon. Eugen Fink insisted that play 'belongs essentially to the ontological constitution of human existence; it is an existential, fundamental phenomenon' (Fink, 2016, p. 18). Similarly, Helle Marie Skovbjerg argued that play is a way of being and a way of being together (Skovbjerg, 2021, p. 10), and consequently, to 'take play seriously is to take everything human seriously' (Skovbjerg, 2016, p. 104, my translation). Finally, Ann Charlotte Thorsted drew on the Danish philosopher Løgstrup to understand play as 'those moments that are not dependent on anything but our own devotion to life itself' (Thorsted, 2013, p. 21, my translation).

Framing play like this also entails that I do not see play as childish or belonging to the realm of children. I follow Stuart Lester when he fundamentally questioned the logic of Modernity that 'establishes oppositions between play and other ways of being, marking the modern segmentation of human life into discrete parts in which play and childhood are separated from the rest of human life' (Lester, 2013a, p. 135).

This framing of play as an existential phenomenon and an autotelic activity generates an immediate dilemma that runs underneath the entire project, surfacing regularly to ask if play is a means or an end? Is play a phenomenon studied in its own right or are we interested in play because it might solve problems and improve things? This is another question I can't answer, but my own approach has been to maintain that the activity of play 'has only internal purposes, not ones that transcend it' (Fink, 2016, p.20). Play is unlikely to captivate the players, to be as utterly engrossing as it needs to be, to *become* play, if the players are more concerned with how they might benefit in the longer run than they are with the play experience itself. In other words, if people engage with each other in the junk playground with the explicit purpose and expectation of becoming more democratic or improving democracy, somehow, they are likely to be disappointed. In contrast, I see play as particularly promising here exactly because it has the potential to dismantle the contemporary orientation towards instrumentality and utility, freeing things 'from the drudgery of being useful' (Laxton, 2019, p. 19). While it might be more appropriate to say that play may allow us to renegotiate the meaning of usefulness rather than rejecting it altogether, play offers us a space where we can be less constrained by narrow expectations of quantifiable outcomes and results. I thus also agree with Maria Lugones when she described playfulness as 'an openness to being a fool, which is a combination of not worrying about competence, not being self-important, not taking norms as sacred and finding ambiguity and double edges a source of wisdom and delight' (Lugones, 1987, p. 17).

When I tentatively suggested the notion of 'junk playground as agora', I imagined a democratic space, like the Greek agora, but one that would encourage exploration and experimentation beyond what is typically considered democratic. It should be a space where familiar expectations of usefulness could be diminished, if not forgotten. I borrowed the concept of 'junk playgrounds' from the Danish tradition of *'skrammellegepladser'* (Coninck-Smith, 2022), a simple, yet compelling idea first proposed by Danish architect C. Th. Sørensen in 1931 (C. Th. Sørensen, 1931/1978). The lure of this space was in how it invites a wide range of play practices, including play with materials or 'loose parts' (Nicholson, 1971) that can always be moved, manipulated, combined, and destroyed; they are inherently malleable, even if they may resist our attempts to change or break them. The name *skrammellegeplads* has an evocative quality that conjures up images of play experiences that can be spirited, unruly, and decidedly corporeal. What would it entail to think of democracy along these lines, as something that derives its dynamic from constant reconfigurations? I wanted to explore what might happen if I loosened the idea that 'politics is the province of disembodied acting, of rational minds rather than fleshy bodies' (Lloyd, 2023, p. 27) and what might lie beyond the 'myth of disembodied rationality' as Amanda Machin put it (Machin, 2022). If we are to take seriously the claim that 'doing politics, including democratic politics, is always corporeal' (Lloyd, 2023, p. 27), it seemed crucial to also consider the possibility of 'thinking in movement' (Sheets-Johnstone, 1981) that play provides.



# 1.4 Designing for *Playful Democratic Friction*

I knew that I wanted to approach the design of the junk playgrounds in a collaborative fashion, as I was also inspired by recent calls to do 'democratic theory democratically' (Asenbaum, 2022). To achieve that, I have drawn on the rich traditions of participatory design and co-design, while working in the field of constructive design research (Koskinen et al., 2011; Krogh & Koskinen, 2020a), where construction 'becomes the key means in constructing knowledge'" (Koskinen et al., 2011, p. 5). Building on this, Eva Brandt and Thomas Binder have suggested that the essential contribution of constructive design research is in 'exploring the possible through making' (Vaughan, 2017, p. 101), which is at the very heart of my project. As Eva Brandt, Thomas Binder and Elizabeth B.-N. Sanders argued, participatory practices in PD 'include techniques and tools for engaging people in telling, making and enacting' (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013, p. 147). Following this tradition, Awais Hameed Khan et al argued that there is a need to consider the 'politics of materiality' to better grasp how 'our choices about materiality can act as democratic mediators among participants in design activities' (Khan et al., 2020, p. 930). In general, my project has benefitted greatly from the knowledge of, and sensitivity towards, the material dimensions of PD and co-design, with prototyping being a key element in many cases. This enhanced acuity in relation to the material dimension, and the capacity to enable dialogue both with and through materiality, is unique to design and is, I believe, critical to reimagining and reinvigorating democratic participation.

I found that Carl DiSalvo brought together these threads, when he proposed 'design as democratic inquiry' (DiSalvo, 2022). He strove to 'make worlds seem real enough

such that we might tentatively know them, to consider and engage them as believable potentials' (Disalvo, 2022, p. 242). Design experiments can, he argued, 'help us collaboratively explore and proffer ideas about how we might live together differently' (DiSalvo, 2022, p. 161), which is a central dimension of this project. He described design as 'partial, fragile, and often lacking' (DiSalvo, 2022, p. 154) and the experiments he conducts are 'not clean and tidy, but splintered, compromised, frustrating, full of longing, and uncomfortable' (DiSalvo, 2022, p. 177). When DiSalvo talked about design experiments that are splintered, compromised, frustrating, full of longing, and uncomfortable, it both resonates with the experiments I have conducted and with a turn that I see unfold in design research. Although participatory design and co-design have made important contributions to this PhD, I have a sense that there is more at stake in relation to design. That we must also ask, as did DiSalvo, 'How might we design together, differently?' (Disalvo, 2022, p. 242). As you may realise by now, I'm not so interested in familiar territory, in stability and settled affairs, in things that work as intended, or in that which efficiently produces expected outcomes. Instead, I am drawn to the borderlands of domains and disciplines, where things get muddled and murky, where they start to fray at the edges, and where sedimented and hegemonic discourses and practices can be loosened and reconfigured. In design research, I have been especially drawn to those areas where design is made vulnerable, where the weaknesses, flaws, and contradictions are laid bare. I find that this is generally where interesting things happen, when our assumptions and pretensions start to unravel, because we allow the friction to take hold in us, and we ask the questions we cannot answer. I see this happening at the edges of design and design research when, for instance, the field of co-design moves beyond celebrating its many successes to also reckoning with its own flaws and limitations. I see a critical example of this when Otto von Busch and Karl Palmås argued that co-design is corrupted (Busch & Palmås, 2023) yet 'designers still tell themselves unreluctantly that more design is the tool to fix what design originally left unsatisfactory' (Busch & Palmås, 2023, p. 2). Or when the influential Design Research Society organised its biennial conference around the themes of 'Resistance, Recovery, Reflection, Reimagination', and stated that 'design has long been a practice of smoothing away the rough edges of the world () but, in the present moment, the world is kicking back'[5]. Further, when the call claimed that 'it makes no sense to continue using the same methods, approaches and processes to solve problems as those that created this state of affairs in the first place', we can recognise the critical perspectives of Luce Irigaray and Audre Lorde. It seems that the whole field of design research is being pushed to its current limits. Even more fundamental is the critique by Tony Fry and Adam Nocek when they claim that 'design is situated at the ontological core of this crisis' (Fry & Nocek, 2020, p. 2). They go on to insist that 'design must un-design its own designing, but in so doing, it cannot make this a design project. In short: design must become unrecognisable to itself' (Fry & Nocek, 2020, p. 10). I am equally puzzled and intrigued by this argument because what does it mean for design to become unrecognisable to itself? Finally, when Arturo Escobar asked 'can design's modernist tradition be reoriented from its dependence on the life-stifling dualist ontology of patriarchal capitalist modernity toward relational modes of knowing, being, and doing?' (Escobar, 2018, p. 9), I don't know how to respond. DiSalvo, von Busch, Palmås, Fry, Nocek, Escobar and others have compelled me to move into very unfamiliar territory, to ask questions I was not comfortable asking, and to engage with the bewildering concept of ontology, which, in turn, has provided me with critical breakthroughs in my project.

Whereas these are tensions and frictions largely within design research, there are also tensions between design and other fields. Most relevant for this project was the somewhat surprising realisation that where design researchers typically think of design along democratic trajectories, many democracy scholars have almost the opposite understanding of design. When design is mentioned in democratic theory, it is often referred to in an almost derogatory way. Here, democratic institutions and processes are described as 'over-designed', apparently meaning that too much has been determined in advance as a strictly-sequenced series of event, leaving little to no space for citizens to intervene or change the trajectory. While I think it's safe to say that is not how design is usually conceived in design research, it was a perception of design that provoked me to think differently[6].

[5] Ihttps://www.drs2024.org

[6] I was invited to write a post about this issue for Agora, the blog of The Participatory and Deliberative Democracy Specialist Group: https://deliberative-hub.wordpress.com/2023/07/21/bridging-the-gap-between-democracy-and-design/



These critical voices and frictions ask questions I can't answer and cause problems I can't solve, and they will continue to disturb me long after this project is over. However, they are all crucial issues from the field of design research that has greatly contributed to the generative friction that has become so essential to the project. I don't think design needs smoother processes, better toolkits, nicer graphics, higher efficiency, increased predictability, or any of that. On the contrary, it needs more confusion, more forgetting what we're doing, more getting lost in the woods. Or maybe design does not need those things per se, but democracy and our ongoing inquiries into ways of living together *do*, and if design is to be helpful in that endeavour it must embrace the confusion and not-knowing and get lost with us. Following Jack Halberstam, in this project I am after 'models of contestation, rupture, and discontinuity for the political present' (Halberstam, 2011, p. 19). Also, like Halberstam, I do not believe such models are only to be found in the halls of academia, but everywhere:

> **[...] in popular places, in the small, the inconsequential, the antimonumental, the micro, the irrelevant; I believe in making a difference by thinking little thoughts and sharing them widely. I seek to provoke, annoy, bother, irritate, and amuse; I am chasing small projects, micropolitics, hunches, whims, fancies.**
>
> *(Halberstam, 2011, p. 21)*

Drawing on all these crisscrossing movements, shifts, ruptures, and tensions across the literature, and rooted in the lively encounters in the junk playgrounds, I will develop a concept of 'playful democratic friction'. This idea speaks directly to my understanding of democracy as movement, and I suggest that friction can help us to 'emerge from under the shadow of inevitability' (Tsing, 2005, p. 269), to move out of the known world, to experience alterity in the flesh, to see and do democracy differently. I will return to this proposition soon enough, but first I will take another couple of steps back.



## 1.5 An origin *Story*

With those steps, we have jumped right into my past. While 'origin stories are the experiences that go un-noted in many academic genres' (Cox et al., 2021, p. 147) and are typically left untold, I wish to share mine before we move on. If I knew from the beginning that this project would be practice-based, it was only later that I understood the implications – that it would be based in my practice, and *my* practice was and is mainly a practice of gathering people together. My greatest work-related joys have been intimately tied to creating safe-enough spaces for people with different backgrounds to talk, think, play, move, and change together.

In 2013, I was self-employed, working with 'games-based learning' in educational and cultural institutions. My proposition was twofold. In the short term, I suggested that games could spark rich learning experiences by creating structures, narratives, and mechanics for doing meaningful things. In the longer run, I hoped games could encourage us to organise teaching and education differently, inspired by the practices, cultures, and communities that emerged *around* the games. At this point, I started to realise that where the former was a popular proposition, the latter was usually not. It was as if collectively we were expecting more from the games than from the people using them and the contexts in which they were embedded. This was becoming an increasingly untenable situation for me; I felt stuck and in need of a different path. A series of coincidences and encounters shifted my attention from 'games' to 'play'. I suddenly felt like a novice, who could not claim to know much about play. That made me eager to learn more, and I hoped that I could yet again gather people to join me on a journey of exploration. I knew intuitively that our inquiries into the nature of play could not merely be intellectual but would have to be playful. We should learn about play *through* play. That is about as much as I had decided when I made the first tentative invitations for what would become the CounterPlay festival. I was rather anxious and hesitant, because this vague aspiration had already grown into something very precious to me, and I desperately wanted it to succeed. To be honest, I didn't quite know what I was doing, so I merely tried to convey my own dreams in the hope that someone would be drawn to the fiction. In a blog post[7] , I introduced the idea of a new play festival, almost as if it already existed:

[7] http://www.mathiaspoulsen.com/a-festival-of-play-games/

**CounterPlay is a tribute to and an exploration of the many ways, in which a more playful approach can help us live better lives. We focus on the excitement, intense engagement and rich experiences of people involved in all kinds of playing experiences. This sparks an investigation of how play can be transformative, change our thinking, push our boundaries and lead us places, we never imagined.**

A local library offered to host the festival, then kind people started suggesting talks, workshops, and other playful ideas that they were keen to share. To my immense surprise, far more people than I had ever imagined wanted to play, with around 150-200 people showing up for each of the five festivals, from the first in 2014 to the most recent in 2019. Not only did they often come to voluntarily host a workshop or play session, but they also brought with them all their personal dreams, which they often willingly shared with the slowly-growing play community. They may have come because of a professional interest, but for most of them, it became a deeply personal journey: 'There's always this amazing, inclusive energy (...) I cite CounterPlay as one of the most meaningful experiences of my life. The last time I was here, I felt like it sort of breathed life back into me'[8] .

At its best, it was a space for people with different backgrounds to move very close to each other in a rare intimacy, to be present, to ask difficult questions, and pursue playful inquiries. The festival slowly evolved into a vibrant site for learning about play through play but also, and more importantly, a safe space for experimenting with alternative ways of encountering each other and of living together. These inquiries were sometimes verbal, but just as often they grew out of corporeal encounters between bodies, as when two people dressed up in cardboard armour and started fighting in the middle of the library.

[8]Interview with participant, CounterPlay 2019, 15:10: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vtugkhU8524



As a play community, we have made many things together over the years, and we once created a book, 'The Power of Play: Voices from the Play Community'. It brought together voices, stories, personal experiences and academic research, in a messy, kaleidoscopic, but determined and hopeful manner. That book is like a supportive, older sibling to this dissertation from which I have borrowed not only the square format, but also its kaleidoscopic nature and playful spirit.


Warriors in cardboard armour.

*Photo credits: Benjamin Pomerleau.*

People would host workshops and play sessions where they invited participants to play in every way imaginable – building, drawing, jumping, tumbling, dancing, thinking, improvising, dressing up, and so much more. When we organised a band to play in the morning, mostly as a cheap trick to lure everyone into the main hall, people did not sit down – they started dancing.

Delightful dancing in the morning.

*Photo credits: Benjamin Pomerleau.*



Few things ever went as expected, because everyone started playing along, developing a sense of ownership, subverting the plans and schedules we had prepared. As one person said, it was a 'magnificent mayhem'. Play scholar Helle Marie Skovbjerg wrote that the festival 'invites you to surrender to the movement of play and to place faith in the future, without knowing where play will take you () the play festival inspires hope for the future of play and incites "play courage" in all' (Skovbjerg, 2018, p. 3).

The complexity of the event and the growing community was far greater than my limited capacity to make sense of it. I kept asking myself, and anyone who would humour me, what might be going on here? I was beginning to believe that we were indeed seeing examples of play scholar Thomas S. Henricks' argument that when we play together, and 'when people agree on the terms of their engagement with one another and collectively bring those little worlds into being, they effectively create models for living' (Henricks, 2015, loc. 66). This idea took root, though it was nothing but a hunch, an intuitive sense that perhaps these playful encounters could inspire different avenues towards democratic participation. Is democracy not also a matter of collectively imagining and exploring better alternatives to the existing conditions? And should not democratic societies also cultivate public spaces where citizens can engage in such explorations? Maybe by expanding our participatory repertoire, we can invite more people to join the conversation and enrich our otherwise languishing collective imaginary.

I dwell so long in the past because these are fond memories that put a smile on my face, but also to illustrate my practice as it informs this project, and to demonstrate how I came to consider connections between playful encounters and democratic participation in the first place. I reckon that this thesis makes little sense in isolation, and it was all the above experiences, observations, and questions that sent me on a trajectory towards the PhD. I was longing for what Laurene Vaughan called 'the luxurious space of study': 'For an advanced practitioner, the luxury is the freedom and approval to be a student, a questioning novice, for this is rarely allowed within the formal activities of practice' (Vaughan, 2017, p. 15). After a decade being self-employed, the promise of such 'luxury', the time and opportunity to ask questions too big and unwieldy to answer, was precisely what compelled me to pursue the PhD. In Tim Ingold's words, I am an amateur, 'one who studies a topic not – like the professional – in order to stage a career, but for the love of it, motivated by a sense of care, personal involvement and responsibility' (Ingold, 2020, p. 11). Little did I know when I embarked on this journey that it would transform me, change my life, subvert my thinking, and send me into a borderlands between worlds.

# 1.6 Research *Questions*

In the following, I will sketch out the three main research questions that evolved with this project. While they have been with me all along, they have also changed considerably through the project. Furthermore, they have not always been at the forefront of my consciousness, and often, I merely relied on my research programme, 'junk playground as agora', to guide me.

My first question indicates my early intuition and curiosity:

1. What happens when we understand play as a mode of democratic participation?
   a. What might playful democratic participation look and feel like?
   b. How can play inspire a broader participatory repertoire?
   c. How can play cultivate new democratic imaginaries?

With this question, I suggest that play is a mode of democratic participation, allowing me to focus on the implications and possibilities of that proposition.

Question 1a speaks to the design experiments and my research programme 'junk playground as agora'. The junk playground is not an answer, merely a means of inquiring into the experiences of people playing. This is the primary question I pursue through the analysis chapters 7-11.

Questions 1b and 1c unfold the two primary dimensions of my initial hypothesis, namely that playful participation may have the potential to spark new modes of participation and new democratic imaginaries. 1b is primarily addressed in Chapter 11, and I return to question 1c in chapters 12 and 14.



2. How can we study playful democratic participation?
   a. What are the methodological requirements when studying fleeting encounters and affective experiences involving both human and more-than-human bodies in the junk playgrounds?
   b. What are the underlying epistemological and ontological implications for the research and the researcher?
   c. How might we start talking about that which we are not quite ready to talk about yet?

This question pertains most explicitly to matters of methodology, with 2a suggesting that a certain methodological sensitivity and flexibility is required. This will be explored in detail throughout Chapter 6.

Question 2b points to chapters 2 and 3, where I discuss my ontological and epistemological positions. However, this dimension also pertains to the epistemological and ontological changes occurring during the project, to the research and to me as a researcher, something I will discuss explicitly in Chapter 13.

Question 2c alludes to a recurring challenge I faced throughout the project, where I have repeatedly found myself backing away from issues I did not feel ready to talk about yet.

Essentially, with these questions I wish to better grasp what kind of a researcher I must become to adequately study sometimes quite ineffable matters. Underneath my academic aspirations, I have a growing suspicion that I am also trying to figure out what I must become to live well today.

3. How might we design for playful democratic participation?
   a. What are the possibilities and challenges in designing new spaces for playful democratic participation?
   b. What happens when the junk playgrounds 'talk back' to design research?

With this final question, I seek to grasp how the project may inspire new design projects to enrich democratic participation. Whereas question 3a is oriented mainly towards design practices, 3b considers the possible implications for design research.

# 1.7 Research-as-*Assemblage*

I seek to conduct my research in a transparent manner, and I believe that to achieve this it helps to frame the research project as an 'assemblage'. This allows me to better explore the many different 'bodies, things and abstractions that get caught up in social inquiry, including the events that are studied, the tools, models and precepts of research, and the researchers' (Fox & Alldred, 2015, section 1.6). In the research assemblage, 'there is no "subject" and no "object", and no single element possesses agency' (Fox & Alldred, 2015, p. 401). Nick Fox and Pam Alldred claimed that such an approach can help 'open up what has sometimes seemed like the 'black box' of social inquiry' (Fox & Alldred, 2017b, p. 158) in an attempt 'to reveal the affect economies and micropolitics of social inquiry' (Fox & Alldred, 2017b, p. 159). This allows, I argue, for a potentially much richer understanding of the research project, as it includes not only the actions, interactions, and affective experiences of the people involved, the traditional 'research subjects', but also all the more-than-human entities and the affective flows of the researcher.

Vital components in the resesarch assemblage.



Any attempt to list all the 'bodies, things and abstractions that get caught up in social inquiry' – from my own history, to meetings, conversations, experiments, materials, tools, the weather, a trip around the world – will always be woefully inadequate. Even so, I have found it fruitful to develop an awareness of the interconnected nature of all the components that make up a research project. All encounters, and the ensuing friction, the pushing and pulling, the shifts and ruptures, as well as the recurring feelings of apathy and paralysis, the moments of joy and possibility, all these persistent affective flows run through the thesis. They cannot be understood as isolated incidents, for the affective forces have been building up, accumulating, gaining strength, and they have changed both the project and me in radical ways. With the notion of the research-assemblage, I also question binaries like 'theory' and 'practice'. I thus agree with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro when he argued that it is:

> **[...] about time we rethought the notion of practice. Especially since the radical contrast between theory and practice is, in the end, purely theoretical: pure practice exists only in theory; in practice, it always comes heavily mixed with theory**
>
> *(de Castro, 2003, p. 15)*

My research brings together a great many different components, and where some of them could be described as theory and others might be understood as practice, I don't think such a distinction is particularly helpful. Practice, theory, ideas, thoughts, people, encounters, locations, conversations, physical materials, goosebumps and other affective responses; I merely understand all these things as different components in the assemblage, and none of them should be seen as dominant. In turn, this questioning also alters what I understand as my contributions. Some might say that my primary contributions should grow from the empirical design experiments, from the junk playgrounds. While those are certainly important, I don't think it can be divided like that. I am not building up to some grand climax or crescendo, where everything suddenly fits together to play a perfect tune. It is the journey and the movement that matter most, not the conclusion or the summary of my contributions. For good measure, I will arrive at a conclusion eventually, and I will review selected contributions at the end, but this thesis has a more fluid character, as things emerge along the way, and important points may appear in surprising places. It would have been beneficial to dwell with these ideas and to further unpack them, but there was neither time nor space. In a more disciplined project, these ideas would undoubtedly have been rooted out in editing, but I have decided to leave them in the assemblage, as seeds that might – or might not – sprout later. This is how I work, how I think, how I am, and I need to trust that it is also how I can be(come) a researcher.

# 1.8 Reading *Guide*

I would like to say that you can read this thesis whichever way you like, because I do not see it as an orderly, uniform whole, where one chapter flows naturally into the next, as if guided by some kind of externally predetermined logic. However, I failed to escape the structural constraints of the PhD, and some things – such as ontology, epistemology, theory, and methodology – do seem to come in handy before other things, such as analyses and discussions. Before I lay out this structure, I want to make a remark about the reading experience.

Sometimes, as we move along, we will come close to the empirical encounters in the junk playgrounds, sometimes we will play with theoretical concepts, and, sometimes, we will try to make sense of my own affective experiences that have sparked friction and drift in the project. I will alternate between what may be perceived as a more traditional academic 'meta-language', talking *about* theoretical and empirical phenomena, and a voice that is more personal, playful, and poetic, closer to the body, where I am seeking to emulate and evoke the affective dimensions of the phenomena in question. Where the first is probably more familiar, the second may generate some friction, but as I will discuss repeatedly, *friction* is both a means and an end for this project. The friction may intensify to the point where the larger project is almost obscured, but I find it fruitful to 'instill in readers that sense of "being lost" () to understand the world-making that goes on in turbulent places' (van de Port, 2016, p. 184). Both the junk playgrounds, the main empirical foundation for the project, and my own journey have been marked by great turbulence, and I can only convey that experience by exposing you to a slight variation of the same. I hope you can trust that we will arrive *somewhere* in the end.



## 1.8.1 The Journey

While the thesis is structured in a certain manner, I think of it less like a rigid structure that binds us and more like one possible journey through the text. I have tried to illustrate the steps we will take by bundling the chapters together and giving them each a specific colour, hoping to shed just a little light on where we're going. Right now, we are at the end of the beginning of this journey, as we are about to leave the introduction behind.

From here, we can move on to the bundle of chapters I have thought of as preparation and packing, even though that is a bit misleading. While we are indeed gathering the different things we need on our journey – o*ntology, epistemology, theory*, and *methodology* – these chapters are not merely instrumental, but have a much more important role to play, and I believe they make their own contributions. I decided to use gerunds to name these chapters, because they allow us to act, and their primary purpose is to create movement.

In **Chapter 2,** I suggest understanding ontology not as a fixed core, but incessant processes of becoming, and I orient the project towards a *relational ontology*. In **Chapter 3**, I discuss epistemology and ways of knowing. I develop my own position in the intersection between knowing as *process*, *experience*, and *relations*. I argue that both ontology and epistemology have severe implications for our capacity to develop new conceptions and practices of democracy, which is what I aspire to. **Chapter 4** is a shorter intermezzo, where I develop a variation of affirmative critique that I use to cultivate a sense of democratic pluralism in the project. In **Chapter 5**, I introduce and discuss my theoretical perspectives. I draw together different fields of research under the categories of *democracy, participation, friction, and prefiguration*. In **Chapter 6,** I develop my methodological framework by combining *artistic research*, *autoethnography* and *constructive design research*. It is also here that I describe my *research materials*, my *analytical* approach, and my *ethical commitments*.

By then, we are ready to return to the junk playgrounds, as we move into analytical territory. In **Chapter 7,** I explore how people have become attuned to the playgrounds, to each other, and to the more-than-human entities. This leads us to **Chapter 8**, where I try to grasp the many different rhythms and affective intensities that reverberated through the playgrounds. In **Chapter 9**, things get a little heated, as I follow the various forms of social friction and conflicts that have emerged along the way. **Chapter 10** reminds us that the playgrounds have also been animated by practices of care and a sense of collective joy. In **Chapter 11**, I explore the many modes of participation the playgrounds have enabled, and develop a framework describing participation as a multi-dimensional assemblage.

Chapter 11 serves as a bridge to my discussions that begin with **Chapter 12**, where I discuss how the junk playgrounds might *complement* existing democratic institutions and practices by suggesting new possibilities for *participation*, *creativity*, and *community*. **Chapter 13** is another intermezzo, where I develop the concept of *drifting by friction* to trace how the project and I have drifted and undergone significant transformations. It serves as an intervention that allows us to read **Chapter 14** with a slightly different gaze. Here I use the notion of *playful democratic frictions* to argue that the junk playgrounds have allowed us to *prefigure* new worlds that may help us question assumptions about democracy. In **Chapter 15**, I unfold a critical-speculative reflection on things I might want to do differently in future research projects.

And just like that, we arrive at **Chapter 16**, where I draw the threads together one last time, discuss my possible contributions and – hopefully – send us on our way toward new adventures.

Along the way, we will also encounter a few short **vignettes**, which I use to share personal stories and reflections that may provide additional glimpses into my process, reveal my doubts, create friction, and point to new possibilities.



# 2. Becoming



I did not expect to write about ontology, I did not *want* to write about ontology, and I will readily admit that I find the concept deeply bewildering, still. I do not dare to suggest I now understand what ontology means, 'nor would I want to pose as a member of a small avant-garde of theorists who finally know what ontology is really about' (Mol, 2003, p. 151), as Annemarie Mol has put it. However, the work I hope to conduct cannot eschew the ontological dimension, because that would leave too much to be taken for granted as axiomatic, beyond questioning and critique.

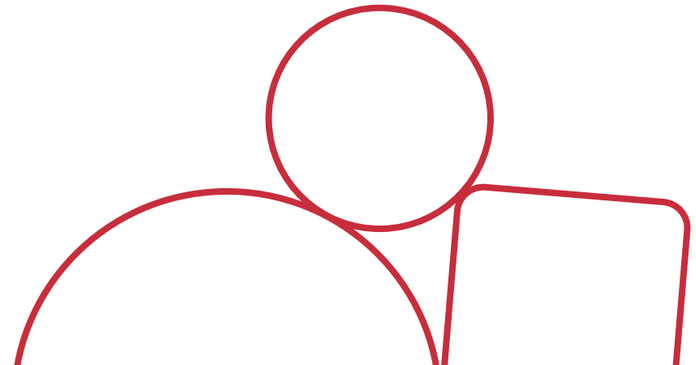
## 2.1 Ontological *Contingency*

In my attempts to demystify ontology and to draw it just a little closer to the playful practices from which this project grew, I will follow those scholars who understand ontology not as some fixed essence or core, but as inherently contingent and malleable. I begin with John Law, when he argued that 'there are different realities being done in different practices' and that we should treat 'reals as effects of contingent and heterogeneous enactments, performances or sets of relations' (Law, 2015, p. 127). Law drew on the work of Annemarie Mol, who contended that 'ontology is not given in the order of things, but that, instead, ontologies are brought into being, sustained, or allowed to wither away in common, day-to-day, sociomaterial practices' (Mol, 2003, p. 6). I agree with both Law and Mol, which means that when I engage with ontology it is not a matter of asserting what exists objectively, 'a reality that is out there beyond ourselves' (Law, 2004, p. 24), but rather, it's about trying to grasp how we enact ontological realities through our lived practices. In following this line of reasoning, I also align myself with Jane Bennett when she argued for the notion of 'weak ontology' (Bennett, 2001, p. 160). The 'weak ontologist', Bennett suggested, 'emphasizes the necessarily speculative and contestable character of her onto-story and thus does not try to demonstrate its truth in any strong sense' (Bennett, 2001, p. 161).

In discussing what has been described as 'the ontological turn' in anthropology, Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen suggested that the turn should be seen as a methodological intervention making it possible to see new things in one's research material 'that one would not otherwise have been able to see' (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017, p. 4). They argued that:

> **[...] if what gets in the way of seeing new things in our ethnography are prior ontological assumptions as to what those things can be in the first place, then overcoming this predicament of ontology () must involve making those assumptions explicit, and then changing them.**
>
> *(Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017, p. 12)*

Understood as a 'methodological intervention', the ontological turn potentially expands our capacity to see new things, and to challenge existing assumptions about how things and realities are constituted and enacted through many different practices.





# 2.2 Relational *Ontologies*

As I have drifted through the project, I have increasingly found myself alienated by the familiar, modern idea of the self as 'autonomous, sovereign and [the] sole locus or origin of experience, emotion and action' (Yin, 2018, p. 196). In that perspective, social relations, in contrast, are considered as potentially detrimental to our individual autonomy (Yin, 2018, p. 196) to the extent that it can seem as if 'there is a war on the idea of interdependency' (Butler, 2015, p. 67). Arturo Escobar argued that 'we modern humans have invented the powerful fictions of the individual (the ego), the economy, free markets, nature, and many more, each of them as an irrefutable reality that exists intrinsically on its own' (Escobar, 2020, p. 4). He further argued that these fictions of Eurocentric Modernity rest on a dualistic ontology of separation with dire consequences:

> **[...] it divides the human from the nonhuman (culture from nature); () it divides the "civilized" (Europeans, moderns, rational people) from the "noncivilized" (primitives, barbarians, underdeveloped people, nonmoderns, terrorists). These binaries give rise to many other divisions (mind-body, reason-emotion, secular-sacred, individual-community, material-spiritual, masculine-feminine, white-black, Indian, or "people of color," and so on) in which the second pole of the binary is subordinated to the first (thus, for example, the emotions and the feminine are subordinated to the rational and the masculine).**
>
> *(Escobar, 2020, pp. 122–123)*

I believe that those fictions are slowly falling apart, and I have been inspired by the growing critique of this emphasis on individuality and autonomy. Scott F. Gilbert, Jan Sapp and Alfred I. Tauber have argued that historically in Western science, the ideal of the 'autonomous individual agent' has driven biologists to frame their studies around such isolated agents, describing them as 'in competition with one another' (Gilbert et al., 2012, p. 326). More recently, this trend has been questioned when new research has revealed 'a world of complex and intermingled relationships' (ibid). Gilbert et al concluded that for 'animals, as well as plants, there have never been individuals' (Gilbert et al., 2012, p. 336). I stumbled upon their work while reading Donna Haraway, and she unfolded a similar narrative rooted in the notion of sympoiesis, which she understands as 'making-with' and she argues that 'nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing' (Haraway, 2016, p. 58). In contrast, for Haraway,

> **[...] becoming-with, not becoming, is the name of the game () ontologically heterogeneous partners become who and what they are in relational material-semiotic worlding. Natures, cultures, subjects, and objects do not preexist their intertwined worldings.**
>
> *(Haraway, 2016, pp. 12–13)*

Similarly, Karen Barad has proposed that to be 'entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence' (Barad, 2007, p. ix). This stance also explains her suggestion to shift from 'interaction' to 'intra-action', from a notion of 'separate individual agencies that precede their interaction' to the belief that 'distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action' (Barad, 2007, p. 33). Judith Butler, in a similar vein, stated that:

> **[...] to be alive is already to be connected with what is living not only beyond myself, but beyond my humanness, and no self and no human can live without this connection to a biological network of life that exceeds the domain of the human animal.**
>
> *(Butler, 2015, p. 43)*

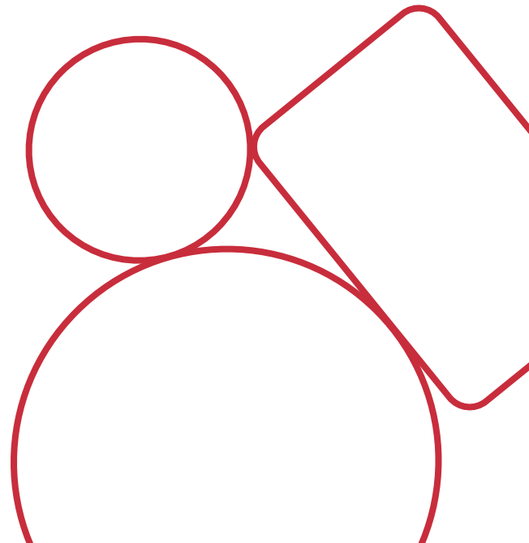


Combining these trends in Western science with Indigenous knowledges, Arturo Escobar suggested the notion of 'radical relationality' (Escobar, 2020, p. xiii) and a relational ontology, arguing that 'all existence is radically interdependent' (Escobar, 2020, p. 4) and further that 'things and beings are their relations; they do not exist prior to them' (Escobar, 2020, p. 71). In the relational ontology I unfold here, the individual remains a useful category, but it is no longer possible to accurately discern where one individual ends and another begins, so entangled are we always-already. Concepts like agency and freedom are also still relevant, but they must be reconfigured to acknowledge that neither can be situated solely at the level of the individual, or even the human. The idea of a relational ontology speaks directly to my practice, yet I do not contend that this is now the right or true universal ontological position, or that it has been proven, somehow; such is not my aim. I am not after proof, but possibility; not universality, but pluriversality. When I position myself within a relational ontology, it is thus primarily because I suspect it may help in my 'gathering together' and that it may generate friction in the process, potentially leading to more openings than closures.

# 2.3 Democratic *Ontologies*

The final question I will investigate here is how ontology relates to democracy and the political. John Law argued that if ontological realities are enacted, then we will have to choose whether to pursue the enactment of this or that reality through our practices, and that the debates around those realities amount to a kind of 'ontological politics' (Law, 2004, p. 162). I am hearing here a refrain that runs through this project: Anna Tsing's incessant reminder that 'there are other ways of making worlds' (Tsing, 2015, p. 155) and Donna Haraway's claim that we should dare to be 'for some worlds rather than others and helping to compose those worlds with others' (Haraway, 2016, p. 178). It appears crucial to include the ontological dimensions in democratic encounters, yet Roberto Frega argued that 'political theorists have systematically eschewed ontological talk' (Frega, 2018, p. 157). As Frega further argued, 'ontological premises inevitably shape the most basic assumptions upon which political theories are built, even when, perhaps especially when, these premises are not spelled out' (Frega, 2018, p. 157). In other words, our democratic theories and practices always makes assumptions rooted in certain ontological premises, but those premises are often not made explicit. Drawing on Foucault, Irena Rosenthal further argued that 'contrasting the dominant ontology with an alternative ontology can encourage the struggle against domination: it can make the democratic public mindful of the biases and exclusionary implications of the dominant view and open up reflexive space to experiment with other options' (Rosenthal, 2019, p. 243). For Chantal Mouffe, the political is always ontological (Mouffe, 2005, pp. 8–9) and she contended that it is 'the lack of understanding of "the political" in its ontological dimension which is at the origin of our current incapacity to think in a political way' (Mouffe, 2005, p. 9). In other words, in Mouffe's understanding, what is often lacking in democratic societies is exactly the ontological dimension, where the underlying, taken-for-granted assumptions can be contested through agonistic encounters. From a different perspective, Marisol de la Cadena argued that the 'ontological division between humans and nature that constitutes the modern world' severely limits the 'public imagination about who can participate in politics and what can be considered a political issue' (de la Cadena, 2015, p. 88). Similarly, Judith Butler argued that 'certain kinds of practices which are designed to handle certain kinds of problems produce, over time, a settled domain of ontology as their consequence, and this ontological domain, in turn, constrains our understanding of what is possible' (Butler, 2001, p. 4).

In these views, if we don't engage with ontology, we risk mistaking our assumptions about how things are as the actual and only way things are and can be, which contributes to what I call 'tales of necessity'. Unless ontologies can be questioned, they risk creating oppressive hierarchies that pretend to be unavoidable. I will return to these discussions of democracy, contestation, and agonism in Chapter 5.1, where I unfold my conception of democracy rooted in traditions of participatory and radical democracy. For now, I will merely maintain that ontology is with us, whether we acknowledge so or not, and ignoring ontological questions may have critical implications.



# 3. Knowing



From the beginning of this project, I maintained a sense of direction: I knew where I was going, somehow, across that field, over that mountain, through that valley, making a stop in that town to refuel, and then onwards. It was only a general sense of direction, yes, but it has guided me and reminded me where I wanted to go, what I wanted to do, and why. This was all borne out of lived experience, a curiosity and an intuition that emerged from my previous encounters and practices. In stark contrast, I have struggled with the how. I didn't know how to do what I wanted to do, and I was unaware how I could come to know what I wanted to know. It has been equal parts terrifying and invigorating, confining and liberating. Not knowing how to know, or what it even means to know, has occasionally led to complete paralysis and deep despair, but it has also tempted me with the alluring promise of wide-open spaces to traverse and get lost in.

Let us begin with a brief playful inquiry. If I asked you to pick up a pen and draw an image of knowledge as a metaphor, what would it look like?

It is likely that you would draw a lightbulb, a book, gears grinding, a brain, or maybe you would depict a seemingly effortless transmission of knowledge from one head-as-container to another. At least that's what a few Google searches suggest. What if we were instead to imagine a concept of knowledge using only materials from the junk playground?

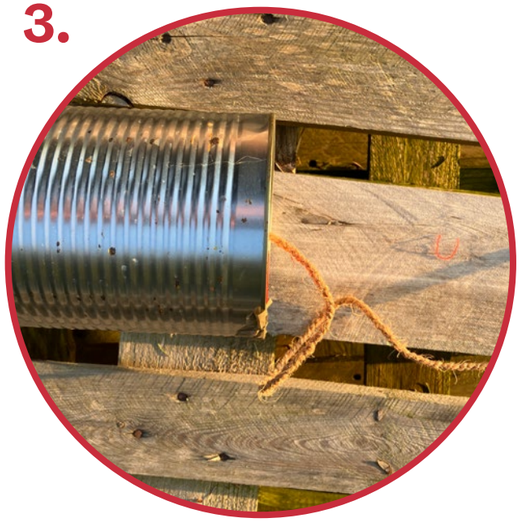
***What would knowledge look like if you could only pick one of the items below?***

1.

2.



3.



4.

5.

6.

***Imagine being able to hold knowledge in your hands. Which of the objects below would represent the affective experience of touching knowledge?***

1.

2.

3.

4.

***I will let you ponder these questions for a minute before we move deeper into the territory of epistemology.***

**Epistemology is inescapable. A reflexive researcher actively adopts a theory of knowledge. A less reflexive researcher implicitly adopts a theory of knowledge, as it is impossible to engage in knowledge creation without at least tacit assumptions about what knowledge is and how it is constructed.**

*(Carter & Little, 2008, p. 1319)*

It is easy enough for me to agree with Stacy Carter and Miles Little here, and I also willingly embrace the responsibility that follows, but from there, things immediately get much more confusing and murkier. Because ...

... what is knowledge? What is 'a theory of knowledge?'
What does it mean to know?
Where does knowledge come from?
When do I know something? When I see something?
When I hear something? When I touch something?
When I sense something in the air?

The questions are crawling out of the woodwork, insisting that before I can say much about anything, I will have to approximate a concept or theory of knowledge, an epistemic point of departure, that is meaningful and useful in this specific context. The theory of knowledge I am after here is a tenuous one that enhances the sensitivity with which we can approach encounters between humans and more-than-humans, animate and inanimate bodies. What might be the softest, most gentle way we can possibly grasp anything, from the tangible to the ineffable, and still consider it knowledge: a social interaction, a fleeting encounter, hands touching an object, a sense of belonging? Grasp it, hold it gently for a while, just long enough to establish a dialogue with it, hear what it has to say, and then set it free.



I am inspired by play scholar Helle Marie Skovbjerg's repeated use of the metaphor of a jelly cake, as she is striving to develop a gentler language to grasp the ontological dimension of play:

**Talking about play can be experienced as if one is holding a jelly cake in the hands. If we squeeze too much, we destroy the cake, but if we don't hold it at all, we cannot grasp it. We have to gently hold the cake, hold play, and in that way share play with each other () only by holding on to play in a linguistically gentle way can it become possible to talk about play for the good of play; an ungentle language can exert violence to the phenomenon we hope to approach.'**

*(Skovbjerg, 2021, p. 12) (my translation)*

As Skovbjerg has argued, our language and our attempts at generating knowledge risk undermining or even violating the phenomenon we seek to understand. All too often, sensitivity and flexibility seem to give way to a certain kind of academic rigour and a view of knowledge that is 'exclusive and restrictive' (Hannula et al., 2014, p. vii), effectively making a great number of phenomena unavailable for our research. Henk Borgdorff wrote that 'traditionally, the central focus of epistemology is on propositional knowledge – knowledge of facts, knowledge about the world, knowing that such and such is the case' (Borgdorff, 2010, p. 55). In contrast to this widespread idea of the university as a 'fact-producing industry' (van de Port, 2016, p. 168), I am not merely seeking that which can be considered irrefutable fact. I am instead after something 'otherwise than knowing' (Hannula et al., 2014, p. vii): a soft, loose, gentle, and generous theory of knowledge, one that is alive and moves with us, that springs from experience, and draws together rather than separates. In the following, I therefore present an eclectic and loosely-held-together theory of knowledge that focuses on *process*, *experience*, and *relations*.

# 3.1 Knowing as *Process*

The knowledge I pursue is always on the move, always evolving and going somewhere new. Following Alfred North Whitehead, I understand the world itself, as well as our understanding of it, to be inherently processual and 'each actual thing is only to be understood in terms of its becoming and perishing' (Whitehead, 1933, p. 354). There seems to be growing support for the idea of knowledge as *knowing*, an epistemology of process, ranging from the natural sciences to artistic research. John Dupré and Sabina Leonelli argued that 'the targets of biological investigation, far from being fixed are constantly metabolising, developing, and evolving (...) they are not things at all, but processes' (Dupré & Leonelli, 2022, p. 2). Consequently, they have called for a 'processual epistemology that properly complements a process-filled world' (Dupré & Leonelli, 2022, p. 6). I find a similar position within artistic and performative research, where formal knowledge, in a static sense, is not the goal so much as 'unfinished thinking' (Borgdorff, 2010, p. 44). According to Amanda Ravetz and Helena Gregory, artistic research 'is always fluctuating, a growing that can slip through the fingers, a mistake that can become an opening' (Ravetz & Gregory, 2018, p. 11). Artistic and performative research creates movement as it 'moves from trying to stabilise knowledge towards emphasising knowledge as fluid and complex knowledge-creation' (Østern et al., 2021, p. 12). Tim Ingold moved in a similar direction when he distinguished between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge, he argued, is static, seeking the 'safety and security of established positions', and knowledge is thus a matter of 'fixing things within the concepts and categories of thought' (Ingold, 2021, p. 58). Wisdom, which Ingold seemed more attracted to, 'unfixes and unsettles', it is a 'way of going along in the world, and it has paths rather than endpoints' (Ingold, 2021, p. 60). The understanding of knowledge I propose here is more akin to wisdom, in Ingold's terms, more about unsettling than fixing. Such processes of knowing in research 'often resembles an uncertain quest in which the questions or topics only materialize during the journey' (Borgdorff, 2010, p. 56) and it is more directed at that 'which is unthought, that which is unexpected – the idea that all things could be different' (Borgdorff, 2010, p. 61). This brings us back to Whitehead, who emphasised the importance of 'the adventure of imagination', the ongoing process of exploring 'what may be', calling for the vigour to embark on new adventures 'beyond the safeties of the past' (Whitehead, 1933, p. 360).

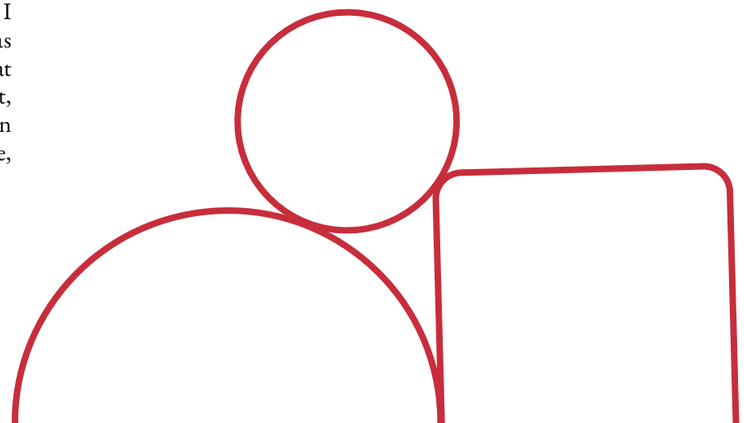


# 3.2 Knowing as *Experience*

If knowledge is always of a processual nature, always a verb and never a noun, where does the process of knowing begin? I suggest that all knowing begins by 'making meaning through interaction with our environment' (Stark, 2014, p. 88). This position is typically ascribed to pragmatism, and here I will draw mainly on John Dewey's work. For Dewey, there was no knowing apart from our experiences in the world. He argued that when 'we experience something we act upon it, we do something with it; then we suffer or undergo the consequences. We do something to the thing and then it does something to us in return' (Dewey, 2012, p. 153). Knowing is an 'intentional endeavour to discover specific connections between something which we do and the consequences which result' (Dewey, 2012, p. 160), 'a process of inquiry, of looking into things, of investigating' (Dewey, 2012, p. 162). This assertion leads to the conclusion that 'all thinking involves a risk', as the inquiry is also an 'invasion of the unknown'; that is, of the 'nature of an adventure; we cannot be sure in advance' (Dewey, 2012, p. 162). Dewey also addressed a dilemma with which we are still struggling, namely the 'evil results which have flowed from this dualism of mind and body' (Dewey, 2012, pp. 154–155) where bodily activity is seen as 'an intruder', 'a distraction, an evil to be contended with' (Dewey, 2012, p. 155). Pragmatism thus helps me question this dichotomy that remains widespread, not least in democratic theory where 'the unquestioned authority of scientific expertise can render other forms of knowledge - particularly bodily knowledge - either invisible or trivial' (Machin, 2018, p. 85). With Dewey and pragmatism, it makes no sense to separate mind from body, to consider one superior to the other, as knowledge also originates in *felt* experiences. Finally, and as a consequence of thinking as the active engagement with the world, Dewey saw knowledge as a 'mode of participation' that cannot be the 'idle view of an unconcerned spectator' (Dewey, 2012, p. 364). This pertains to anyone, including the researcher, who is seeking to generate knowledge, and who can find no privileged position from which to acquire knowledge.

## 3.3 Knowing as *Relations*

So far, I have asserted that I understand knowing as processual and rooted in embodied experience. Finally, I will contend that knowing is also always unfolding and emerging in and through relations with humans and more-than-humans alike. My emphasis on the relational is essential, because 'a participative methodology needs to rest on a participative world-view' (Reason, 1994). Here I follow Barbara Thayer-Bacon, when she proposed a 'relational epistemology' (Thayer-Bacon, 2010). She argued that we 'become knowers and are able to contribute to the constructing of knowledge due to the relationships we have with others' and through our 'social environments, our cultures, past, present, and future, as well as our surrounding natural environment, and the forces of the universe as a whole' (Thayer-Bacon, 2010, p. 3). Similarly, Tim Ingold claimed that 'all knowing is intrinsically social' and knowledge 'continually arises from dialogical correspondences' (Ingold, 2020, pp. 10–11). Finally, I draw on Paulo Freire, who understood knowledge as essential in the pursuit of liberation. He insisted that knowledge emerges 'through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other' (Freire, 2000, p. 72).





## 3.4 Making Friends with *Rigour*

I do not usually speak of rigour, and when I do, I typically experience the same visceral reaction as described by Ravetz and Gregory: 'The shape my mouth makes when I speak the word rigour seems cruel, lips pushed forward then flopping back to make a guttural g sound' (Ravetz & Gregory, 2018, p. 3). Rigour is often seen as 'the final arbiter' (Ravetz & Gregory, 2018, p. 7), the linchpin that holds together the research, while simultaneously holding it to a certain academic standard. Academic work must be rigorous, but what does it mean within the eclectic theory of knowing I have presented here? Ingold suggested that if we are to make fruitful use of the concept of rigour, we must distinguish between two kinds: 'one that demands accuracy in the recording, measurement and integration of an unyielding world of objective facts' and another that 'calls for practised care and attentiveness in an ongoing relation between conscious awareness and lively materials' (Ingold, 2020, p. 14). He proposed that we call this latter form 'amateur rigour', a kind of rigour that is 'flexible and in love with life, by contrast to the professional rigour that induces rigidity and paralysis' (Ingold, 2020, p. 14). Where the first kind of rigour mentioned by Ingold is typically considered trustworthy to the extent that other researchers can 'use the same methods to turn up the same data again' (Ravetz & Gregory, 2018, p. 9), the second kind should be trusted 'in as much as it turns something around, makes it differently comprehensible' (ibid). When I maintain that my work aspires to be rigorous, it is the 'amateur rigour', that seeks first and foremost to make something 'differently comprehensible'.

# 3.5 Knowing and *Democracy*

The concepts of knowledge and democracy are deeply entangled. One mirrors and shapes the other and vice versa, and they mutually determine and predetermine what is conceivable and possible. Democracy has traditionally been intimately tied to a specific conception of knowledge that originates mainly in Eurocentric enlightenment and Western Modernity (Machin, 2022; W. Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Santos, 2018; Schaffer & Gagnon, 2023). Here, the emphasis is on the individual as an autonomous, rational agent and democratic participation is thus typically defined as conducted through rational discourse. When the theory of knowledge that I have outlined above seems to deviate from these ideals, that is exactly the point, because for a different configuration of democracy to be possible and meaningful, a different configuration of knowledge is required. I listen to the voices that have already made similar arguments and, unsurprisingly, these voices have traditionally been the voices of people marginalised and oppressed by this epistemological hegemony. Numerous feminist scholars, such as Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon, have argued that feminism need to transform existing models of rationality:

> **Traditional Epistemology shows its androcentricism with its embrace of Rationality as an Ideal, for rationality (or reason) is again associated with the mind, which is linked to males. Irrationality, in contrast, is associated with the emotions and intuitions, which are normally attributed to women.**
>
> *(Thayer-Bacon, 2010, p. 5)*



Further, she argued that when we 'pretend to offer a neutral, general theory of knowledge (...) what we really offer is an androcentric Epistemology' (Thayer-Bacon, 2010, p. 6). Or as Carole Pateman has noted, 'we are all taught that the "individual" is a universal category that applies to anyone or everyone, but this is not the case. "The individual" is a man' (Pateman, cited in Mouffe, 1993, p. 13). In other words, rationality has been conceived of by men, in ways that favour men and then that ideal has been imposed as universal and neutral, marginalising those in democratic societies who cannot or will not adhere to it.

In a related way, postcolonial and decolonial scholars, like Anibal Quijano, have argued that most conceptions of democracy are underpinned by Eurocentrism and Western Modernity. In this understanding, 'only European culture is rational, it can contain "subjects" - the rest are not rational, they cannot be or harbor "subjects". As a consequence, the other cultures are different in the sense that they are unequal, in fact inferior, by nature' (Quijano, 2007, p. 174). Similarly, Boaventura de Sousa Santos argued that the 'epistemologies of the North' frame the 'Eurocentric epistemological North as the only source of valid knowledge' and, in contrast, 'the South (...) is the realm of ignorance. () On these terms, the only valid understanding of the world is the Western understanding of the world' (Santos, 2018, loc. 309). Santos further argued that the 'epistemologies of the South do not aim to replace the epistemologies of the North' (Santos, 2018, p. 329) but the goal is rather to 'erase the power hierarchies inhabiting them' (Santos, 2018, p. 329). Consequently , Santos suggested supplanting the 'abstract universality' of the North with a greater diversity and pluriversality (Santos, 2018, loc. 333), cultivating an 'ecology of knowledges' that recognises the 'copresence of different ways of knowing' (Santos, 2018, locs. 348–353). This notion of an ecology of knowledges is a fundamental prerequisite for enabling pluralistic democracies with more equal access to participation. Furthermore, a narrow conception of rationality rooted in Western science also severely limits what can be imagined. If we remain too tightly bound by these ideals, it is indeed, as Foucault argued, that 'we have to walk in line because of the extreme narrowness of the place where one can listen and make oneself heard' (Foucault, 1997, p. 324). I will return to these matters, and for now I merely maintain that for democracies and democratic participation to evolve, our idea of knowledge and rationality must change too. With the proposition of the 'junk playgrounds as agora', I therefore seek to provide epistemic spaces for knowing otherwise, for cultivating different ecologies of knowledges, and for stretching conceptions of knowledge to make other democratic configurations possible.

# 4. Critiquing



I have a sense that many of us who are practitioners at heart, who love to do things in the world, to gather people and things together, to experiment and play, to mess around and see what happens, that we are also sometimes slightly intimidated by the very notion of theory.

I know I am.

Sometimes, theory can paralyse me, make me fearful and timid, as I turn all too reverent in the face of words I often don't understand. Such a stance is no good for what I am hoping to achieve here – to cultivate a space of trust, to spark conversations, to gather people together. I appreciate design scholar Johan Redström's suggestion that theory, etymologically connected to 'tourism', is about *seeing* something, 'to be a spectator', and theory is essentially 'meant to take you places so as to witness a spectacle' (Redström, 2017, loc. 218). The 'transitional theory' Redström sketched out allows for a plurality of different understandings and definitions because, as he argued, 'it is much more powerful to work with difference as a basis when coping with complexity and change' (Redström, 2017, loc. 2993). I recall Clifford Geertz's claim that 'human thought is consummately social: social in its origins, social in its functions, social in its forms, social in its applications' (Geertz, 1973, p. 360). If thinking is social and theories are meant to take us places, then perhaps we can understand theories as stories, if slightly more robust than the ones we typically tell around the campfire, but stories, nonetheless. Stories that attempt to grasp how some facet of the world works, but also stories that aim to shape the world through their telling (Law & Urry, 2004). My mental image of writing with theory is akin to that of an unpredictable, lively conversation, across time and place, with whomever I am citing; it is not a fight, I am not trying to win, and very rarely do I seek to prove someone else wrong. I am just trying to allow the stories and conversations to take us places we may have not seen before. Different theories are, in my mind, not competing for victory in a battle, but are simply inviting different stories and conversations. Some stories are more likely to be helpful for the predicaments we are in, but none of them have a monopoly on the truth. This, I believe, is exactly what Anna Tsing meant when she urged us to tell new stories that might be 'simultaneously true and fabulous' (Tsing, 2015, p. viii). In the name of collaborative survival, we need other kinds of stories to 'enlarge what is possible' (Tsing, 2015, pp. 155–156). 'Not that this will save us—but it might open our imaginations' (Tsing, 2015, p. 19) – and that might just be enough. In a similar fashion, Donna Haraway, drawing on Marilyn Strathern, has convinced me that it 'matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories' (Haraway, 2016, p. 12). It matters whether I say that theory is a competition, a race, a battle, a zero-sum game or a loving gesture, a means of connection, a hand we stretch out to reach each other in the dark. Is doing research and making theory a matter of 'mining the world for data', as Tim Ingold scornfully described it, or is it a way of 'honouring the world, and of offering something in return for the gift of existence'? (Ingold, 2021, p. xii). I have taken a decisive turn towards the latter.

# 4.1 Affirmative *Critique*

All this is not to say that we should withhold critique, but merely that critique might simply mean we can tell better stories together. In contrast, the kind of theory that deters and disenchants me is akin to a notion of criticism that Raymond Williams described as 'fault-finding' and 'negative judgment' (Williams, 1976/1983, p. 83). I was thrilled to learn that there are rich traditions pursuing other forms of critique, as demonstrated by Michel Foucault

> **I can't help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply not judgments but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep. Perhaps it would invent them sometimes - all the better. All the better. Criticism that hands down sentences sends me to sleep; I'd like a criticism of scintillating leaps of the imagination.**
>
> *(Foucault, 1997, p. 323)*

What might a critique look like that brings ideas to life, that watches the grass grow and listens to the wind? I see already the contours of a different, more poetic, creative, and edifying mode of critique. This brings me to Bruno Latour's inquiry, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?' Latour asked: 'Should we be at war, too, we, the scholars,



the intellectuals? Is it really our duty to add fresh ruins to fields of ruins? Is it really the task of the humanities to add deconstruction to destruction?' (Latour, 2004, p. 225). This line of questioning eventually led him to a different conception of the critic and critique, as he suggested that the 'critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles' and the critic is not the one 'who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather' (Latour, 2004, p. 247). With my relational ontology, my practice of gathering together, and my hope to explore other possible worlds, this notion of critique as creating arenas in which to gather is deeply compelling. I find that a similar current runs through much of Rosi Braidotti's work, revolving around the notion of an 'affirmative ethics' (Braidotti, 2012, 2019) which also contains the idea of affirmative critique. She drew on feminist and Indigenous philosophies to suggest that critique can and should be reconciled with creativity (Braidotti, 2019, p. 50), and that 'critique and creation work hand-in-hand' (Braidotti, 2019, p. 36). She argued that 'critical thought cannot stop at the critique of the actual () but needs to move on to the creative actualization of the virtual – that is to say of what we are in the process of becoming' (Braidotti, 2019, p. 65). Affirmative critique, then, should aspire to sustain a movement from 'what is' towards 'what might be', towards actualizing virtual possibilities. Similarly, Jane Bennett has argued for 'affirmative theorizing' (Bennett, 2001, p. 161), where she emphasised that the 'more aware of wonder one is—and the more one learns to cultivate it—the more one might be able to respond gracefully and generously to the painful challenges posed by our condition as finite beings in a turbulent and unjust world' (Bennett, 2001, p. 160). The path I am following here is also what has sent me on numerous journeys into the heterogenous field of affect theory. This was something I did not expect from the outset, mainly because it took me such a long time to understand what people mean when they talk about affect. However, I had to open the door, if just a little. Affect theory is, at its most basic, concerned with the 'ability to affect and be affected', and it seeks to grasp what happens in 'an encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting, body' (Deleuze et al., 1989, p. 17). Kathleen Stewart has argued that affect theory presents us with

> **the possibility of sidestepping the dualist dead ends of modernist, humanist social science and its unfortunate affective habits of snapping at the world as if the whole point of being and thinking is just to catch it in a lie.**
>
> *(Stewart, 2017, p. 196)*

Snapping at the world to catch it in a lie sounds exactly like the kind of critique that would send Foucault to sleep. Instead, argued Stewart,

> **affect added an affirmative critique that registers surprise at what and how things happen. It waits to see as things unfold in a moment, notes points of contact, recognizes the weight or smell of an atmosphere, or traces the spread of intensities across subjects, objects, institutions, laws, materialities, and species.**
>
> *(Stewart, 2017, pp. 194-195)*

Similarly, Tyrone S. Palmer argued affect theory 'prioritizes positivity and connection over and against detachment and destruction' and 'affect affirms life, resistance, futurity, mobility, capacity, openness, and in the simplest of terms, existence' (PalmerW, 2023, p. 122).

Throughout this thesis, I try to cultivate a mode of affirmative critique that builds up more than it tears down, that opens more than it closes, and that gathers people together more than it scatters them. I simply cannot do this work from a position that establishes critique and *kindness* as opposites. It is my hope that there will be moments where I live up to the wonderful and radical creed of Paulo Freire:

> **'Dialogue cannot exist () in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people () If I do not love the world—if I do not love life—if I do not love people—I cannot enter into dialogue'**
>
> *(Freire, 2000, pp. 89-90)*



A loving critique fit for the junk playgrounds?

# 4.2 Towards democratic *Pluralism*

I hope that such an affirmative critique, with its capacity to create 'arenas to gather', can also contribute to a vibrant pluralism across these pages. If I return for a moment to CounterPlay, what struck me when I observed people playing was the wild diversity of their approaches. People had come from most parts of the world, and they brought a plethora of play traditions and cultures with them. One person later reflected on this, stating that 'CounterPlay showed in practice something that I already believed in theory: that, as long as there is playfulness, people from the most diverse backgrounds, disciplines and ways of life can find a common language[9].'

To paraphrase Iris Marion Young's notion of 'listening across differences' (Young, 1997, p. 69), most often people managed to play across their differences, moving a little closer together in the process. What they said, with and without words, seemed to evoke a kind of pluralist demeanour, where everything that could help sustain the shared play experience was heartily welcomed. No expression of play could be readily renounced before it had been enacted, brought to life, and sensed in the bodies of the players. I have found here a parallel to William Connolly's ideals of democratic pluralism (Connolly, 2005). He argued that pluralism is essential because it allows us to *both* hold on to our own set of beliefs, our *creed*, and insist that any one set of beliefs will always be inadequate and flawed:

> **You love your creed;**
> **you seldom leave it entirely in the closet when you enter politics. But you appreciate how it appears opaque and profoundly contestable to many who do not participate in it;**
> **and you struggle against the tendency to resent this very state of affairs.**
>
> *(Connolly, 2005, p. 4)*

[9] https://www.facebook.com/groups/counterplay/posts/2592199314252849?comment_id=2595278377278276



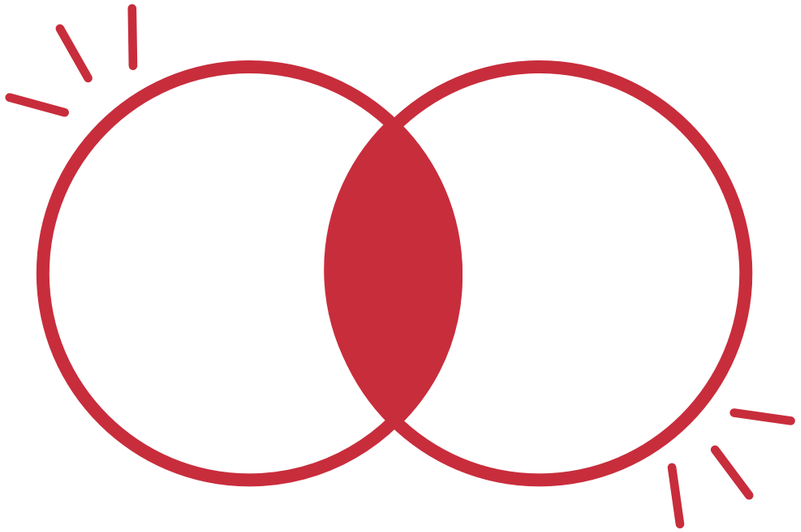
I aspire to enact this idea of pluralism through the project, and I think of this text as an agora itself, a gathering place where many different voices come together with the same pluralist demeanour as the people playing. To sustain this dedication to pluralism and listening across difference, I have developed an eclectic strategy that underpins the entire project. In their introduction to a book on eclectic analytical strategies (Husted & Pors, 2020), Emil Husted and Justine Grønbæk Pors lamented the situation where researchers hide their analytical decisions and considerations to make a research design seem flawless. This makes it harder to learn from and question the research by positioning the researcher as a 'mythical figure' who never doubts their own 'theoretical capacity' (Husted & Pors, 2020, p. 14). In contrast, I try to show my doubts and insecurities, as I hope to make fruitful use of the mess, the unanswered questions, and all the moments where I have felt vulnerable as a budding researcher. Husted and Pors distinguished between 'electicism as integration' (Husted & Pors, 2020, p. 23) and 'eclecticism as friction' (Husted & Pors, 2020, p. 25), referring to two different poles in a spectrum of eclectic strategies. Where the former seeks to smooth out contradictions between the combined theories or concepts, the latter aims to turn the differences into a resource and make productive use of the ensuing friction. The goal is to call forth new perspectives that could not have come from any of the existing theories, but only from the meeting and the friction between them. I don't want to claim that one is inherently better than the other, and while I am instinctively drawn to the friction, I realise that what starts as friction often stabilises and sediments, moving towards a degree of integration over time. Thus, much of what may seem like 'eclectic integration' in the text at this point has been intense, tear-inducing friction.

Pluralism, listening across differences and eclecticism, will be threads running through this project, where I bring together a range of theories, concepts, people, and materials that are not immediately related or maybe even considered compatible. Such an approach does not lead to any kind of finality or totality, no clear-cut answers or unequivocal results. In the words of Donald Schön, I am not seeking to reach some 'high, hard ground', a vantage point from which to observe the landscape far and wide, but rather, I wish to venture into the 'swampy lowland where situations are confusing "messes" incapable of technical solution' (Schön, 1983, p. 42) As Schön noted, it is in the swamp that we find the 'problems of greatest human concern' (Schön, 1983, p. 42).

As this project unfolded, I have invited hundreds of people to enter loosely defined spaces oriented towards an eclectic collection of discarded materials. Together, we have been playing, exploring, experimenting, tinkering, telling stories, messing around, and hanging out, to explore what a 'junk playground as agora' might look and feel like in actual, lived practice. Rarely have we tried to come up with solutions or answers, and even when we did try, we often came up short. These playgrounds have indeed been more like swampy lowlands than high, hard grounds; they have been spaces for rather eclectic assemblages of bodies and materials, and they have certainly been spaces for making and staying with the trouble, as Donna Haraway insisted that we must (Haraway, 2016). Considering how all these people have been courageously, if sometimes cautiously, 'muddling through' (Schön, 1983, p. 43) the swampy playgrounds, I feel obliged to stay in the swamp with them, to make a home here, and it is my sincere hope that you will find a way to feel comfortable enough to stay with me for a while.

## VIGNETTE:

# Serendipitous Democratic Encounters





Before I go on to discuss my theoretical framework, there is a story I need to tell if I am to honour my declared intentions of making my journey visible to you. Truth be told, I was a little intimidated by the word 'democracy' for a long time. As I have already described, my initial, tentative attempts at bringing 'democracy' and 'play' together were born from pure intuition, a mere hunch. I hardly knew anything about democracy, other than the most general and trivial assumptions. However, in the moment I wrote a blog post playfully asking if play can save democracy[10] , I realised that I had suddenly committed myself, and I was now bound to understand democracy at least slightly better. This predicament was also emphasised by the committee that reviewed my PhD plan early on, when they recommended that I get a 'project supervisor in political science'. They knew what I knew – that I didn't know much, if anything, about democracy. I realised immediately this was indeed sound advice, yet to begin with, I ignored it, because I had no idea where to find a political scientist or anyone studying democracy who would also be interested in play and junk playgrounds. For a while, I built up this fear that whenever I would eventually present my work to 'real' democracy scholars, I would be ridiculed, laughed out of the room. 'What does this have to do with democracy?' – I kept asking myself. Then one day, out of the blue, in a beautiful case of serendipity, I received a message on my then-favourite social medium, Twitter (now X), from one of those political scientists whom I was a little afraid of:

[10]See http://www.counterplay.org/can-play-save-democracy/

Hi Mathias, I just saw that you are studying play and playground as part of the democratic participation. That is so exciting! I am working on this issue with a colleague too. We suggest democratic playgrounds as new formats of participation.

*2 Jun 2021*

Your work looks fantastic! It is very close to what we are doing. We don't have any practical experience with playgrounds, we just theorize them so far. I'd be happy to send you our draft paper, which is currently under review in a journal. I'd also like to put you in touch with my co-author. Can you share your email address, please?"

*2 Jun 2021*

It was Hans Asenbaum, a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance at Canberra University, and the paper he mentioned was soon to be published under the title '(De)futuring democracy: Labs, playgrounds, and ateliers as democratic innovations' (Asenbaum & Hanusch, 2021). This would prove to be exactly the opening I needed. We met online, where we discussed our shared interests in democratic playgrounds, and then time passed. A year later, I was planning my research stay abroad, where I would visit a group of scholars at Monash in Melbourne. At the same time, Hans would be at the Centre in Canberra, and I planned to visit him and his colleagues for a month. In Melbourne, the day before heading to Canberra, I had an inspiring conversation with a colleague who suggested that maybe my project was not about democracy after all, but about community or something similar. Letting go of the concept of democracy would certainly have made things much less complicated. Still, something made me reluctant to let it go just yet. I held on, but I still did not quite know *how* my work was democratic. Then I went to Canberra, and on



the very first day I faced the intimidating experience of presenting my work to everyone at the Centre. I cautiously asked, 'What might play teach us about democratic participation?' and added another disclaimer, saying that 'Maybe my project is not *about* deliberation or even democracy *per se* – and that's okay.' I would soon realise that all my worries had been completely misguided, as everyone was so kind, curious, and patient with me. They invited me to write a paper for their working paper series (see Poulsen, 2023) and asked me to host a small junk playground workshop (that would become EX9).

The visit was profoundly transformative and gave me the confidence I had been missing to state that this project *is* indeed about democracy. That feels like a big thing, and I would certainly have talked a whole lot less about democracy were it not for those short four weeks in Canberra.

Junk playground experiment in Canberra

# 5. Theorising



I will now move on to outline the primary theoretical perspectives underpinning this project. First, I will develop my understanding of *democracy* before I discuss the role of *participation* and *friction* in potentially *prefiguring* other democratic worlds.

## 5.1 Democracy

Here, I will trace relevant theories and perspectives on democracy to chart my own position. It is not a complete mapping of the entire landscape, and I am not aiming to build a robust, immovable foundation but, rather, to shake things loose.

### 5.1.1 Why Democracy?

Why engage with democracy in the first place? Truth be told, my initial impetus for this project was mostly that of an increasingly disaffected citizen, as I have found it ever more difficult to vote for this or that politician to represent me. My growing democratic disenchantment contrasted with the reinvigorating experience of people playing at CounterPlay. I couldn't help but compare how the two enabled different conditions for imagining other ways of living together. While I saw elected representatives maintain the notion of 'politics of necessity', the people I played with offered me a spirited exploration of what life together might also look and feel like. Politicians told me that *nothing* is possible, apart from that dictated by economic necessity, but the players told me that *anything* is possible to *imagine*. Without knowing either of these terms just yet, I had a sense of representative democracy as constantly reaffirming a 'one-world world' (Law, 2015), a world that could only ever be thought of in one and the same way, while the players were enacting a 'pluriverse' (Escobar, 2020; Reiter, 2018a), multiple worlds, where many ways of being could exist alongside each other. This was where I first came to ask if there might be a way in which the playful creation of 'models for living' (Henricks, 2015, loc. 66) could be 'translated' to the language of democracy.

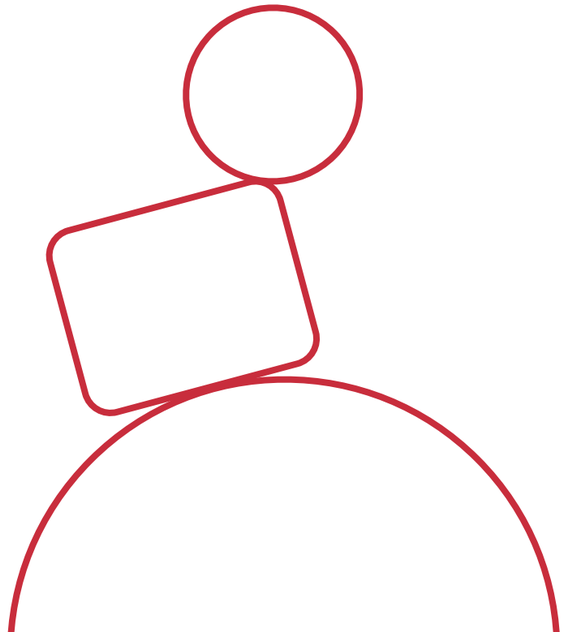
## 5.1.2 The Many Meanings of Democracy

There is another question I have asked repeatedly: is this democratic? Is that democratic? Is anything, anything at all, about these junk playgrounds democratic? Good people told me to hold my horses, to wait, to allow something to reveal itself. Meanwhile, I crossed my fingers, hoping the answer to those questions would be yes, but I was never sure. I could not be, as I deliberately embarked on this journey without pinning down my understanding of democracy, actively eschewing rigid definitions in favour of maintaining a conceptual openness.

Talking about democracy and identifying democratic practices is inherently difficult, because they have been conceived and described in more ways than I can count, and sometimes in rather contradictory terms. As Pierre Rosanvallon stated, 'there is scarcely another word in political usage whose practical definition is more variable' (Flügel-Martinsen et al., 2018, p. 27) than 'democracy'. I think Ricardo Blaug captured the inherent confusion quite well when he stated that 'trying to understand democracy is like reaching into a black plastic bag. You can feel a large object, but accurate description is difficult because the shape is extremely complex' (Blaug, 2002, p. 104). He then made the distinction between democracy as 'a decision-making method () and as a set of political institutions' and 'democracy as civic virtue, as a way of life, as a mode of interpersonal conduct oriented to what is good for all () as an ethical ideal' (Blaug, 2002, p. 104). Similarly, Stephen Elstub and Oliver Escobar also distinguished between *representative democracy* with 'emphasis on the work of representatives, advocates and experts' and participatory *democracy*, which 'compels all citizens to encounter other citizens without intermediaries' (Elstub & Escobar, 2019, p. 2). It was the latter tradition that inspired Carole Pateman to talk about a 'participatory society', 'a society so organised that every individual has the opportunity directly to participate in all political spheres' (Pateman, 1970, pp. 105–106). While 'humanity has never experienced what we may understand as a perfect democratic condition' (Papacharissi, 2021, p. 23), as some groups have always been excluded and some modes of participation deemed undesirable, the ideal of participatory democracy persists.

**"I merely ask again: what is democracy, and who makes the verdict?"**

*(Koch, 1945/2023, p. 19)*



However, today democracy is often 'identified with () competitive elections, representative institutions, the party system, and constitutional protections' (Schlosser et al., 2019, p. 28). In these cases, argued Donatella della Porta, the focus is on 'procedural criteria' which includes 'free, competitive and periodic elections as a sufficient indicator for the presence of democracy' (Porta, 2013, p. 2). This notion of liberal, representative democracy is often simply equated with 'democracy'. For instance, on the official site of the Danish Parliament, www.ft.dk, one can read that 'democracy means rule of the people' and that 'in a democracy the people elect some people to the parliament () which pass the country's laws'[11] . That is, in most contemporary democracies, the movement has generally been towards more minimal forms of democracy, echoing Schumpeter's idea that 'the role of the people is to produce a government' (Schumpeter, 1943/2003, p. 269).

[11] https://www.ft.dk/da/leksikon/Demokrati

## 5.1.3 Democratic Problems

As we have seen, at least in principle, democracy can be different things to different people, but in practice, it seems that democracy is mostly made to be one and the same thing to most people. This necessarily entails a marked reduction of difference, and I believe that accounts for at least some of the more fundamental problems facing democracy and democratic societies today.

Numerous scholars talk about 'democratic backsliding' (Bermeo, 2016), which can lead to 'democratic breakdown or simply the serious weakening of existing democratic institutions for undefined ends' (Bermeo, 2016, p. 6). Others claim there is a growing 'democratic disconnect' (Foa & Mounk, 2016) where many citizens have become 'more cynical about the value of democracy as a political system, less hopeful that anything they do might influence public policy, and more willing to express support for authoritarian alternatives' (Foa & Mounk, 2016, p. 7). Pierre Rosanvallon argued that the 'chief failing of democracy in the minds of many is that their voice is not heard' (Rosanvallon, 2018b, p. 2). One of the major problems with most contemporary democracies, many scholars seem to agree, is fuelled by the fact that 'many voters dislike and distrust their elected representatives now more than ever' (Runciman, 2018, p. 4). If we cannot trust representatives to represent our interests, wishes, hopes, dreams, and desires in any meaningful way, can we trust democracy at all? David Runciman summarised this state of affairs as a 'zombie democracy' where 'people are simply watching a performance in which their role is to give or withhold their applause at the appropriate moments' (Runciman, 2018, pp. 46–47).



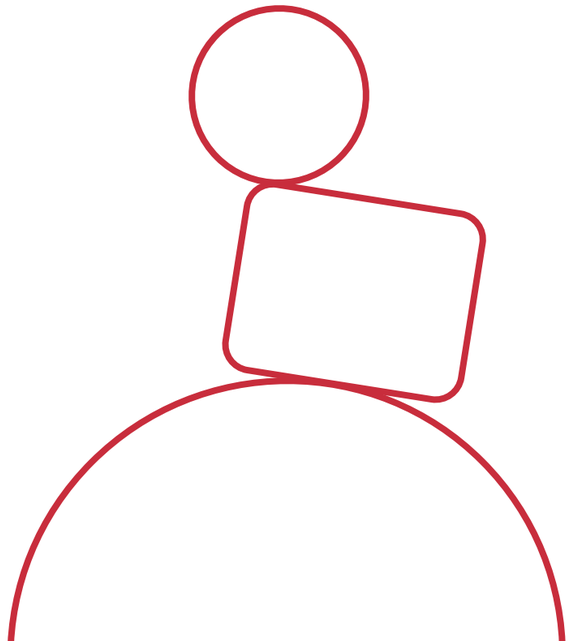
## 5.1.4 Tales of Necessity

While these problems pose serious threats to the health of any democratic society, I primarily focus on issues revolving around what I will describe as 'tales of necessity'. This is closely related to the notion of 'zombie democracy' and the feeling that our involvement as citizens makes little difference, but its causes are deeper and more complex than what can be remedied by, say, more efficient participatory procedures. I will start to unpack this argument with what Colin Crouch called 'post-democracy' to describe a democratic era, where 'politics is really shaped in private by interaction between elected governments and elites that overwhelmingly represent business interests' (Crouch, 2004, p. 4). Post-democracy, for Crouch, is not the same as non-democracy, but it does create a crisis of democracy, when citizens are increasingly discouraged or even prevented from participating in open debate, negotiation, and contestation of political matters. Along similar lines, Sheldon Wolin has argued that contemporary democracies have evolved into a stale form of 'managed democracy' whereby 'corporate power and its culture' have 'become integral, so the citizenry has become marginal and democracy more manageable' (Wolin, 2017, p. 131). Jacques Rancière described this movement strikingly as fuelled by 'hatred of democracy' (Ranciere, 2006), where 'oligarchic governments' pursue a 'compulsion' to 'get rid of the people and of politics': 'Proclaiming themselves to be simply administrating the local consequences of global historical necessity, our governments take great care to banish the democratic supplement' (Ranciere, 2006, p. 81). From a different perspective, and against the background of her anthropological studies of corporate resource exploitation in Indonesia, Anna Tsing claimed that the 'successes of corporate consolidation, free-ranging finance, and transnational economic standardization backed by military muscle have made it difficult for people all over the world to think beyond the story of neoliberal globalization' (Tsing, 2005, p. 269). While these are only tiny fragments of different analyses made by different people in different fields of research, they all point to the limits of the political, the limits of democracy, and a recurring refrain of necessities and inevitabilities.

In addition to limiting the space of the political, excluding citizens from most democratic processes and limiting the scope of what can be contested, there is also a proclaimed necessity as to *how* people can participate. As della Porta argued, an 'image of democracy as a market perniciously pushes for individual egoism when collective commitment is called for instead' (Porta, 2013, p. 189). This further reduces the scope of the political and the openings for participation, as everything that falls outside 'liberal rationalism' is often disregarded. In short, with these 'tales of necessity', the 'space for meaningful citizen input is increasingly constrained by technocratic decision-making and global economic pressures' which effectively means that the 'political has been taken out of politics' (Bua & Bussu, 2023, p. 4).

Drawing together some of these threads, Wendy Brown has argued that most people 'have ceased to believe in the human capacity to craft and sustain a world that is humane, free, sustainable, and, above all, modestly

under human control' (W. Brown, 2015, loc. 3282). She reminds us that in our search for more just futures, even insisting that '"another world is possible" runs opposite to this tide of general despair' (W. Brown, 2015, loc. 3294). Following these perspectives, I argue there is a great need to challenge the 'tales of necessity', to insist that other worlds are indeed possible, and to bring those worlds into existence, to enact them and sense what living in those worlds might be like. What might a conception of democracy look like that can better inspire and sustain the capacity to imagine and enact other possible worlds?





## 5.1.5 Reimagining Democracy

The many problems and shortcomings of contemporary democracies have been met with a great number of responses, often under the header of 'democratic innovations' (Smith, 2009) which Graham Smith first defined as 'institutions that have been specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process' (Smith, 2009, p. 5). Elstub and Escobar have more recently proposed a revised edition, suggesting that democratic innovations are

> **'processes or institutions that are new to a policy issue, policy role, or level of governance, and developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence'**
>
> *(Elstub & Escobar, 2019, p. 11)*

In the revised and expanded definition, democratic innovations are thus broadly conceived as new initiatives, whether as institutional or more dynamic processes that increase the possibilities of citizen participation in democratic societies. Among the wealth of democratic innovations, various conceptions of deliberative democracy have taken precedence, and Smith has later argued that 'deliberative democracy has become too hegemonic' (Smith, 2019, p. 579).

While I agree with the stated intentions of democratic innovations, and I find much to celebrate in the many recent contributions, I cannot shake the feeling that many of these laudable efforts to improve democracy seem to take for granted some underlying, ontological assumption that we always-already know what democracy is and can be. As if 'democracy is a known entity, composed of a specific set of institutions,

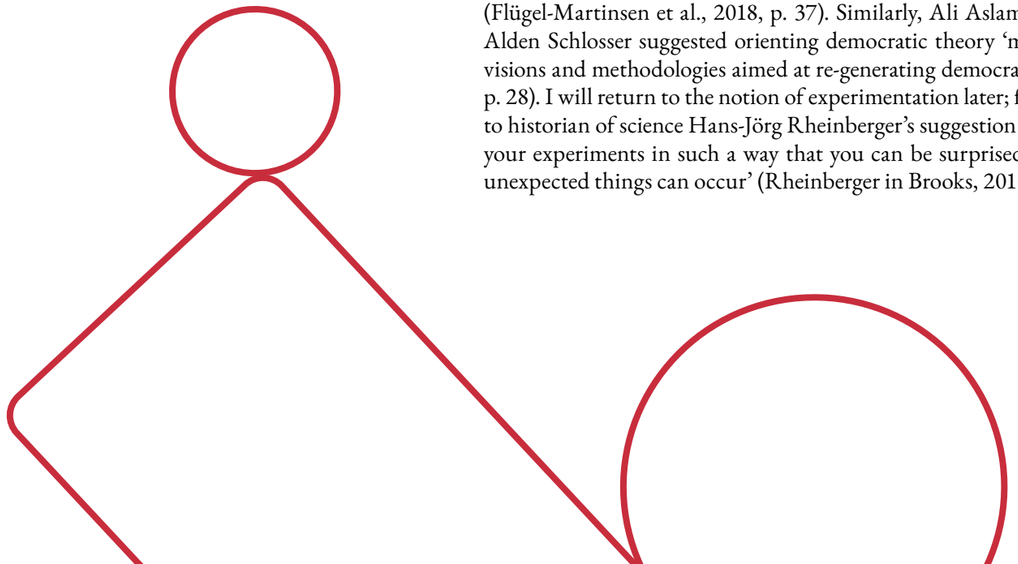
practices, norms, and commonly held beliefs' (Schlosser et al., 2019, pp. 28–29). For instance, when both deliberative and participatory democracy have been critiqued for their 'failure to achieve consequential input into central decision-making processes' (Elstub, 2018, p. 187), then both fields are assessed as if their main contribution is and must be 'consequential input into central decision-making processes', as if that is all democracy is about. By doing so, we risk perpetuating the 'tales of necessity', which also limits the potential for expanding the political. Rather than building democratic innovations on a known and established foundation, I sense a greater potential in acting as if we don't know exactly what democracy is, means, or can become. To begin this inquiry, I follow Ricardo Blaug (Blaug, 2002) to distinguish between 'incumbent democracy' and 'critical democracy'. Incumbent democracy, he argued, is 'liberal, realist, representative, institutional and protective' and frames participation 'through the metaphor of the market, as a competition for votes and as the (political) survival of the fittest' (Blaug, 2002, p. 105). Further, he argued that incumbent democracy tends to build on a particular conception of participation as governed by institutions, and it generally avoids questioning this organisation (Blaug, 2002, p. 109), as if it always-already knows what democracy is, what it looks like, and how it works. In contrast, 'critical democracy' builds on the participatory ideals of democracy, 'sees participation through the metaphor of the forum, and is thus primarily deliberative, direct, developmental and personal' (Blaug, 2002, pp. 105–106). Further, critical democracy seeks to enable citizens to question and critique existing institutions and practices (Blaug, 2002, p. 107).

As I have already described, I am trying to develop a form of affirmative critique that can also pertain to the ontological level, a critique that reaches into our understanding of the very being of things. Perhaps what is missing from many of these attempts to improve democracy is a closer examination of democratic ontologies. As I argued, matters of ontology are always with us, and if we ignore them, we 'black-box' fundamental issues and assumptions, preventing critical investigation of their implications. Roberto Frega argued that theories of democracy often implicitly build on 'substantialist ontologies', where democracy's legitimacy is tied to either the individual or institutions (Frega, 2018, p. 161). He suggested, instead, to pay much greater attention to 'social interactionist ontologies' (Frega, 2018, p. 162), where democracy is continually shaped, negotiated, and enacted through social interactions. When I rooted this project in relational ontologies, it also means that I conceive of democracy as always constituted through relations and encounters. Following Rosanvallon, approaching



democracy like this means that it is 'on the basis of its indeterminacy, its tensions, and its contradictions that one must build a theory of democracy' (Flügel-Martinsen et al., 2018, p. 28). It also means 'democracy is less stable, settled, or predictable than many theorists assume, and in fact the aspiration toward a settled form for democracy is among the threats to its continual regeneration' (Schlosser et al., 2019, p. 30). This also resonates with the practice-based approach suggested by Andrea Felicetti, when he argued that we should question the idea that 'democracy has some sort of fixed core around which a political system should be organized—such as elections, deliberation, or participation' (Felicetti, 2021, p. 1589).

Rosanvallon drew some of these disparate, critical threads together when he suggested that the very definition of democracy should be 'the regime that must ceaselessly interrogate its definition of itself' (Flügel-Martinsen et al., 2018, p. 37). While this definition may seem bewildering at first, I have yet to find one that better sparks the inquiries I am aspiring to conduct. If democracy is only democracy so long that it interrogates its definition of itself, then it must always be on the move. I hear echoes of John Dewey, who insisted that the 'very idea of democracy () must be continually explored afresh; it has to be constantly discovered, and rediscovered, remade and reorganized' (Dewey, 2021, p. 32, 1937). Rosanvallon further argued that in the 'ceaseless interrogation' of democracy, there is a need for an 'experimental universalism' (Flügel-Martinsen et al., 2018, p. 37). Similarly, Ali Aslam, David McIvor, and Joel Alden Schlosser suggested orienting democratic theory 'more toward experimental visions and methodologies aimed at re-generating democracy' (Schlosser et al., 2019, p. 28). I will return to the notion of experimentation later; for now, I will merely refer to historian of science Hans-Jörg Rheinberger's suggestion that 'you have to conduct your experiments in such a way that you can be surprised by the outcome, so that unexpected things can occur' (Rheinberger in Brooks, 2013, p. 201).



## 5.1.6 Radical Democracy

I believe that this stance towards democracy also relates to the tradition of 'radical democracy', which shares with participatory democracy the intention to engage all citizens in the ongoing formation of society. Further, radical democrats also point to the challenges brought about by increasing institutionalisation. Sheldon Wolin argued that 'institutionalization marks the attenuation of democracy' and that democracy should be seen as 'a moment rather than a form' (Wolin, 2016, p. 108). Bonnie Honig suggested that 'to affirm the perpetuity of contest is not to celebrate a world without points of stabilization' but rather to 'treat rights and law as a part of political contest rather than as the instruments of its closure' (Honig, 1993/2023, p. 15). She argued that if we embrace this 'perpetuity of contest' we must also reject 'the fantasy that the right laws or constitution might some day free us from the responsibility for (and, indeed, the burden of) politics' (Honig, 1993/2023, pp. 210–211). That is, we can create 'points of stabilization', such as institutions and procedures, but only temporarily, because no procedure, institution, right, or law can be above perpetual contestation. The notion of contestation is also central to the work of Chantal Mouffe and she argued that a 'project of radical and plural democracy () requires the existence of multiplicity, of plurality, and of conflict, and sees in them the raison d'être of politics' (Mouffe, 2013, 99). She maintained that these conflicts should take the form of agonism, not antagonism, where 'the others be seen not as enemies to be destroyed but as adversaries whose ideas should be fought, even fiercely, but whose right to defend those ideas will never be questioned' (Mouffe & Martin, 2013, p. 185). She contended that the 'belief in the possibility of a universal rational consensus has put democratic thinking on the wrong track' and continued:

> **Instead of trying to design the institutions which, through supposedly 'impartial' procedures, would reconcile all conflicting interests and values, the task for democratic theorists and politicians should be to envisage the creation of a vibrant 'agonistic' public sphere of contestation where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted.**
>
> *(Mouffe, 2005, p. 3)*



As I have already mentioned, I also draw on William Connolly's work on democratic pluralism (Connolly, 2005). He argued that 'pluralists adopt a bicameral orientation to political life' (Connolly, 2005, p. 4), where one might have strongly rooted beliefs and values, but remains willing to question them and their foundations. Connolly suggested that we should pursue a form of 'agonistic respect', which also entails a 'generous ethos of engagement' (Connolly, 2005, p. 31):

> **'In a relation of agonistic respect, partisans may test, challenge, and contest pertinent elements in the fundaments of the others. But each also appreciates the comparative contestability of its own fundaments to others'**
>
> *(Connolly, 2005, p. 123)*

With radical democracy, we can also understand 'the experience of political action as a criticism of how politics occurs in modern democracies' (Volk, 2021, p. 441). So conceived, radical democracy is also the act of 'repoliticizing what has been depoliticized, in showing that what appears to us as natural and ahistorical is in fact contingent, constructed, and contestable' (Thomassen, 2013, p. 180). Here we see again a parallel to the notion of 'ontological politics' and my aim to challenge the 'tales of necessity'. Radical democrats generally seem committed to participatory democracy, yet they insist that the conceptions of participation must be perpetually contested to cultivate more vibrant and pluralistic democracies.

What I take from radical democracy is the critical, generous attitude, the insistence that things could be different, and the belief that contestation is not only inevitable but integral to and constitutive of democracy. It corresponds, I believe, with the notion of affirmative critique that my work is rooted in. I will later argue that radical democracy may also be further invigorated by play and a playful attitude, both of which reject fixed meanings and maintain that things could be otherwise.

### 5.1.7 Democratic Assemblage

If there is no fixed core, no substantialist ontology, but rather movements, relations, and interactions, then perhaps we can understand democracy as an assemblage. Hans Asenbaum suggested that if we think of democracy as an assemblage, we can see that 'democracy is not only constituted by carefully planned processes, but also by the many things—human and non-human—that assemble in ever novel and unforeseen configurations' (Asenbaum, 2023a, p. 251). This opens new perspectives, argued Asenbaum, when we shift our focus from 'carefully developed expert designs' towards 'attending to serendipitous processes of becoming, including human and non-human participants' (Asenbaum, 2023a, p. 259).

With these fragments and facets, we may begin to see the conception of democracy that informs this project: one where democracy is not first and foremost about the elections, representatives, institutions, and laws, but rather about the constant becoming, the 'rebellious moments', the ruptures and shifts, the incessant negotiation, the dissensus and difference. Rather than maintaining a firm grip on established democratic principles, it encourages me to take a step back and to hold them more loosely. If democracy is more moment than form, more movement than stasis, then perhaps the notions of democracy as a way of life and living still hold promise for us? The Danish scholar Hal Koch argued that 'democracy does not let itself be contained by a formula. It is not a system or a doctrine. It is a way of life' (Koch, 1945/2023, p. 21) and John Dewey similarly argued that 'democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience' (Dewey, 2012, p. 96). At the very least, such an orientation would call for a different awareness and attitude; a different way of being in the world, where 'rather than attempting to gain mastery over assemblage, we should engage with assemblage through open curiosity, humility and respect' (Asenbaum, 2023a, p. 253). Maybe it also calls for a playful attitude that involves 'not taking norms as sacred and finding ambiguity and double edges a source of wisdom and delight' (Lugones, 1987, p. 17). These are some of the questions and proposals that I will return to later. First, I will turn towards the concept of participation.

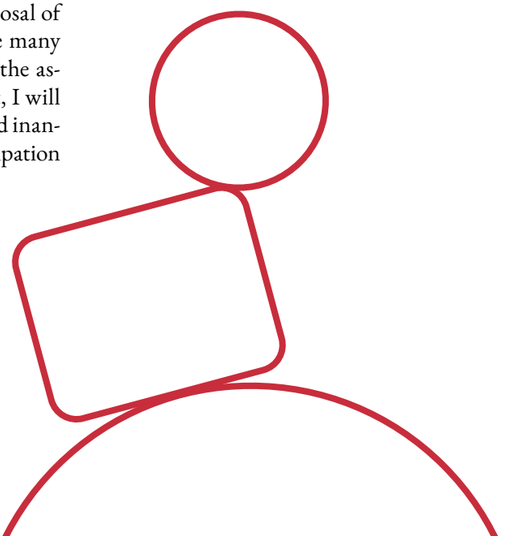


## 5.2 Participation

This project was born from the intuitive sense that play might inspire a wider participatory repertoire. This, I hypothesised, could potentially make it meaningful for more people to join democratic conversations, with and without words, and enable richer and more diverse democratic imaginaries. In the following, I will develop a conception of participation to better grasp how people have engaged in the junk playgrounds. As we have seen, Carole Pateman has long been a proponent of participatory democracy and participatory society. Pateman distinguished between two different forms of participation: 'partial' and 'full'. The former was described as a process of mutual engagement where the power to make decision lies with one party (Pateman, 1970, p. 70), and the latter is understood as those situations where everyone involved has equal power to determine the outcomes (Pateman, 1970, p. 71). More recently, Nico Carpentier suggested definitions along similar lines. He distinguished between a sociological and a political approach to participation. Where the former includes a broad range of human interactions (Carpentier, 2016, p. 71), the latter only refers to the 'equalisation of power relations between privileged and non-privileged actors in formal or informal decision-making processes' (Carpentier, 2016, p. 72). He then made a distinction like Pateman's when he suggested a continuum from 'minimum' to 'maximum' participation. With Pateman and Carpentier, we might say that participation always entails some shift of power, even in the most partial or minimalist versions, because otherwise, it is not participation at all. On top of that basic premise, we further see that participation exists on a continuum from partial to full, or from minimum to maximum. We can find a similar perspective in Sherry R. Arnstein's widely cited 'ladder of citizen participation' (Arnstein, 1969). Arnstein used the rungs of the ladder to assess the extent of citizens' power in making decisions (Arnstein, 1969, p. 217). She lamented the paradox in which participation is 'a revered idea that is vigorously applauded by virtually everyone' (Arnstein, 1969, p. 216), yet 'when the have-nots define participation as redistribution of power' this seeming consensus would dissipate. For Arnstein, as for Pateman and Carpentier, there is a 'critical difference between going through the empty ritual of participation and having the real power needed to affect the outcome of the process' (Arnstein, 1969, p. 216). In these traditions, there is generally a greater attention towards the outcome of participation, such as making decisions, having impact, and achieving (political) influence. I agree that if there is no possibility to shape the process and the outcome, if everything is controlled and determined in advance, it makes little sense to talk about participation. However, a narrow focus on power relations risks losing sight of other important dimensions of participation that may offer essential contributions to democratic life. I contend that participation is not merely about gaining power in formalised political processes, but also about creating openings and finding points of entry into democratic life beyond institutions. As Adrian Bua and Sonia Bussu noted, Arnstein's ladder has been 'criticised for giving quite a simplistic representation of participatory roles and a very linear and hierarchical measure of citizen empowerment' (Bua & Bussu, 2023,

p. 7). Rather than describing a normative and linear process from maximum to minimum participation, I understand participation as multidimensional phenomenon, in which many different forms of participation can take place in the same event, and any one participant can shift between different modes of participation. I am inspired by the typology introduced by Christoper Kelty et al (Kelty et al., 2014), who described seven dimensions of participation. They argued that participation cannot be reduced to 'a simple either/or parameter' (Kelty et al., 2014, p. 12); thus, we cannot conclude that either something is participation, or it is not, but we must rather understand participation as a 'configuration of dimensions' (ibid). In different contexts, different dimensions may matter more than others, and thus the configuration will vary from person to person, from situation to situation.

In a similar vein, Carsten Stage and Karen Ingerslev asked how we might 'grasp the complexity of socially engaged participation if it is not a question of voting, but embedded in a variety of complex social situations?' (Stage & Ingerslev, 2015, p. 121). They responded by suggesting the concept of participation as assemblage (Stage & Ingerslev, 2015), which they defined as 'a multidimensional process, where human and non-human elements assemble in ways that develop (more or less empowering) capacities' (Stage & Ingerslev, 2015, p. 123). For them, the power dimension is always present, but they argued that it is not only 'linked to a more equal distribution of the power to decide, but also to a personal or collective sense of efficacy, vitality and well-being' (Stage & Ingerslev, 2015, p. 126). I find Stage and Ingerslev's proposal of participation as assemblage to be useful, and it allows me to better grasp the many modes of participation in the junk playgrounds. However, in their analysis, the assemblage apparently only consists of humans and their intentions. In contrast, I will also stress the entanglement of humans and more-than-humans, of animate and inanimate matter, and in the following, I will develop an understanding of participation that brings these strands together.





## 5.2.1 Beyond Rational Discourse

So far, I have discussed participation quite broadly, and now I will focus on participation beyond the confines of rational discourse. I thus follow Noortje Marres' suggestion to develop 'a sense of public engagement as an embodied activity that takes place in particular locations and involves the use of specific objects, technologies and materials' (Marres, 2012, p. 7). Building on my relational ontology and epistemology, I contend that we cannot understand participation as merely interaction between rational, autonomous individuals who seek to maximise their influence, agency, and power. I thus also question the 'long intellectual history that suggest that material engagement presents an inherently problematic mode of involvement' (Marres, 2012, p. 13). In this tradition, immaterial things such as 'language, consciousness, subjectivity, agency, mind, soul' have been foregrounded and deemed superior to 'the baser desires of biological material or the inertia of physical stuff' (Coole & Frost, 2010, p. 2).

There seems to be a growing interest in other ways of being human and other ways of participating in democratic societies. Even within deliberative democracy, the discipline of rational discourse par excellence, the perspective has been broadened considerably in recent years. Toby Rollo has argued that the agency of citizens must be understood as consisting of both speech and deeds (Rollo, 2017, p. 2), and further, that it is 'no less a violation of democratic ideals to demand speech from citizens who wish to contribute in silence through their everyday deeds than it is to impose silence on those who wish to contribute through their speech' (Rollo, 2017, p. 17). A similar orientation is demonstrated by the growing curiosity towards alternative forms of speech and 'creative, playful, emotional, [and] sometimes carnivalesque forms of claim making' (Curato & Parry, 2018, p. 6). A concrete example can be found in Selen Ercan and Caroline Hendriks' study of Knitting Nannas Against Gas, 'a group of women who express themselves through a variety of verbal and non-verbal performances; they sit, knit, and display colours, objects and symbols in playful ways, and they share their craft and messages with audiences on the streets and online' (Ercan & Hendriks, 2022, p. 172). Finally, Hans Asenbaum and Amanda Machin argued that 'the radical democratic exploration of the nonhuman condition may find fruitful ground in theories of new materialism that disturb limited assumptions about human rationality and mastery over nature' (Asenbaum et al., 2023, p. 5). What might participation look

like if human agency could be decentred, and if it were to be considered as much a messy corporeal affair as a clean, rational act?

Following this thread, I ask, with Jane Bennett, 'What if we loosened the tie between participation and human language use, encountering the world as a swarm of vibrant materials entering and leaving agentic assemblages?' (Bennett, 2010, p. 107). In posing that question, I orient myself towards the heterogenous field of 'new materialism' (Coole & Frost, 2010). I do so because the materialist dimension connects well with my proposition of the 'junk playground as agora', where participation is expected to grow from encounters with materials. New materialism is also relevant here, because it insists that language is 'forced to take its place as one element of assemblages that are always both material and discursive' (MacLure, 2017, p. 52). It breaks down the 'distinction between organic and inorganic, or animate and inanimate, at the ontological level' (Coole & Frost, 2010, p. 9).

**Now that the stirrings of the earth have forced us to recognize that we have never been free of nonhuman constraints how are we to rethink those conceptions of history and agency?**

*(Ghosh, 2017, p. 119)*

One of the major implications of new materialism pertains exactly to the notion of agency, which also remains central for the study of democracy. Where the conscious, autonomous subject has traditionally been the democratic ideal, this is transformed radically in new materialism. Here, 'the attribution of agency to non-living material that co-exists and co-enacts with the living, human and non-human' (Stengel, 2019) is seen as a defining trait. With this idea of distributive agency, we must accept that the range of possible 'unintended or unanticipated effects is considerably broadened' (Coole & Frost, 2010, p. 10). The new materialist world is a far more contingent and open-ended world, where traditional chains of causality are loosened markedly, and where human intentions can perhaps best be understood as 'a pebble thrown into a pond' (Bennett, 2010, p. 32). This is not to say that our agency is eliminated altogether, but merely that it is much less direct than we used to think and that in any situation, agency is shared between the different human and more-than-human bodies present.

Taken together, I understand new materialism as one – of several – attempts to decentre the human, to 'make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other' (Haraway, 2016, p. 1). For Anna Tsing, crossing the human-'more-than-human' divide is a matter of nothing less than 'collaborative survival: staying alive—for every species requires liveable collaborations' (Tsing, 2015, p. 28).



## 5.2.2 Affective Attunement

The new materialist perspective has immediate consequences for how I can talk about participation. It means that when people step into the junk playgrounds, they enter dynamic complex relations with both humans and more-than-humans alike through *affective attunement*. I understand these relationships as assemblages (Deleuze et al., 1989) to describe the messy, lively entanglement of matter. In an assemblage, 'there is no "subject" and no "object", and no single element possesses agency' (Fox & Alldred, 2015, p. 401). For the junk playground, this mean that I cannot expect to find discrete chains of causality, and I must strive to understand even the actions of humans as encounters between bodies that cannot be 'governed by any central head' (Bennett, 2010, p. 24). I have already defined affect as the ability to affect and be affected, and I argued that affect theory is preoccupied with what happens in 'an encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting, body' (Deleuze et al., 1989, p. 17). Bodies are understood here broadly, consisting of both human and more-than-human, animate and inanimate bodies. Affect theory seeks to grasp flows, forces, and energies passing between bodies, asking 'what bodies do (...) and especially how bodies are impelled by forces other than language and reason' (Schaefer, 2019, p. 1). Margaret Wetherell made a similar point when she claimed that to 'attend to affect is to stress the limits of reason and the limits of the immediately knowable and communicable' (Wetherell, 2013, p. 351). The notion of affective *attunement* was first used by Daniel Stern to describe a behaviour that allowed for parents and children to share a similar affective state (Daniel N. Stern, 1985, p. 142). Attunement has later been used more broadly, not least in affect theory (Manning, 2013; Massumi, 2011). Through attunement, we can engage in 'relations that open us to affecting and being affected by another (human or non-human, material and conceptual, animate or inanimate) body' (Dos Santos, 2022, p. 257). Attunement, then, is how we relationally orient ourselves to 'spaces, encounters, events, histories, futures, and other selves through somatic interplay' (Willink & Shukri), and this is not only something that happens on a human scale (Manning, 2013, p. 11). That is, all bodies and materials, human and more-than-human, are involved in processes of affective attunement, even if it may be a little harder for us humans to discern how more-than-human entities do so.

## 5.2.3 Playful Democratic Participation

In the existing literature on play in relation to democracy, the references predominantly point towards the use of games, game mechanics, gamification structures etc. rather than the more open-ended and free-form dimensions of play I am interested in. In *Making Democracy Fun*, Josh Lerner (Lerner, 2014) asked if games can 'make democratic participation more appealing', to which he answered in the affirmative (Lerner, 2014, p. 189). Robert T. Craig (Craig, 2022, p. 3) suggested that play may 'aid the communicative accomplishment of democratic deliberation', while John Gastil argued that game mechanics or 'features' of games can help us achieve 'the desired ends of deliberation' (Gastil, 2022, p. 12). When Lerner stated that 'games can transform democracy' (Lerner, 2014, p. 207), it seems that such a transformation does not address the underlying structures of democracy. Rather, it aims to make participation *within* those structures more engaging. Many of these suggestions apparently assume that we already know what democracy is and that we only need to make it better, more accessible, and motivating. I contend that there is more to play than serving as a kind of democratic scaffolding.

One of only few exceptions to the above pattern is made by Hans Asenbaum and Frederic Hanusch, when they suggested the concept of 'democratic playgrounds'. They argued that play can 'unfold the agentic potential of participants' as 'play goes beyond discursive expression' (Asenbaum & Hanusch, 2021, p. 7). In these democratic playgrounds, they imagined three types of play: (1) 'free play' with various materials to engage in open-ended scenario building, (2) role play where scenarios are enacted, and (3) organised games. They argued that the democratic playground can challenge 'democratic solutionism' and 'output-orientation' by cultivating a kind of 'democratic serendipity' and more open-ended explorations of 'alternative, more democratic futures' (Asenbaum & Hanusch, 2021, p. 9). That is, in their conception of democratic playgrounds, play can not only support but also question and critique existing modes of democratic participation. They conceded that such democratic playgrounds do not yet exist, and thus call for further research and experimentation (Asenbaum & Hanusch, 2021, p. 9), something I hope to address with this thesis.



## 5.2.4 Playful Democratic Participation

I will end my discussion of participation by returning to my suggestion that there is something about *playful* participation that makes it different from other forms of participation. I find that one distinguishing characteristic is that in play, the primary catalyst for participation is the play experience itself. Whereas participation in other contexts is often expected to be driven by external goals, play is typically said to be an 'autotelic' activity, because 'play has only internal purposes, not ones that transcend it' (Fink, 2016, p. 20). In the following, I will suggest that play scholar Helle Marie Skovbjerg's 'mood perspective' is particularly useful here. The theory has been developed by Skovbjerg over the past decade (Gudiksen & Skovbjerg, 2020; Karoff; Skovbjerg, 2016, 2021; Skovbjerg & Sumartojo, 2023), as a commitment to play as an integral aspect of human life and to develop a richer language of play. She described play mood as 'the state of being where you are distinctly open to new meaning production and where the possibilities exist for that to happen' (Karoff, 2013, p. 8). She suggested that the *play order* – the way play is organised, the *play media* – the materials or tools for play, and the *play practices* – the doing of play, come together to shape the experience of play as certain play moods (Skovbjerg & Sumartojo, 2023). In her moods framework, four kinds of play practices point to four kinds of play moods. The play practice 'sliding' describes the play actions where one is turning inwards, repeating the same actions over and over; the playing body is calm, moving slowly , often likened to being in a state of 'flow', and these actions can lead to the play mood 'devotion', and a 'feeling of lightness, of predictability and of settling into a well-known space' (Skovbjerg & Sumartojo, 2023, p. 4). The second play practice is called 'shifting', and here, the players seek the thrill of bodily movement, like in the roller coaster, or running really fast down a steep slope, which can generate the play mood 'intensity'. The third play practice is 'displaying', where the players are 'taking the stage', showing themselves off to an audience, performing, sometimes like actors, dancers or circus artists, and this leads to the play mood 'tension'. The fourth and final play practice is 'exceeding', where players seek to break 'cultural codes for what is expected in the play situation, to make change, and to make sure that play takes unexpected routes', leading to the play mood 'euphoria'. With her mood perspective framework, we can grasp many ways of playing, as well as the shifts and transitions between them (Skovbjerg, 2021, p. 78). Finally, Skovbjerg demonstrated the same orientation towards plurality that underpins this project, when she insisted that we must explore all possible dimensions of play without premature judgement (Skovbjerg, 2021, p. 11).

With these fragments of a participatory framework, I will continue by suggesting that one important aspect of participation in the junk playgrounds is that it seems to boast a certain capacity for generating friction, which I will unfold in the following.

# 5.3 Friction

**Nothing is impossible to change**
**Distrust the more trivial, in appearance simple.**
**And examine, above all, what seems habitual.**
**We begged expressly:**
**don't accept what is of habit as a natural thing,**
**because in time of bloody disorder,**
**of organised confusion**
**of unmerciful humanity**
**nothing should seem natural,**
**nothing should seem impossible to change.**

*(Bertolt Brecht, cited in Heritage, 2018, p. 17)*

In the face of the 'tales of necessity', how do we come, as Bertolt Brecht urged, to 'examine what seems habitual', and demonstrate that nothing is impossible to change? One of Brecht's own suggestions was, of course, the *Verfremdungseffekt* or 'distancing effect', and my proposition here will follow a similar line of thinking. To create ruptures and to question things that have otherwise sedimented into established worldviews, I suggest that friction can help us. In this section, I will argue that by generating friction, it may become possible to illuminate the artificiality and constructed nature of necessity, potentially revealing the un-necessity of necessity.

When I talk about friction, I begin with *Merriam-Webster*'s definition as 'the rubbing of one body against another'[12] . Kathleen Stewart can help us see how we might sense friction as an affective phenomenon, as a 'surging, a rubbing, a connection of some

[12] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/friction



kind that has an impact () bodies literally affecting one another and generating intensities: human bodies, discursive bodies, bodies of thought, bodies of water' (Stewart, 2007, p. 128). Friction is what happens when, for instance, the people in the playgrounds rub their skin against a rough piece of wood or a cold iron pipe, or when they rub against other human bodies. It is an affective experience of both affecting and being affected by the encounter. However, it goes beyond the tangible, as it also includes friction with existing ideas and expectations, and with ways of knowing and being. Anything can rub up against anything, and friction can ensue from any encounter. Laurent Berlant has described 'the affective sense of the familiar friction of being in relation' as a kind of inconvenience that 'is evident in micro-incidents like a caught glance, a brush on the flesh, the tack of a sound or smell that hits you, an undertone, a semiconscious sense of bodies copresent on the sidewalk' (Berlant, 2022, p. 14). The notion of inconvenience also speaks to my relational ontology and my recurring discussion of interdependency, because Berlant argues that inconvenience 'disturbs the vision of yourself you carry around that supports your sovereign fantasy, your fantasy of being in control' (Berlant, 2022, p. 15). In other words, the friction that follows from encounters has the potential to question the very idea of the independent, rational subject. When participation creates inconvenience and friction, I believe that it echoes Isabelle Stenger's idea of presenting a proposal:

**[...] not to say what is, or what ought to be, but to provoke thought, a proposal that requires no other verification than the way in which it is able to "slow down" reasoning and create an opportunity to arouse a slightly different awareness of the problems and situations mobilizing us.**

*(Stengers, 2005, p. 994)*

Finally, in Anna Tsing's study of capitalist resource exploitation in Indonesia (Tsing, 2005, p. 11), she emphasised how friction can help us see the contingent nature of what is otherwise taken for granted. Friction can help us to 'emerge from under the shadow of inevitability' (Tsing, 2005, p. 269), she argued. With these perspectives on friction, I will suggest that design and play both offer rich possibilities for generating such friction.

## 5.3.1 Design Friction

Design has often been expected to *reduce* friction, and 'design has long been a practice of smoothing away the rough edges of the world', as the current call for DRS 2024 states . Indeed, as Eric Gordon and Gabriel Mugar argued, the 'promise of frictionless technological systems has been a driving force in the space of innovation, from the tech sector to the social sector' (Gordon & Mugar, 2020, p. 4). Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby have argued that 'designers feel an overpowering urge' to fix the challenges of our time 'as though they can be broken down, quantified, and solved' (Dunne & Raby, 2013, p. 2). Similarly, Mahmoud Keshavarz and Ramia Mazé critiqued participatory design for often being concerned primarily with 'the practicalities of its methods and tools' because design projects are typically grounded on defining a problem to be solved (Keshavarz & Mazé, 2013, p. 8). Design has thus traditionally had a strong orientation towards solving problems or what Gilles Paquet has called 'solutionism' to describe exactly those situations where 'issues are interpreted as puzzles to which there is a solution, rather than problems to which there may be a response' (Paquet, 2005, p. 315). Even when a lot of issues in the world are caused by design, Otto von Busch and Karl Palmås have argued that those problems are merely seen by designers as 'opportunities waiting to be fixed by a new design' (Busch & Palmås, 2023, p. 17).

While there still seems to be a strong discourse around design as a matter of solving problems, there is also a growing critique of this ethos. This has been an important development, questioning the conception of design as a matter of solving problems, yet there seems to be a sentiment among some design scholars that this is not enough. Under the banner of critical design, Dunne and Raby referred to their design work by stating that there are no 'solutions in these projects or even answers, just questions, thoughts, ideas, and possibilities, all expressed through the language of design' (Dunne & Raby, 2013, p. 66). Similarly, Mark Blythe et al proposed creating silly objects as a kind of 'anti-solutionist strategies', rejecting the notion that 'complex social, political and geographical phenomena like ageing populations are technological problems to be solved' (Blythe et al., 2016).

Where there are thus numerous examples of design generating friction, some design scholars argue that this friction does not go deep enough. Indeed, there are those who claim that design is at the centre of the multiple crises we are facing 'since it is in large part the agent responsible for the fabrication of the rational technocratic human whose ambitions have put life in on this planet in jeopardy' (Fry & Nocek, 2020, p. 10). Consequently, Tony Fry and Adam Nocek insisted that 'design must un-design its own designing, but in so doing, it cannot make this a design project. In short: design must become unrecognisable to itself' (Fry & Nocek, 2020, p. 10). While I still don't quite know what to make of this, or what it would mean to make 'design unrecognisable to itself', the phrase stays with me and sustains the notion of friction with prevalent conceptions of design. To sum up, there seems to be a growing appetite for friction in design research (if less so in design more generally), and it is this appetite I will draw to the foreground here.



## 5.3.2 Playful Friction

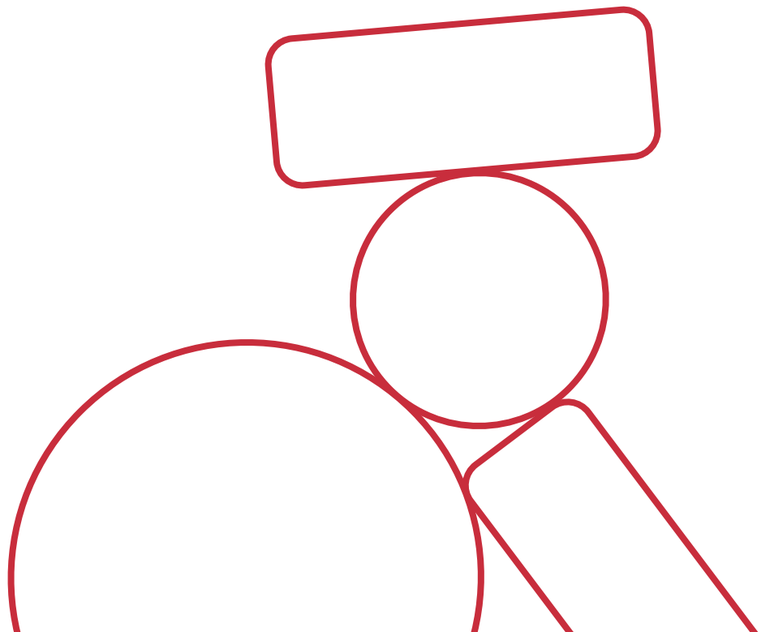
Like design, play is also routinely brought to support 'tales of necessity' in various ways. Numerous play scholars have lamented how many theories on play share 'an emphasis on the utility of play, which either acts as second fiddle to work or serves some "higher" biological purpose' (Spariosu, 1989, p. 167). In many cases, play is expected to generate certain outcomes, and is often understood as problematic 'unless it can be harnessed in some way to these outcomes' (Russell, 2020). Similarly, Leonie Burton et al argued that the 'dominant way of understanding the value of play places an instrumental value onto it, by suggesting that play is valuable for something other than play' (Burton et al., 2019, p. 29). One problem with this, they argued, is that many important traits of play are disregarded or suppressed, such as those that derive from 'the sheer nonsense of playing, or from play's spontaneous, opportunistic and irrational nature' (Burton et al., 2019, p. 29).

In contrast, I will contend that play also has a unique potential to generate friction with what-is. One of the defining qualities of play, as play scholar Brian Sutton-Smith has famously argued, is its inherently ambiguous nature (Sutton-Smith, 2001). Katie Salen Tekinbas and Eric Zimmerman once defined play as 'free movement within a more rigid structure' and they elaborated that play exists both because of such rigid structures and in opposition to them (Tekinbas & Zimmerman, 2003, p. 304). Play always requires a degree of free movement, but it can never be completely free because of the surrounding structures. Those structures can take any form, from physical structures like a building or a landscape, to structures like the institutions and procedures created to sustain democracy. Tekinbas and Zimmerman's further argued that play 'never merely resides in a system of rules, but through an ongoing process of friction, affects change in the system' (Tekinbas & Zimmerman, 2003, p. 558). Play is movement, and movement can create friction with the structures surrounding it. In his analysis of numerous influential theories of play, play design scholar Jess Rahbek concluded that all these theories share

> **[...] an understanding of play as a fragile meetingplace [sic] of tension between reason and the sensuous, structure and chaos, order and freedom, resolve and uncertainty, seriousness and frivolity, the known and the unknown, reality and fantasy, creation and destruction, boredom and anxiety and being the subject and the object.**
>
> *(Rahbek, 2022, p. 153)*

We can start to see how play thrives on the tension and friction sustained by different positions and ways of being in play rubbing up against each other. Drawing these threads together, I suggest that a playful attitude is particularly helpful for lingering with the friction,

because playfulness is 'an openness to being a fool, which is a combination of not worrying about competence, not being self-important, not taking norms as sacred and finding ambiguity and double edges a source of wisdom and delight' (Lugones, 1987, p. 17). This sense of ambiguity, paradox, and tension runs through my project, just like it runs through my body when I play, and it has the potential to generate numerous layers of friction.





# 5.4 Prefiguration

With this project, I explore how we might shift away from the tales of necessity towards contingency and possibility. I argue that friction can help us to challenge tales of necessity and interrupt typically taken-for-granted assumptions. If we follow the friction, we may eventually arrive at the possibility of seeing and sensing other possible worlds. In this section, I will suggest that by bringing together the notion of the pluriverse with the concept of prefiguration, we can get a better grasp of how multiple worlds can be enacted and experienced.

## 5.4.1 The Pluriverse

In arguing for relational ontologies, I have also suggested that we do not live in one world, but multiple worlds that are constantly being enacted through our practices. This marks a radical departure from what John Law called a 'one-world world' (Law, 2015), which he described as a 'single all-encompassing reality' where everything can and should be explained according to the same ontological and epistemological stance. This one-world world, argued Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser, is 'a world that has granted itself the right to assimilate all other worlds and, by presenting itself as exclusive, cancels possibilities for what lies beyond its limits' (Cadena & Blaser, 2018, p. 3). To enable those possibilities that lie beyond the limits of Western Modernity, Cadena and Blaser suggested exploring 'divergent worldings constantly coming about through negotiations, enmeshments, crossings, and interruptions' (Cadena & Blaser, 2018, p. 6). These different worldings are inspired by the Zapatista movement in Mexico, when it called for 'a world in which many worlds fit' ("Fourth Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle" in Cadena & Blaser, 2018, p. 1). As a conceptualisation of a world in which many worlds fit, the idea of a 'pluriverse' seems to be gaining traction (Cadena & Blaser, 2018; Escobar, 2018, 2020; Kothari et al., 2019; Reiter, 2018b). I believe that a shift from a one-world world to a pluriverse, from the universal to the pluriversal, would allow us to imagine and cultivate different democratic worlds.

## 5.4.2 Prefiguring Other Worlds

With the pluriverse, it becomes feasible and meaningful to explore what other worlds might look and feel like. I have already established that this project grew from the idea that when we play, we 'create models for living' (Henricks, 2015). I will further argue that when we play, we create *worlds for living in together*. To better grasp this dynamic, I draw on the concept of prefiguration (Monticelli & Escobar, 2022) which I understand as the enactment of a different world in the flesh, here and now. Prefiguration emerged from social movements (Keshtiban, 2023, p. 92), and Luke Yates suggested that 'to prefigure is to anticipate or enact some feature of an 'alternative world' in the present, as though it has already been achieved' (Yates, 2015, p. 4). It is similar to Joan Tronto's point that 'people are also always shaping the future by how they act' (Tronto, 2013, x) and it also seems related to how Johan Redström talked about programmes in constructive design research, as stating a worldview that we can explore 'as if they were true so as to learn something about what kind of design they would lead to' (Redström, 2017, loc. 2087). Resting on new materialism and affect theory, I contend that prefiguration is not merely something humans do, but a process that unfolds as in an assemblage between human and more-than-human bodies (Tsing, 2015, p. 22).

There has been much discussion in the literature about whether prefiguration is effective, and to what extent it can support strategic initiatives and long-term change (Yates, 2021). My use of prefiguration is more modest, and I maintain that it can be deemed successful without leading to tangible change; it is enough that we are provided with an opportunity to prefigure other worlds, to get a sense of what living in them would be like. I thus agree with David Graeber when he argued that it is 'one thing to say, "Another world is possible". It's another to experience it, however momentarily' (Graeber, 2002, p. 72). What he points to here is the affective dimension of prefiguration, the bodily sensation of being in a different world.

### Design and Prefiguration

This position resonates strongly with the notion of 'affective prefiguration' proposed by design scholar Ann Light to describe the situations where people get the 'chance to feel differently' by exploring possible 'relationships that are not ubiquitously available at present' (Light, 2023, p. 24). In general, prefiguration is often prevalent in design, if under different labels. From the beginning, participatory design has been about 'future-making—that is, multiple futures imagined and made locally' (Ehn et al., 2014, p. 4). By making futures, PD also becomes a matter of world-making. Susanne Bødker et al stressed that PD is less about developing specific future technologies, and more about helping people realise they have a choice (Bødker et al., 2022, p. 3). It is a matter of cultivating the empowerment that can emanate from understanding the present as a malleable material. In this way, design is also often a matter of loosening the tales of necessity and making other worlds possible through a kind of prefiguration.

In a recent attempt to 'reinvigorate the democratic impulse of collaborative design' (Binder et al., 2015, p. 2), Thomas Binder, Eva Brandt, Pelle Ehn and Joachim Halse have proposed the concept of 'democratic design experiments'. They suggested that democratic design experiments can engage a collective in 'opening up territory through "prototyping" and "trail blazing"' and that 'here-and-now experiments and engagements with possible worlds' (Binder et al., 2015, pp. 156–157). I understand this work as akin to prefiguration, as they suggested that democratic design experiments 'work by making issues experientially available to such an extent that "the possible" becomes tangible, formable, and within reach of engaged yet diverse citizens' (Binder et al., 2015, p. 163).

Carl DiSalvo took their work as his jumping-off point, when he strove to 'make worlds seem real enough such that we might tentatively know them, to consider and engage them as believable potentials' (Disalvo, 2022, p. 242). Design experiments can, he argued, 'help us collaboratively explore and proffer ideas about how we might live together differently' (DiSalvo, 2022, p. 161), which is a central dimension of prefiguration as I use it in this project.

### Playful Prefiguration

Returning yet again to the domain of play, I will argue that play is particularly well suited to prefigure other worlds. In this project, prefiguration is not primarily understood as a conscious act of carrying out plans and strategies, but about creating worlds through experiments and inquiries. It is an approach like that identified by Madeleine Guerlain and Catherine Campbell in their studies of community gardens in East London (Guerlain & Campbell, 2016). They argued that participation is not 'based on a common political intention or self-conscious motive to prefigure a new society but instead on the shared practice of gardening'. This practice has resulted in 'unintended benefits' and 'opening up new possibilities for being, seeing and doing' (Guerlain & Campbell, 2016, p. 220). In their study of children playing in the city, Penelope Carroll et al suggested that 'children's prefigurative play points the way toward the possibility of a more playful, child-friendly city that promotes happiness and well-being' (Carroll et al., 2019, p. 297). Here, prefiguration is not the result of planning or conscious choices, but rather it happens through the act of playing in the city. When we play, we are often said to become 'carried away into the sphere of play, where the player does not reign supreme over his game, but rather to a certain degree is '"pulled into it," loses himself in it, "vanishes" in his magical role' (Fink, 2016, p. 166). This further emphasises the point that prefiguration is not merely a matter of carrying out predefined plans, but equally, a question of being pulled into different worlds that emerge from the experience of playing. I contend that play, because of its inherently affective nature, allows us to experience alterity in the flesh, as a prefiguration of different worlds, of being, and becoming differently.

With these perspectives on participation, friction, and prefiguration, I suggest that the primary task for this project and the junk playground experiments is to create spaces and opportunities for exploring other worlds through prefiguration.

## VIGNETTE:

# Poetic and playful ways of seeing



**'If we had to write our academic pieces as if they were poems, as if every word counted, how would we write differently? How much would we write at all?'**

*(Law, 2004, p. 12)*

This intriguing and thought-provoking question has been echoing through my mind for years, but I have been incapable of responding. Then, one slow Saturday morning, I was sitting in our lounge chair, reading poems by the Danish poet Henrik Nordbrandt, shortly after hearing about his death. I had been flirting with the idea of poetic writing for a while, but to be honest, I did not have the courage or confidence to begin. As Sandra Faulkner noted, 'Many people are frightened by poetry because of ideas that poetry is difficult, mystical, esoteric, and ambiguous' (Faulkner, 2017, p. 209). I am one of those people. I am not particularly well read in the world of poetry, and I had little to no experience with a poetic language. There was no reason for me to believe I had any talent or skill. However, lured by a sensation that maybe, against what felt like all odds, I could write, if not poems, then poetically, I got up from my comfortable chair and tried. I remain reluctant, but I have come to realise that writing poetically makes me turn and taste the words differently. This short vignette is a small, playful experiment that shows a different glimpse of my research process, and it is included here to illustrate my ongoing search for more sensitive modes of inquiry.

**'Researchers (...) are obligated to be reflexive about () what we see and how we see it'**

*(Charmaz, 2014, p. 27)*

While my hands were busy
Making something my words refuse to describe
I asked myself
What does a bottle cap see?
Why do I pretend
That an old tin can sees anything?
Anything at all
And why do I seem to believe
That all eyes must be round?

Seeing
Constantly searching,
Fervently chasing,
Always coming up short
I struggle to find the right words
Words that can capture,
Convey to you
What it means to see

How do I see
Children playing in an old gravel pit?
Running up the slope
Tumbling down
How do I see
Adults cautiously, reluctantly
Letting go
How do I see them trusting a contract
That was never written
How do I see what is not there
The gaps, the blind spots
What goes on behind that tree?
Or in that head?
How do I see
Fear, frustration, anger
Joy, hope, dreams
A connection
An idea
And what happens when I see
Data

Playing with ways of seeing

As moving images
Or words so utterly deprived of life
On a small screen in a room poorly lit?

Please,
Please tell me
How do I see me
Myself
My own body
Outside the mirror
How do I see
My place in the world
My role, my purpose, my convictions
How do I see
Where I begin and where I end
How do I see
What other people see
When they see
Me?

Sometimes
Especially on dark Mondays during winter,
I am afraid
I have seen too little
There is so much, too much
My gaze never caught
I dream of additional eyes
Like a dragonfly
But then there are days
Where I close my eyes in apathy
I see too much
Too much for me to grasp
And certainly far, far too much
To ever write even a single word about

# 6. Doing



Carving out a methodology

In this chapter, I carve out my methodology. Like carving a wooden spoon, it is slow work, and if you rush it, someone might get hurt. I am not a proficient maker of spoons, and I often cut my fingers, because I don't know the spoon knife well enough and something in the encounter between hand, wood and knife take me by surprise.

I will spend more time dwelling here than I had initially expected, because my aspirations are dependent on what methodology might make possible. As Eva Brandt et al argued, 'the issue of method is crucial if design research shall address what is also essential in design: an exploration of the possible' (Brandt et al., 2011, p. 78). And 'an exploration of the possible' is exactly what I am pursuing in the junk playgrounds. In this light, developing a custom methodology that suits the project feels less like dutifully following a recipe, and more like packing for an exciting adventure. What do you bring with you when all you know is that you want to know something you don't know yet, can't know yet?

I will begin by reiterating an important point from my discussion of ontology, where I argued that we constantly enact realities through our lived practices. As John Law and John Urry argued, research methods 'helps to make realities' and different research methods or traditions lead to 'the enactment of different realities' (Law & Urry, 2004, p. 10). I thus also follow those researchers who argue that research is inherently performative, where 'research creates realities, since there is not a detached, but an entangled relation between researcher, researcher phenomenon and the world' (Østern et al., 2021, p. 7). This is the underlying assumption behind the thesis, that I am not merely researching something at a distance, but I am enacting worlds through my entangled engagement.



# 6.1 Practice-Based *Research*

I knew that my research would be practice-based, because it grew out of my own practice of gathering people together. With Craig Vear, Linda Candy, and Ernest Edmonds, we can understand practice-based research as 'a principled approach to research by means of practice in which the research and the practice operate as interdependent and complementary processes leading to new and original forms of knowledge' (Vear et al., 2021, p. 2). In the following sections, I follow Jennifer Mason, when she encouraged a 'pluralist disposition in relation to method' along with a greater 'willingness to cross conventional boundaries and to bring together alternative ways of generating knowledge' (Mason, 2011, p. 83). In my practice-based approach, I am inspired by *artistic research, autoethnography,* and *constructive design research*. I do not see one as more important than the other; instead, they push, challenge, enrich, and crosspollinate each other, allowing me to see and sense things that might have been obscured by a singular methodological gaze.

## 6.1.1 Artistic Research

Where research methodology and methods have sometimes been considered 'a more or less successful set of procedures for reporting on a given reality' (Law, 2004, p. 143), that assumption has been thoroughly challenged in recent years. Noortje Marres, Michael Guggenheim and Alex Wilkie argued that in social research there is 'an appetite for adventure, for moving beyond the customary distinctions between knowledge and art, and for combining the "doing", "researching" and "making" of social life in potentially new ways' (Marres et al., 2018, p. 17). They discussed a kind of social research that draws on creative practices 'with the aim of rendering social phenomena interpretable and knowable' (Marres et al., 2018, p. 18). The main argument, as I see it, for turning to artistic research comes predominantly from a desire to do better, more vibrant research that is more attuned to the worlds we are studying and enacting. Nigel Thrift thus stated that 'the laboratory, and all the models that

have resulted from it, provide much too narrow a metaphor to be able to capture the richness of the worlds' (Thrift, 2008, p. 12). Thrift wanted instead to 'pull the energy of the performing arts into the social sciences in order to make it easier to "crawl out to the edge of the cliff of the conceptual" (...). To see what will happen. To let the event sing you' (ibid). Such poetic language also calls for a kind of poetic sensitivity that reaches beyond what we can cognitively grasp. Articulating the unreflective, getting a grasp of that which may have neither been considered nor said, through creative practices and processes of making and engaging with materials, is a central aspiration of this project. Julian Klein has stressed that the knowledge produced by artistic research is 'sensual and physical' and as such, artistic research strives for a 'felt knowledge" (Klein, 2010, p. 6). For Connie Svabo, an integral premise of performative research, and for her perhaps the main attraction, is the possibility of research 'where the outcome is not defined in advance' (Svabo, 2016, p. 3). Svabo celebrated the opportunity to subvert the typical goal-orientation, as she enjoyed 'doing something without purpose, playing around, and just making something' (Svabo, 2016, p. 10). This attention to the process, the embrace of unpredictability and emergence, and the resistance towards predefined goals and outcomes is shared by most artistic research and resonates with my project and me as a researcher. It entails a curiosity and a willingness to let go of control, to follow what emerges and shows itself or touches the researcher. There is a strong dedication and a special ethos at the heart of these approaches, shifting towards the experimental, the imaginative, the sensorial, and the playful. This is underscored by Nancy Gerber, who argued that 'improvisational and strategic playfulness might shake up and shake out additional insights hiding in the liminal spaces in big and diverse data shadows' (Gerber, 2022, p. 2). Charlotte Wegener and Ninna Meier suggested that this not only has implications for the research, but also for the researcher as a 'creative research practice springs from a curious, sensitive and playful life as a human being' (Wegener et al., 2018, p. 13). Artistic and performative research thus also contributes to this project by strengthening my mandate and confidence to be a *playful* researcher. It offers a way of staying close to the playful experiences of the junk playgrounds, and a strategy for continually opening the research materials for new and potentially surprising insights.

Finally, Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld et al argued that artistic research 'forms unruly knowledge(s)' (Dirckinck-Holmfeld et al., 2020, p. 6) that allows and inspires us to question 'the very limits that govern our most sure ways of knowing, but also governs who counts as a subject at all—and proposes new ways of being in the world in an entanglement with materials' (Dirckinck-Holmfeld et al., 2020, p. 7). As such, artistic research has a capacity for generating friction and for challenging assumptions, including those of the researcher. This may also indicate that there is a potent yet underexplored connection between artistic research and the intentions of radical democracy to question deeply rooted democratic questions.



# 6.2 Autoethnography

As I have all but revealed, I draw heavily on autoethnographic traditions when I speak from my own experience. Here, I will discuss the implications of the autoethnographic approach for my project, and I will begin with a story from Melbourne.

## 6.2.1 Vignette: Melbourne Stories

The sun was shining in Melbourne. It finally felt like spring on this peculiar day, which had been deemed a public holiday due to the death of an old queen in a kingdom far, far away. I had all but forgotten that the colonial empire was still in effect, somehow, but then our Greek Uber driver told us he supposedly couldn't host a barbecue in his back yard, also because of that same queen. It all seemed quite odd to me. A colleague and I were on our way to meet with Stacy Holman Jones. We knew her from a series of unusually playful online workshops called Wandering Feast (Grocott et al., 2023), and I was eager to learn more about her work on autoethnography and performative writing. Early on, she succinctly stated that 'I'm a storyteller, that's my job'. In this short and unassuming sentence, she seemed to capture her whole oeuvre as an academic, a performer, a writer.

*A storyteller*

While we were talking, she encouraged us to find exemplary books, academic or non-academic, as inspiration to guide the writing process. 'What is the experience you are aiming for with the thesis?'

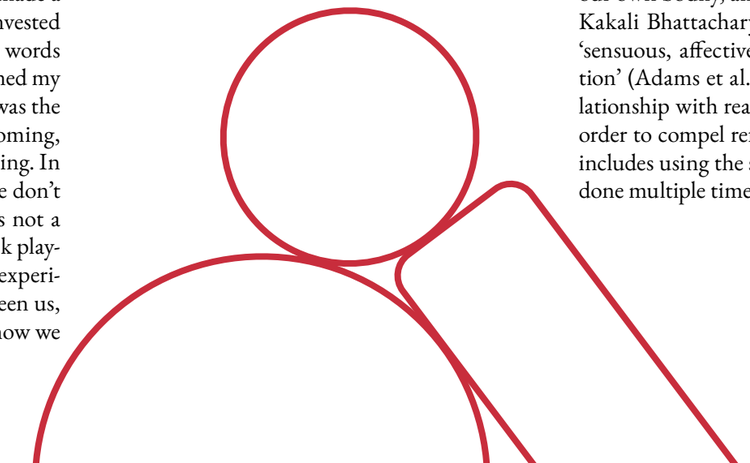
*The experience*

How invigorating. She did not ask about the knowledge we hoped to convey, the theory, the methodology, or any of that, but the experience we wanted our readers to have.

That's fortunate, I thought, because my writing and my thinking is inspired and shaped by all sorts of cultural expressions. A rather heterogenous soup of academic writing, sure, but also fiction, novels, poetry, song lyrics, comic books, children's books, film manuscripts, computer games, art installations and so on. I could try to pretend this is not the case, that I am somehow able to separate academic influences from everything else that shapes my haphazard trajectory through life. Or I can embrace the complexity of living and doing research in a world of entanglement. Stacy unequivocally recommended the latter, and I heeded her advice.

## 6.2.2 Assembling a We

When we met with Stacy in Melbourne, I had already been grappling with autoethnography for a while. I was hesitant to label my work as autoethnographic, and I believe I have sometimes said that I would not go 'full autoethnography', whatever that meant. I found it challenging and intimidating to talk and write *about* myself, using my own person, my own body, my own values, and worldviews. Unfolding my own experiences in this way initially simply felt too 'self-absorbed in a very uncomfortable way—academic navel gazing' (T. Smith et al., 2017, p. 46). I was thrilled to realise that I had mostly misunderstood the nature of autoethnography, and as Tami Spry suggested, 'perhaps autoethnography is not about the self at all; perhaps it is instead about a wilful embodiment of "we"' (Spry, 2016, p. 15). Stacy Holman Jones made a similar argument, when she argued that 'autoethnography is interested and invested in assembling a we' (Holman Jones in Denzin, 2017, p. 132). Those three little words hypnotised me immediately – *assembling a we*. It was, I realised, what had defined my practice of 'gathering together'. Reflecting on this experience now, I believe it was the positive affirmation, the realisation that was both sudden and a long time coming, that there might be a way to bring that practice with me into my academic writing. In my practice of creating spaces where we can collectively explore that which we don't know yet, care and trust are essential concepts. The trust I aspire to build is not a trust in me as an individual, but a trust that emerges between us. With the junk playgrounds I came to realise that if I did not care deeply – about play, about the experiment, about the people—and if I did not trust that which would unfold between us, it was unlikely anyone else would. It is a kind of trust that 'is concerned with how we





feel as we move forward, and how we feel about what might be going to happen next' (Pink, 2021a, p. 196). It is only when this kind of trust takes root that we can enter uncharted territory together. If a text, like this text, asks you to step into the swamp, to engage with new ideas, to embrace inconvenience and to risk becoming different, it must first establish a modicum of trust. The only way I know how to do this is by trying to be present, generous, and vulnerable, and autoethnography helps me do this, even though it remains daunting and difficult.

## 6.2.3 Evocative Writing

I weave my autoethnographic accounts together with other accounts, when I try to respond to my first research question, What happens when we understand play as a mode of democratic participation? I believe that autoethnography can enrich and deepen the experience of reading about the design experiments, making the situations more vibrant as I write on the affective energies in my own body. Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones and Carolyn Ellis made a similar argument when they suggested that autoethnography 'creates space for sensemaking that defies logic or sits outside language and sometimes conscious awareness' (Adams et al., 2021, p. 5). This, the authors argued, draws autoethnography and affect theory close together, because our own bodily, affective experiences offer a fruitful resource for inquiries. Similarly, Kakali Bhattacharya argued that the task of autoethnographic inquiry is to create 'sensuous, affective, spiritual, and cognitive shifts through evocation and provocation' (Adams et al., 2021, p. 120). Autoethnography seeks to establish an active relationship with readers, 'one marked by mutual responsibility and participation—in order to compel reflection, action, and reaction' (Adams et al., 2021, p. 7). This also includes using the second person (Adams et al., 2021, p. 8), something I have already done multiple times – speaking directly to you.

### 6.2.4 Positionality and Transformation

Finally, autoethnography also helps me draw out my own positionality as a researcher. Adams et al argued that we, as researchers, have 'a relational and ethical obligation to acknowledge our positions, views, and commitments in scholarship' (Adams et al., 2021, p. 6) and that we should reveal who we are and what we are interested in. I find that this also mirrors established codes of conduct, as found in the 'The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity', which states that researchers must 'design, carry out, analyse, and document research in a careful, transparent, and well-considered manner' (ALLEA, 2023, p. 7). I believe autoethnography is indeed deeply committed to being 'careful, transparent, and well-considered'.

In this regard, I have found autoethnography helpful in responding to my second research question, How can we study playful democratic participation? and to my ongoing inquiries into the kind of researcher I must become to adequately study the matters I am concerned with. Autoethnographers seek to offer insight into the processes of doing research, not least 'how we grapple with experiences that generate discomfort or that do not feel right or make sense' (Adams et al., 2021, p. 4). When, for instance, I repeatedly share my doubts and insecurities around certain issues in the research, including autoethnography itself, I am not making excuses or attempting to abstain from my responsibility as a researcher. I am trying to trace my own transformation, while making a modest attempt to prefigure academic worlds where such vulnerabilities are less intimidating.

For me, all these threads come together in Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis' suggestion that autoethnography is a 'way of life' and a 'genre of doubt, a vehicle for exercising, embodying, portraying, and enacting uncertainty' (Bochner & Ellis, 2022, p. 15). Further, they argued, autoethnography is a discourse of 'ambiguity, contradiction, contingency, and chance' (Bochner & Ellis, 2022, p. 15). I have come to believe that autoethnography as a way of life is what holds this whole project together. It is how I was able to reconfigure my existing practice as a *research* practice, still mainly concerned with the gathering together, the assembling of a *we*.



## 6.3 Constructive Design *Research*

As the last leg of my tripartite methodology, I move into practice-based design research (Vaughan, 2017) and research-through-design (Frayling, 1993) to follow the strand that has been labelled 'constructive design research' (Koskinen et al., 2011). Ilpo Koskinen et al defined it as 'design research in which construction () takes center place and becomes the key means in constructing knowledge' (Koskinen et al., 2011, p. 5). In my project, construction refers mainly to the junk playgrounds and the construction that takes place *in* the playgrounds. Koskinen et al made it clear that, in constructive design research, the aim is not merely to 'analyze the material world', nor to frame design as an 'exercise in rational problem solving' (Koskinen et al., 2011, p. 42) which is still so often expected from design. Instead, they sought to 'imagine new realities and build them to see whether they work' (Ibid), which would be a matter of discerning their imaginative capacity. This suggests that I will explore how the junk playgrounds might build new realities and go on to assess their 'imaginative capacity'. Finally, they argued that constructive design often works in ways that are 'playful and sometimes disturbing' in order to 'study things outside normal experience' (Koskinen et al., 2011, p. 168). Eva Brandt and Thomas Binder later suggested that the essential contribution of constructive design research is in 'exploring the possible through making' (Vaughan, 2017, p. 101), which is exactly my goal. To reiterate, the junk playgrounds are constructed to explore the possible through making, by inviting participants to playfully engage with discarded materials, guided by a shared matter of common concern.

### 6.3.1 Programme and Experiments

Koskinen et al also suggested that it would be fruitful to conduct constructive design research under the auspices of a 'research programme' (Koskinen et al., 2011, p. 169). This idea has since been picked up by numerous design researchers (Bang & Eriksen, 2019; Brandt et al., 2011; Löwgren et al., 2013; Redström, 2017), including a series of PhD projects (Dindler, 2010; Eriksen, 2012; Feder, 2020; Jönsson, 2014).

However, when it comes to defining what a design research programme is, much ambiguity remains. Johan Redström offered some guidance when he suggested that a design research programme 'depends on a certain worldview—a certain set of theories, beliefs, articulations, assumptions, and so on—to do its thing' (Redström, 2017, loc. 1923). When a research programme states a worldview, it invites us to explore those worldviews 'as if they were true so as to learn something about what kind of design they would lead to' (Redström, 2017, loc. 2087). I thus started sketching the contours of a research programme when I asked the question, What happens *when* we understand play as a mode of democratic participation? That would suggest a worldview in which play *is* a mode of democratic participation, and we would have to understand what kind of (democratic) design that might lead to. Finally, Redström argued that a research programme should seek to strike a balance between 'a suggestive openness and inherent limitations' (Redström, 2017, loc. 2113). In other words, it should be open enough that many lines of inquiry, directions, and outcomes, also unexpected or even unwanted ones, are possible, yet it should offer certain limitations to avoid *anything* being possible, and to serve as creative constraints for the experiments. Similarly, Thomas Binder, Eva Brandt, Pelle Ehn and Joachim Halse argued that inviting people to participate in their 'democratic design experiments' is an

> **active and delicate matter of proposing alternative possibilities just clearly enough to intrigue and prompt curiosity, and, on the other hand, to leave enough ambiguity and open-endedness to prompt the participants' desire to influence the particular articulation of the issue.**
>
> *(Binder et al., 2015, p. 162)*

I knew that I wanted my research programme to invite the same kind of playful, embodied encounters I had observed at CounterPlay, while making a more explicit connection to democratic participation. Guided by these basic considerations, I settled on the research programme *the junk playground as agora*. This programme is a simple yet ambiguous combination of two disparate concepts: the junk playground and the Greek concept of the *agora*.



The Danish term skrammellegeplads, which I have translated as junk playground, was first used by landscape architect C. Th. Sørensen in 1931 (C. Th. Sørensen, 1931/1978), when he suggested that children in cities should have access to such playgrounds:

> **Perhaps we could try to design a kind of 'junk playgrounds' in appropriate and quite big areas, where children would be allowed to use old cars, boxes, twigs, and similar things. It is possible that some supervision would be needed, to prevent too bad cases of truculence and to reduce the risk of children getting hurt. Such supervision may not be strictly necessary.**
>
> *(C. Th. Sørensen, 1931/1978, p. 54) (my translation from Danish)*

Sørensen was concerned that children living in cities did not have access to nature and open spaces to play and 'romp about' (C. Th. Sørensen, 1931/1978, p. 49) to foster 'imagination and initiative', and lamented the lack of the 'outer requirements for development and spiritual growth' (C. Th. Sørensen, 1931/1978, p. 51). For this programme, I have deliberately chosen to use the original name *skrammellegepladser* instead of the newer and now more common Danish name *byggelegepladser* ('construction playgrounds') (Schultze Henriksen, 2006, p. 2) or the related English name, 'adventure playgrounds' (Shier, 1984). It is not entirely clear to me exactly when or why the name changed, but I have a suspicion that *byggelegepladser* was simply deemed to be more agreeable by adults. However, the original name is more appealing to me, because it is quirky and intriguing, and I have found the name itself to have an evocative quality; many people seem to become curious when they hear the word. This seems to be particularly true in Danish, where the word *skrammellegeplads* is rather uncommon, but evokes many different stories and images. There is a built-in friction in the word that challenges social conventions, and this friction may contribute to the estrangement I am aiming for, potentially allowing participants a greater freedom where they are less restricted by existing expectations and experiences.

With the name *skrammellegeplads*, I also wanted to speak to the urgent issues of sustainability, recycling, and reuse. It would have been problematic to only use new materials for the playgrounds, and it would also be a missed opportunity to engage with discarded materials in new and creative ways, potentially reconfiguring their meaning and the way we see them.

As for the other dimension of the programme, I wanted a concept that could call forth images of democratic participation. I considered the public square, the town hall, the library, the forum, and similar spaces. Eventually, I arrived at the Greek notion of the *agora*, drawn to its literal meaning of 'a gathering place'[11] . I thus understand the agora as a 'place where people could come together (...) the political space, proper' (Arendt, 1963/1990, p. 31). My research programme ties in with the longstanding traditions of public deliberation in the *agora*, but then creates friction with these traditions. It does so by turning towards playful, affective experiments, focusing less on the traditional talk-centric notions of democratic participation and more on bodily participation through materialist assemblages.

## Experiments

Where my design research programme really comes alive is through the design experiments that constitute my field work. As Eva Brandt, Johan Redström, Mette Agger Eriksen and Thomas Binder have argued, 'using the metaphor of a design space opened up by the program, we might say that we use the experiment to explore this space, positioning us somewhere to be able to say "this is what the design space looks like over here"'. (Brandt et al., 2011, p. 35). There is a connection here to the notion of prefiguration and affect theory, because the 'affective intensity of experiments are produced by their ability to engender spectacles () and experiences of immersion and 'showing-not-telling' that in themselves hold a potential of experiencing world-making and futurity' (Timm Knudsen et al., 2022, p. 3).


CounterPlay was also one big experiment!

*Credits: Zuraida Buter*

[11] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/agora



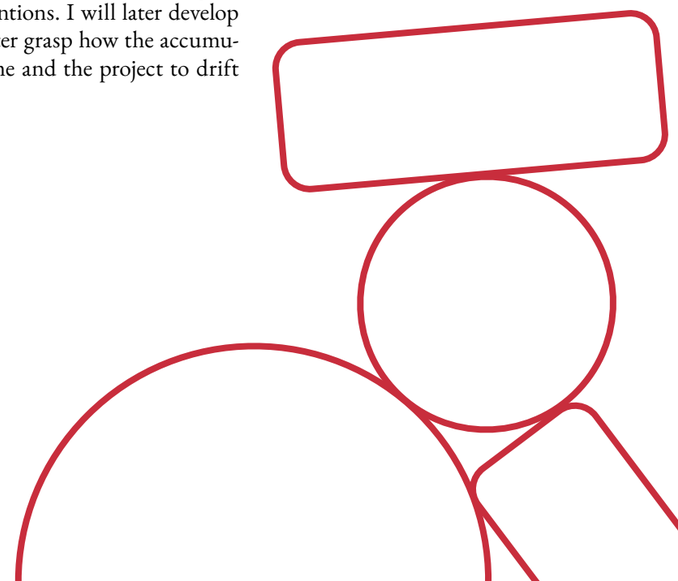
## Materials and Prototyping

Design experiments typically include various materials, often to spark some form of prototyping. The same has been true for this project, where *discarded* materials have been a defining component of the junk playgrounds. With this focus on materials, I draw on the rich tradition of participatory design, and the use of a wide range of 'techniques and tools for engaging people in telling, making and enacting' (Brandt et al., 2012, p. 147). Participatory design has also made important contributions to the use of representations in design work, where 'cardboard mock ups, interactive scenarios, design games and paper prototypes, provided a whole new genre of participatory design techniques that were powerful mediators for envisioning new practices' (Binder et al., 2015, p. 158). Following this tradition, Awais Hameed Khan et al argued that there is a need to consider the 'politics of materiality' (Khan et al., 2020) in PD to create 'a more level playing field for participants, through materiality that engenders a more participatory mindset and results in better outcomes for participation in design processes' (Khan et al., 2020, p. 942). While I have been inspired and encouraged by these approaches, I also see in my project a difference, both in terms of the kinds of materials used, as well as how these materials are often framed. In many cases, such as the work by Khan et al mentioned above, materials are new materials, nice, neat, and orderly. In those cases, materials are more like props (Rajapakse et al., 2019) than, for instance, the vibrant matter described by Jane Bennett (Bennett, 2010). With this project, I thus hope to contribute to a greater appreciation of messy, unruly materials that create friction and offer resistance.

The concept of prototyping has been central to my project in two ways. First, there is the junk playground itself, which is my 'design laboratory' (Binder in Smith et al., 2016, pt. 6155), a prototype that allows me to probe what playful participation might look and feel like. This leads to the second layer of prototyping as a 'vehicle for inquiry' (Wensveen & Matthews, 2014, p. 2). When people in the playgrounds are encouraged to explore the materials, they start improvising, following their imagination, guided by their hands and bodies, towards building surprising contraptions that they use to tell stories about matters of common concern. While the prototypes sometimes become speculative 'conversation pieces' (Malpass, 2016, p. 479), it may very well be the social interaction and new social configurations that are most important. In most cases, it becomes an energetic exploration of new ways of engaging with others, inquiries into 'models for living' (Henricks, 2015, sec. 62).

## 6.3.2 Drifting

Whereas my research programme, 'the junk playground as agora', has remained stable since its formation, the whole project has transformed considerably over the course of three years. To understand and trace these changes, I use the concept of 'drifting' (Krogh & Koskinen, 2020b). Peter Gall Krogh and Ilpo Koskinen described drifting as 'those actions that take design away from its original brief or question and lead to a result that was not anticipated in the beginning' (Krogh & Koskinen, 2020b, p. 6). I assume that most research projects drift to some extent, yet some research designs allow for, or seek out, more drift than do others. Krogh and Koskinen talk about 'drifting by intention', where drifting happens 'not as driftwood, but as in car rally; intentionally and controlled' (Krogh & Koskinen, 2020b, p. 44). If I am to adopt their metaphor, I do not consider my project to be driftwood, but it is also no controlled rally car. It sits somewhere in between, where drifting is not completely random but also not fully controlled. This resembles how scholars of new materialism renegotiate conceptions of human agency and intentions. I will later develop the concept of 'drifting by friction' to better grasp how the accumulation of frictions that have caused both me and the project to drift considerably from where we started.





## 6.3.3 Co-Designing Experiments

Just as I knew from the beginning that my work would be practice-based, I was adamant that it would play out through processes of collaboration, drawing on the strong traditions of participatory design (L. B. Andersen et al., 2015; Björgvinsson et al., 2012; Halskov & Hansen, 2015) and co-design (Brandt & Eriksen, 2010). These aspirations immediately raised numerous pressing questions, especially related to beginnings. There is limited research on the initiation of participatory research and only few studies 'deal with building the participative relationship itself' (Arieli et al., 2009, p. 264). At the same time, I felt certain that the beginning would be crucial, because as Patricia Gayá Wicks and Peter Reason argued

> **the success or failure of an inquiry venture depends on the conditions that made it possible, which lie much further back in the originating discussions: in the way the topic was broached, and on the early engagement with participants and co-researchers**
>
> *(Wicks & Reason, 2009, p. 244)*

In the light of my collaborative ethos and democratic aspirations, it was evident that I had to find someone to codesign the junk playgrounds *with*, but where would they come from? My mind often wandered towards the word 'recruitment', as it seemed almost too obvious that I would have to recruit people. While this word does mean to 'seek to enrol'[13], it seemed to betray the gentle sensitivity I hoped would

[13] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/recruiting

underpin and guide the entire project. Instead, I intuitively turned to the concept of 'attunement', after sensing and tasting both words. Recruitment sounds hard and technical, like a unidirectional process controlled by me, and I just couldn't shake the associations to the military – a recruit, recruiting an army. Attunement, on the other hand, is quite different, feels less controlled, and deterministic, softer, evoking a sense of mutual ownership and empowerment. When Megan Watkins wrote about affective attunement taking place between teacher and students, she suggested that in some cases, 'the excitement and interest that are generated prove contagious with other students keen to be involved as part of the experience' (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p. 283). That was exactly what I was dreaming about: making a proposition or *invitation*, that people would be drawn to and intrigued by.

### Invitations

I believe that my intention to invite participation resonates with that of design researchers Kristina Ståhl and Åsa Lindström. They argued that it is 'generative to craft invitations that spark, and are built on, curiosity, rather than expressing a problem. We call this an area of curiosity' (R. C. Smith et al., 2016, loc. 4376). I never wanted to 'express a problem' in advance, but to invite people to explore 'areas of curiosity' in the junk playground. Further, I agree with Lesley Treleaven's argument that 'the preparatory phase of the inquiry needs to be congruent with collaborative processes and grounded in responses to exploratory dialogue' (Treleaven, 1994, p. 5). In other words, as I was seeking to involve people in playful, open-ended experiments, my approach to attunement and crafting invitations should be imbued with a similar spirit. In my practice of gathering people together to talk, think, and play, I



have been inspired by the late Bernie DeKoven, a play pioneer who joined the New Games Movement (see Fluegelman, 1976) back in the 70s, and dedicated himself to what he called 'the well-played game' (Koven, 2013). When Bernie talked about play, he always started with the invitation:

> **You can't make people playful () But you can invite playfulness. The key word here is "inviting." The implication is that everything you do when you want people to respond playfully is an invitation. Never a requirement. Never even a request. You make that invitation clear by your own playfulness. Which means that you have what I have come to call a "loose hold" on the rules. You are not only willing to change the rules if the game doesn't seem fun enough, you are ready to give people the power to change the game as they see fit. You are even ready to let them quit.**
> **And, of course, to come back into the game when-actually-ever they feel so inclined.**
> **It's an invitation.**[14]

[14] https://www.aplayfulpath.com/inviting-playfulness/

I returned to my previous practice, where my language, my writing, and my way of inviting were always rather informal and playful. When I started working on what would become CounterPlay, I asked, 'Do you want to play along?'[15] and I felt that a similar approach would be viable here. Before the PhD project had begun, I published the blog post 'Welcome to my PhD Project', and ended it with the first invitation: 'If there is any part of this you find interesting, if you see opportunities in playing along or if you think I'm gravely mistaken, please get in touch[16]'. Then, in February 2021, shortly after the official beginning of the project, I received a message from a friend of mine. I hadn't talked to him for a long time, and his interest in the project surprised me:

> Hi Mathias! I enjoy your PhD blog posts and the theoretical, academic thoughts about free play 👊 I introduced your PhD project to a few like-minded people here in my town, and we agreed that it would be cool if you at some point wanted to realise some of your thoughts. In that case, I think our town is playful enough to play along 🛠️
>
> *24 Feb 2021*

> Hi! Your message sparked some good thoughts – thank you! Inspired by your suggestion, I decided to have a more open approach towards choosing where and with whom my experiments should take place. Rather than, for instance, picking a place first, I want to explore where there is interest and a good energy. That might be with you
>
> *25 Feb 2021*

[15] http://www.mathiaspoulsen.com/counterplay/
[16] http://www.mathiaspoulsen.com/welcome-to-my-phd-project/



Encouraged and energised by this exchange, I returned to the blog, where I wrote another post, asking, 'Do you want to play along – in a research project about democratic participation?[17]. ' For this post, I had recorded a short video of myself building a small den to mirror something that might happen (and did happen) in the junk playgrounds[18] . The video was intended to make the invitation more concrete and tangible, showing how an experiment could play out, which materials might be used and so on.

I shared the post with the video on social media and held my breath. For a while, I was left in a state of uncertainty, echoing the argument made by Sarah Pink, Shanti Sumartojo, and Yoko Akamal that 'in open dialogue one holds one's self available to be surprised, to be challenged, and to be changed' (Pink et al., 2018, p. 54). Then something happened: a few people responded, and after a few weeks, I had received comments and emails from 30+ people. I responded to everyone, and when someone showed more than a passing interest in the project, I suggested meeting up, either online or onsite, for an introductory conversation. While I had many enormously fruitful meetings with several groups of people interested in participating, I also realised something that I knew all too well from numerous previous experiences: that establishing trusting relationships and cultivating a shared sense of ownership, is an inherently slow and unpredictable process. In the end, only around half of the experiments were carried out in collaboration with people who responded to my invitations back then.

[17] http://www.mathiaspoulsen.com/invitation/
[18] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txzKenEifhU

Seeking attunement through invitations

## Planning

Once I had established an agreement to work together with a person or a group of people, we started co-designing the experiments. In the early co-design process, we were trying to answer the following questions:

- What might be the matter of common concern?
- Who are we inviting as participants?
- Where should this take place?
- What kind of materials do we want?

### a. Matter of Common Concern

Before each experiment, we started by discussing what might be the matter of common concern. In some experiments, like EX5, the matter of concern was given by their interest in cultivating a community of citizens interested in sustainability and recycling. In other experiments, it was less clearly defined. For instance, in EX3 there was no narrowly defined matter of concern, and the local community was primarily interested in how the junk playground might bring people closer together.

### b. Participants

In most cases, the people with whom I had the initial dialogues already had some idea about who would be participants for the experiments. Sometimes, the participants were a clearly defined group, like in EX2, where the school management wanted to involve the entire staff of the school, while on other occasions, such as in EX3, it was embedded in a larger public event.

### c. Location

Then we discussed where the playground experiment would take place. In some experiments, the location was secondary; it was mostly a matter of what seemed practical or was given by other circumstances. This was true, for instance, in EX1, which simply took place outside Design School Kolding with a group of students. In others, the site itself was integrated with the very purpose of the experiment. This was perhaps most prominent in EX6, where the site, a derelict gravel pit, was the matter of common concern.

### d. Materials

When I decided to use the original Danish name, *skrammellegepladsen*, for the playgrounds, I also made several decisions as to the nature of the materials we would use – discarded materials. These materials have often been referred to as 'loose parts', drawing on Nicholson's widely referenced 'theory of loose parts' (Nicholson, 1971, 1972). The loose parts in this project are bits and pieces of *junk*, discarded materials that typically carry no obvious instrumental value and no clear purpose. I was rarely looking for specific materials, but I was always striving for as much diversity as possible. In general, it was relatively easy to acquire the materials since they had already been discarded. I picked up many smaller things, such as fabric, tubes, cardboard, wheels, and many other things, at the municipal centre for recycled materials in Kolding called The Treasury ('*Skatkammeret*'). I also picked up several loads of wood from a lumber yard, Stark, in Skanderborg, including pallets, boards, beams, and similar. For many experiments, gathering the materials was a shared effort, where I brought as much as I could fit on the trailer, and my collaborators brought whatever they could gather.



## List of Experiments

In the end, my efforts at attunement and co-design led me to conduct experiments in nine different contexts, shown below.

| EX | Partner | Participants | Date(s) | No participants | Duration |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Design School Kolding | Adults | 10 September 2021 | 20 | 5 hours |
| 2 | Mølleskolen | Adults | 7 September 2021 | 90 | 4 hours |
| 3 | Local community group in Hjortshøj | Children and adults | 18 September 2021 | 50+ | 7 hours |
| 4 | UCSYD | Adults | 13 October 2021 | 7 | 4 hours |
| 5 | Redux | Adults | 25 November 2021 | 20 | 2 hours |
| 6 | Local community group in Egebjerg | Children and adults | 5 March 2022, 3 & 10 April 2022 | 20-50 | 3 days, 4-6 hours each |
| 7 | Nicolai for Children | Children | 3, 4, 5 May 2022 | 5 workshops, 25-50 each | 90 minutes each |
| 8 | Monash - Emerging Technologies Research Lab | Adults | 7 September 2022 | 8 | 2 hours |
| 9 | University of Canberra - Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance | Adults | 21 October 2022 | 8 | 2 hours |

## EX1

This experiment was my first prototype, conducted as part of the course Play-Based Intrapreneurship at the Design for Play MA, Design School Kolding. It took place outside, on a patch of grass next to Kolding Å, where I had scattered a large selection of discarded materials. At first, I told everyone that they were alone in their own little worlds and had to figure out how they could come to feel safe enough to exert their agency. Later, I claimed we had discovered that they were not alone in the world after all, and that they now had to form a tribe with the three people closest to them. They then worked in the small groups until the end, when they shared stories about their projects.

## EX2

This experiment began as a dialogue with a primary school. They were concerned about the ownership and creativity of the students when teachers maintain too strict control over the process. These concerns formed the matter of common concern for the experiment: letting go, moving into the unknown, pursuing creativity and imagination by moving into the body and engaging with materials. Moving 'onto thin ice' as one person put it. The experiment took place outside in a large area with grass, shrubs, and trees. I began the experiment by stating that we had arrived in a distant future, and we had to explore the collection of discarded materials to better understand the situation. They worked together in the groups until the end, where we organised a 'varnishing' to see their works and hear their stories.

## EX3

This was the one where a friend of mine contacted me to suggest that we should conduct a junk playground experiment in their local community. They wanted to explore how the junk playground could potentially bring the people in the local community closer together. The experiment was conducted as a part of their annual summer party where many children and adults came to the playground. Some stayed almost from the beginning at 12:00 until the end around 19:30, and there was lively activity all along.



## EX4

A person from the administration bachelor education at UCSYD saw my invitation, and suggested we should conduct an experiment as part of their course on democratic co-creation, which also became our matter of common concern. We conducted the experiment in Bronzehallen at a renovation site in Kolding. They then worked together to explore the role of democratic co-creation in their professional practice. At the end, they shared stories and reflections.

## EX5

I had contacted a recycling centre in Kolding, and we agreed to conduct an experiment. They were in the early phase of cultivating a recycling community, and we decided to use the experiment to support that process. The matter of common concern here was how to engage people in experimenting with reuse and recycling. People worked together in groups, and we ended with people telling stories about their works.

## EX6

This experiment emerged from a conversation with a colleague who was involved in a local council where she lived. They were working with the municipality to renovate an old, derelict gravel pit. The council wanted to involve the local community to a greater degree than possible in the formal collaboration with the municipality, and they suggested creating a junk playground to explore the possibilities of the site. This experiment took place in the gravel pit across three weekends, when both adults and children from the community came to explore the site through playing and building with the discarded materials.

## EX7

While teaching at Design School Kolding, one of the organisations we worked with, Nicolai became interested in my project and suggested we conduct experiments together. This led to five, short experiments with school classes, each experiment lasting 90-120 minutes. Here I invited the children to explore the materials and create something that was important for them to feel safe in the future.

## EX8

At the beginning of my research stay at Monash University in Melbourne, I was invited to host a workshop and I decided to run it as a small experiment. It took place in a meeting room with all the materials scattered across the tables. Here the matter of common concern was the contemporary university and academic working environments. People worked individually, and we ended with everyone sharing stories about their creations.

## EX9

I was also invited to host a workshop at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance, and I ran this as a small experiment. The staff at the centre was invited, and we decided to explore different conceptions of democracy and possible democratic futures.

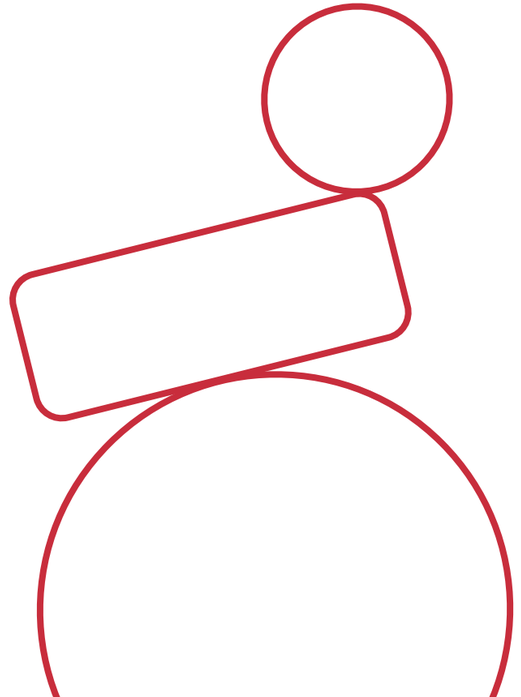


### My Roles

I always knew I would be an active participant, if only because the experiments grew out of my own practice and would not have happened without me taking the initiative. In the beginning, I was somewhat sceptical about the degree of my involvement with the experiments, struggling as I was with certain remnants of academic ideals. Later, encouraged by artistic research, autoethnography, and constructive design research, I learned to rest more calmly in my role as an entangled researcher. Or rather, my roles, plural, because during the playground experiments, I took on different roles depending on what was needed and seemed appropriate.

#### a. Host

I often began the experiments in the role of a host who was primarily concerned with welcoming people into the playground. This is not unlike the role one might have at an informal social gathering or a party, where a group of people, who may or may not know each other in advance, are going to spend some time together. I agree with Richard Schechner that 'play is dangerous and, because it is, players need to feel secure in order to begin playing' (Schechner, 2004, pp. 26–27), and so I was trying to help people feel secure *enough*.



### b. Storyteller

In most of the experiments, I typically began as a host and then shifted into the role of a storyteller. This was perhaps also where my practice was most performative, as I was telling stories and inviting participants into an imagined world, suggesting that we had all been somehow transported to the future. The story changed a little from experiment to experiment, but it was typically a variant of this story I told at EX2:

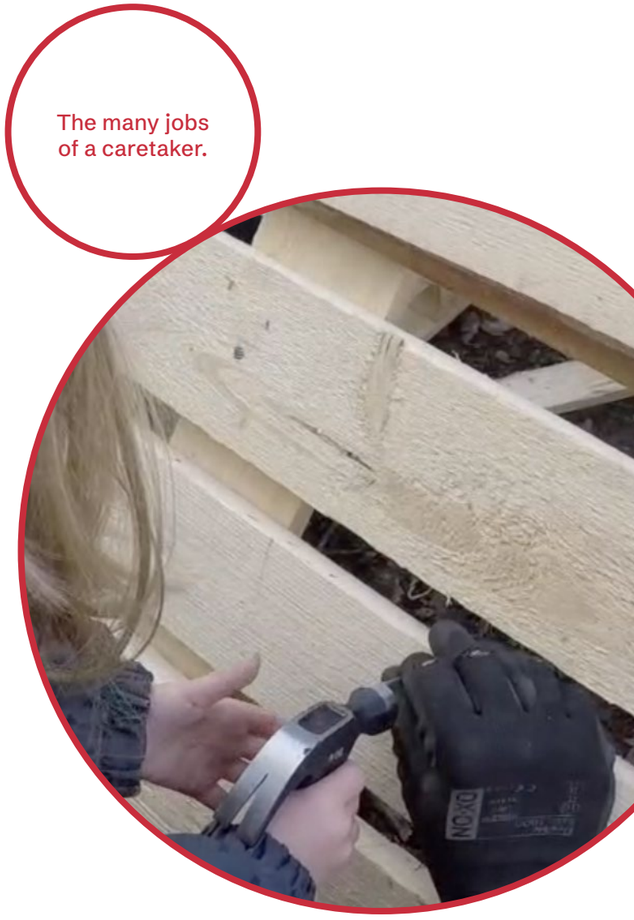
**We have landed far into the future, and nothing is as we're used to. It's very empty here, and there is no one to tell us what is going on. We cannot find any written sources, and we are simply lost. The only thing we have at our disposal are all these materials. They must contain the secret to our shared future. Together, we now must start exploring the materials, touching them, and listening to them. Maybe you're not used to things talking, but they do so here, and they have many stories to tell. If you think you know what will happen or when we should end up – you are woefully wrong. Hold on to the unpredictability, the unknown, and try following your bodies and hands, improvising in a dialogue with the materials.**



I sought to establish 'fictional space as design space' through the narrative 'game-of-make-believe' mediated by material that 'gives mandate to imagination' (Knutz et al., 2016, p. 12). I sought to convey a sense of estrangement, hoping to strike a meaningful balance between the strange and the familiar (Kjaersgaard & Boer, 2015). The purpose of these efforts was to inspire and encourage participants to move away from what they already knew, pushing them from rational thought and discourse towards more sensorially-grounded experiences.

### c. Caretaker

Upon welcoming people into the playground and seeking to spark a sense of estrangement through storytelling, I typically shifted into a more practical role which I liken to that of caretaker[19]. Like the design practices described by Li Jönsson et al, I have tried to 'imbue the days with care' (Jönsson et al., 2019, p. 4). I hoped to convey a sense of care in the way I crafted the invitations, how I welcomed people, and through my narrative framing of the experiments. However, I think my most important caring contributions were those that took place during the experiments, as if I was embodying a promise that things would be okay, somehow. I often found myself walking a fine line between helping participants to move on without telling them where to go or what to do. I would help with finding materials and using tools, but I always insisted that I had no ideas as to what people should make. Sometimes, it was enough to offer a little practical help, like holding a nail for someone with limited hammering experience.




[19] I was initially unsure whether to use the word 'janitor' or 'caretaker' when I wanted to translate the Danish word *pedel* to describe how I have served a very practical role in many of the experiments. The more I realised that my most important 'job' was to take care of, and care for, the people in the playground, the choice of words was suddenly a given.

# 6.4 Research *Material*

While this section was previously called Data and Coding, there was too much friction between the word 'data' and my general orientation. My position thus resonates with the stance from artistic and performative research paradigms, where words like 'data collection' and 'coding' are increasingly considered 'positivist leftovers in academia' (Østern et al., 2021, p. 3). Inspired by Tone Pernille Østern et al, I will discuss the different *research materials* that were generated during the junk playground experiments, including:

- Video recordings
- Photos
- Conversations
- Postcards from the future - written reflections from participants
- My own notes and reflections

The list may immediately raise one big question: where are all the interviews that typically underpin qualitative research? In this project, where I am seeking to understand that which takes place partly outside rational thought and discourse as bodily affects, asking people to rationally reflect on the experience retrospectively seemed counterintuitive. Instead, I have tried to focus on the process and on the reactions that emerge immediately from and in the experience itself. In an ideal world, the two would not be mutually exclusive, but in the world of a PhD student already drowning in materials, I decided to focus my limited time and attention on what seemed to be *most* relevant, which was the immediacy of the process.

## 6.4.1 Video Recordings

Across the experiments, I used different strategies for recording video. In all experiments, I made short recordings to capture specific situations, and to hold onto the embodied feeling of being present. In some experiments, mostly those that took place



indoors, such EX 4, 5, 8 and 9, I used stationary cameras in different positions around the site.

It was always a delicate balance between documenting the experiments close to the experiences of the participants, while reducing the risk of obstructing said experience. For instance, in EX2, I tried to find volunteers to wear a GoPro harness, but the situation was already challenging and a little intimidating to many, and it is perhaps not surprising that wearing a camera while sustained in uncertainty would be daunting. I found myself in similar situations repeatedly and looking back on them, I believe that I generally paid more attention to the experience than to documentation. I was a practitioner first, and a researcher second.

In other experiments, this was less of a problem, especially when the participants were children, who were more eager to wear the cameras. The richest video material thus stems from EX6 and EX7, where two children at a time were wearing the GoPro harnesses as they moved around the junk playground. Like Shanti Sumartojo and Sarah Pink, I do not believe that the cameras

> **offer us the possibility to objectively capture the world as it appears in front of the camera lens, but instead record a video trace through the world as created by our movement in specific environmental, sensory and affective configurations.**
>
> *(Sumartojo & Pink, 2017, p. 40)*

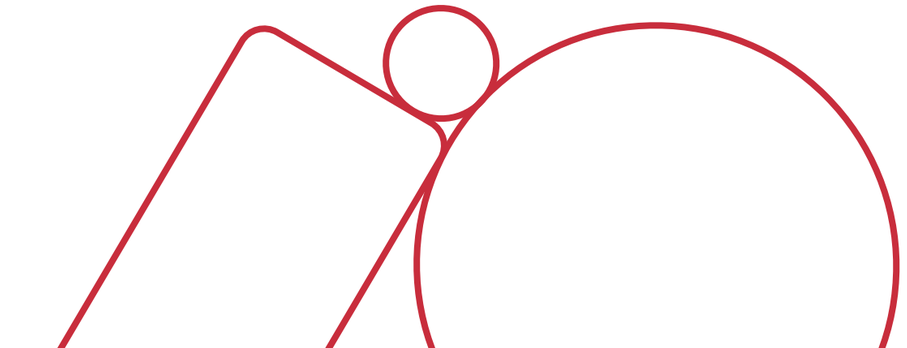
Furthermore, the recordings also had the benefit of allowing me to revisit my own experiences, 'noticing new things, or connecting sensorial impressions in new ways' (Sumartojo & Pink, 2017, p. 46) long after the experiments had ended.

### 6.4.2 Postcards from the future

After the first experiment, I developed the concept of 'postcards from the future' as an attempt to facilitate participants' reflections as close to the experience as possible. When I framed the experiment through storytelling about travelling to the future, I would end by asking people to write a postcard from the future to their former self. The idea was that they would write the postcard while we were still in the future, still playing, as an attempt to invite reflections near the experience.

### 6.4.3 My Own Notes and Reflections

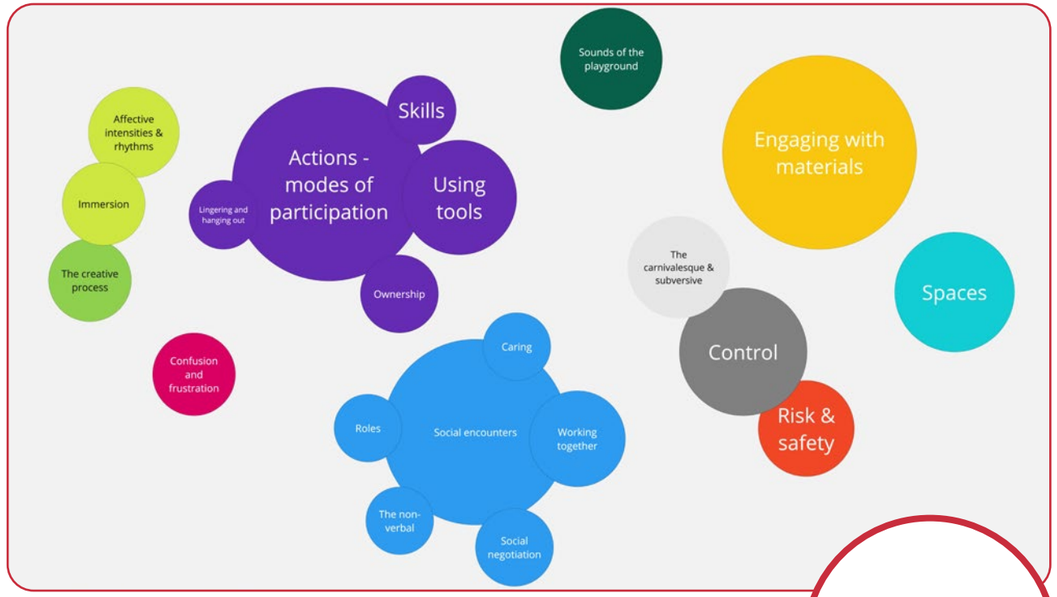
While I did make field notes during the experiments, most of my notes and reflections were written shortly after the end of the experiments. During the experiments, I was typically so involved through my different roles that there was little time for stepping out to write notes.





## 6.5 Coding

How to proceed with those research materials? After some hesitation, I chose to follow the tradition of coding. It originates from grounded theory as developed by Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2006) who argued that 'grounded theory is derived from data and then illustrated by characteristic examples of data' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2006, p. 5). Later, it has been developed along different trajectories, and I was most inspired by the constructivist approach (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019; Charmaz, 2014). Kathy Charmaz insisted that we 'construct codes' (Charmaz, 2014, p. 114) because we are 'actively naming data - even when we believe our codes form a perfect fit with actions and events in the studied world' (Charmaz, 2014, p. 115). When I started coding, I was using Dedoose, and first imported full transcripts of my materials. Following Charmaz, I tried to do 'initial coding' 'line-by-line' (Charmaz, 2014, p. 121). After a while, I realised that I had probably coded more material in one round than I should have, and I ended up with more than 200 codes. I exported the 214 codes from Dedoose to Excel and copied them into Miro as virtual post-its. Here I proceeded to synthesise the codes into thematic groups, resulting in a new code tree with 27 codes. While this tree was more manageable, I did not feel that it adequately captured the actions and complexity of the experiments. I decided to do another round of open coding on a different segment of the materials, this time with an even greater focus on staying close to the participants' actions. After this second round of coding, I again imported the codes into Miro, where I synthesised them through grouped into categories. Upon two rounds of initial coding, I merged the categories and then synthesised these categories into the first draft of a code tree, shown below.




Trying to make sense of my codes.

I tried applying this code tree to segments of video to assess whether it more adequately managed to also capture the unspoken and processual. However, I still had this sneaking suspicion that something was amiss. Charmaz's suggestion that 'you may sense that the process of coding produces certain tensions' (Charmaz, 2014, p. 115) resonates deeply with my own experience. I was struggling with a sense of arbitrariness: that the codes lost their connection to the materials and experiments. Udo Kelle described two aspects of coding that are often particularly difficult for novices like me (Kelle, 2007). First, the 'search for adequate coding categories can become extremely tedious' (Kelle, 2007, p. 136). This search, Kelle argued, then often leads to 'an enduring proliferation of the number of coding categories which makes the whole process insurmountable' (Kelle, 2007, p. 136).



This was exactly what happened for me. With a concept from grounded theory, I was unable to find the right fit between my materials and the codes, meaning that 'the categories must be readily (not forcibly) applicable to and indicated by the data under study' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2006, p. 3). The people in the playgrounds were moving around, building things, interacting, negotiating, and sometimes merely lingering, hanging out, not doing much. They were speaking, but on many occasions, this was less important than what they were doing or even not doing. The coding based on the transcripts, however, felt inadequate to capture the liveliness and complexities of these experiences. I repeatedly failed to define codes that were both close to the experiments, conveying actions, and potentially pointing towards more focused codes and analytical themes. In the end, while the codes helped me identify analytical themes, they themselves only play a minor role in this thesis. Even so, I do believe that coding using methods from grounded theory contributed to a stronger 'analytic import' (Charmaz, 2014, p. 2) because it made me stay with the empirics for such a long time. Grounded theory 'prompts you to keep interacting with your data' (Charmaz, 2014, p. 115), and I have undoubtedly seen, heard, and sensed things that only occurred to me after hours and hours of engagement with the materials. As an example, I did not pay too much attention to the skills of the participants, such as using simple tools like knives, hammers, and handsaws. Initially, I merely saw both adults and children who were not very proficient with the tools. Situations like the one shown below were not at all uncommon, if somewhat unorthodox. The salient point here, however, is that such crude skills did not get in the way of participation. On the contrary, in many cases they became an opening, demonstrating how participation is perfectly legitimate despite the lack of what could be considered sufficient skills. The participants did not seek to refine their sawing skills, they sought to get the job done, and more than that, they aspired to play a part. I could not see this before I had been dwelling with the materials for hours and hours, and I might not have done so without my coding efforts.

Interesting sawing technique

# 6.6 Goosebumps and *Analytical Moves*

The dilemma from the previous section follows us, still. I need to approach my vibrant and unruly research materials in a way that is nimble, sensitive, and gentle, allowing them to maintain their vitality. In the following, I will unfold my analytical approach as 'analytical moves', to suggest that analysis is more like an improvised dance than a strategy or a system.

While coding was helpful, it also generated an intense friction. It made me question my worth as a researcher, because I felt that I had failed, again and again. As Anette Markham argued, when, in academic research, 'something fails or is deemed a failure, it is likely hidden behind the cleaned-up explanation of one's practices in a written report' (Lammes et al., 2023, p. 50). However, as I have already stated, I try to resist those urges and to share what has been most difficult. I follow Markham when she suggested understanding failure as 'critical junctures where we might pause, reflect, and possibly think otherwise' (Lammes et al., 2023, p. 50). Maybe we can say that coding provided such a critical juncture, to pause and reflect, wondering why the friction was so strong? I cannot say for sure, but I believe that part of my frustration grew from the feeling that my coding practice conflicted with my interest in the unruly, pluralism, movement, and friction. Maggie Maclure argued that what she calls 'conventional qualitative method' has a built-in desire to subdue and control difference through 'all its devices for reducing uncertainty and mining meaning', including 'the sorting and subordinating practices of coding' (MacLure, 2017, pp. 48–49). In contrast, Østern et al argued that a 'performative analysis is oriented towards and produces differences that make a difference' (Østern et al., 2021, p. 10) and performative research 'ultimately produces movement' (Østern et al., 2021, p. 12). I am exactly after analytical approaches that can appreciate differences and spark movement. Finally, Østern et al suggested that such an approach 'liberates the researcher and ensures that it is acceptable, desirable and required to be embodied and affected' (Østern et al., 2021, p. 14). However, such liberation does not come easy. I have a sense that one major challenge here has been my difficulty in trusting my own intuition and affective responses. When I suggest that there is a need for participation beyond rational discourse, then why was I so reluctant to trust my own body, my own senses, my own intuition?

Many scholars have already argued that intuition plays an important role in research. Sarah Pink suggested developing an 'ethnographic hunch' which she described as 'those moments when we realize that we have found something significant for the course of our research' (Pink, 2021b, p. 34). To develop such an awareness requires 'seeking out the things, processes, and connections that are not immediately obvious' and to 'bring things together in order to create novel or previously imperceptible understanding' (Pink, 2021b, pp. 39–40). Similarly, MacLure suggested that the challenge is to be attentive to how our research materials always contain 'capacity to force thought' and that the 'unruly



potentials in data can be sensed () when something seems to reach out from the inert corpus of the data to grasp us' (MacLure, 2017, p. 51). I believe such a hunch and attentiveness only become more pertinent in practice-based research, as being a practitioner and forming a practice is also partly a matter of cultivating a stronger intuition. Vear, Candy and Edmonds argued that practice-based research can be 'driven by intuition and personal vision', and they stressed the 'importance of staying true to the hunch that begins the research, which usually arises through practice [and must be explored through practice]' (Vear et al., 2021, p. 470). For me, hunches and intuition are often marked by a decidedly bodily reaction. Sometimes, when I attend a presentation, or talk to people, or read a text that resonates, or even, on the rarest of occasions in the best of times, when I am writing, I suddenly get goosebumps. I immediately know that something is going on, even though I typically can't tell what it is yet. Along the way, I have slowly been learning to trust these affective responses, to stop, to listen, to sense, to follow. While I can almost be certain that my affective response indicates something interesting is underway, goosebumps are not exactly directional, and they cannot accurately point me in a specific direction.

Reiterating my suggestion to pursue an eclectic strategy to cultivate pluralism in and through the project, I will extend this into the analysis as well. I draw together different research materials and different theoretical perspectives in continued attempts to cultivate connections and conversations between them, to see what might happen when they encounter each other. This echoes MacLure's suggestion that we might 'think of wonder as an alternate concept in place of analysis' (MacLure, 2017, p. 52), and that we need to become 'attentive and open to surprise to recognize the invitation; and once invited in, our task is to experiment and see where that takes us' (MacLure, 2013, p. 231). This has convinced me that it is indeed possible to cultivate a more exploratory, open-ended mode of analysis. It echoes Jane Bennett's claim that 'enchantment is something that we encounter, that hits us, but it is also a comportment that can be fostered through deliberate strategies' (Bennett, 2001, p. 4). Perhaps analysis can indeed be a matter of cultivating and pursuing wonder and enchantment as it stands (or jumps!) out from the research materials? I hope so.

In the end, my analysis draws on the coding and themes identified through the process, but more than that, it is guided by my affective responses to certain facets in the research materials. As such, my analytical approach mirrors my general approach, which means that it pursues and enhances movement, plurality, affective intensities, and friction across the research materials.

# 6.7 Ethical *Commitments*

While this may be an appropriate place to talk about ethics, the following discussions might also conjure a sense of déjà vu, because the matter of ethics has been with us from the very beginning. When I suggested that this project is about the difficulties of living together, I was already alluding to Joan Tronto's understanding of an ethics of care as a matter of repairing the world so 'we can live in it as well as possible' (Tronto, 2013, p. 19). Judith Butler argued that the 'ethical question, how ought I to live? or even the political question, how ought we to live together? depends upon an organization of life that makes it possible to entertain those questions meaningfully' (Butler, 2015, p. 44), and I have tried to organise this project in ways that make it possible to entertain those questions meaningfully. Understood like this, ethics is not an appendix, something you can stick in a methodology section and then you're in the clear. On the contrary, it flows across every page, and is present in every encounter.

In a more conventional sense, research ethics is often oriented towards avoiding negative consequences, and we have a responsibility to ensure that our research does not harm anyone involved (Kara, 2015, p. 77). Following Marilys Guillemin and Lynn Gillam, I distinguish between 'procedural ethics', which involves formalised codes and procedures, and 'ethics in practice', which refers to everyday ethical issues that happens in research encounters (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 263). From the perspective of procedural ethics, I follow both "The European Code



of Conduct for Research Intregrity" (ALLEA, 2023) and "Danish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity" (Uddannelses- og Forskningsministeriet, 2014), but as I will argue, this only covers the bare minimum of my ethical commitment. When researching dynamic, emergent phenomena, such as the junk playgrounds, there is no way for me to know what happens next and this 'forecloses the possibility of the predictive risk mitigation' (Pink et al., 2018, pp. 126–127). Guillemin and Gillam suggested an approach to everyday 'micro-ethics' and 'important moments' that is rooted in reflexivity: 'Being reflexive in an ethical sense means acknowledging and being sensitized to the micro-ethical dimensions of research practice and in doing so, being alert to and prepared for ways of dealing with the ethical tensions that arise' (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 278). Marc Steen followed a similar path when he suggested to make ethics in design processes 'explicit by embracing reflexivity' (Steen, 2015, p. 410). He then illustrated this reflexive stance with a series of questions to continuously ask oneself:

> **What is happening here and now? How am I moving between other and self, between openness and closure? How are we using our capacities for perception, our capacities for conception? How is the cooperation process evolving? Am I promoting curiosity or creativity? Are we sharing power and agency? What do I think and feel? What do I want to do? What can I do differently?**
>
> *(Steen, 2015, p. 411)*

### 6.7.1 Avoiding Negative Consequences

Procedural ethics typically 'foreground key ethical principles such as informed consent and assent, confidentiality, privacy and anonymity, and the minimisation of any possible harms or risks stemming from the research' (Spencer, 2021, p. 2). In all experiments, I have sought to ensure that everyone involved should be informed and knowledgeable about the research project (Johansson & Hall, 2019, pp. 1–2). I started the experiments with an introduction, where I talked about the research project and what the participants' role would be. I stressed that participation was voluntary, and they could step out at any moment. While such informed consent is always critical, it is even more important and potentially more challenging when children are involved in the research, as was the case in EX3, EX6 and EX7. There is an ongoing discussion about how, and from whom, informed consent should be acquired in research with children, and adults are often important gatekeepers (Spencer, 2021, p. 14). While I have worked with adult gatekeepers (parents in EX3 and EX6, teachers in EX7), I have also always tried to inform the children about the project in a way that could be meaningful to them. This is always a challenge, and I had no immediate way to assess whether it was meaningful. Furthermore, in some experiments, such as EX3, there were no collective start and end points, as people came and left during the day. Here I could give no shared introduction, but I tried to tell people about the project when I saw an opportunity and when they asked. I am certain, though, that some people participated in this experiment without talking to me and possibly without knowing much about the research project. For them, it was probably just an opportunity to play with materials in the junk playground, while they were at the summer party in their local neighbourhood. This points to another dimension of ethical commitments: where the efforts to avoid negative consequences is a kind of ethical baseline, it was also always my intention to co-design the experiments in ways that would first and foremost lead to meaningful experiences for those involved. I have thus done my best to avoid making 'participants feel like a subject of novel experiments with little value in return' (Pink, Akama, and Sumartojo 2018, 70), which might lead to a lack of trust due to 'objectification' (Pierce et al., 2019). As I have already emphasised, I expect that what I might be able to say about play as mode of democratic participation stems primarily from those situations where people are absorbed by the play experience. There may be a flipside to this because what if people play so well that they 'lose themselves'? In proposing 'an ethics of affective experimentation', Britta Timm-Knudsen,



Mads Krogh and Carsten Stage argued that it should always be possible 'to exit the experiment in order to counterbalance the affectively compelling nature of the experiment' (Timm Knudsen et al., 2022, p. 10). While I was indeed hoping that the junk playgrounds would be 'affectively compelling', it was also important for me to stress, repeatedly, the voluntary nature of the experiments and that anyone could step out at any time. This has been my basic principle of play design and facilitation for many years, yet while I believe it is essential, it obviously doesn't guarantee that everyone experiences participation as completely voluntary. For instance, in EX2, the staff of an entire school was involved, including the management. Did this influence the degree to which participation was voluntary? I have no reason to believe that anyone felt uncomfortably pressured to participate, but that may nonetheless have been the case.

There is also the question of how uncomfortable we can ethically allow participants in our research to feel. They should certainly always be allowed to step out voluntarily, but should they also be encouraged to endure some degree of discomfort? This is a tricky discussion, and in this project, the junk playground experiments have intentionally sought destabilisation and estrangement, and a modicum of discomfort often followed.

Another important dimension of avoiding harm pertains to the notion of confidentiality (Saunders et al., 2015). It is common to assume that the researcher 'has the responsibility to protect the participant from harm by altering any personal, identifying information' (Allen, 2017, p. 228). However, as Benjamin Saunders, Jenny Kitzinger and Celia Kitzinger argued, 'guaranteeing complete anonymity to participants can be an "unachievable goal" in qualitative research' (Saunders et al., 2015, p. 617). Confidentiality, so conceived, is thus almost always a compromise between 'maximising protection of participants' identities and maintaining the value and integrity of the data' (Saunders et al., 2015, p. 617). Even if a person is anonymised by using pseudonyms and their photos are blurred, both of which I have done, it may be possible for those persons or people who know them well to recognise them in the text or images or both. I do not believe this necessarily means that those research materials cannot be used, but they must be used with caution and care, and I still strive to avoid any negative repercussions.

I see no way around these ethical issues, no easy or right answers, only the demand for an enhanced ethical reflexivity and sensitivity that allows us to navigate research territories fraught with dilemmas. Despite the flaws of my efforts to avoid negative consequences for anyone involved, I remain confident that nobody has suffered any serious negative consequences due to their participation.

## 6.7.2 Affirmative Ethics of Care

I agree with the ethical guidelines to avoid research participants suffering negative consequences and I am especially guided by the more recent orientations towards reflexive and sensitive ethical practices. However, I also agree with Jane Bennett when she suggested that we should nurture a 'spirit of generosity that must suffuse ethical codes if they are to be responsive to the surprises that regularly punctuate life' (Bennett, 2001, p. 3). Following this line of thinking, I have found it fruitful to work from an affirmative ethics of care, which I will briefly unfold here.

First, I draw on Joan Tronto's definition of care as 'a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible' (Tronto, 2013, p. 19). This perspective underpins the entire project. Tronto's work is rooted in a relational 'feminist ethics of care' where 'the world consists not of individuals who are the starting point for intellectual reflection, but of humans who are always in relations with others' (Tronto, 2013, p. 36). Puig de la Bellacasa made a crucial addition to Tronto's work, when she insisted that care must extend to include 'a more than human life-sustaining web' to 'decenter anthropocentric ethics' (Bellacasa, 2017, loc. 3767).

Second, I will further argue that this feminist ethics of care has much in common with a notion of affirmative ethics, as proposed by Rosi Braidotti, an idea that is closely related to my earlier discussion of affirmative critique. Braidotti suggested that 'affirmative ethics builds on radical relationality, aiming at empowerment', which means 'increasing one's ability to relate to multiple others, in a productive and mutually enforcing manner, and creating a community that actualizes this ethical propensity' (Braidotti, 2019, p. 166). Through such affirmative ethical relations, argued Braidotti, we can 'create possible worlds by mobilizing resources that have been left untapped in the present, including our desires and imagination' (Braidotti, 2019, p. 166). Affirmative ethical relations, then, is about creating conditions for mutual empowerment and for imagining and enacting new worlds together, even beyond the human dimension. I can offer no fully formed affirmative ethics of care; it is, and must always be, evolving, but as I have drawn out the contours here, it points to an ethical stance that is concerned not only or primarily with *risk avoidance*, but with creation, with the worlds we can create together.



## 6.7.3 Broader Ethical Commitments

I have a sense that my ethical commitment goes beyond just my own research, as I have become increasingly concerned with the well-being of academic environments and communities. Drawing again on the tradition of autoethnography, I agree with Holman Jones when she argued that 'we cannot write or work isolation; instead, we must support and be supported by a community, a we and an us' (Holman Jones, 2017, p. 132). Can we accept 'protocols of academic research' that are rooted in a logic 'of taking rather than giving, extraction rather than reverence' (Ingold, 2021, p. xii)? Or should we, as Tim Ingold set out to do, 'develop a way of study, or a method, that would join with the people and things with whom and which we share a world, allowing knowledge to grow from our correspondences with them'? (Ingold, 2021, p. xii). I share Ingold's aspirations, and I agree with Anna Tsing when she argued for the importance of designing 'research that requires playgroups and collaborative clusters: not congeries of individuals calculating costs and benefits, but rather scholarship that emerges through its collaborations' (Tsing, 2015, p. 285). Finally, bell hooks argued that if we are to sustain our struggles for justice and equality, we need a 'mediating force that can sustain us so that we are not broken in this process, so that we do not despair' (hooks, 2015, p. 26). For hooks, this 'mediating force' was love: 'as we work to be loving, to create a culture that celebrates life, that makes love possible, we move against dehumanization, against domination' (hooks, 2015, p. 26). In agreement with hooks, I believe that it might be beneficial to infuse our broader ethical commitments with a similar notion of love so that we are not broken and do not despair.

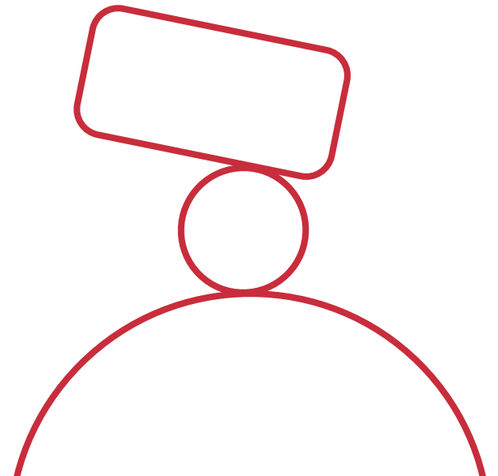
Summing up, the affirmative ethics of care I have laid out here is not to be seen as a code or a procedure. It is a sensibility and an attitude that I have tried to keep alive and present throughout this project. My ethical considerations are ingrained in the ongoing questioning of my research practices and my own role in those, as well as in constantly caring for the shared experience and well as for the individual participants. Ethics extends beyond individual research projects; it is in how we act in the world, and eventually, in how we seek to live our lives, as researchers and as humans.

# 6.8 Writing and Reading as *Method*

I will end my methodology chapter by discussing two foundational aspects of my research that seems to be often left unnoticed; namely writing, and reading.

## 6.8.1 Writing as Inquiry

I want to think for a moment about the obvious fact that this thesis is mainly made up of writing: words on pages, shown on screens if not printed on paper, depending on your personal preferences. The primary interface between you, me, and my research is pages and pages of written text and a selection of images. Despite the overwhelming prevalence of written research, I have a sense that not enough attention is paid to the act and art of writing. Writing in academia is often just assumed to be something we can somehow already do when we arrive at the doorstep, as if we are 'already ready as writers' (Badenhorst et al., 2021, p. 19). When we then realise that we were not at all ready, that we came woefully unprepared, that our writing is deeply flawed and inadequate, so many of us are plagued by perpetual impostor syndrome. We probably all know this particularly unwelcome voice: 'You cannot, you cannot, you will never be able to write like that again; fun will fade away, enthusiasm slowly die and you will plod your way through life from now on' (Wegener et al., 2018, p. 199). For me, this voice often speaks the loudest whenever I try to follow academic writing in its more classical, neat, and tidy guises. Then I end up with what Peter Elbow calls 'defensive writing' which means 'not risking complicated thoughts or language, not risking half-understood ideas, not risking language that has the resonance that comes from being close to the bone' (Elbow, 1998, p. xix). Such writing is hardly fruitful, neither for the research, for the reader, nor for me. What I really like and aspire to is writing as a creative practice, as a journey of exploration, a series of playful encounters with letters and words. I play with writing not merely in the name of transparency and resonance, but also because it is the only way I can write this much and stay sane. This is perhaps not so different from how actual, accomplished writers approach their craft: 'Writing is at its best – always, always, always – when it is a kind of inspired play for the writer' (King, 2000, 142). Thus, when Elbow asked, 'How can I get myself to put in the daunting time and effort I need for more consistent good results?', his answer





mirrors my own experience: 'The answer, I think, is to cheat—to look for pleasure and shortcuts' (Elbow, 1998, xxi).

### Proximity and Friction

For me, writing is an ongoing, experimental inquiry. As Anna Gibbs argued, writing is not 'something that comes somehow after the event, a simple "outcome" of research () but is a mode of inquiry in its own right' (Gibbs, 2015, p. 222). Where writing is an inquiry, and I "write in order to learn something that I did not know before I wrote it" (Richardson, 2001, p. 35), I also write with the intention of bringing you and I closer together, to "assemble a we'. The closer you can come to everything that has transpired in this project, including the people playing in the junk playgrounds, the better. Writing about artistic research, Mika Hannula, Juha Suoranta and Tere Vadén pointed to an important duality in academic writing when they suggested that 'the trick is to find a way of writing that suits not only the topic but also the researcher doing the writing' (Hannula et al., 2014, p. 24). This is obviously a far greater challenge than the little, mischievous word 'trick' might indicate. First, how to find a way of writing that suits the topic? I began by trying to find a tone of voice and a language that is nuanced and sensitive enough to gently grasp and hold the fleeting encounters and embodied sensations in the junk playgrounds. Meier and Wegener expressed a related challenge when they told us that they have 'shared the struggle of balancing academic conventions with a quest for making our texts live, and breathe and convey the lived experiences we encountered in our field studies' (Meier & Wegener, 2017, p. 195). Hannula et al argued that there is a delicate balance to be found between two extremes where, at one end, the 'text does not "speak about" something but is that something' and at the other extreme, 'a research report that is written in a metalanguage that talks about the phenomena that it wants to describe' (Hannula et al., 2014, p. 25). If the concept of a metalanguage represents more traditional forms of academic writing, then it seems to me timelier to explore how we might perform the other half of that equation. Maybe we can draw a little inspiration from outside academia? When defining 'what writing is', Stephen King boldly claimed that it is 'telepathy, of course' (King, 2000, p. 100), 'no mythy-mountain shit; real telepathy' (King, 2000, p. 102). What he meant, or so I assume, is that writing, good writing, brings us closer together in a 'a meeting of the minds' (King, 2000, p. 103) where he can write about anything, say, a white rabbit with the number 8 painted on its back, and I can see that rabbit and that number 8 clearly in my mind. It mirrors Kenneth J. Gergen and Mary M. Gergen's argument that evocative writing seeks to 'engage the reader in a more fully embodied experience'

(Gergen & Gergen, 2018, p. 5). Evocative writing, like affirmative critique, might also help us shift beyond accounts of 'what there is' to writing that calls forth 'what could be' (Gergen & Gergen, 2018, p. 4). Meier and Wegener seem to strive for a similar goal, namely that of achieving resonance between the text and the reader. Resonance, they claimed, can 'facilitate a better understanding of the research we are attempting to convey in our papers, an understanding that draws on readers' prior experiences, and their embodied knowledge' (Meier & Wegener, 2017, p. 193). Resonance means inviting the reader directly into the text, to share the lived, embodied experience we write about. In a similar vein, anthropologist Mattijs van de Port asked 'How can I move my readers closer to this sense of being lost' that his writing explores (van de Port, 2016, p. 167), a question that points right into my own fieldwork. I am writing about *skrammellegepladser*, spaces that are inherently messy, chaotic, and open-ended. As I aspire to bring you close to the experiences, situations, and atmosphere, how could I write in ways that are orderly and tidy? Should I really pretend that I have been in control all along, just for the sake of keeping up appearances? Or should I allow myself to get lost with you? I choose the latter.

While I seek to bring us closer together, I also aim to create friction with my writing. Following Anna Tsing, I try to 'write as a hair in the flour':

> **To write as a hair in the flour is to look for weaknesses, confusions, and gaps in business as usual () As a hair in the flour I tell of utopian social movements even where they are not victorious. These movements keep alive our sense that the forms of hierarchy and coercion we take most for granted can yet be dislodged**
>
> *(Tsing, 2005, p. 207)*

In short, I write as an ongoing, experimental inquiry, to bring you closer, to generate friction, and to play.



## 6.8.2 On Reading

Where I have argued that writing is too often understood as something we researchers can somehow just do, then reading is hardly even mentioned. We can all read, right? It would seem Lina Katan and Charlotte Andreas Baarts are correct in arguing that the role of reading in the production of knowledge is a neglected area of study (Katan & Baarts, 2020, p. 56). They argue that 'reading is generally considered neither a method of inquiry in its own right nor a practice with significant impact on research results' (Katan & Baarts, 2020, p. 56). For me, reading is *both* a method of inquiry in its own right, a practice with significant impact on research results, *and* a source of joy and hope. There is probably not one single thing I have spent as much time doing in this project as reading. Saner people than me suggested that maybe I had read enough, and they were undoubtedly right. My partner, my supervisors, my colleagues, they have all smiled in a patient manner while I passionately told them about yet another text I had just started reading, when I really shouldn't. Having the time to read without a demand for immediate justification has been perhaps the greatest privilege of the PhD. If the PhD, for a practitioner like me, offers a 'luxurious space of study' (Vaughan, 2017, p. 15) then reading was the epitome of that luxury.

When I have sometimes felt alone in what is so often referred to as a solitary project, I have turned to reading, always to be reminded that we are all thinking-talking-writing-wondering together across time and space. I have realised, time and time again, that 'human thought is consummately social: social in its origins, social in its functions, social in its forms, social in its applications' (Geertz, 1973, p. 360). Reading is thus also essential for my ambitions to develop an affirmative critique and to cultivate plurality, encouraging more vibrant, democratic conversations. I don't feel confined by the work of others. On the contrary, encountering their thoughts and ideas, as well as their concerns, fears, passions, and desires, feels liberating and empowering, and makes me hopeful. They are not telling me what to do or how to think, they are

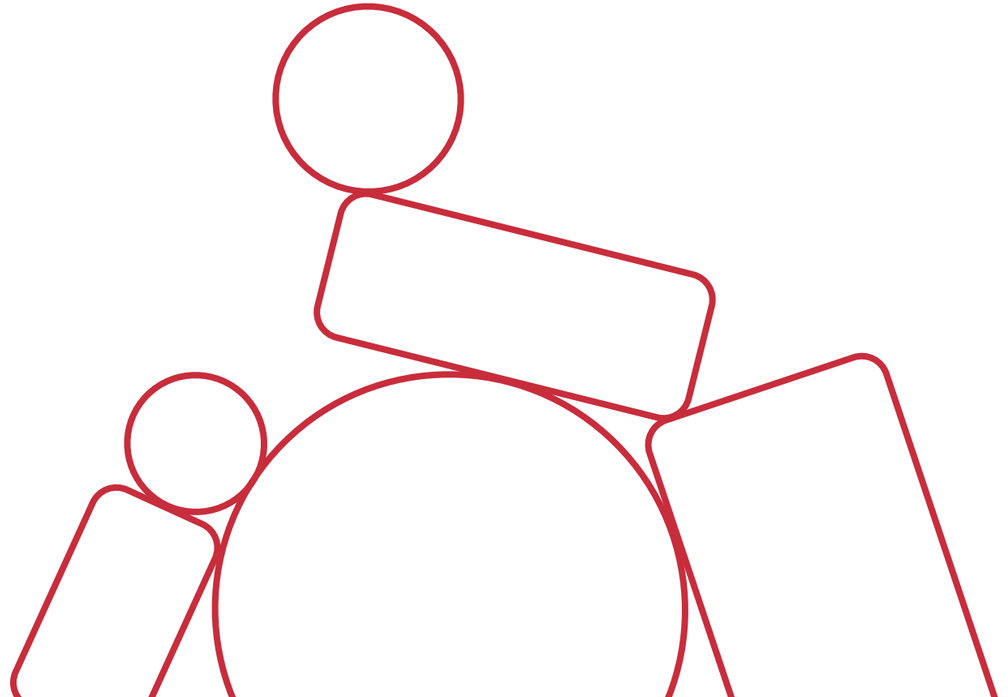
merely showing that thinking is possible, that they thought like this and had these ideas, and that there are always differences in how they think and how I think. Those differences open a space for thinking otherwise, where a sense of inconvenience makes itself felt as 'the force that makes one shift a little while processing the world' (Berlant, 2022, p. 14). Reading is often inconvenient, because it forces me to acknowledge all that I don't know and don't understand, but as Lauren Berlant argued, 'a degree of vulnerable openness increases during any encounter, whether it's brief or enduring' (Berlant, 2022, p. 118). From these vulnerable encounters with texts, thoughts, ideas, ways of thinking and being, however seemingly insignificant, 'a whole world can wobble when that openness ignites insecurity about how to live otherwise' (Berlant, 2022, p. 120). And if there is one thing I have tried to achieve with this project, it is to make worlds wobble, including my own.

I thus agree with Katan and Baarts when they argued that reading 'becomes a personally transformative activity' with the capacity to alter the reader (Katan & Baarts, 2020, p. 70). All this constant reading *has* changed me, changed the researcher I can be, and the research I can do. It has not happened all at once, never all at once, as there is no one critical juncture to point to, but always as a kind of piling-up, an accumulation, drip-drip-drip. When I describe this project as also being an exercise in self-transformation, in exploring who I might become, I have been repeatedly pushing up against what seems like the limits of my capacity. If Judith Butler is right when she argued that 'liberty emerges at the limits of what one can know' (Butler, 2001, p. 8), then reading has indeed been liberating, as it has helped me traverse the borderlands, sometimes pushing the limit a little bit further.

When I understand knowledge as the process of *knowing*, and I agree with Rosi Braidotti that it is crucial to 'reassert the dynamic nature of thinking and the need to reinstate movement at the heart of thought' (Braidotti, 2012, p. 7), then reading has been my most treasured approach. In contrast to the more occasional encounters with other humans and more-than-humans, the texts are always there, I am always reading. If I cannot write, if I cannot think, I can read, and it almost



always instigates some movement, just enough to start thinking. So significant is reading, yet I almost didn't mention it at all, because no-one ever really talks about reading as something worth mentioning, yet what could be more important? Indeed, Katan and Baarts concluded by suggesting that we should 'renegotiate the position of reading in relation to other research practices, where reading has hitherto been largely overlooked' (Katan & Baarts, 2020, p. 73). While I cannot fully unpack their proposition here, I wish to acknowledge and emphasise the vital importance of reading in my own research practice.



# 7. Attuning to the Playground

In the following chapters I will mainly speak to my first research question, as I am exploring what playful democratic participation might look and feel like in the context of the junk playgrounds. What drew people to this project and the junk playgrounds? How did people find their way into dialogue with the materials? What were the frictions they encountered? These are some of the questions that sparked the analyses of this chapter, where I will be investigating how people attune themselves to the project and junk playgrounds.

# 7.1 Attuning to *Invitations*

In the following, I will tell a few stories to explore how affective attunement began even before any junk playground experiments took place, as I sought to shape the project through ongoing dialogues, hoping to achieve some degree of resonance with the people who might join me. When I shared my initial invitation along with a video of me building a simple shelter, I received numerous responses from people who were curious about the project and wanted to join in. As could be expected, people had many different reasons for contacting me, some professional, some personal, many somewhere in between.

One of the first meetings were with the management team from a public school, and a few central words and phrases kept coming up. They wanted to support their employees in having 'the courage to jump into something new', to dare going out on 'thin ice', to 'let go of the reins' and 'set the students free'. They were concerned about the ownership and creativity of the students, when/if teachers maintain too strict control over the process. I was impressed with their willingness to ask such critical questions of their own practice, which also implicitly meant challenging the political structures in which they were working.

Another meeting took place in a rural area, outside a small museum, where I met with three women who were working to create a cultural hub with the local community. They echoed each other in insisting that they 'work somewhat unconventionally', a pattern that was emerging across most of my meetings at this point. Their approach often generated a friction through what they described as a 'resistance towards or even fear of change'. This included, they said, a 'resistance towards the more open-ended processes that they were seeking to apply'. When they hosted meetings, people would 'ask for a specific agenda and expect certain results'. These concerns and observations had put them on a constant search for 'an idea space where the idea



emerges from the collaboration' and 'something else becomes possible and permitted', which I believe helps explain their interest in my project. 'I am just very, very inspired by these conversations', one of them said when we had been talking for a while. I sensed this as an affective response, expressing a strong attunement to our shared ideas and longings. This was the first time I felt the resonance in my own body, like a chord being struck, causing everything to vibrate.

The next meeting was at a library, where the person who responded to my invitation had invited four of his colleagues to join us, as they were apparently also intrigued by my proposition. As the conversation was starting to flow, a woman, who had so far been mostly quiet, shared a personal story. She told us of her two sons, both diagnosed with ADHD: 'We have a lot of scrap wood lying around at home, and they really enjoy building things. They play around and they are very engaged in the process'. She went on to explain how the dedication of her sons would typically dissipate as soon as they were given very specific instructions on what to build. Where they thrived in the open-ended experimentation, they languished under the constraint of external directions. It was clear that she was thinking along with the project, and relating it to her own personal, lived experience. This story shifted the entire meeting towards something more substantial and deeply rooted. As much as we were talking about my project and their work at the library, they were also grappling with much larger questions. One said that the boundaries around their work were often too narrow. Another lamented that they were 'wrapped in the municipal' and questioned the prevalent demands to produce 'progression and a plan'. It was remarked that something happens to motivation and energy 'as soon as I focus on getting over there', and when 'one has to say the right words' to be taken seriously. In contrast, they talked about play as 'magic', as affording a special 'presence' where no external goals were required. They saw in the project an opening for improving their professional contributions to the library, but they also identified the possibilities for rewarding experiences on a personal level.

Finally, I met with two people at a municipal recycling centre. I had contacted them to share my invitation, as I felt their creative efforts to explore recycling and reuse of discarded materials corresponded well with the spirit of the junk playgrounds. They were in the early phase of cultivating a recycling community, and they were eagerly exploring ways of engaging citizens in safe spaces of curiosity and experimentation. They showed me Arnstein's famous ladder of citizen participation (Arnstein, 1969), and they argued for the importance of 'moving up the ladder', engaging citizens on higher rungs of the ladder. I sensed a sincere ambition, but also a frustration that such a shift seemed harder than it should be. While they seemed to really believe in this kind of co-creation and shared ownership, they also described a struggle in 'justifying their actions upward in the system' in a 'political organisation'.

### 7.1.1 Harnessing Friction

The meetings were reinvigorating and incredibly important for the project. I left them all with a feeling of gratitude for the courage and sincerity these people showed me. At the time, I described these situations using Jennifer Mason's notion of affinities, understood as 'encounters where it is possible to identify a spark or a charge of connection' (Mason, 2018). The meetings were vibrant, and I took this sense of connection as a sign of attunement, that there was something in the proposition and in the atmosphere that really resonated.

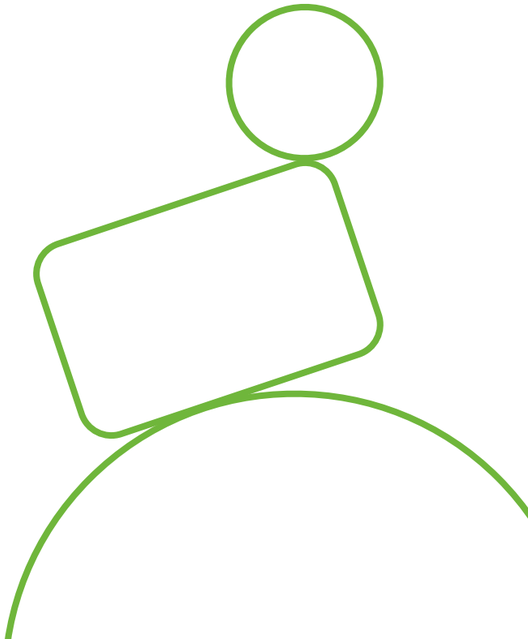
Despite the many differences between these contexts, they all shared a sense of confinement, of bumping up against rigid structures and 'too narrow boundaries', as one person expressed it. In their different ways, they conveyed to me that there was a friction between what they felt able to do to do and what they believed would be the best, most meaningful course of action. They expressed a need and a desire to move beyond what was currently possible, and they longed for other, less restricted conditions for participation. It seemed like my invitations and the meetings sparked an interest by intensifying a friction these people had already experienced within their current practices. Here I refer to my understanding of friction as discussed earlier, a 'surging, a rubbing, a connection of some kind that has an impact' (Stewart, 2007, p. 128). I will argue that these people all found themselves 'rubbing against' different facets of what I have called 'tales of necessity'. I believe that they all expressed a resistance towards what several scholars have identified as a 'global audit culture' (Shore & Wright, 2015; Spooner, 2017), where 'everything is measured and numbered' (Gair et al., 2021, p. 3). This is a type of governmentality based on 'an instrumental, results- and target-driven normative order' that governs by numbers and through numbers (Shore & Wright, 430). I believe that a weariness with this logic, focused on predictable, quantifiable outcomes, is evident in all four conversations, when people lamented the limited opportunities for them to engage in more open-ended collaboration with the inherent risk of not achieving what was expected.



For instance, when the people at the recycling centre struggled to deepen the involvement of citizens within the existing structures, I also understood this as a struggle to loosen their hold on the process and hence to risk the idea of predictable outcomes.

In critiquing the global audit culture, Marc Spooner went on to call for a collective resistance, suggesting that we should 'meet where the present horizon intersects collective will and wild imagination; there, toward the radical politics of possibility: subversive, defiant, critical, and most important, full of hope' (Spooner, 2017, p. 910). Maybe my project offered a glimmer of this bold proposition, and at the very least it seemed to remind people that alternatives were possible. As Anna Tsing remarked, friction may allow us to 'emerge from under the shadow of inevitability' (Tsing, 2005, p. 269), because it helps us see other possible practices, other possible worlds. In turn, friction helps us see that there are always 'other ways of making worlds' (Tsing, 2015, p. 155).

However, one ironic and slightly disheartening conclusion from these initial conversations is that those people who were most eager to join never found a viable way into the project. For the people in the museum and the library it seems that the friction was too intense, the gap between their current reality and that of the imagined junk playground too big. With busy schedules, limited resources, and the very expectations and structures they questioned, it simply became untenable. Even so, I took an important lesson from early in the project that there is a demand for modes of participation that harness friction, rather than merely seek to reduce it. As we shall see in the following section, friction would also come to play an important role as the junk playground experiments unfolded.



# 7.2 Attuning to the *Playgrounds*

I will now jump to the junk playground experiments to explore how people followed different paths into the experience, attuning themselves in different ways to the materials and encounters. I will look at attunement through the prism of new materialism, as this can help us see how attunement is not merely a human endeavour, but processes that unfold between both human and more-than-human bodies. As I have discussed in my methodology, it was my goal to call forth a sense of estrangement, a friction possibly strong enough to encourage participants to move beyond their familiar practices. If we revisit the story I told at the beginning of most experiments, perhaps we can see this more clearly:

> **We have landed far into the future, and nothing is as we're used to. It's very empty here, and there is no one here to tell us what is going on. We cannot find any written sources, we are simply lost. The only thing we have at our disposal are all these materials. They must contain the secret to our shared future. Together, we must start exploring the materials, touching them and listening to them. Maybe you're not used to things talking, but they do so here, and they have many stories to tell () If you think you know what will happen or when we should end up – you are woefully wrong. Hold on to the unpredictability, the unknown, and try following your bodies and hands, improvising in a dialogue with the materials.**

This is clearly a story with a new materialist vibe, seemingly embodying Jane Bennett's notion of 'vibrant matter', as I followed her suggestion to 'overemphasize, the agentic contributions of nonhuman forces' (Bennett, 2010, p. xvi), insisting that the materials



were actively playing along and pushing back. My impetus to tell the story this way was mostly intuitive, informed by my own playful practice and an attempt to destabilise the situation enough for new assemblages to emerge. With that story, I invited all the many participants in the junk playground experiments to play the fool with me, pretending that the materials speak back until at some point, maybe, we were no longer pretending.

Sometimes, as we shall see in the following, a participant may lean towards rejecting the proposition altogether, yet as she lingered in the emerging assemblage, things changed. In EX2, when people were sharing their reflections towards the end, one person, Olivia, described how she was initially very reluctant to step into the playground, expressing a strong internal resistance. She clearly felt uncomfortable in the beginning, and mentioned how she would probably have had a more positive attitude, had she been in a group with close colleagues. Here, however, she was in a group with employees from across the school, people she didn't know well. I cannot follow her process in proximity, but in what I assume to be a combination of a sense of professional obligations, curiosity, and courage, she decided to stay with the trouble. Engaging in the process of playing and making, interacting with her colleagues, the materials, and the surrounding nature, she forgot about her initial reservations, as well as her desire to reach a goal or produce a specific result. As she said, she 'had just been playing really, really well'. Some people laughed, perhaps because there is still something inherently alien in saying, as an adult, that you have 'just been playing', and during work hours, to boot. She excused her lack of in-depth reflections and repeated that she had simply been too immersed in the activity to reflect on it yet.

Let us move on to the students in the EX4. We enter the scene right after I have finished telling a version of the story introduced above, and the students formed a circle, where they took turns sharing their thoughts and ideas on their matter of common concern: how to engage marginalised citizens. One person suggested that 'There are people who need to be represented but who are currently not'. These first steps were cautious and a little timid, as if they could not let go of the assumption that something specific had to come out of all this and that they should predict this 'something' in advance. After a while, the circle dissolved, and they started gathering materials. The rather complex social issues they were grappling with seemed to become more concrete and tangible through the emerging material constellations they built, which evolved when the materials started 'talking back'. One person complained that the objects she had assembled did not fit together: 'They do not form a unity'. She elaborated that it is 'an incomplete world, no matter what we do'. She ventured out in search for different materials, insisting that 'I need to find some bricks that fit better, these are not quite right'. While she was still searching for materials that could follow *her* intentions, it appears that she faced resistance from these bricks; they did not want to tell the same story. The group's key theme was balance, pursuing a vision of a balanced, inclusive society. One of their main challenges was to create an installation, using cardboard tubes, that could simulate this delicate balancing act. Even though it was a highly simplified model, the dynamic nature of the assemblage resisted their attempts and insisted that such a balance would always be precarious and temporary, which became particularly evident when part of their installation fell and shattered on the concrete floor.



The group started from what seems like a more conventional approach, as they attempted to solve their problem by thinking and talking about ideas and expectations. Increasingly frustrated with the failures of this tactic, they slowly shifted towards engaging in more dynamic, affective and experimental encounters with the materials. Where Zizi Papacharissi charted how social media allows people to 'feel their way' into news events (Papacharissi, 2014), here the materials allowed the group to slowly, carefully feel their way into the experiment. One person said that they were 'used to being in a more controlled process' and this may help us understand why their process of attunement seemed challenging, as they had to first overcome the friction of open-ended exploration.

Prototyping a 'balanced society'.

We will end by tracing a rather different form of affective attunement that took place right at the beginning of EX5. One person, Ulla, was engaged in an affective dialogue, inquiring what her body and the materials wanted to do. She walked among the materials, before she picked up a wooden grating and continued her curious search pattern. After a while, she placed the grating on a metal rail with a series of wheels underneath, while the rail itself lay on a tilted sheet of wood, and the grating rolled down like a skateboard going downhill. This movement seemed to propel the encounter onward. She found another set of wheels that she also placed under the grating, and she then stepped onto the 'skateboard'. It tilted as she was going back and forth, the assemblage was volatile and unstable.

Trying out the 'skateboard'

'How do I get down?' she asked, laughing, before she stepped off and continued her search for other materials. She found a big bucket that she tried on as a hat, while another person, Vivian, came up to the skateboard with a big ventilation pipe between her legs.

Improving the 'skateboard'





She sat down and started rocking from side to side, while Ulla came back and gave her a gentle push with a cardboard tube, so she rolled a bit to the side.

They continued like this for a while, finding various objects to generate motion, even contemplating creating a sail for greater propulsion. They later reflected on the experience: 'We were quite inspired by the play itself, the rocking back and forth, the idea that we could drive somewhere, we took that with us, there should be some fun no matter what the world looks like'.

Creating movement.

With these three cases, we see examples of what Brian Massumi labelled 'differential attunement', where the participants are 'all in on the event together, but (they are) in it together differently' because we all 'come with a different set of tendencies, habits, and action potentials' (Massumi & Manning, 2012) Or as Andeline dos Santos described it, 'different bodies register and respond to affects in different ways. An affect that may arouse one might inhibit another' (Dos Santos, 2022, p. 256).

Whereas some people were immediately attracted, physically, to the allure of the materials, others were more hesitant, sometimes even uncomfortable. Some lingered for a while, maintaining a distance, while others got dragged right into the thick of it. Following Sara Ahmed, we can start to see how to be 'affected by something is to evaluate that thing' and 'evaluations are expressed in how bodies turn toward things' (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p. 31). She discussed how humans are both attracted by the call of 'happy objects' and at the same time make a choice about which objects to align themselves with. For instance, in the situation with the improvised skateboard, the wheels became a 'happy object' for the two women, who were drawn to the possibility of movement, the thrill of not quite knowing what would happen next.

In the cases from EX4 and EX5, we observe how people were attuning themselves to the materials, turning towards some things and away from others. In EX4, they turned towards materials they knew, mostly cardboard, whereas in the second case, the attraction seemed to lie more in the unknown and the surprises that the assemblages could produce. The latter example in particular draws out what Kathleen Stewart dubbed 'the affective subject', a person who 'aims to notice what crystallizes and how things ricochet and rebound in a social-natural-aesthetic ecology of compositions and thresholds of expressivity' (Stewart, 2017, p. 194).

Where in the EX4, people seemed to hold on to a greater sense of control, in EX5, the two women demonstrated a 'certain willingness to



appear naive or foolish', which, according to Jane Bennett, is an important technique in attempting to 'to discern nonhuman vitality' (Bennett, 2010, p. 14). It is difficult to ascertain where their own agency and intentions ended and where the forces of the objects took over. All components of the assemblage become entangled in ways we cannot accurately discern. Puig de la Bellacasa argued that 'understanding contact as touch intensifies a sense of the co-transformative, in the flesh effects of connections between beings () touching is also called upon as the experience par excellence where boundaries between self and other are blurred' (Bellacasa, 2017, loc. 1660). Following Bellacasa, when the people in the playgrounds touch bodies, human and more-than-human, they transform each other; however imperceptibly, the distance between these bodies collapses.

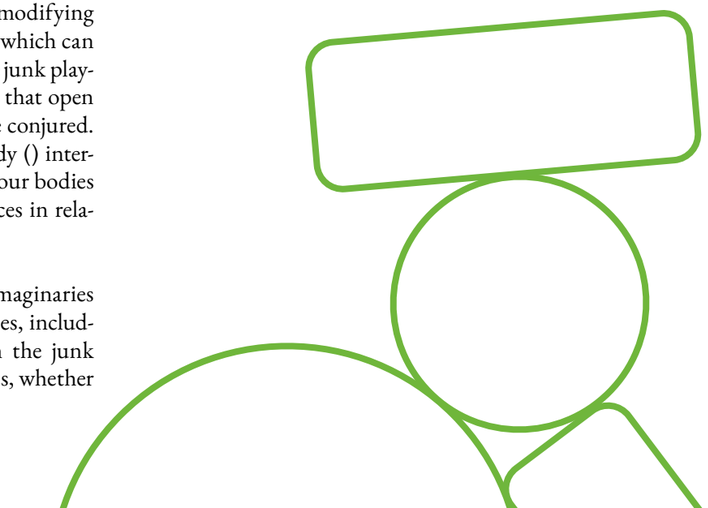
Across all the experiments, participants attuned in different ways, some fast, some slow, some jumped right in, others were more cautious or sceptical, biding their time. From a design perspective, I believe it is fruitful to consider and accommodate for a wider range of such attunement strategies, allowing for many ways of entering an event, many ways of playing, and many ways of becoming a participant.

# 7.3 Imagination and the *Imaginary*

In these first few glimpses into the junk playgrounds, we have followed encounters between human and more-than-human bodies as they form new assemblages that may offer new opportunities for engaging, lively play experiences. I will end this chapter by looking at how we are also starting to see new imaginaries and worlds emerge. To better understand how such new worlds come about, I will argue that attuning to the new materialist assemblages of the junk playgrounds can spark new imaginaries. While I remain curious as to how these imaginaries might travel and live on with the participants outside the playgrounds, it is not my aim here to follow those trajectories. I stay squarely in the imaginaries as they unfolded in the playground.

In the following, I will draw on Kathleen Lennon's concept of imaginaries as 'the ways in which the world is lit up for us' (Lennon, 2015, p. 139). Further, for Lennon, the world is always an imaginary world, one that is constantly imagined and reimagined, always with the 'possibility of it being imagined in different ways, being open to alternative visions' (Lennon, 2015, p. 12). She argued that changing or modifying our imaginaries requires 'the devising of alternative images which can be affectively engaging' (Lennon, 2015, p. 114). It seems the junk playgrounds have offered such affectively engaging experiences that open the possibility for other imaginaries and other worlds to be conjured. Finally, Lennon suggested that 'our imaginaries of the body () intersect with our imaginaries of the world () and to re-imagine our bodies is to re-imagine possibilities for our inter-subjective practices in relation to a shared social world' (Lennon, 2015, p. 132).

With this I will argue that a greater diversity of bodily imaginaries might also enable a greater range of inter-subjective practices, including *democratic* practices. Thus, when the participants in the junk playground experimented with a range of bodily imaginaries, whether





they jumped right in or took more cautious steps, they also potentially examined new possible ways of being in the world. If the body can be imagined differently, if we feel that there are other ways of being a body, then it may be an opening to imagining other ways of being and other worlds. That takes me back to Thomas S. Henricks' argument that when we play together, we 'create models for living'. That is what all these people in the playgrounds have been doing, enacting models for living, through their corporeal encounters. These are not big 'models' for living, but rather, the creation takes place in the small (Binder et al., 2015; DiSalvo, 2022). For the time being, I will merely suggest that in reading the junk playground experiments like this, multiple imaginaries can emerge, including bodily imaginaries, where participants, through the process of affective attunement, can explore and enact new worlds.

If we return one last time to Olivia, the hesitant woman from EX2, perhaps we can see more clearly now how her imaginary evolved through the process. Initially, her imaginary of her own capacity to enter the playgrounds was configured a certain way, not a bad way or a wrong way, just one possible way. Her world was, at that time, lit up in a way that did not make it meaningful for her to accept my invitation; it was neither safe nor appealing enough. Staying with the trouble as she did, her imaginary shifted or evolved, bit by bit, and the world became lit up in a different way. We cannot say exactly how it happened, and I don't think it was merely something in her that shifted, but rather the shifting sands of the experience, the ongoing reconfigurations of the assemblages. It was the rain that stopped for a while, the people who proved to be better play mates than expected, the intrigue of the materials, the possibility of telling other stories about their collective futures, the laughing and, who knows, maybe it was also the beer at the end. It was all that and more, at least as much as it was conscious intention and agency on her part. With as much as I cannot say, what I *can* say with some certainty, however, is that the shift was substantial enough for her to 'play really, really well', which is no trivial matter, and that might just be enough for now.

# 8. Rhythms and Affective Intensities



From the very first experiment, I had a sense in my body that these events were always unstable and volatile, and that there was no centre or static core. Rather, the junk playgrounds came alive as dynamic flows, pulsating energies, movements, a beat and a certain constellation or symphony of *rhythms*. While I did not design the junk playgrounds with rhythms in mind, in hindsight I realise that they have indeed been sites of 'polyrhythmic assemblages', and to move a little closer to this phenomenon, I will analyse situations and processes in the junk playgrounds by using 'rhythmanalysis' (Lefebvre, 2004) to identify affective intensities.

# 8.1 Hammers and a *Vibrant Yellow Cloth*

We begin in the gravel pit, right at the beginning of EX6. A group of children and one adult were in the middle of building something at a popular point at the top of the steep slope. I got the sense that they were initially making a table, presumably for storing their precious soda cans. It would later evolve into a fort, a helicopter, and whatnot, supporting the twists and turns of the play experiences that unfolded around it. This is also an example of how the GoPro footage 'invites researchers to take a new route of movement through the world, accompanied by the recording, and an empathetic sensibility or disposition' (Sumartojo & Pink, 2017, p. 42). In the following we share a perspective with the boy Arthur, who was wearing the GoPro. The whole sequence lasts around 10 minutes in total.

Erik and two children, presumably building a table.

One of the children, Arthur, was there with his dad, Erik, and they were busy building the table. As we shall see, Arthur was immediately drawn to other ideas.



Arthur showing a piece of wood to his dad.

Arthur: 'Dad, Dad!' - he was trying to attract his dad's attention, but Erik was busy.
Arthur: 'Dad, Dad, can we use these for something? ... Uhm, Dad, can we use these for something?'
Erik: 'Yes?' - his dad replied, but he seemed a bit absent-minded; he was clearly caught up with something else. Arthur was not easily deterred, so he went on:
Arthur: 'To build stairs so it's easier to come up!'

Making stairs on the slope.

He walked to the edge of the slope, maybe to indicate his intention to build the stairs. He dropped the beam and picked up a board that he tried to push into the wet soil.

He left the board and went back to his dad, who was still busy.

Arthur: 'Dad, can't I borrow...'
Erik: 'Wait a second ... it's just because ... I need some more nails.'
Arthur: 'Dad, can't I just use the hammer quickly?'
Erik: 'I'm just trying to hammer something.'

Arthur visiting two friends on the slope.

He left the group again, walked around the area, and engaged with some of the other children before he returned to his dad.

Arthur: 'Dad, now I need that hammer soon.'
Erik: 'We are just in the middle of hammering.'

A yellow cloth calling for Arthur.

Still unsatisfied and hammer-less, he went to another child close by, where he found a piece of yellow fabric with a pile of nails on it.

Is he attaching the cloth to the roots of a tree?

Arthur moved towards the fabric, and his hands immediately started to fiddle with it, as if he was trying to tie a corner of the fabric to the root of a tree.

Arthur: 'Look, Dad.'
Erik: 'Which fabric is that? Is it someone's scarf?'
Arthur: 'No. It is a scarf, but it's not anybody's. It's something they brought.

Making stairs on the slope - again.

He finally got hold of the hammer, a big rubber mallet, from his dad. He returned to the board from before and tried to hammer it into the soil.

Arthur: 'Uhm, hmm, yes.'

It's like he was not completely satisfied with the result. It didn't quite stick. He took the board and the hammer, and made another attempt, closer to one of the other boys.



Checking in with a friend.

Arthur: 'What are you building? Is it so you don't fall down?'

Arthur listening to his father's ideas.

Erik: 'Come over here, we have an idea. We have made this, but we can find some branches to put on the side, so you can go in there.'
Arthur: 'That's a good idea,' – he said as he ran off, presumably to find a branch.
Erik: 'Do you want to help find branches?'

Finding branches for the fort.

Arthur: 'Yes, you could break off these or cut them off?'
Erik: 'Over there, there are a lot of branches over here?'

Then Arthur seemed to suddenly remember the yellow fabric and ran back to it.

Arthur: 'But I'm also in the middle of doing something.'

Coming back to the yellow cloth.

He sat down and started, yet again, fiddling with the fabric. Apparently, he wanted to fasten it to the tree, and he pushed a nail through the crocheted cloth.

Materials and children moving up the slope.

Someone in the background, who was still working with the branches, called out for the hammer.

Lauge: 'I need the hammer to hammer them into the ground.'

Arthur got up and moved toward Lauge, who was hitting at the end of a branch.

Arthur: 'Oh, I just needed the hammer.'
Lauge: 'That's just too bad.'

Arthur turned around, and ran toward some of the other children, who were playing on the slope.

Is it a window?

Arthur: 'What is that? Oh, we can use that as a window!'
Anna: 'Y es, that's why I took it up here.'



'Raw materials'.


Arthur: 'Thanks.'

He took it from the girl and returned to his dad.

Arthur: 'Dad! We can use this!'

He held up the hard plastic, as if to show its potential as a window. Coincidentally, it said 'raw material'.

Trying to get the hammer.

Arthur: 'We can use this as a window.'
Lauge: 'Are we allowed to do that?'
Arthur: 'Yes, we're allowed to use everything.'

They started to attach the plastic to what seemed to be slowly evolving from the initial table towards a place to hide, a den or a fort.

Arthur: 'Where's the hammer? CAN'T I BORROW THE HAMMER!?' – he sounded increasingly desperate.

Toiling away!

He got the hammer back, and returned promptly to the yellow cloth, where a nail was still sticking out, while the pile of nails lay on top of it.

Does it stick?

He hammered the nail into the root, and tugged at the cloth, as if to see if it would hold, but it looked like he pulled the cloth over the head of the nail, essentially undoing the work he had been doing.

Yet another attempt at fastening the cloth.

However, he was not easily deterred, and he picked up another nail that he sought to attach to a branch at the other end of the cloth.

Looking for useful materials.

He turned around, as if scanning the immediate vicinity for useful materials.

Arthur: 'Ooh, this stick one can use.' He sounded quite excited, as he found the small stick.



Trying out a new strategy.

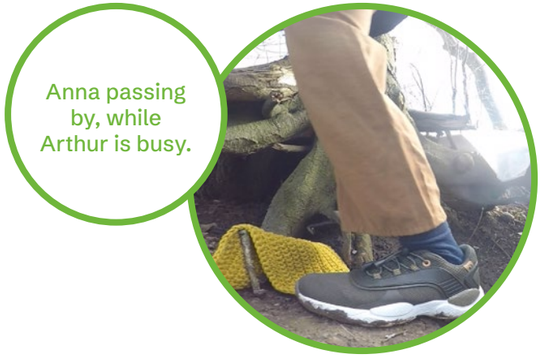
He turned back to the cloth, lifted it up and put the small stick underneath it, before he began to hammer it down like a kind of tent peg.

He keeps at it.

Lauge: 'I would like to borrow the hammer.'
Arthur: 'Yes, in a little while, I just need to use it for something first.'

He picked up another small stick and placed it under the other end of the cloth.

Anna passing by, while Arthur is busy.



Anna: 'Can I just pass by here, Arthur?'

More sticks for the project.

She left and he returned to the cloth. Someone was shouting: 'I need the hammer, Arthur!'

Arthur: 'Yes, but I need to use, I need to, I just ... I just need to find two sticks, and then I have to hit them into the ground, and then you can have it.'

Arthur remains focused on the task at hand.

Lauge: 'Arthur, can I borrow the hammer?'
Arthur: 'Yes, in a little while.'

He continued, calmly, to hit the sticks into the ground. He seemed very focused on the task, despite the activities taking place around him.

Reluctantly handing over the hammer.

Lauge: 'Can I please borrow the hammer?'
Arthur: 'Yes, in a moment. Like that ..' (he says to himself).

Now he was finished, it seemed, and he got up to hand over the hammer.



What is this for? A flag?

Arthur immediately left his solitary project behind, as he approached one of the other children.

Arthur: 'What are you building?'
Lauge: 'I was just thinking, a wall ...'

He picked up what looked like an old coffee sack

Arthur: 'We could also build this, a bit of floor, so we don't slip?'
Lauge: 'No, but maybe we can use it as a flag?'
Arthur: 'Oh, yeah ... hey, can't I just quickly borrow the hammer?'

It doesn't quite seem to work.

He then tried to hit the wooden beam into the ground. Maybe he wanted to erect a flag pole for the coffee sack 'flag' he just found? 'No!' – he exlaimed to himself before he suddenly stopped, as he probably realised that the big, square beam wasn't easily driven into the ground. There was too much friction. He turned towards the group with his dad, where we (myself included) were talking about how to make a hole in the plexiglass without causing it to splinter.

Me: 'We have small wood drills down there, I think they can go through?'

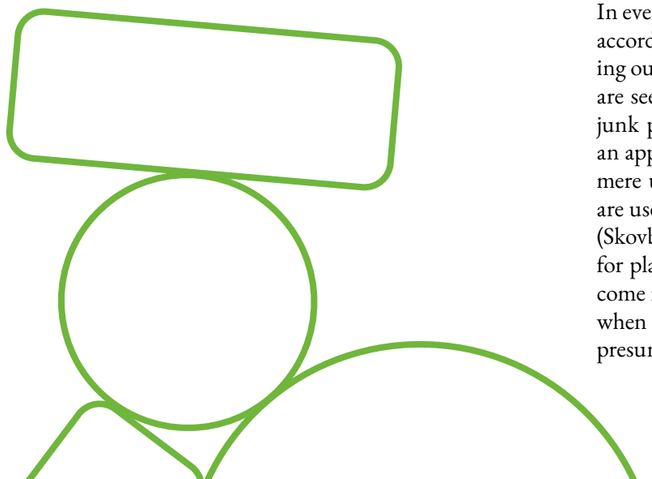
Arthur: 'I'll get those." He ran down the slope at a breakneck pace, arriving safely at the bottom, where he started browsing the materials.

Since attunement is always ongoing, a continous calibration and recalibration, we can understand this entire sequence as one of attunement. Arthur was continually attuning himself to the event, to the other people, to the site, and to the materials, just like they are attuning to him in an assemblage of attunements.

### 8.1.1 Play Practices

I believe that what we see here is essentially a *play practice,* or an assemblage of play practices. As Helle Marie Skovbjerg argued, play is always about doing something, and it is in the 'doing' that play can happen (Skovbjerg, 2021, p. 53). What Skovbjerg called 'play practices' are actions done for the sake of getting 'into' and sustaining play. In the following, I will analyse the above sequence as such a series of play practices. While we cannot surgically discern or disentangle the multiple layers of motivation and intention that emerge and unfold through the sequence, I think it is reasonable to assume that *one* of Arthur's intentions was to get into play. To that end, he engaged in a range of play practices, actions done for the sake of enacting and sustaining the play experience.

In the beginning of the sequence, he repeatedly tried to catch his father's attention, before he went looking for something else to do, as a plan B of sorts. Rather than asking the same questions and repeating the same actions to gain access over and over, he went on to create a small world of his own, where he was a little less reliant on the whims of others. He seemed drawn towards the yellow cloth, which inspired him to pursue a series of play practices. It was never entirely obvious what exactly he was trying to achieve by fastening the cloth to the tree and the ground. In a later conversation, he described how the nails 'were lying all over the place () I gathered them and nailed it in place'. Following this explanation, he was trying to create a semblance





of order and stability in what was essentially a volatile, unpredictable, and messy situation. It is a rational perspective, and I suspect that this is a post-rationalisation that demonstrates his capacity to address an adult audience. It is almost as if he produced what Sebastian Deterding called an 'alibi for play' (Deterding, 2017), something adults often do to legitimise their play activities. However, I am not convinced that tidying up the nails in an orderly fashion was the most salient aspect of his endeavours. At first, he was seeking his dad's attention, and when he was unable to immediately achieve this, he did what was in his power to get into play. Once he succeeded, engrossed in the activity of fastening the yellow cloth with nails and sticks, I believe that he pursued what Stuart Brown calls the 'continuation desire' of play (Brown & Vaughan, 2010, p. 18). This desire is essentially the desire to keep playing and the task of the player is to 'find ways to keep it going' (Brown & Vaughan, 2010, p. 18). As I will examine in the following, several different objects were integral to these attempts.

### 8.1.2 Happy Objects

In everyday life, materials and objects are often assessed and evaluated according to their instrumental qualities and their utility for carrying out certain tasks or solving specific problems. In other words, they are seen as props for human intentions. With the glimpses from the junk playgrounds, it is becoming increasingly clear to me that such an approach is inadequate here. There is something else at stake than mere utility and technical problem solving. For Skovbjerg, materials are useful in play practices to create situations where play can happen (Skovbjerg, 2021, p. 54). Thus, the most important aspect of materials for play is that the players can 'do something with these materials to come into play' (Skovbjerg, 2021, p. 53). We saw this numerous times when we followed Arthur, as he repeatedly did things with materials, presumably for the sake of making play happen.

Out of habit and the socialisation that follows from the traditions of Western Modernity, my gaze instinctively searches for human actions. I see *humans* do things with things. However, if we acknowledge the implications of new materialism, we cannot assume that Arthur or any of the people in the playground are exerting a kind of unidirectional agency or intention. Their actions are not those of omnipotent beings imposing their will on the world, but rather, of creatures and critters with severely limited capacities for direct change. They are, reiterating Jane Bennett, merely 'throwing pebbles in a pond' (Bennett, 2010, p. 32) and hoping for some kind of meaningful or enjoyable outcome. The materials and objects talk back, or perhaps more to the point, they play along. I find a similar position in recent studies of children's play, where Hillevi Lenz Taguchi studied children playing with sand (Taguchi, 2014). She argued that 'the glittering sand and the child are in a co-constitutive relationship'. (Taguchi, 2014, p. 7). She further contended that playing with the sand formed an assemblage that blurred the 'binary distinctions between humans and more-than-humans, adults and children' (Taguchi, 2014, p. 9). Playing is not just something the children do to the sand, but an event emerging from the encounter. In another study, that coincidentally also involves playing with sand, Anne-Lene Sand et al argued that there is no clear line between the children and the materials, but a 'force in both the children's bodies and the material which overlaps and resonates with each other' (Sand et al., 2022, p. 63) (my translation from Danish). They also argued that 'the material contributes to creating a social space, where the social practice is closely linked to what the boys are doing with the sand' (Sand et al., 2022, p. 63) – and what the sand does with the boys.

If we return to Arthur with these perspectives, the question of what he did with the nails, sticks, boards, and beams is inadequate, and we must also ask what they did with him, and what emerges from these encounters of distributed agencies and intentions. If I still do not quite dare to claim that the cloth, the hammer, or the gravel pit itself have aspirations and intentions of their own, they do exert important influence on the emerging unfolding of the event. Whereas the materials



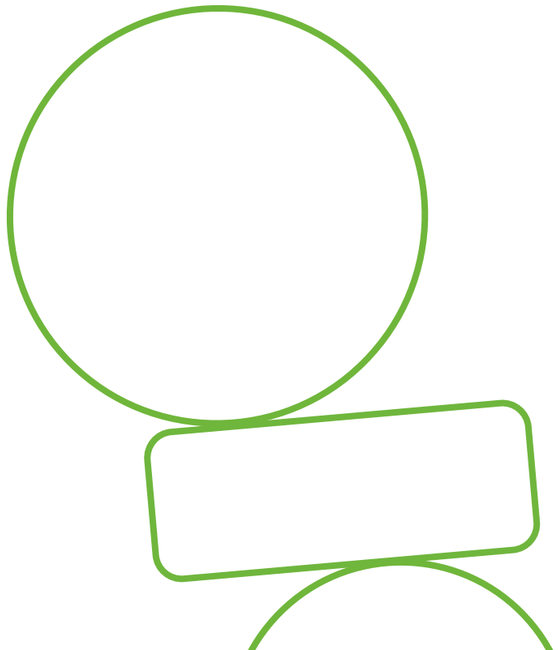
were sometimes conducive to Arthur's efforts, lending themselves to his ideas, they also oftentimes resisted him, got in the way, and rejected his impulses. Like the board he repeatedly tried to push into the ground, allegedly to build stairs on the slope for easier access to their favourite vantage point. The same could be said for the square beam he wanted turn into a flagpole, but neither the hammer, the beam, nor the soil agreed with him, and he eventually gave up and moved on. Yet again, there was too much friction, literally. If I were to apply a logic of productivity and efficiency, it would be all too easy to conclude that he did not really succeed in anything during the time we spent with him above.

What he did achieve, I would argue, was to be moved in ways that afforded play, which also shows in his relationship with the cloth. I have no way to accurately discern exactly how he was affected by the cloth, but it seems evident to me that he *was* affected. He affected the cloth by touching it, stretching it, and not least by fixing it in place with the nails and sticks, but the cloth also affected him through their encounters. Other objects attracted him during this sequence, such as the sticks, pieces of wood, the plexiglass, rope, and not least the rubber mallet, yet he kept coming back to the yellow cloth. As he initially wandered off from his dad, he was drawn to what he thought was a scarf; this little, seemingly insignificant yellow crotched cloth exerted a pull on him, oriented him towards itself, in a way similar to what Sara Ahmed called a 'happy object' (Ahmed, 2010). She argued that we 'judge something to be good or bad according to how it affects us, whether it gives us pleasure or pain' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 31). Our evaluations of objects are expressed in how we turn towards certain objects and away from others. In her words, 'objects that give us pleasure take up residence within our bodily horizon' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 31). For Arthur, the cloth was apparently a happy object, taking up residence within his bodily horizon, and he moved towards it, repeatedly. It intrigued him when he first encountered it, and it developed a hold on him, such that even his father's invitations to play were not quite enough for him to leave it behind. While it may be a stretch to suggest he was indeed feeling happy, I sense bursts of affective intensities like spikes of energy emanating from his bodily engagement with the cloth. Alongside Ahmed's notion of 'happy objects', I believe these intensities can be described with Jennifer Mason's conceptualisation of affinities (Mason, 2018). Mason described affinities as 'potent connections that rise up and matter' and as 'encounters where it is possible to identify a spark or a charge of connection that makes personal life charismatic, or enchants, or even toxifies it' (Mason, 2018, loc. 288). Following this framing, we can see several encounters that could be understood as such 'affinities', both between the people, and the material objects. When Arthur first found the small stick, he said to himself in excitement, 'Ooh, this stick one can use', as if this encounter generated a spark that changed his trajectory. He realised that the stick had a certain quality, and he immediately expanded his play practice to include it. In the following, I will argue that these encounters also generate their own rhythms.

### 8.1.3 Rhythms

While I have focused on the affective relationship with the objects, it is also becoming evident to me that there are certain movements, shifts, energies, and rhythms that flow across the playground. In the play practices described by Skovbjerg, the actions of play are characterised by a rhythm between repetition and rupture (Skovbjerg, 2021, p. 55). In the following, I will take a closer look at these rhythms through the prism of Henri Lefebvre's 'rhythmanalysis' (Lefebvre, 2004). As Lefebvre never offered a clear definition (Lyon & Crow, 2018, p. 4), the closest we seem to get is his assertion that whenever 'there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm' (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 15). With that, we can already start to see rhythms in the sequence above, where Arthur and the other people were situated in place atop the slope in the gravel pit, their play experience unfolded over time, and it clearly required a certain 'expenditure of energy' from everyone involved. For Lefebvre, as for Skovbjerg, the repetition of rhythms was essential, as there is 'no rhythm without repetition in time and in space, without reprises, without returns, in short without measure' (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 6). At the same time, however, there is no 'identical absolute repetition' and as such, 'there is always something new and unforeseen that introduces itself into the repetitive: difference' (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 6). Tim Edensor, with his interest in the rhythms of urban spaces, argued that this constant oscillation between repetition and difference 'avoids the conception of place as static, for rhythms are essentially dynamic, part of the multiplicity of flows that emanate from, pass through and centre upon place, and contribute to its situated dynamics' (Edensor, 2010, p. 3).

When Arthur was engrossed in the play activity of fastening the yellow cloth, finding nails or sticks, hammering them into the root or ground, he was repeating the same actions again and again. He held the nail or the stick while he hammered down on it with much vigour. It never happened in precisely the same way, because even the repetitive





practice of hammering is never a complete carbon copy of the previous actions; a kind of displacement or shift happens from iteration to iteration. When he realised that the nail did not actually hold the cloth, because the head of the nail slipped through the stiches, he was drawn instead to the small stick, which apparently had a different quality, it spoke to him in a different way. It was still a repetition, but in a different way, because he was driving one kind of material – nails or sticks – into other kinds of material – roots or soil, from slightly different angles, with varying degrees of force, and so on.

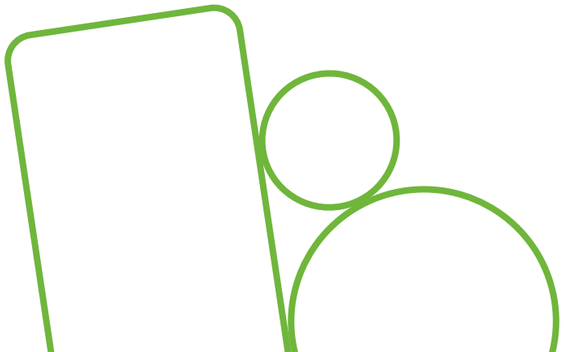
This experience also demonstrates how rhythms are never merely *human* rhythms. These are not rhythms produced by human agency alone, but the rhythms always emerge from the encounters between humans, other living beings, physical materials, places, and so on. Diana H. Coole and Samantha Frost maintained that new materialist assemblages are always marked by 'considerable instability and volatility since their repetition is never perfect; there is a continuous redefining and reassembling of key elements that results in systems' capacities to evolve into new and unexpected forms' (Coole & Frost, 2010, p. 14). The new materialist assemblage can thus also be seen as a nexus of rhythms, a 'polyrhythmic assemblage'. These ideas would probably not be alien to Lefebvre, who himself stated that for the rhythmanalyst

> **[...] nothing is immobile. He hears the wind, the rain, storms; but if he considers a stone, a wall, a trunk, he understands their slowness, their interminable rhythm. This object is not inert; time is not set aside for the subject. It is only slow in relation to our time, to our body, the measure of rhythms.**
>
> *(Lefebvre, 2004, p. 37)*

Further, Lefebvre argued that the 'interaction of diverse, repetitive and different rhythms animates () the street and the neighbourhood' (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 30). As we can also see, there is never just one rhythm, but interactions of diverse rhythms, polyrhythmia (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 16), that sometimes coalesce, sometimes diverge, sometimes come into conflict with each other, and it is these encounters of rhythms that makes places, like a junk playground, come alive. Any place, then, is configured through a multitude of rhythms that 'interact and impact each other' but at the same time, 'different rhythms never become one rhythm, but they will amplify or decrease each other' (Christiansen & Gebauer, 2019, p. 7). We have seen how Arthur wove himself in and out of the many rhythms that formed the social fabric of the event, staying connected while diving deep into focused actions. He seemed to sometimes play at the edge of other rhythms, when, for instance, his dad and other children were building a table, or when Anna stepped right across him. These rhythms were never entirely separate from each other, nor did they ever form one synchronised beat. Instead, they unfolded polyrhythmically into and out of each other. Arthur's rhythm enhanced and was enhanced by other rhythms when he kept suggesting small gestures, such as offering up ideas for how to use certain materials or running down to get the wood drills at the end. He alternated between seeking connections, continually reaffirming his place in the event with the others, while also trying to maintain a sense of autonomy. For instance, when he sought to attune himself to his dad's rhythm for a while, and Erik finally actively involved him in finding the branches, he suddenly returned to the yellow fabric, insisting that he was 'in the middle of something'.

#### 8.1.3.1 Tools

The constant negotiations around who got to use the hammer also sparked numerous rhythms. The people in the playgrounds, especially but not exclusively the children, were almost constantly debating the right to use certain tools, from hand tools like hammers and saws to power tools like drills, jigsaws, sanders and so on. In the gravel pit, the negotiations were, on the surface, driven by certain specific, often urgent, needs. We see this when Arthur stressed the urgency of





the matter by saying 'Dad, now I need that hammer *soon*!', as if he had an important deadline to make. I'm pretty sure he didn't. Everyone who asked for the hammer typically expressed that they needed the hammer for this or that – for driving in nails, for hammering branches into the ground and so on. We saw this when Arthur said that he needed to use the hammer for two more sticks:
'Yes, but I need to use, I need to, I just ... I just need to find two sticks, and then I have to hit them into the ground, and then you can have it.'

He was searching for the words, as if the very important purpose had not revealed itself to him just yet; the idea was only slowly forming as he spoke. I believe he was improvising, 'thinking-in-movement' (Sheets-Johnstone, 1981) and I get the feeling that the very specific need for two sticks was made up as a response to make his claim on the hammer more convincing. This was his alibi, how he legitimised and substantiated his claim to the hammer, but I wonder if it is even the utility and function of the hammer as a *hammer* he was after in the first place? It often seemed like the negotiation or haggling took on its own life. It could possibly be just another way to stay connected, to maintain a spark that keeps the play experience alive, a play practice of its own. When Skovbjerg argued that play materials can only really be evaluated by the extent to which they 'work to create play situations with' (Skovbjerg, 2021, p. 46), I would suggest that the hammer did indeed work as a material to create play situations with. The people in the playground were not so much seeking a hammer-hammer, the hammer was not first and foremost a tool to efficiently drive nails, sticks, branches, or beams, but a play-hammer, a material to enact play situations with. This observation may be supported by the fact that nobody ever questioned the usefulness of the large rubber mallet, which was certainly not the best tool for any of the tasks they were using it for. They could have walked down the slope, something that generally seemed enjoyable, to find other, more suitable hammers, but they didn't. It seemed less important to find the best tool for the job and more important to just do something with something. Who knows, maybe using a big, unwieldy and sort of inappropriate rubber mallet was *more* appropriate because it felt more *playful?* It undoubtedly added both friction and surprise to the experience, when, for instance, it would bounce back and absorb the energy from hitting a nail in a completely different manner compared to a hammer made of steel.

I believe this illustrates an important point made by Maria Øksnes when she argued that 'children's seemingly purposeless play is meaningful and fun because of the simple pleasure of doing precisely what one is doing' and 'the value of play for children seems to lie in "the in-between", the here-and-now – and not in any positive outcomes in the future' (Øksnes, 2013, p. 149). Arthur and the other children seemed exactly drawn to the excitement of 'doing what they are doing' in the moment, and they were, by all accounts, not too concerned with expected future outcomes.

# 8.2 Repeating *Rhythms*

We have already seen how some rhythms repeat themselves in slightly different iterations. There is one rhythm in particular I have observed across the junk playgrounds, a recurring movement back and forth to the collection of discarded materials. All the experiments typically began with an exploration of the piles of discarded materials, where people would be drawn to or even 'seduced by', as one person put it, the materials. They would pick something up, and bring it with them to some other place, but they always returned, again and again, to the shared collection. We see a hint of this in the written reflections from EX2, where one person noted that 'it is good to be in movement. To go over and fetch things. To go exploring. Finding hidden treasures. To build something together'. This person conveyed the sense of attraction that the materials had sparked, an occasionally magnetic force that sustained a rhythm of to-and-fro.

In the gravel pit, we can see another example of this. One child was dragging a blue drainage tube up the hill, while another was sitting further down with the other end of the tube. 'I'm ready,' the boy at the top said as he held the end of the tube up to one ear and stuck a finger in the other. He made a concentrated attempt to hear something, while the other kid shouted into the tube. As I was observing this, it seemed that the sound travelled better outside the tube than inside, and the boy dropped his end of the tube, which slid down the hill. A group of children quickly gathered in the middle of the steep slope within the space loosely circumscribed by the long blue tube. To the children playing, the tube was transformed into a wild ocean with dangers lurking everywhere:

Is it a slope in a gravel pit - or a roaring ocean full of dangers?

'There are bombs and missiles and lava underneath the bombs, and there is fire and COMBAT MISSILES!'
'Save yourself. Don't save other people. Just save yourself. THE SHIP IS SINKING!'
'We must hurry to the helicopter.'
'The rescue helicopter will take us away from this sinking ship.'



A table, a fort or a helicopter?

The intensity of the situation continued to increase as they all ran up the hill to what used to be a fort and was now a helicopter that quickly took them away from danger. This went on for a while, with the group scattering and reassembling, using the 'helicopter' as a rallying point and a narrative device.

Hands touching materials to assess whether 'some thing' can be used for 'something'.

The children seemed to be improvising based on their collective repertoire, including experiences with ships sinking in the digital game Roblox Titanic, the available materials, the topography of the gravel pit, their own bodies, and their affective responses and intensities. Between the intense outbursts of euphoric play energy, the children kept returning to the collection of materials once they ran out of materials, ideas and – perhaps - energy. The piles of materials at the foot of the slope seemingly became a kind of 'recharging station' where the imagination of the players could be topped up. They went through the piles, seemingly looking for specific items and materials, but more often, they were simply 'browsing', randomly letting their hands assess whether 'some thing' could be used for 'something' – as if the materials became a catalyst for imagination and play, something with which to improvise new play situations.

As Thomas S. Henricks argued, 'players want to get their hands on playing materials; they itch to see what they can do with them. And it is precisely because they do not know how this process will go—and what it will feel like—that they want to be involved' (Henricks, 2015, loc. 918). The materials held a promise of play and surprise, and that may be a central reason why people maintained this rhythm, back and forth. This also mirrors Skovbjerg's argument, when she reminded us that we cannot judge materials for play detached from the play experience. She claimed, for instance, that many adults have a certain taste in what counts as 'good' and 'bad' play materials for children, often tied to romantic images of what play used to be like before digital technologies. However, she claimed, for the children, the only thing that really matters about play materials is whether they 'work to create play situations with' (Skovbjerg, 2021, p. 47, my translation). The main point is not to assess seemingly functional qualities of the junk materials, but to better understand how they may inspire play.

This refrain, '*some thing*' that can be used for '*something*' also reminds us yet again that these are affective experiences, bodies affecting and being affected. The notion resonates with Kathleen Stewart's argument that ordinary affects are 'things that happen' in relations and encounters, and when they happen, they 'catch people up in something that feels like *some*thing' (Stewart, 2007, pp. 1–2).



## 8.3 Surprising *Rhythms*

In the example from the gravel pit, it seems that the children were also using the available materials, the site, and their bodies to create 'precarious circumstances' (Henricks, 2015, p. 214) whereby they could oscillate between order and disorder, between having and losing control. They showed 'a desire to disturb things, and to inject surprise into the mundane practicalities of everyday experiences' (Lester, 2010, p. 2). Another way of understanding this rhythm is through the prism of 'predictive processing', which Marc M. Andersen et al used to suggest that players chase surprising situations to observe their own capacity to resolve the surprise. They argued that play is 'the deliberate seeking and creation of surprising situations' (Andersen et al., 2022, p. 11), which I can recognise in the story from the gravel pit just above. The core of their argument is that players seek surprising situations that 'gravitate toward sweet-spots of relative complexity with the goal of resolving surprise' and that play feels good whenever the player 'is reducing significant levels of prediction error (i.e., surprise) faster than expected' (M. M. Andersen et al., 2022, p. 2). Finally, they suggested that

> **[...] if the environment provides no immediate surprises or uncertainties, children and adults will combat boredom by creating and establishing an environment specifically tailored to the generation and further investigations of surprise and uncertainty.**
>
> *(M. M. Andersen et al., 2022, p. 9)*

It is important to stress that what they proposed is a 'cognitive theory of why humans play' and their aim was 'to bring play research where it belongs; at the centre of developmental research'. I do not share those aims, just as I neither share the underlying assumption of individuals as autonomous entities nor their emphasis on the agency of human beings. Here, I argue that it is not merely individuals surprising themselves, but rather that surprise emerges from the assemblage, and that many different components cause the surprise through their entanglement. While I can't tell if the boards, tubes, beams, or fabrics have been surprised as well, they have undoubtedly been involved *in* surprising. In this light, the children can be seen as harnessing the potential of the materials, their own bodies, and the site to create surprising situations, again and again.




In EX1, one of the groups had created a narrative of a ship that could take them around the world, where they would essentially live on noodles and seaweed:

> **What we all had in common was that we want to see things as they are, sort of, it was important for us to have a window to the world, so we called our boat …*See-Sea* (everyone started laughing), but like … you see the sea. And this is our flag, and we also have a speaker because we like to have music on board. We are not entirely sure if we can all try to stand on it … should we try?**

One of them jumped up, and the rest of the group held their breath. Clearly, they hadn't tried if it could hold. 'It's safe.' The rest jumped up. 'No, no, it's good, come, yeah, we can all stand on it.' I believe that at least part of the tension here was sparked by the possibility of surprise: would it collapse under their combined weight?

# 8.4 Grasping Slow *Rhythms*

The rhythms I have traced so far all emphasise heightened affective intensities, where a lot is going on at once, and everything is moving at a rapid pace, but it would be a misunderstanding to suggest that those were dominant in the playgrounds. Instead, I want to stress that it makes no sense to establish a 'hierarchy of affects', as it would prevent us from grasping the plurality of rhythms of the junk playgrounds. For Lefebvre as for many of the more recent rhythmanalysts, it is only possible to 'grasp a rhythm' if one has been 'grasped by it; one must let oneself go, give oneself over, abandon oneself to its duration' (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 27). For me, to navigate the junk playgrounds as a researcher, a host, a storyteller, a caretaker, and a human also meant to navigate the polyrhythmic assemblage. I was always 'grasped by' the rhythms, but not necessarily in the same way as the participants. From the outset of the very first junk playground experiment, this proved to be one of my greatest challenges as a researcher – to attune to the multitude of rhythms. In the previous chapter, I described how the students in EX4 attuned themselves to the playground. Here, I can reiterate by saying that it played out in a different rhythm than I expected, and throughout the experiment I was concerned by what seemed to me at the time like a diminishing engagement. As I wrote in my reflections immediately after the experiment had concluded:

> **[...] a few of them decided to have a break and went out for a smoke. Suddenly, they were all gone. At this point, I was concerned that the whole exercise was simply not meaningful for them, and that they were close to dropping out of it altogether. It made me wonder if there was anything I could or should do to help them to move on.**



I was somewhat frustrated with the process, as I intuitively sensed this slowing down as a flaw in the experiment. I have become convinced that it was not so much a lack of affective intensity that characterised this experiment, but rather a rhythm and a pulse that I was unable to register at the time. As Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seighworth argued, 'it is quite likely that affect more often transpires within and across the subtlest of shuttling intensities: all the minuscule or molecular events of the unnoticed' (Gregg & Seighworth, 2010, p. 2). This served as a welcome and important reminder that my affective attunement needed recalibrating, and that 'affective attunement is a practice, and we become better at it with practice' (Dos Santos, 2022, p. 287). When I was fortunate enough to have my partner participate in EX8, she emphasised my orientation towards a certain kind of intensities:

> **You don't make these structured events, but you do facilitate intensities. Being your partner for almost 12 years, I also know how you react when there's no intensity. You get frustrated, and bored and kind of difficult, because you thrive on what's going on in the intensities and that's what you're good at. When that intensity does not happen, that's also when your frustration occurs.**

Clearly, I had to develop a more sensitive register, and my body had to learn that not sensing affective intensities does not equate the absence of intensities or, worse, a failed experiment where nothing interesting transpires. Often the experiments began with high intensity, quick rhythms, with people and materials moving around rapidly, and then, after a while, it could be 30 minutes, an hour, two hours, the rhythms and the energy flows would change. This was also true in EX1, which we can see if we revisit my notes

> **After a while, the activity – and maybe energy – levels dropped, the process slowed down and I sensed that maybe we were nearing the end. As one said afterwards, the activity shifted from exploring and making to simply hanging out in the environments they had created together. () My immediate reaction, being in the middle of it, was that the slowing down, the loss of focus and momentum, was a signal that energy, ideas, and possibilities had all been exhausted, but I think this was a misunderstanding on my part. Playing is hard work, and quite demanding. It requires shifts in intensity, going up, going down, to sustain itself.**

It was in the same experiment that one of the participants later shared how she was tired throughout the experiment:

> **I was very tired, so I just picked some materials that would work for making a place to sit in. () I felt very tired from the beginning but even more tired as the exercise progressed and realised that it's very difficult to play and enter in the play mode when you don't have the energy for it.**



This points to the issue that play demands a certain level of energy and that the absence of said energy can make participation difficult. In this situation, the person did not give up or leave, but stayed with the experience and merely adjusted her efforts to better match her energy levels. In most play experiences, such oscillating, changing rhythms and modulating intensities are probably the norm rather than the exception. I find additional perspectives on this in play theory, where Skovbjerg demonstrated that players often alternate between different play practices and play moods (Karoff, 2013) sometimes only because some play practices are simply too demanding and tiring to be sustained for longer periods of time. One can only laugh intensely for so long, for example.

# 8.5 Sonic *Rhythms*

Whereas the rhythms I have traced so far have mostly been sustained by bodies moving, the playgrounds have also been rife with sounds and sonic rhythms. Studies of sound typically draw on the concept of soundscapes, which was first introduced by R. Murray Schafer (Schafer, 1969, 1993), who argued that any analysis of soundscapes must first 'discover the significant features of the soundscape' (Schafer, 1993, p. 9). If we consider the soundscape of the junk playgrounds as a vital component in the assemblages we are tracing here, to enter the junk playground is also to be grasped by a multitude of sonic rhythms, to be affected by and attune to the rich soundscape of human and nonhuman:

Junk playground drumming.



Laughter, incessant, excited laughter. Humming and the occasional drumming on what sounds like old tin cans. The sounds of tools, from power tools to the hammer. Clank-clank-clank. The hammer hitting, or not hitting, a nail. A saw slowly cutting through a wooden board. The tearing of duct tape. The beating hearts of the participants, their breath, sometimes rapid from running up a hill, their footsteps, the fabric on their bodies rubbing against a piece of rough, un-planed wood. The rhythms of the discarded materials, as they travel across the sites, often in the hands of humans. Branches breaking, wheels rolling, objects hitting the ground. The wind rustling in large pieces of fabric hanging between trees, or the occasional rain shower on makeshift shelters with tarps as roofs.

Sound and affect are intimately connected, and Michael Gallagher argued that 'sound itself is also a kind of affect – an oscillating difference, an intensity that moves bodies, a vibration physically pushing and pulling their material fabric' (Gallagher, 2016). Sounds create rhythms, too, and these rhythms also contribute to defining what is possible to do and to imagine, as well as who gets to participate. Of great relevance to my efforts here, Marie Koldkjær Højlund, Anette Vandsø and Morten Breinbjerg proposed a concept of 'sonic citizenship' (Højlund et al., 2021), where citizens must also be capable of attuning to the many different soundscapes they encounter, similarly to the affective attunement discussed above. They likened the notion of sonic citizenship to citizenship more broadly, and argued that as citizens, we must continually strive to create balances in 'sonic communities' through ongoing dialogue and negotiation with our fellow citizens (Højlund et al., 2021, p. 17). I cannot fully unfold this idea here, but it seems to me that attuning to the playgrounds is also about attuning to, and negotiating with, the affective forces of sound, including which sounds are pleasant and welcome, and which are not. Sometimes, one specific sound interrupts the flows and movements, as 'sudden loud sounds agitating bodies to make them jump or startle' (Gallagher, 2016, p. 6). I noticed a small example of this in EX5, where the distinct, loud noise of a large piece of metal clanking as it hit the concrete floor made all the bodies nearby stop and turn towards the sound. Someone immediately claimed that 'it wasn't me' (who made the sound). While this was probably said as a joke, it points nonetheless to the widespread disciplining of sound, where many types of sound are deemed undesirable. If we always attempt to limit and reduce sounds we don't like, seeing them as unwanted disturbances, we are also allowing for very specific modes of participation while suppressing others. I argue that we cannot understand the junk playgrounds and the emerging assemblages as affective experiences without listening carefully, and we cannot limit what we hear to the words spoken.

# 8.6 Colliding *Rhythms*

Sometimes, different rhythms in a polyrhythmic assemblage 'jar and clash' (Edensor, 2010, p. 14), leading to 'arrhythmia', where rhythms bump into and potentially change each other through a kind of rhythmic friction. In EX7, we can see a couple of examples.

The first is a softer clash, where two children were working together, and decided they wanted to make a car. They had a sheet of wood that they used for the chassis of the car, and then they started cutting pieces of blue tube for the wheels.

Will this ever become a car?



One of the children, Lucas, tried to attach the 'wheels' with nails. He seemed focused, in his own rhythm, repeating the actions with every single wheel, slowly, meticulously. Another member of the group, Luna, followed a rather different rhythm. She walked around the site, allowing herself to be drawn to different materials, before she eventually sat down and started drawing a sketch of the car they were supposedly building together. This was not a distraction, she insisted, but an important contribution to the process of making the car, and from a design perspective, sketching is a perfectly meaningful contribution. At the same time, Lucas kept working on the car, patiently trying to attach the wheels, but never really succeeding. Occasionally, Luna returned to him, as if to momentarily synchronise their different rhythms. She kept repeating that she would be the test driver of the car, which I see as an expression that she remained engaged and maintained a sense of ownership, despite her fluctuating rhythms. Thus, while their rhythms were never fully synchronised, and they were sometimes jarring, it did seem that they were close enough to maintain a sense of collaboration.

The second example shows a sharper collision between rhythms.

Getting ready for another trip.

At the edge of the playground, Victor and Elliot were playing with a rudimentary car that was essentially a pallet on wheels. They had not made the car from scratch, but rather, they found it abandoned from a previous experiment and they continued working on it. They stopped building to do the very first test drive. I sensed their rhythm as flowing somewhere between two types of play moods in Skovbjerg's typology, 'intensity' and 'euphoric' (Skovbjerg, 2016, 71-74). They were absorbed and their spirits were high. This was thrilling! Another child, Theo, walked across the yard towards them. He had been drifting around for a while in a different, slower rhythm than Victor and Elliot, but seemed drawn to their beat. However, when Victor invited Theo to join him on the cart, he initially refused.

Getting on, getting ready!

After Victor went for another ride, Theo got on, crawling up at the back of the cart.

Here we go!

With Victor in front and Theo behind him, his legs sticking out to one side, they raced down the sloping courtyard at what seemed like a high speed, considering how low they were to the ground and the somewhat crude braking mechanism.

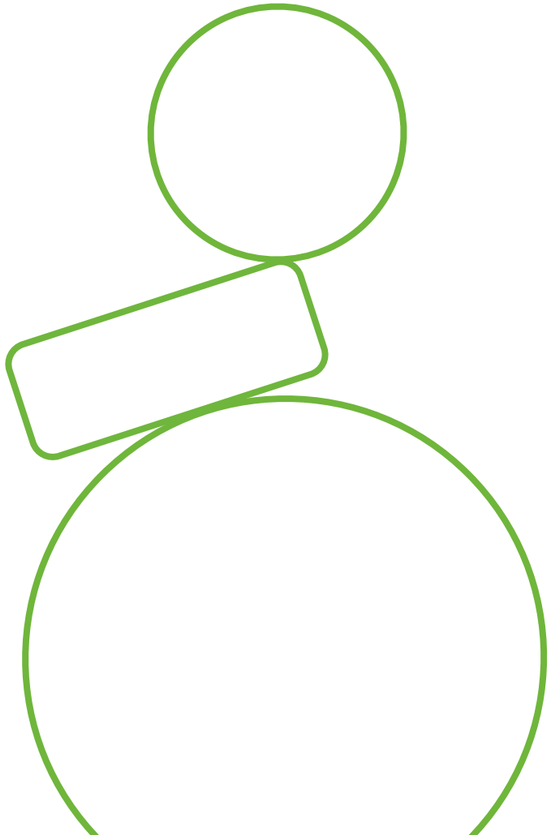
Colliding rhythms.

While the children (just barely) avoided a head-on collision with a robust iron fence, their rhythm collided with the rhythm of their teacher, Ellen, who arrived while the children were driving.

Ellen: 'I don't think you should drive this fast, something could happen to your legs down there.'
Victor: 'That's also why I try to brake.'
Ellen: 'Now it works and that's nice, so I think you should stop driving now.'

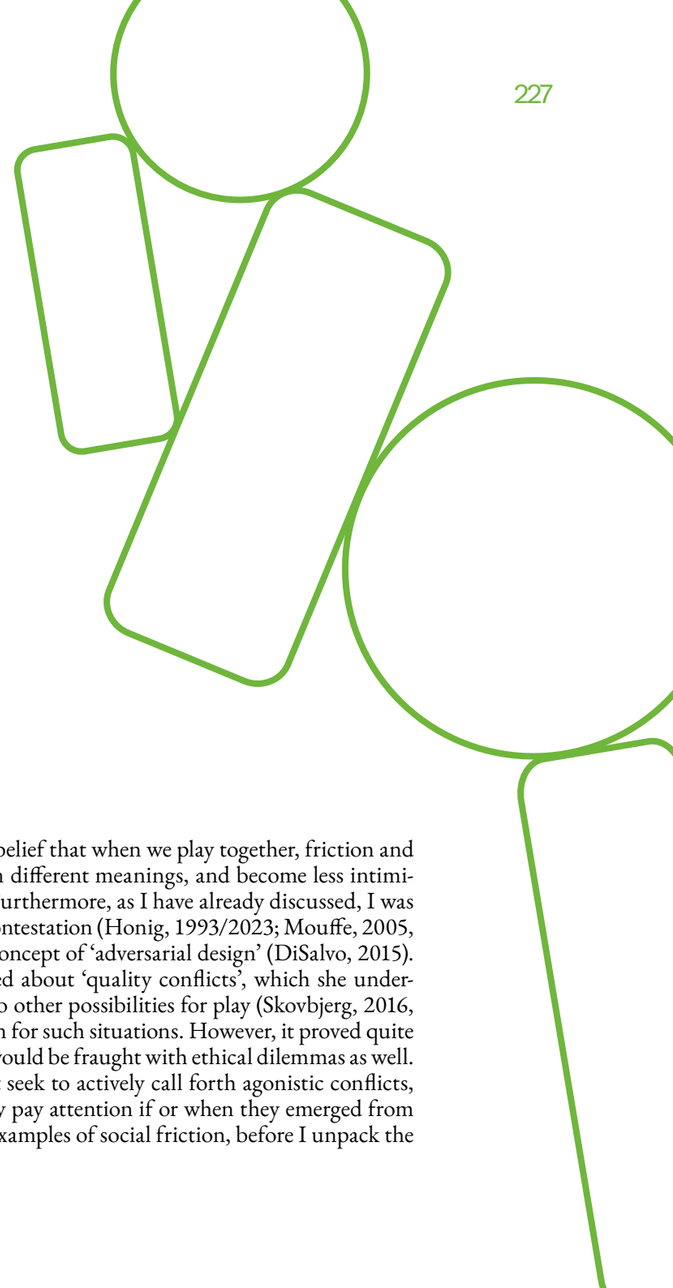


This can be read as a collision between the cyclical, experimental, and creative rhythms of the children, and the linear rhythms of society, here perpetuated by the responsible adult who was concerned that they might get hurt.



# 9. Conflicts and Social Friction$_S$





Through my earlier practice, I developed the belief that when we play together, friction and conflicts can often be reconfigured, take on different meanings, and become less intimidating and threatening for those involved. Furthermore, as I have already discussed, I was drawn to radical democratic notions of agonism and contestation (Honig, 1993/2023; Mouffe, 2005, 2016, 2018) and related ideas, such as Carl DiSalvo's concept of 'adversarial design' (DiSalvo, 2015). Similarly, in play studies Helle Marie Skovbjerg talked about 'quality conflicts', which she understood as productive conflicts that can open our eyes to other possibilities for play (Skovbjerg, 2016, p. 94). For a long time, I considered how I might design for such situations. However, it proved quite challenging to consciously design for conflicts, and it would be fraught with ethical dilemmas as well. Unable to develop an appropriate approach, I did not seek to actively call forth agonistic conflicts, but I also did not design *against* them. I would merely pay attention if or when they emerged from the encounters. In the following, I will first examine examples of social friction, before I unpack the one larger conflict I have registered.

# 9.1 Social *Friction*

In most cases, social friction did not spring from major disagreements and heated arguments, but rather from more subtle tensions, from differences in the minor key, so to speak. Several people have described collaboration as challenging, which we can examine if we visit the students at EX4 once again. We saw earlier how they attuned to the situation, each other, and the materials, taking their time and making space for everyone to share their ideas. When we were reflecting on the experience together towards the end, Molly described how she found it difficult to make decisions together:

> **I think it was a little difficult because we were so many. Who should take control? I thought we had more time, my process, I think slowly sometimes, I just had to … I think it was challenging, also the thing with putting it together at the end and agreeing on what to go with.**

And Lea continued:

> **It's challenging to listen to other people's ideas, for example, that embroidery, we'll bring it along and then we might find out what we can use it for; that you give space to each other's ideas and thoughts. Will you use it, yes or no, we'll find out, but that you don't, 'now I take control', but that you give space to each other's creative sides. That gives you this feeling that if you are to create something, then you can't stand alone, you must include everyone to create something that is dignified.**



I suggest that we can understand these situations with Laurent Berlant's conception of 'inconvenience' (Berlant, 2022). Berlant used the concept of inconvenience to describe 'the affective sense of the familiar friction of being in relation' (Berlant, 2022, p. 14). For Berlant, every relation to anyone or anything comes with a certain degree of inconvenience, where the world gets in the way, and such inconvenience is the 'force that makes one shift a little while processing the world' (Berlant, 2022, p. 14). Other people are always inconvenient to us, just like we are always inconvenient to them. Even so, their inconvenience is not something we avoid; in contrast, argued Berlant, 'there is an inconvenience drive—a drive to keep taking in and living with objects' (Berlant, 2022, p. 20). 'Objects' includes other people, and she adds that 'animals, things, and thoughts are inconvenient too' (Berlant, 2022, p. 22). When things get in the way of our movement, when they are inconvenient, they change our trajectory. We can already see this in the statements about. Another person, Rosa, described how this 'inconvenience' got in the way of her usual way of working:

> **I'm really good at thinking of solutions right away. I say OK, I need this solution, how do I get there? Now this has given me the skills to say, okay, now we begin here, then I pick up a little from this and a little from that, and then I end up with some kind of solution. Is it the same solution I thought about in the beginning? That's not certain, but it might very well be better, and maybe I wouldn't have arrived at it, if I hadn't been open.**

Berlant's notion of inconvenience shares similarities with Kathleen Stewart's notion of affect as 'a surging, a rubbing, a connection of some kind that has an impact', with 'bodies literally affecting one another and generating intensities' (Stewart, 2007, p. 138). In the quote above, the assemblage of stories, human bodies, materials and so on came together, got in the way, rubbed against each other, generated friction, and challenged this person to adjust to the experience in a different manner. Rather than jumping to conclusions in pursuit of more immediate solutions, the inconvenience and friction made her pause and wait for other possibilities to emerge.

Berlant argued that inconvenience can loosen objects, including ourselves, shaking things up to make new configurations possible. This is akin to Anna Tsing's argument that friction can help us to 'emerge from under the shadow of inevitability' (Tsing, 2005, p. 269), meaning that friction can loosen claims to historical necessity. In the small, the above glimpses show people embracing the inconveniences and the ensuing friction generated small ruptures or shifts, openings that allowed them to experience alterity, other ways of being together.

## 9.1.1 Access to Resources

As we have already seen, access to various resources such as materials and tools sometimes became a point of contention between people in the junk playgrounds, and we have heard the refrain 'Where is the hammer?' It was most visible among the children, where in some situations, it was seemingly as much about the social interaction as an actual need to use the specific tool. However, in many situations, the negotiations over access to hammers and saws and other tools were apparently experienced as a kind of inconvenience. In the following situation from EX7, two boys in the playground disagreed about who got to use the saw, and things got a little heated.

One of the children, Ebbe, was fastening a piece of wood in a vise, apparently getting ready to saw.

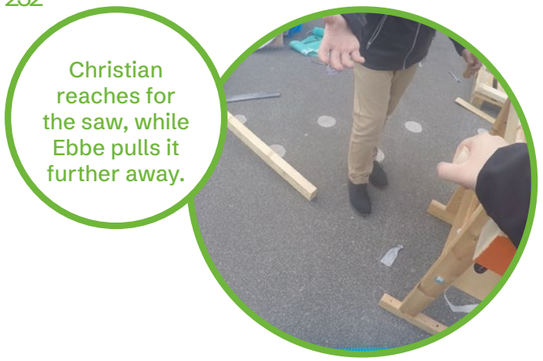

'I'm about to saw' – he proclaimed. However, the moment he picked up the saw, another boy, Christian, put his hand on top of his, effectively preventing him from using the saw.




Christian: 'It's mine!'
Ebbe: 'No, because you didn't use it' – he insisted and started to saw, as if to demonstrate his rightful ownership.


Christian: 'Yes I did!'
Ebbe: 'You didn't use it!'
Christian: 'Yes, I just put it there ...'
Ebbe: 'But you didn't even have it?'


Ebbe stopped sawing and pulled the saw back as Christian reached for it.




Christian: ‘Come on, give it to me.’
Ebbe: ‘Take it easy, don’t shout at me!’ - he was clearly agitated, but reluctantly handed over the saw.


About a minute later, he picked up a saw from someone else and got back to sawing. The disagreement proved to be but a brief intermezzo.






This can hardly be understood as a conflict either, merely a short dispute over the right to access the saw. There is clearly an experience of inconvenience at play, though. Berlant also talked about ‘micro-incidents’ (Berlant, 2022, p. 14) and these incidents remind us, again and again, that we are ‘inescapably in relation with other beings and the world and are continuously adjusting to them’ (Berlant, 2022, p. 15). Here the adjustment manifested in a series of corporeal responses, almost a little dance between the two.

Why did Ebbe hand over the saw? I cannot say for sure, but one interpretation would be that he had a sensitivity towards the possible consequences of an extended conflict. Where conflict and strife can be generative catalysts of play, they can also cause the play experience to fall apart (Skovbjerg, 2016, p. 89, 2021, p. 97). Perhaps he was aware that insisting on his right to use the saw would be more trouble than it was worth, risking a breakdown in what otherwise seemed like a lively play experience. Or maybe he simply realised that there were ten other saws within reach, so why bother?

None of these small glimpses show actual conflicts. Rather, they illustrate mild forms of inconvenience and friction sparked by the differences between the various bodies that rub up against each other. In the next section, we shall follow inconveniences and frictions as they spark a deeper conflict that calls for more profound adjustments.

# 9.2 An Extended *Conflict*

Among the milder forms of social frictions, only one larger social conflict stands out in my research materials. It happened in the gravel pit, and in the following, I will trace how the conflict unfolded between a group of children as they were playing together. For me, few experiences in this project were as affectively demanding as being in the midst of this conflict, following it as it escalated for hours. Even watching and transcribing the recordings was rather excruciating.

The fort and a simple swing.

We enter where a group of children were working on their fort atop the steep slope in the gravel pit. The conflict had probably been brewing for a while already, probably for longer than we can know.



Magnus: 'Would you please fetch some rope?"
Liam: 'No, do that yourself, like we do.
Magnus: 'Can you help me a moment?'
Liam: 'But everyone are not your slaves.'

There was a clear indication here that Liam was annoyed. Then a little bit later, Magnus was alone, working on the fort. He had not really noticed how the other children had gone to play elsewhere, so immersed in his own work had he been. Another child, Hugo, came by to get a hammer.

Hugo: 'I need ten nails and a hammer.'
Liam: 'We'll take the things we have made. We'll bring the ladder with us.'
Magnus: 'For what?'
Liam: 'Nothing … for our new base. For our new base. We're building a new base.'

After this little exchange, Liam and Hugo left Magnus alone in the fort. He had now realised that they had left him to build a new base elsewhere. Then Hugo came back to fetch a hammer.

Hugo: 'Can I ask for a hammer?'
Magnus: 'There. Are. Other. Hammers. Down. There, for f…'
Hugo: 'Yes, but I don't bloody know…' – he is yelling now.
Magnus: 'Then ask an adult!' – they are both yelling.

Hugo left again, and Magnus sat down by himself. He seemed somewhat despondent.

Magnus: 'Awww.' He sobbed, and then decided to leave the fort.

Magnus leaving the fort, heading down the slope.

Magnus: ‘ARGH. I don’t want to be up here anymore, that’s for sure. I don’t want to be up here any longer. Okay, that tree is falling over, it’s certainly falling. Okay. I’m done. Completely done up here. I will take these loose things with me down because I’m done. This place is too dangerous. I’m done. Aw, aw, aw. I’m done. That tree is coming … I’m done up here.’

He picked up a few things and walked down the slope, while he talked to himself, loudly.

Magnus: ‘I’m completely done. That tree can fall over. It’s a little … aw … their new base … I don’t want to be in that old crap any longer.’



As he made it down the slope, he walked toward a group of boys that included Liam and Hugo.

Magnus: ‘That tree is falling into the fort anytime. Can I join you? Can I join? The tree can make the entire fort collapse. Oh, just forget about it, you’re not listening to me anyway.’

Reaching out to Liam and the other children.

One of the adults, Ida, intervened.

Ida: ‘Magnus, I understand that there is some disagreement how to use the fort and such. Liam says you make most of the decisions up there.’

Magnus: 'No, I don't.'
Liam: 'Yes, you say our ideas are not any good and stuff like that.'
Magnus: 'No, I have not at all said that.'
Liam: 'Ok, maybe you haven't said it, but that's how I feel.'
Ida: 'Can't we agree that …'
Magnus: 'But Liam says I can't build anything without asking for permission.'
Liam: 'But that's only because we want to also be involved in deciding what should be in there.'

Magnus seemed to have inadvertently fuelled this conflict by not being attentive to the ideas and wishes of the others, while he was mainly pursuing his own agenda. Liam claimed that Magnus had made decisions on his behalf, that he kept ignoring his ideas, and in essence, he was complaining that his agency had been reduced. After the brief intervention, they went their separate ways. Magnus returned to the fort.

Magnus: 'Then I can just go into this fort that they call some old shit!'

He talked to himself.

Magnus: 'Now I'm ashamed.'

Back in the fort, alone.



He stayed in the fort. He sobbed a little before he got up and walked over to look for the other boys by their new base. He found them without making contact, and then he quickly ran back to the fort.

Magnus: 'Now they can just have fun, while I sit here in my ugly, good, big fort. I don't want to build. Aw.'

Magnus: 'You might as well give me zero.'
Liam: 'But you just said you didn't want to be with us?'
Magnus: 'But I do, I do, I DO!'

Liam ran away, leaving Magnus on his own again.

Magnus: 'Then I can just sit here in this ugly shit. Uh. They say it is some old shit, and they are right … I'm such a fool' – he talked to himself and cried.

The harder Magnus was on himself, the more evident it became that all he ever wanted was to maintain the social connection with the other children, yet he continued to come up short. As we have already seen, conflict can be understood as a potential source of energy for play, if the players are able to modulate the intensities. However, conflict can also transform into a negating force that can make play collapse when it becomes too unbalanced. Gilles Deleuze argued that 'when we encounter an external body that does not agree with our own () it is as if the power of that body opposed our power () when this occurs, it may be said that our power of acting is diminished or blocked' (Deleuze, 1988, p. 27). It seems that Liam felt his 'power of acting was diminished' and that there was something in the encounter between Magnus, Liam, and Hugo that reduced the capacity for their bodies 'to joyfully exist'. If we assume that they were all seeking such joyful states through the practices and moods of play, the conflict effectively undermined that striving. Where in the previous chapter I mainly focused on more positive intensities and 'affinities', here we see the flipside of that coin, that affinities can also be 'toxic and fearful as much as they can be enchanting and joyous' (Mason, 2018, loc. 4132).

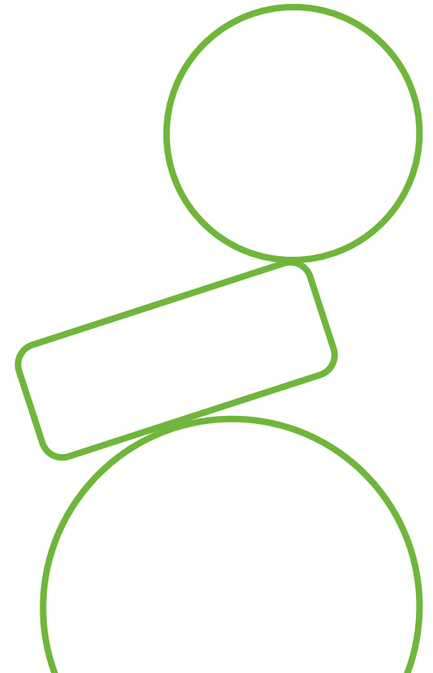
The children in the playground generally expressed a delight in feeling capable and (somewhat) autonomous. Several of them explicitly stated that they enjoyed being able to do and build what they wanted, instead of what the adults told them to. When this clash happened, Liam felt like his much-cherished agency was being undermined by Magnus, who, in turn, felt like he was merely exercising his right to make decisions about their shared fort. With one of Christopher Kelty et al's seven dimensions of participation (Kelty et al., 2014), we can see that Liam decided to 'exit' the situation altogether. Rather than staying with Magnus to reconcile what may have seemed like an impossible conflict, he left and started building a different base elsewhere with other children. While this seems reasonable, allowing him the agency to decide when to enter and when to leave the encounter, it doesn't account for Magnus' possibility of exiting. It seems he had nowhere to go.

Another way of reading this conflict would be as an important reminder that conflicts and pain are all but inevitable in play. Here I draw on Aaron Trammell's efforts to 'repair play' (Trammell, 2023), which he described as 'a form of intellectual reparations that amends the common-sense notion that play is pleasurable' to also focus on 'exploring the deep, painful, and sometimes traumatic depths of life' (Trammell, 2023, p. 15). Trammell contended that play is only voluntary to some, historically only to white people who are privileged by the particular notion of civilization that dominates play, and the Western values that underpin it. He argued that play is often a subject-object relation, not one of equal subjects voluntarily playing with each other, but where one is playing and the other is being played with (Trammell, 2023, p. 59). Similarly, Anthea Moys argued that 'play studies, for the most part, through its focus on freedom, fun, games, leisure and flow largely fails to question who plays, for whom and for what reasons' (Moys, 2022, p. 26).



When I look at the conflict through this prism, things change. For instance, I believe it was play for Magnus when he was completely immersed in building the fort according to his own ideas and desires, yet for Liam it felt like he was being played. He felt more like an object, or, even closer to Trammell's argument, a slave, as we saw before, when he exclaimed to Magnus that 'everybody is not your slave!'. Conversely, it was probably play for Liam when he decided to simply leave with another group of friends and set up a new base in a different location. He found a way out of the dissatisfying relationship and began playing in a different environment. In this situation, Magnus was the one being played, and it was evident that there was no pleasure for him to be found, anywhere.

Thus, even when play 'works' as play, this may only be the case for some and not for others. In the past, I have tended to agree with Johan Huizinga and Thomas S. Henricks when they argued that it is 'false play' whenever 'participants themselves are not really in control – or are in control only in quite modest ways' (Henricks, 2006, p. 217). While this may sound reasonable enough, the argument is beginning to feel inadequate, like a cop-out that allows me to disregard disconcerting aspects of play as 'not-play'. Instead, I argue that we need to develop a stronger sensitivity towards situations where play may be painful to some or all the players, and where the pain has something important to tell us about the nature of play, also when it breaks down or turns dark.

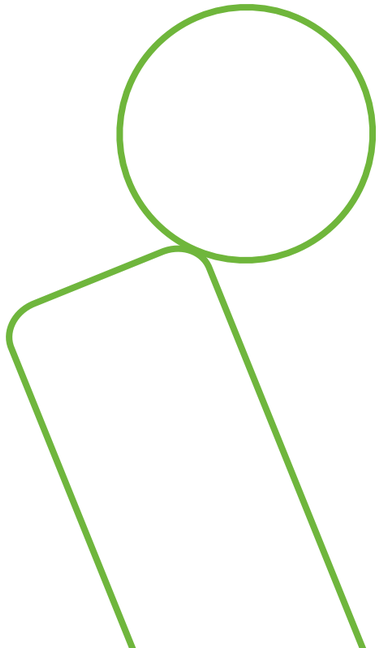


# 9.3 Friction *Perpetuated*

I will not contend that the drawn-out conflict between the children had a happy conclusion, or that it was desirable as such. However, with the previous analysis, I will maintain that it was helpful and important, and that we should become even more attentive to the nature of conflicts. These situations, while challenging, sometimes painful, and excruciating to endure, are all but inevitable, also between adults in democratic societies. I will stay a little bit longer with the friction, as I will argue that these situations may have the potential to emphasise difference and create movement.

## 9.3.1 Difference and Movement

The notion of difference plays a big role in the encounters we have explored in this chapter. We are inconvenient to each other, in part because we are different from each other, and these differences can generate friction and conflicts. We can never fully step into each other's shoes, so to speak; there is no way of ever completely reconciling the difference, but 'through listening across difference each position can come to understand something about the ways proposals and claims affect others differently situated' (Young, 1997, p. 69). For the students, 'listening across differences' seems to have been helpful, whereas for the children in the gravel pit, it proved too difficult. Iris Marion Young further argued that if we expect to be able to 'understand one another because we are able to see ourselves reflected in the other people and find that they see themselves reflected in us', we risk purporting a 'conceptual projection of sameness' (Young, 1997,





p. 44). Such a projection of sameness risks closing off the 'creative exchange these differences might produce' (Young, 1997, p. 45). Similarly, Anna Tsing suggested that to build collaboration on our differences may be the most meaningful kind of collaboration, and she favoured collaboration with 'friction at its heart' (Tsing, 2005, p. 246). The differences, inconveniences, and frictions rub against our expectations that encounters should be smooth, unproblematic, efficient, somehow. As I have argued, the inconveniences and the friction can loosen up sedimented social practices and established cultural configurations, making them more malleable by demonstrating their contingent nature. They create openings and they remind us that there are 'there are other ways of making worlds' (Tsing, 2015, p. 155) and that things are perpetually changing. We are thus bound to be forever adapting and adjusting, attuning, shifting, moving towards and away from other bodies, because 'when it comes to living in proximity, there is no such thing as passivity' (Berlant, 2022, p. 24). Consequently, we must always be on the move, as 'adjustment is a constant action' (Berlant, 2022, p. 24). As we have seen, perhaps this is most evident and tangible when we pay attention to the inconveniences of social life, and, even more so, when our interactions collapse. These perspectives talk back to my theoretical discussion of democracy as always-only in states of becoming. It seems fitting to end this chapter with a 'postcard from the future' from EX4:

> **Being suspicious can be both healthy and problematic. While everything seemed difficult, it is often merely the beginning, and in the end, it was all good and fun. Remember that there needs to be space for differences; listen to them, they may teach you something.**

# 10. Care and Collective Joy

If the previous chapter conveyed the impression that the junk playgrounds have been rife with social friction and almost unbearable conflicts, this chapter will serve as a counterpoint. In the following, I will argue that the playgrounds have to a greater extent been defined and animated by small acts of care and a sense of collective joy. As I have discussed, I follow Tronto's definition of care as 'a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible' (Tronto, 2013, p. 19). Like all the other threads I weave together throughout this thesis, the acts of care I am talking about here are small, easily overlooked, disregarded, or neglected, seemingly insignificant and trivial in the face of the perils we find ourselves in. However, these microscopic incidents may be the fabric that holds it all together in the playgrounds, that which makes these small worlds liveable.

# 10.1 Caring Practices in the *Playgrounds*

## 10.1.1 Giving Gifts

Caring in and for the playgrounds has taken many forms, the most tangible perhaps being that of gift-giving. In a very concrete manner, I see a caring generosity in the way many participants give materials to each other, when they find something someone else has been looking for. On some occasions, this almost became a role or an identity of its own, as when Thomas in the gravel pit stated that 'I don't build anything, I just find boards for people.' He didn't seem to want projects of his own, but he apparently enjoyed finding materials for everyone else. Or in EX7, when two children found a button that someone else had been searching for.

Helga: 'Did Morten find one of these buttons?'
Lotte: 'No.
Helga: 'Should we give it to them?'
Lotte: 'I want to give it to him.'
Helga: 'But I was the one who found it!'
Lotte: 'Ok, let's give it together.'

Then they marched off together to almost ceremoniously hand over the button to Morten, who seemed happy with this seemingly trivial little object.

Traditionally, gift-giving has been understood through the logic of reciprocity, about which Mauss claimed that 'in theory these are voluntary, in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily' (Mauss, 1990, p. 3). I share the bewilderment of David Graeber, when he pointed out that 'almost all this literature concentrates on the exchange of gifts, assuming that whenever one gives a gift, this act incurs a debt, and the recipient must eventually reciprocate in kind' (Graeber, 2011, 90). In studying the encounters in the junk playgrounds, I have found it necessary to soften this reciprocity, to loosen the expectations that gifts must always be returned. Helle Marie Skovbjerg had a similar intention when she questioned the belief that 'giving a gift



to somebody is coded with expectation and codes for receiving' (Grocott et al., 2023, p. 304). Instead, she argued that when we play with each other, 'we share because we care about "the play", and we give bravely, for we do not know whether the others will accept, nor whether we will get anything back (Grocott et al, 2023, 303).

Sometimes, what people gift to each other is even less tangible than buttons and ideas. Iris Marion Young argued that the 'opening onto the other person is always a gift', where 'the trust to communicate cannot await the other person's promise to reciprocate, or the conversation will never begin' (Young, 1997, 50). In EX3, one of the children decided to gift to the community a large construction, a tower of sorts. The boy, William, was in the junk playground with his parents and grandfather, and they had been working for a long time on what was first a kind of fort, a hide-away, before it grew taller and taller.

From a fort to a tower and beyond...

At one point, they wrote *byg tårnet større* (build the tower bigger) on the side, as an invitation for more people to join them.


'Build the tower bigger' - an invitation to play along.

One of William's parents afterwards described to me how they had seen their son shift into a role that was not typical for him in social contexts. 'He is usually a little introverted,' they said, but when many other children later came to play with the tower, he told me that he was quite proud he had made something that other children wanted to be a part of. While he was consciously sharing the tower with everyone at the festival, and with great success, I believe he was also sharing more than that: he was sharing a slightly different version of himself. Here we see another aspect of Young's point that 'opening onto the other person is always a gift', as he was gifting a different version of himself to this community, perhaps also to see how it would be received. The tower ended up as a kind of collaborative centrepiece at the playground, an installation that kept evolving as many different children took part in building it during a seven-hour period.



## 10.1.2 Sharing Skills

On most occasions, the people in the playgrounds were not particularly concerned with specific skills, despite the orientation towards tinkering, building, and making. The need for skills was reduced to a bare minimum, to what was needed for the play experience to keep moving. The joy, when the experience was joyful, did not so much emanate from doing things the right way, but simply from doing something and doing something together. This is not to say that skills don't matter in the junk playgrounds, but merely that the meaning of skills has been somewhat reconfigured. Even so, I have seen repeatedly that developing and maintaining a sense of community 'requires labour, skills, knowledge and sociality to care for others and the space' (Hirscher, 2020, p. 4). As Anja-Lisa Hirscher also argued, 'one major aspect of care is identified as sharing skills amongst the members' and further, 'when members have special skills, they can develop an identity related to these skills but also care for others by transferring them' (Hirscher, 2020, p. 4). There are many small examples of skill sharing, which I see as a form of care for the shared experience. In EX5, a group of people were working on their piece, and as one person was struggling a bit with sawing, another person shared the advice: 'My ex-husband has taught me one thing, and that is, you have to let the saw do the work!" While this was perhaps mostly said as a joke (which can also be seen as a small act of care), it was nonetheless also an attempt to help with the task of sawing when she noticed that the person was struggling.

While the junk playgrounds and all the collections of discarded, disorderly materials have sometimes encouraged more unrestrained and wanton energies, there are also numerous examples of people being attentive and careful in their approach. The practices and work of care can thus also entail a carefulness to how things are carried out, where finesse and accuracy suddenly come to matter. Let us follow a group of children in the EX7 when one of the children, Karl, got hold of a saw, while the other two attempted to fasten a piece of wood in the workbench.


Ella: ‘Then you just have to saw straight down here’ – she pointed with her finger to where he should begin.


After these instructions, he started to saw. Perhaps it bears noticing that he showed better technique than most, including adults, as he slowly dragged the saw across the wood a few times to create a groove for the saw to dig into.


Despite his skills, he quickly ran into trouble. The saw got stuck in the wood, and he realised that he hadn’t accurately followed the line. All the while, he talked to himself.

Karl: ‘Come on! Damn! It’s a little hard to saw.’

Then another member of his group came over, and Karl readily admitted that he’d sawed a little outside the line.

Karl: ‘It went out’ – he pointed to the line.
Freja: ‘It doesn’t matter.’




He continued, but something was not quite right, apparently.

Karl: ‘Why is this saw so bad?’ – he complained, but he didn’t give up so easily. ‘Come on!’ – he cheered himself on.


Then Ella came back over.
Ella: ‘Oh my God, Karl, you haven’t sawed straight!’
Karl: ‘But it was crazy difficult!‘
Ella: ‘A, you will saw straight now!’
Karl: ‘I’m actually trying to get it straightened up!’ – he got back on the saw, and was suddenly quite fast.
After a while, he made it all the way through the wood, and ran to share the good news with his group.

Karl: ‘Girls!’ – he held up the two halves to show the result.


Freja: ‘Good, good.’
First, they were excited, but then they began to inspect the work in greater detail.
Ella: ‘A, you haven’t sawed straight at all! Look!’ – she pointed with her finger to where there was an inaccuracy. They were laughing.
Karl: ‘But it’s difficult! It’s difficult to saw straight!’


On to new assignments.

A little later, he came back and wanted to saw again.
Karl: 'Can I try to saw? Again?'
Ella: 'This time you must saw straight!'
Freja: 'This time it's important that you saw straight!'
Karl: 'Yes, but before it was difficult.'
Karl: 'Come on! Come on! Down! Damn. It's difficult' – he kept cheering himself on until he managed to finish the job.

For Karl, who was doing all the sawing, I believe there were different motivational drivers in play. It was quite evident that he cared about the sawing itself, he was very excited about it and told stories about how he likes to saw and build things at home. He probably also wanted to maintain good relations with the other members of his group – the 'girls' as he called them. In any case, he was evidently caring about this job, about getting it right. Was it actually important for what they were making to be this meticulous? Probably not, but that is entirely beside the point; it was important for them in the moment, and I understand the attention to detail as a practice of caring for their shared experience.



## 10.1.3 Caring for Place


Keeping the fire going.

In the gravel pit, in a corner of the flat area in the middle, there was a small firepit. Someone lit the fire at the beginning of the first day, and without much communication or negotiation, tending to the fire became a communal task, a small ongoing act of caring for the common good. The fireplace became a kind of meeting place, a social hub where people would assemble when they needed a break from all the ruckus, a place where they could hang out, relax, recharge while perhaps roasting a marshmallow. On the second day of the experiment, one of the parents had prepared dough at home to make 'bread-on-a-stick' on the fire. She didn't make a big deal about it; on the contrary, it was 'just a dough', she said, but I still see it as an important act of care.


Bringing dough as a small act of care.

Where the caring practices were often directed towards other people, there were also numerous examples of people caring for the *place* where the experiment took place. We have seen this already with the campfire in the gravel pit, and it also manifested in the shape of dens, forts and other kinds of hideaways.

Showing the decor.

A fort with hearts on the wall.

An imposing fort on the top of the slope.

Now, how do we get up there?





These different dwellings or domiciles served different purposes for the players, but the one that I want to discuss here is as a setting for hanging out. I will argue that hanging out can also be seen as a practice of caring for a place in a way that makes it more 'homely' or that makes it possible for us to 'live in it as well as possible' (Tronto, 2013, p. 19). When Anne-Lene Sand followed a group of young people to understand how they used different parts of the city, she ended up with them in places where they were, in their own words, 'just hanging out': 'When we are here, we are just hanging out () sitting here under the bridge, drinking, talking about everything, bullshitting each other, and listening to music' (Sand, 2014, p. 83). While the young people often described this activity as 'doing nothing', Sand understood it as a specific way of 'doing place'. She argued that by 'hanging out without an explicit purpose', their way of seeing 'the place, its qualities and potentials has changed' (Sand, 2014, p. 125). Similarly, Carroll et al studied children playing in urban spaces, and they similarly argued that the children 'asserted their right to the city through "just hanging out"'(Carroll et al., 2019, p. 303). In these ways, I have come to understand hanging out as not only a deeply relational practice of great importance, but also as a means of caring for each other, the shared play experience, and the physical place where it all happens

### 10.1.4 Carnivalesque Care

Sometimes, the care practices of the junk playgrounds took on a slightly different, more subversive and carnivalesque character. In EX2, one group investigated the well-being of their students. This was clearly a matter of great concern to everyone involved, and something they cared about deeply. However, instead of engaging with this issue in a more traditional manner, they turned it upside-down. When they presented their work at the end, they told their story as follows.

**We have come to a very dystopian future, but maybe it is not that unlikely. We have come to a future when all young people are somehow afraid of something. We have come to a future where our school constantly receives a steady stream of police reports. This is why we had to invent the "Help Me!" wagon. It is a vehicle that is supposed to ensure that the children will not, in any possible way, experience any kind of incident. The only thing that is allowed is to tickle. Of course, you don't ask the student if he or she wants to be driven across the schoolyard in the wagon. They must come and ask; we are not allowed to ask them anything. They must sit down, then they have their mouth, eyes, and ears covered, and then they must wear this safety hat. And the seatbelt, the seatbelt, of course. There is also something for the feet if you are a little anxious during the trip. In the 21st century, the teachers have been replaced with AI, and this also solves the unemployment problem, as the teachers are supposed to drag the students across the schoolyard.**




Demonstrating the 'Help Me' wagon.

I cannot tell exactly when or how this story emerged, but it seems that they were playing with the materials, found the wheels, and started making the cart. Somewhere along the way, they apparently realised that the role of the cart would be to protect their students from any possible harm. While the narrative about the overly vulnerable children can seem offensive or even degrading, something happens when seen through a Bakhtinian lens, where 'degradation [...] has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one' (Dentith, 1995, p. 206). Bakhtin argued that the carnivalesque helps to liberate us 'from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from cliches, [and] from all that is humdrum and universally accepted' (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 34). Playing in this way allowed the group to imagine and investigate a complex, delicate subject in a less restrained manner. I believe that they also demonstrated Richard Schechner's point that the 'fun of playing, when there is fun, is in playing with fire, going in over one's head, inverting accepted procedures and hierarchies' (Schechner, 2004). I understand this potentially provocative story as an expression of care for the many students who are struggling with anxiety and mental well-being more broadly. I also understand their approach as a sign of curiosity, of wanting to turn things around and see them differently. Following Foucault, I believe that curiosity evokes 'the care one takes of what exists and what might exist () a certain determination to throw off familiar ways of thought and to look at the same things in a different way' (Foucault, 1997, p. 325).

## 10.1.5 Showing Vulnerability

We have seen how people in the playgrounds have been caring for each other and for the shared play experience. For Tronto, caring is intimately tied to vulnerability, and she argued that the 'first step that citizens need to take, and the one that requires considerable bravery, is for each person to admit human vulnerability' (Tronto, 2013, p. 146). The problem is, she contended, that the 'capacity to see oneself as vulnerable is not highly valued in our culture' (Tronto, 2013, p. 150). Quite the contrary, neoliberal ideals insist that 'everyone is capable of taking care of themselves' (Tronto, 2013, p. 145) and that anyone who shows vulnerability and a need for help and support 'must be incapable of taking care of themselves, and indeed, must be incompetent' (Tronto, 2013, p. 145).

I believe we have already seen several small glimpses of people embracing their vulnerability in the playgrounds, such as the people saying that they don't quite know what is going on, or how to 'get into their bodies', or those who shared the difficulties of working together—just to name a few. They could have kept up appearances, pretending that they were indeed the rational, competent individuals we are often expected to be. We can see a similar situation in slightly more detail if we visit EX8, when Mathilde described how she felt unable to fully commit to the experiment the way she thought she was supposed to.




**I think it's so interesting with these materials because you really meet yourself in them, or they kind of talk back, and they were really talking to me in a frustrating way because I play very orderly. I am very orderly, it's not because I like it, it's just how I am, and this frustrates me, sometimes, and then I started out with this one, because I thought, Oh, I had it all figured out. That's the orderly side of me, right, trying to figure everything out and being very clever. So, I thought this is like research, you hold it like this, but it slides all the time, so you to grip something but it slides. I'm very genius. But then I got irritated with myself and thought, well this is not the process of being a genius or clever, you need to provoke yourself a little bit, and then I just went mad and did all kinds of things. Even though there was this discussion inside my head, I needed to find a meaning for everything. () This is kind of a game of trying to cheat myself into being disorderly, but when I did something, I followed myself and found that I did what I used to do. It felt like a race of trying to get out of my comfort zone, but I could always just step into my comfort zone.**

In sharing these reflections, I believe she showed vulnerability through her willingness to elaborate on the difficulties she had attuning to the experiment. She readily admitted that the materials and the experience revealed something about herself that frustrated her, something she wanted to change. When Laurent Berlant talked about 'transformational infrastructures' and the possibility of becoming otherwise, she suggested that the crucial things is to 'loosen up at the moment when everything in me would prefer not to' (Berlant, 2022, p. 223). I believe this is mirrors what Mathilde talked about. She did want to loosen up, but she didn't feel able to. Rather than rejecting the proposition altogether, or resorting to her familiar way of doing things, she stayed with the challenge and the trouble. She could also have abstained from sharing her feelings, but she didn't. She laid bare what she herself experienced as a short-coming on her part, of not being quite as adept as she would have liked. This, I think, is a courageous act, because she shows vulnerability in an uncertain situation among people she may have wanted to impress.

I contend that there is vulnerability in accepting and embracing the not-knowing and the confusion that permeates all the experiments. People have engaged with these underlying conditions in different ways, but many have struggled with it, trying to somehow make sense of things and chart a path forward. As Isabella in EX1 expressed it, 'It was also a good feeling to know we all don't really know what we are doing'. While feeling lost, she found at least some solace in sharing that experience with others. A similar expression is found on a 'postcard from the future' in EX2, when a participant wrote that the 'goal-less space challenged me, but the community provided direction and meaning'. This is a recurring pattern, where people were initially confused and disoriented, with nobody to tell them exactly where to go or how to go about it: 'In the beginning, it was hard. I didn't think I had any ideas, but it was wonderful to experience that by working TOGETHER we found new ideas and motivation and that helped me'.

When Joan Tronto asked 'how do we change our concepts about humans so that instead of thinking of them as autonomous, we also recognize them as vulnerable and interdependent?' (Tronto, 2013, p. 169), we may see a fragment of a response here. If the junk playgrounds have been safe enough for people to acknowledge a degree of vulnerability, then perhaps such spaces may also suggest that we 'will benefit from recognizing the large web of caring relationships within which our lives gain meaning' (Tronto, 2013, p. 182).

In some cases, people may have found or created a modicum of stability in the experiments, but I think that more than that, they simply found in each other a capacity to linger with the confusion. Among all the small acts of care, sometimes participants were thus drawn closer together by the sheer bewilderment of the experience, indicating that there may have been a kind of connective tissue in the confusion.



## 10.2 Collective *Joy*

I believe that these small stories of care illustrate crucial moments in the junk playgrounds, when the otherwise prevalent narrative of individual responsibility has been ruptured. Showing vulnerability and engaging in practices of care may open for other ways of being together, and in the following, I will argue that these practices may also enable a kind of collective joy. I do not mean to claim that there is a causal relationship in which practices of care lead to a feeling of collective joy, but I have a sense that when we are brought to care for others beyond our intimate relations, we are also already entering the vicinity of a joy that is bigger than any of us. I had this hunch early on, in the first meetings and conversations, such as the ones with the museum and the library. They sparked joyful affective intensities or affinities that seemed to emanate from our being together, exploring shared concerns, frustrations, passions, and dreams. For instance, when the person from the museum said 'I am just very, very inspired by these conversations', my own feeling in that moment was of a deep, joyful resonance.

In conceptualising collective joy, I draw on the work of Lynne Segal (Segal, 2018) and on Edith and Victor Turner's studies of communitas (Turner, 2012; Turner, 1969; Turner, 1977). Segal defined collective joy in stark contrast to what she described as 'the now ruling rationality to individualize every moment of our existence' (Segal, 2018, p. 259). For her, collective joy is different. As she argued, while we are typically 'encouraged to see happiness as something embedded within us, the type of euphoric happiness we call "joy" takes us beyond or outside ourselves' (Segal, 2018, p. 24). Collective joy typically emanates from being 'fully absorbed or lost in something clearly bigger than ourselves, free for a while from exactly that self-monitoring that disciplines our daily lives' (Segal, 2018, p. 263). I believe that we have already seen several examples of this in the junk playgrounds.

I contend that the junk playgrounds can be understood as a kind of liminal space, where otherwise prevalent rules and expectations can be challenged and reconfigured. Edith Turner argued that in such liminality we can experience a 'time of wide-open wonder and realization' and that the 'collective joy at these times can be unforgettable. It is communitas' (E. Turner, 2012, p. 168). Communitas and collective joy both harbour a relational commitment at their core that grows from encounters with humans and more-than-humans.

## 10.2.1 Sensing Collective Joy

Talking about collective joy is difficult because I have had no way of accurately or definitively ascertaining when, where, or whether it transpired. Like any affective phenomenon, it is not mainly expressed or captured through language. As we have seen, Lefebvre argued that it is only possible to 'grasp a rhythm' if one has been 'been grasped by it' (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 27) and I believe the same to be true when it comes to collective joy. It is very difficult to only describe collective joy from the outside or at a distance. In fact, it may very well be that the primary reason why I insist on fleshing it out here is exactly because I was so deeply affected by it myself. In many cases, when I returned home from the experiments, I was still 'riding the high'; the rhythms, energies, and intensities of the junk playgrounds were still reverberating through me.

After the initial conversations, one of the first times I felt overwhelmed by collective joy was in EX2. The build-up to this experiment was rather complicated and confusing, for me as well as for the participants. On my way there, I almost turned my car around, so distraught was I. However, there was a good energy in the group from the beginning, and people immediately started to push at the boundaries of what could happen, what they were allowed to do, and how much they should listen to my guidance. Despite – or because of? – the initial confusion, something happened, and quite quickly. The energy spiked, everybody started moving around, exploring the materials, picking up tools, combining things, drilling, cutting, using power tools, drills, jigsaws, angle grinders, and screwing together things such as pallets, boards, beams and so on. They quickly scattered over the large area in what seemed like an act of playful appropriation, taking over the space for their needs, making small campfires, hanging banners and rope between the trees. It looked like some kind of encampment or settlement was emerging. As I walked back and forth across the playground, I quickly gained a sense of frivolity, a desire to pursue the wanton and wild, moving beyond the frame set by me.

While my initial nervousness and anxiety had not entirely dissipated, it was far overshadowed by a feeling that something clicked; I was ecstatic and, as far as I could tell, I was not alone. The experiment was marked by numerous such signs of joy throughout the day, and these sentiments were also mirrored in the written reflections afterwards:

**Lovely day. Process, everything emerged out of what everyone was doing, everybody was active, shared ideas, we went in and out of each other's ideas and shared our own. Play, immersion, the idea grew out of our actions, words, cues for each other. (...) The play grew, was fun, kept being fun, developing, because everyone joined in".**

This person not only clearly expresses a joyful excitement, they also showed how the sense of belonging and



shared meaning-making made the experience engaging and meaningful. Another person was even more explicit about this sense of community: 'I have been on a journey this afternoon, where there was much joy [...] together with colleagues I don't normally talk to. (...) it was so much fun and there was a delightful feeling of community'.

There are many other important facets to this experiment, some of which I have already discussed, and some that were demanding and challenging. However, it seems that this sense of joy that grows from being in it together is not necessarily limited by difficulty, but perhaps even made more robust by it.
Another moment deserves to be mentioned here. This time, we were in the gravel pit, on the first day of experiments. People were roaming around the site, traversing the slopes, dragging materials, picking up tools, trying, building, interacting, playing, forming a lively, polyrhythmic assemblage of human and nonhuman bodies. Children and adults alike, so actively engaging with the materials, each other, and the site itself, this intriguing gravel pit that promised to hold so many secrets. We never quite knew what would happen next, but a whole range of possible worlds were always on the cusp of emergence. In one of those rare situations where I could just linger and observe things from a distance, another adult, Ida, came up to me and exclaimed, with palpable excitement, that 'it's completely magical': I don't think Ida suggested that the situation was magical in the sense of 'summoning up supernatural powers', but in the sense of 'the marvelous erupting amid the everyday' (Bennett, 2001, p. 8). Following Jane Bennett, I believe that the magical aspect, which I also felt in my own body, can be understood as a kind of 'enchantment'. To be enchanted, according to Bennett, 'is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday' (Bennett, 2001, p. 4). Bennett is so concerned with enchantment because she believes that it holds the potential to evoke a sense of love for the world and for our very existence. She argues that 'one must be enamored with existence and occasionally even enchanted in the face of it in order to be capable of donating some of one's scarce mortal resources to the service of others' (Bennett, 2001, p. 4). In other words, moments of enchantment, like the one shared by Ida and me, may allow us to fall (back) in love with the world(s) and with existence itself. While Hannah Arendt was talking about education, she made a similar point when she argued that we must 'decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it' (Arendt, 1961, p. 196). If we do, Arendt argued, we must contribute to the ongoing care for and renewal of the world that is otherwise bound for inevitable ruin. I believe that we were doing so in the junk playground, if only on a very small scale.

Enchantment, Bennett further argued, is never fully under our control and it 'hits one as if from out of the blue, without warning' (Bennett, 2001, p. 169). In a similar vein, Segal argued that collective joy 'jolts us out of the ordinary' and 'usually arrives unexpectedly'. Like play, it is not something that can be easily produced or conjured (Segal, 2018, p. 77). There is a pattern here, between collective joy, communitas, enchantment and play, in that they all presuppose a different configuration of concepts like agency and control. It is not unlike that which is proposed by new materialism and other more-than-human shifts and turns. Bennett continued along those lines when she further argued that 'enchantment includes () a condition of exhilaration or acute sensory activity" of being "both caught up and carried away' (Bennett, 2001, p. 5).

This notion of being 'caught up and carried away' echoes a sentiment shared by many people in the playgrounds, who have described forgetting about time and place. We saw it perhaps most clearly with Olivia from EX2, when she described how she forgot about her initial reservations, as well as the desire to reach a goal or produce a specific result. As she said, she 'had just been playing really, really well'. This is a characteristic often described as 'immersion' in play experiences (Ermi & Mäyrä, 2005), or, as Eugen Fink described it, of being 'carried away into the sphere of play, where the player does not reign supreme over his game, but rather to a certain degree is "pulled into it," loses himself in it, "vanishes" in his magical role' (Fink, 2016, p. 166). Where I have framed the 'junk playground as agora' experiments around one or more matters of common concern, sometimes these matters were effectively sidestepped amidst the joyful energies. While this sometimes made *me* concerned because I was still secretly hoping that *something* should come of all this, it is also exactly from those moments that the most vibrant feelings of collective joy emerged.

Victor Turner argued that 'communitas is of the now' (Turner, 1969, p. 370), which is similar to both Fink's argument that 'playing has the character of a pacified "present"' (Fink, 2016, p. 20) and Segal's claim that collective joy typically happens when we are 'fully absorbed in our experiences of the moment' (Segal, 2018, loc. 106), arriving from 'the sense of being fully alive to the world we are in at the moment' (Segal, 2018, p. 77). In other words, communitas, collective joy, and play are all phenomena that hinge on the possibility of being present in the here and now. Presence is a condition, but these phenomena also seem to boast the potential to capture our attention, to *make* us present. Segal further argued, drawing on Aristotle, that collective joy can only ever 'stem from those activities that we desire to do for their own sake' (Segal, 2018, p. 16). In these situations, participants seem to become at least as much as, if not more, interested in the play experience itself, in pursuing 'the desire for more playful assemblages' (Lester, 2013a, p. 138). We saw this with the two women and their improvised 'skateboard', or the woman in the school experiment who had 'just been playing so well', or the euphoric children in the gravel pit as they



were playing on the slope. Here play *became* the matter of common concern, that which the players strove towards and aspired to keep going, pursuing what Stuart Brown called the 'continuation desire' of play, where we simply desire to keep playing (Brown & Vaughan, 2010, p. 18). Similarly, Turner argued that the experience of communitas is followed by 'a desire to keep communitas from ending' (E. Turner, 2012, p. 218). When we are in these experiences of play, collective joy, and communitas, our instinct seems to be one of holding on to it for as long as possible, to extend the moment into the future.

Most of the experiments ended with people telling stories about their works. On some occasions, this turned into a shared reflection session, whereas in other situations, it seemed more like an extension of the play experience, pursuing the 'continuation desire' mentioned by Brown. I believe we can see a few aspects of this if we allow a story from EX2 to unfold. They had all been playing, exploring, experimenting, cursing, laughing, building, hanging out for hours, and at the end, I invited them all to join an impromptu art exhibition. One group had created a catapult or slingshot, and their narrative evolved around this contraption:

**We thought that the school of the future should be a school without a timetable, without classes, so when the children arrive in the morning, they say 'bye-bye to Mom and Dad, and then they are thrown into the catapult. Just shoot, we'll see what happens! Watch out for the rock! (they launch a rock with the catapult, and people are laughing as it flies far beyond the designated landing area). Then they (the students) fly into a learning space, maybe they end up in a learning space with 1st and 9th grade, it is mixed, of course, because age doesn't' matter. Maybe they land in the lake, where teaching is underwater.**

It seemed like their process had been inspired by the idea of making a working slingshot, and the narrative developed around it. They started playing with notions of unpredictability as a factor in the school, by all accounts because they couldn't control the shot of the catapult with much accuracy. What was going on here? Were they seriously entertaining ideas about a better future for their school dictated by unpredictability? Or were they still playing? It was probably a bit of both but, at least to an extent, it seems that they were holding on to and extending this moment of playfulness as long as they could.

In these different ways, the junk playgrounds can be said to inspire inquiries into the question of how we might achieve 'a maximum of joyful passions' (Deleuze, 1988, p. 28). Ignoring or forgetting external goals and expectations also contributes to making play political, because it produces 'moments that reconfigure the existing order of the world to satisfy their own urges' (Lester, 2013b, p. 28). This is most visible with the children in my experiments, but perhaps no less relevant for the adults, because 'such vibrant and hopeful moments invite adults to rethink ideas about what constitutes a 'good life' (Lester, 2013c, p. 39). For me, this is a key point, as it indicates how the playgrounds may transcend their instrumental function, allowing instead the players to experience the world differently or, better yet, to experience different worlds.

Testing the slingshot.



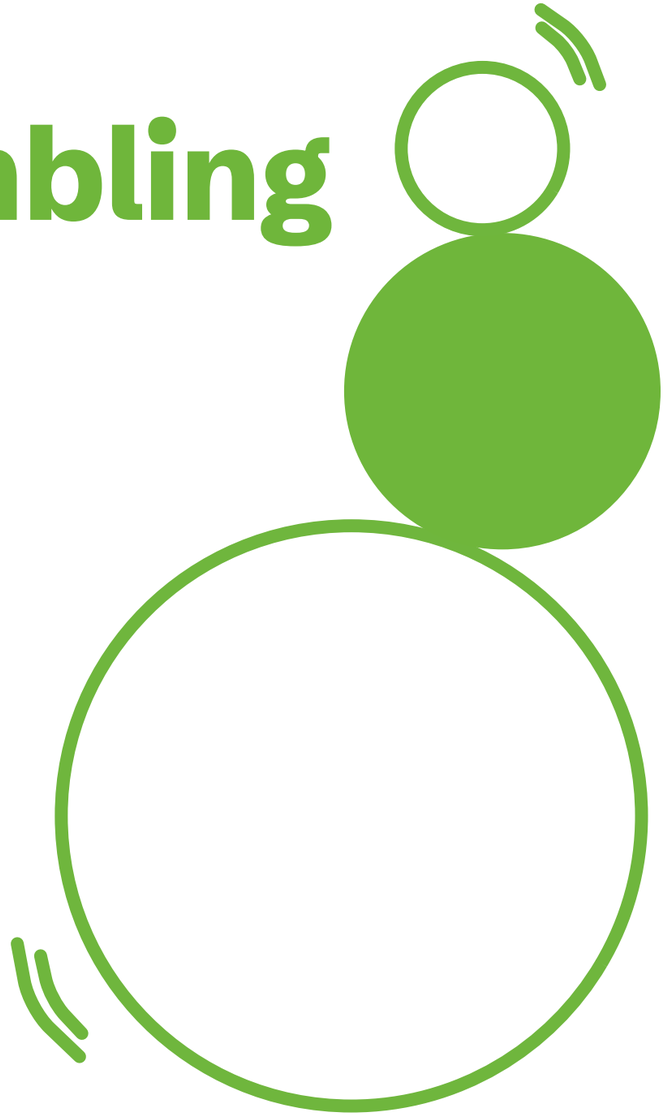
## 10.2.2 Democratic Joy

I see the concept of collective joy as particularly useful here because it bridges two aspects of democratic participation that are often overlooked – the social and collective nature of the experience and the joyful engagement. From a democratic perspective, joy and especially collective joy is often disregarded and not granted the same value as, say, rational discourse and decision-making. I believe this should be understood in light of narratives of the rational individual, who remains driven by rational arguments rather than by affective sensibilities.

While collective joy still seems largely relegated to the margins of democratic theory, a growing number of scholars argue for more joyful democratic encounters. Zizi Papacharissi kept repeating what seems like a rhetorical question about democratic participation, when she asked 'but is it a joyful mode of engagement?' (Papacharissi, 2021, p. 70). She stated that if we want active citizens, we must also offer 'engaging opportunities of interaction' (Papacharissi, 2021, p. 103) and suggested that 'referenda could be replaced with opportunities that invite joyful, playful, and more meaningful interaction' (Papacharissi, 2021, p. 76). This mirrors findings that people want 'political engagement more broadly to be enjoyable' (Hendriks et al., 2020, p. 155). The junk playgrounds seem to deliver these qualities, as they have widely become spaces for joyful social interaction, and perhaps they indicate that it is indeed possible to 'turn the struggles for greater participatory democracy into sites of collective exhilaration, given the creativity, strength and agency we can gain from one another along the way' (Segal, 2018, p. 259).

## VIGNETTE:

# A Trembling World





I was visiting an artist one day to learn about her artistic assemblage practice, and we casually talked about the inadequacies of Enlightenment ideals, including the myth of the disembodied (yet distinctly male), autonomous individual and all that. She said,

**'Those ideals, they will soon die. Everything is trembling, almost falling over. Can't you feel it?'**

'Yes,' I replied. 'I feel it, too.' It's a certain vibe, a tone, a flow of energies, an undercurrent, shifts and movements, cracks, and openings. It is all these voices, whispering and mumbling, sometimes humming and singing, but always at a volume that requires attentive listening. It's not the insistent voices of over-confident white men we have grown so accustomed to. These voices are different, less assertive, like they also don't know exactly what is going, but they are somehow fine with the not-knowing, the fabulation, and the rambling storytelling. There's a radical curiosity at play, they talk of many possible worlds, many ways of knowing, many ways of becoming, plurality, pluriverses, worlds where we humans finally give up our long-standing claims to exceptionalism, where we embrace a different place in the world, and we become-with everything else that exists. I feel it affectively, like the goosebumps I mentioned earlier. Along the way, I have slowly been learning to trust these affective responses, to stop, to listen, to sense, to follow. Let them guide me, even if I don't know exactly where they're going. Maybe I have indeed been practicing the 'arts of noticing' that Anna Tsing (Tsing, 2015, p. 17) claimed is essential for collaborative survival. Is my body, this crude affective registering device, becoming slightly better attuned, marginally more sensitive towards the ephemeral and that which is barely visible? I'm not sure, I'm never sure, but in any case, I do feel that the world is indeed trembling, quivering, like something is about to happen, but I am growing increasingly impatient. I reluctantly accept that the happening is bound to be slow, glacial, scattered, and unpredictable. The tremors, the changes, are real, but obscured, and I still don't know exactly what to do with this or how to talk about it. It feels like there is an idea, or many ideas, shapes, weightless, floating just outside my limited reach. I do understand, though, that what the voices and the energies are saying is that 'everything needs to change significantly if "humanity" is to confront the civilizational crisis it has wrought upon itself and the Earth' (Escobar, 2022, p. xxiv). Everything is a lot, and what does that even mean? Where do we start? Is it like eating an elephant (which would be somewhat counterproductive to the idea of collaborative survival)? It is a lot to take in, everything, too much for any one mind to comprehend, but maybe that's the point? Maybe we have already stretched the over-reliance on individual, rational minds too far? Maybe there are ways of making sense and making worlds that are more sensitive, caring, loving, and collective?

# 11. Participation in the Playgrounds

While I have yet to more explicitly and in greater detail analyse the participatory dimensions of the junk playgrounds, I believe that I have, at the same time, been talking about participation all along.

To briefly summarise my theoretical orientation towards participation, I argued that participation should always involve a degree of openness, allowing participants to shape both the process and the outcome. I also noted that it is inadequate to only focus on shifts in power, and that by understanding participation rather as a multi-dimensional assemblage, we may become attentive to a broader, more inclusive participatory repertoire. With new materialism, I argued that participation cannot be understood as merely the enactment of human agency through rational discourse, but that agency must be understood as distributed across assemblages of human and more-than-human bodies. Finally, I suggested that this broader conception of participation also allows for the inclusion of play practices and playful approaches, even – or especially – those that may question established assumptions about democracy and democratic participation.

We have already seen numerous examples in the junk playgrounds that demonstrate different facets of this conception of participation. We have seen people who jumped right in, who started participating by doing things, by touching and sensing, building, and telling stories, and we have seen those who bided their time, who moved more slowly and cautiously. We have seen bodies moving, human bodies and more-than-human bodies, encountering each other and generating sparks of energy and intensity. We have seen things slow down, with people hanging out and apparently not doing much. We have seen people doing things with and to materials, using hammers, saws, and other tools, but we have also seen the materials come alive and do things with people, resisting and pushing back. We have seen negotiations, inconveniences, and disagreements. We have seen caring practices unfold with people caring for the shared play experience and cultivating a sense of collective joy. We have seen all that and more, and I argue that there are traces of participation across all these situations, but not in any pure sense, and not with clearly identifiable shifts from 'partial' to 'full' along a linear trajectory.

In this chapter, I will draw these threads together and frame the junk playground experiments primarily as spaces defined by their *participatory plurality*.

## 11.1 A Participatory *Framework*

Building on the different strands of research on participation discussed earlier, I propose an experimental framework to identify and analyse the modes of participation taking place in the junk playgrounds. It is not my intention to narrowly define participation or to unequivocally determine whether a situation qualifies as participation, but rather to better understand how different facets of participation comes together in the junk playgrounds, and how they might create entry points and openings into new participatory imaginaries. I try to grasp participation as always-already relational, as unfolding in dynamic assemblages, where both human and more-than-human bodies encounter each other in meetings no one entity controls. In a participatory assemblage, there can be no linear progression from less to more power, and participation should rather be understood as something that unfolds between the different entities in the assemblage, such as humans, tools, materials, soil, sites, the weather etc. I do not see participation as moving towards an end point, but rather as dynamic flows that are constantly changing. As affective flows, where it is the movement as much as the destination that matters, we can understand participation as a living composition, where participants continuously jump and shift between the dimensions, and possibly lingering in several dimensions at once. As Fox and Alldred argued, 'power

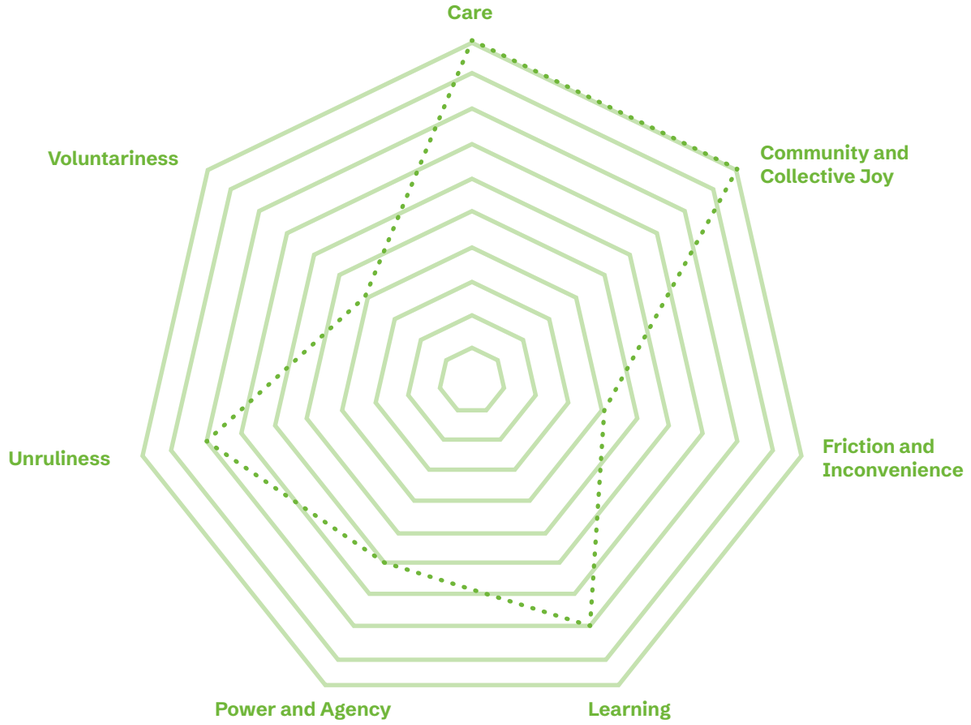


resides in the affective flows between relations in assemblages, the aggregations and singularities these flows produce, and the capacities or constraints upon capacities produced in some – and not other – bodies, collectivities and nonhuman formations' (Fox & Alldred, 2017b, p. 154)

I suggest visualising this typology as a dynamic web of interconnected dimensions, where the connections and movements matter as much as the individual dimensions:

### EXPERIMENT 1

*A multidimensional participatory framework.*



These seven dimensions have emerged by drawing on the theory and typologies discussed earlier, as well as through the analyses in the previous chapters. It is not meant as a universal, all-encompassing model for assessing and evaluating participation, but merely as an analytical tool to probe the different modes of participation as they have unfolded in the junk playgrounds. The seven dimensions are not equal and cannot be compared directly. No one dimension is inherently more important than another; they merely all represent dimensions of the participatory repertories that have unfolded across the junk playgrounds. Finally, the diagrams are not rooted in quantitative data, and should thus not be understood as accurate depictions, but merely as illustrations based on my qualitative research materials.

As I was developing this framework, I suddenly hesitated.

Making a diagram like this felt a little bit like sustaining the 'positivist leftovers in academia' (Østern et al., 2021, p. 3) I have already discussed and critiqued. Every so often, models, diagrams, frameworks, and other visualisations become more than what they are. Or rather, they are *taken* to be more than what they are, as if they make assertive truth claims. I can only reiterate Stengers' suggestion that we should 'laugh not at theories but at the authority associated with them' (Stengers, 2005, p. 994). This framework claims no authority for itself, and it has no general, universal ambitions. To put it another way, the framework is merely a material to enact play situations with. As such, it is not much different from the junk playground experiments, or my numerous attempts to evoke similar sentiments and experiences in this text. It has value to the extent it helps us create friction, slow down, ask questions, see what we would otherwise not see, sense what we would otherwise not sense, and only in this specific context.

With these caveats, I will continue by describing the seven dimensions of the framework.



### 11.1.1 Care

This dimension draws on my analysis of caring practices in the junk playground. As we have already seen, care and caring practices can take many different forms. For instance, sometimes people in playgrounds have given each other gifts as a sign of care, or they have cared for the shared play experience, or for sustaining relations, or for the safety of each other. Underneath these different forms of care, I maintain a connection to Tronto's definition of care as 'everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible' (Tronto, 2013, p. 19).

### 11.1.2 Community and Collective Joy

Closely linked to the dimension of care, this dimension speaks to all those situations where participation has been sparked and sustained by a sense of community and collective joy. This dimension also speaks to Haraway's notion of 'becoming-with' as a 'response-ability', a way to respond relationally to our encounters in the world (Haraway, 2016).

### 11.1.3 Friction and Inconvenience

This dimension emphasises the many different forms of friction, difference, and inconvenience we have seen emerge in the junk playgrounds. It includes the more literal forms of friction between human bodies and discarded materials, for instance, but also the social friction that I discussed in Chapter 9.

### 11.1.4 Learning

This dimension consists of all the varied opportunities for learning, personal growth, and transformation, as well as the skills and competences that may come into play. While there are many forms of learning taking place, my primary focus here is learning to participate. I reiterate Carole Pateman's dictum that we 'learn to participate by participating and that feelings of political efficacy are more likely to be developed in a participatory environment' (Pateman, 1970, p. 105).

### 11.1.5 Power and Agency

This dimension represents the more classical focus on the redistribution of power, such as 'partial' and 'full' participation', or 'minimalist' and 'maximalist' dimensions of participation, tracing the shift of power in the situation. In the context of relational ontologies, it is inherently difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain the extent of individual power and agency. However, this does not mean that individuals and groups of individuals are without agency, merely that they are never able to exercise that agency in a unidirectional manner.

### 11.1.6 Unruliness

This dimension includes those situations where people in the playgrounds have challenged rules, conventions, and expectations, including those of the experiment itself. Here I consider situations where the players have been unruly and subversive, including what Helle Marie Skovbjerg termed 'euphoric play' as well as those situations that may seem 'inappropriate in the eyes of some adults precisely because play is not rational and it escapes adult control' (Cohen, 2011, p. 177).

### 11.1.7 Voluntariness

This describes the degree to which participation is voluntary, and whether participants can decide when to enter and exit the event. Do they themselves decide to join in the first place, or are there circumstances that pressure them to accept my invitation? I have already discussed how I question the clearcut distinctions between play and not-play, and hence, it is not a given that play is a voluntary activity, despite my best intentions. This dimension may help us talk about that.

In the following, I will use this framework to analyse selected dimensions of participation in specific situations from the junk playgrounds.

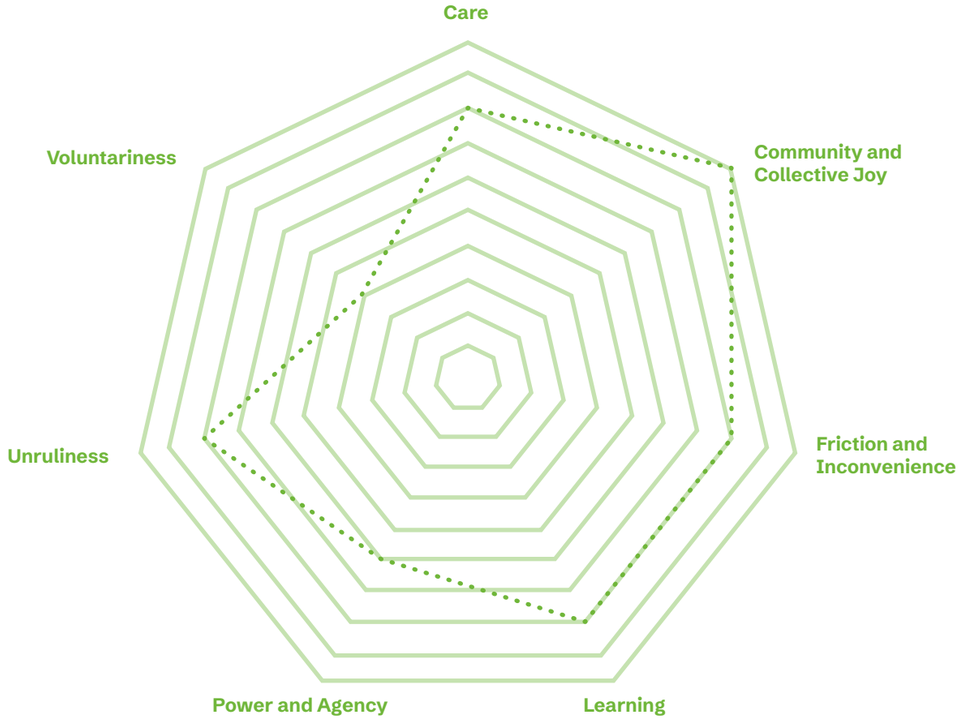


## 11.2 Voluntariness and *Power*

I will begin with EX2, which we have already visited several times. For many of the people in this experiment, what really seemed to make participation meaningful was the strong sense of community, also and not least with those colleagues they did not already know.

### EXPERIMENT 2

*Experiment 2 - voluntariness and power.*



What I want to focus on here, however, is the opacity that pertains to the voluntary nature of the experiment and the degree of shifts in power. While I explicitly stressed in the beginning of the experiment that participation was voluntary, that people could always step back, take a break, or otherwise adapt the experience to their needs, it was nonetheless still embedded in a work-related event and the entire management team was there. In that light, was participation voluntary after all? Could they have rejected my invitation to play along without any consequences? Maybe you recall Olivia, who initially felt a strong resistance towards participating. While she ended up enjoying the experience, this situation raised a great number of questions. Did I lure her into participating in something she would have otherwise refused? Did I make an unreasonable offer she couldn't refuse, considering the presence of her bosses? Or did she simply warm up to the experience on her own terms? The answer is probably somewhere in between. Even so, it serves as an important reminder that participation is often not completely voluntary, despite my best efforts.

Similar issues surface in relation to the power dimension, where one could reasonably question the actual change in power relations. While people had ample room to manoeuvre and make decisions *during* the experiment, I cannot tell what happened afterwards. It is unlikely, for instance, that all the different ideas and stories were considered as relevant for implementation. Maybe *nothing* changed, despite the joyful engagement. Of course, I have already argued that in encounters like these, some things *always* change, even in the smallest of ways, but from a more classical participatory perspective, the shifts in power afterwards may been negligible.

Finally, Andrea Cornwall argues that for people to have a voice, they must be able to speak up without fear of reprisals. This, she argued, can never be 'guaranteed no matter how well-meaning the instigators of the process may be' (Cornwall, 2008, p. 278). This is true here as well. While I tried to ensure that the junk playground would be a safe space, I had no control over what might happen after the experiment ended. While I got a sense of playful, unruly energies, including what seemed like friendly banter, I cannot tell if people held back for fear of reprisals.

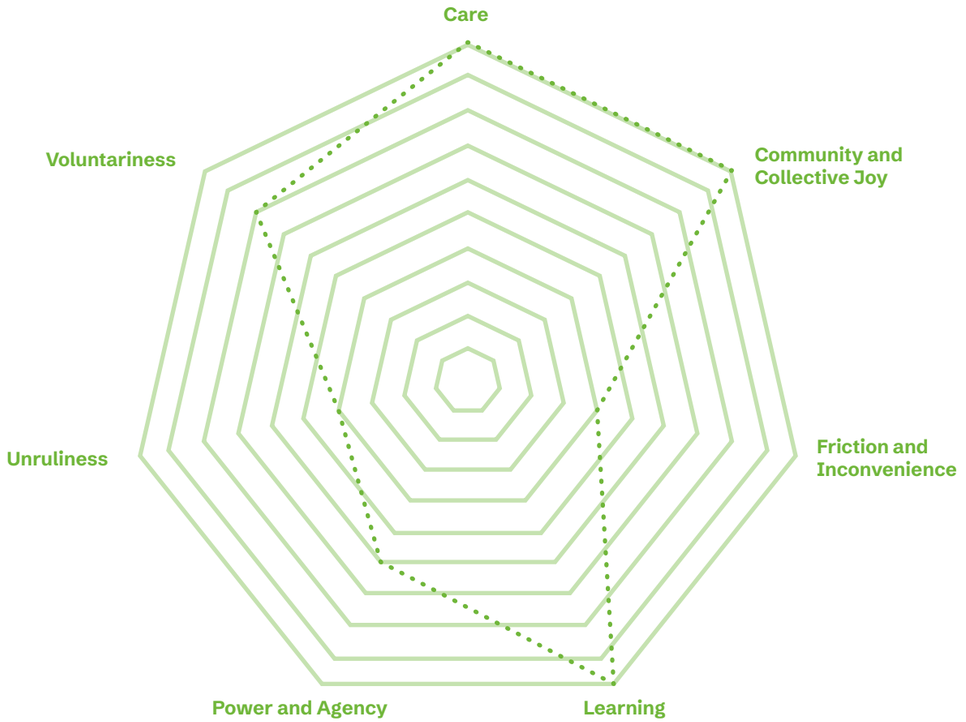


# 11.3 Learning, Care, and *Community*

If we move on to EX3, we can explore the dimensions of learning, care, and community.

## EXPERIMENT 3

*Experiment 3 - learning, care and community.*



This experiment was mostly driven by the children, and while I have assessed that they did experience significant levels of agency, to make decisions and shape the course of events, their power was also limited by my (albeit inadequate) safety measures, and their parents' opinions and interventions. However, the children found ample opportunities to participate across several dimensions. We can perhaps already see this, if we recall how William and his family built a big tower that he later shared with everyone. He seemed to learn something about himself that made it possible for him to participate in ways that he would usually not have done.

Another boy, Bashir, who had fled with his parents from Syria to Denmark, got involved in building a fort or tower with some of his friends. His parents consciously stepped back and let him play for several hours. He told me that he liked building things in this way because he felt like he 'got better at it', that he learned things, and that he could do more. Through my short conversations with him during the day, I got the sense that the process of working together with his friends gave him a tangible sensation of increasing his capacity not just for building things, but for establishing social relationships and developing a sense of belonging. I see his engagement as an indicator of him feeling a growing agency in relationship with his friends and the available materials, mirroring Henricks' claim that 'play makes people aware of their capacities for social agency' (Henricks, 2015, loc. 3131). During the day, he found many ways to participate, from the more unruly, physically active to the more introspective and calmer, like painting beautiful hearts on the wall of the fort. Furthermore, by developing his capacity for participation, he was also practicing what Donatella della Porta talked about as a 'virtuous circle of participation', where the act of participating is itself seen as improving the capacity of citizens to engage in democratic practices (Porta, 2013, p. 41).

Experimenting with expressions.



# 11.4 Agency and *Voluntariness*

Continuing from the previous story about the children in EX3, we can visit a group of children EX6 to learn a little bit more about their experiences of agency and voluntariness.

## EXPERIMENT 6

*Agency and voluntariness.*

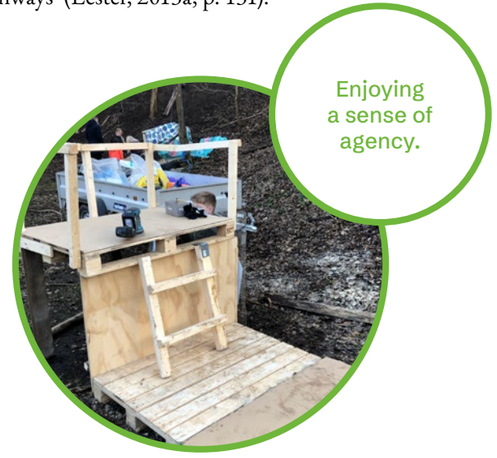
Especially for the children, the junk playgrounds seem to have offered a welcome opportunity to explore their own agency. Several of them explicitly expressed delight in *not* having to adhere strictly to rules and goals defined by adults. In a conversation after the gravel pit experiments had ended, one of the children told me that he enjoyed participating and that 'it was fun to do what one felt like, being all creative, I have never tried that so much, in school we mostly have to do what the adults tell us'. Let us follow a group of three children, who came to the gravel pit together. For at least one of them, Malthe, I believe the experience of having agency had started the day before, when he first heard of the event:

**It was me who found out about it in the shop yesterday. There was a man talking to another man. I was standing there with my grandmother, waiting, and I heard this conversation where he said, 'If you don't use all the sausages, I can just take them back,' and then I asked if there was something happening in the gravel pit.**

He seemed a little proud to have made this discovery and decided to bring a couple of his friends to the gravel pit. When I first encountered them during the experiment, Malthe and his two friends were in the middle of building what looked like a small tower. They seemed quite careful, as they also spent quite some time sanding the rather rough wood. As we were talking, they told me that this experience was quite different from what they expected.

Malthe: 'I thought we were to come down and build a playground today, where you had already found all the things. Like, a bought slide and such.'
Me: 'Is it more fun like this?'
Malthe: 'Yes, it is more fun like this [...] then we have all these tarps and things, so we can make what we want. [...] We didn't want to make a slide. We thought first about a den, but we didn't make that, then a hut, but we didn't make that, and then we thought of a watchtower [...] but we could make a small hut underneath. If it starts raining, we could go in there.'

Malthe and his friends expressed delight in realising they had more agency than expected and that they could decide what they wanted to make, pursuing their 'own desires rather than following adult determined pathways' (Lester, 2013a, p. 131).



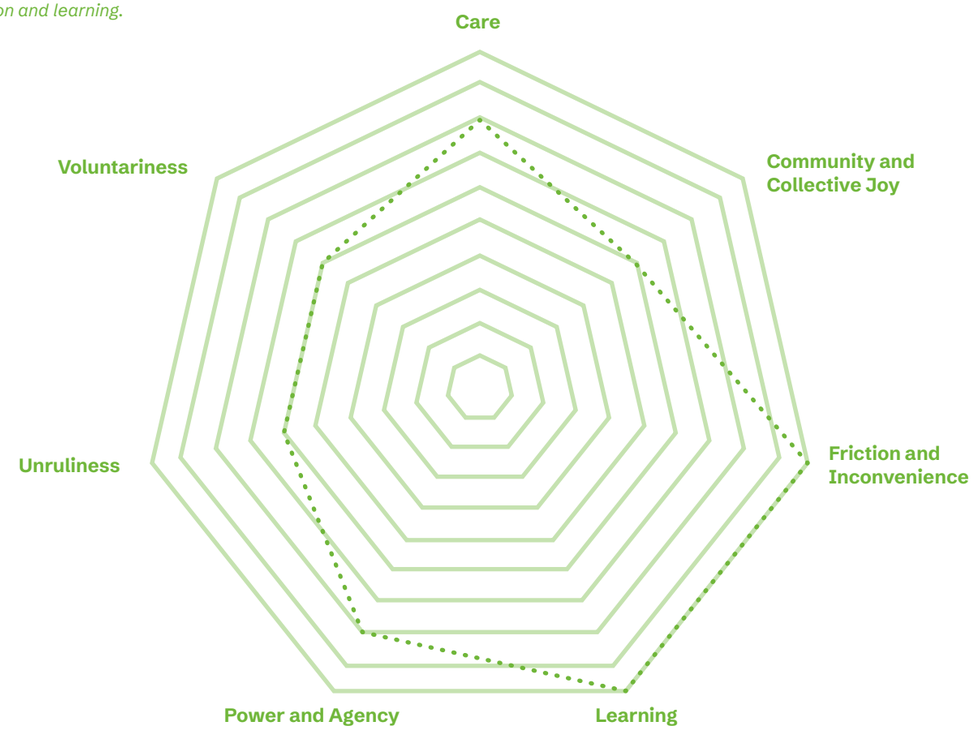



# 11.5 Friction and *Learning*

As we are starting to see, there are many different possible configurations of the participatory assemblage, and here we will trace one that is constituted primarily by friction and learning.
EX4 may have been less voluntary than some of the other experiments, since the participants were students, and it was designed as part of a mandatory course. I also did not sense quite the same unruly and communal energies as in other experiments.

## EXPERIMENT 4

*Friction and learning.*



I have already discussed some of the friction and inconvenience in EX4, where the students found it challenging to work together under the unfamiliar conditions and constraints I offered them. While I was somewhat concerned during the experiment, it seems we all had a rather different experience. One person, Nora, wrote the following on her 'postcard from the future':

**Dear Nora. I think you are brave. You were also brave earlier this morning, but today you have been closer to creating something with your fellow students than ever before. It felt good to take a step back, let go of control and surrender to the process. Important development towards who you want to be and what you want to be a part of.**

I agree with Nora, she *was* brave, for accepting the invitation to play, despite expressing concerns along the way, and she was also brave for sharing these reflections with us at the end. I believe she herself felt brave for several reasons, for stepping into the junk playground in the first place, for 'creating something with her fellow students' and for 'letting go of control'. Nora and her fellow students explicitly mentioned how they found this lack of control daunting and unfamiliar, for this was not at all how they were used to working. Maybe more than that, Nora felt brave because of her courage to take a few steps towards who she wants to be(come) and what she wants to be a part of. She embraced her own *incompleteness* and dared to propose that she was merely in the process of becoming. From the perspective of participation, we can see here that the 'empowering dimension is not only linked to a more equal distribution of the power to decide, but also to a personal or collective sense of efficacy, vitality and well-being' (Stage & Ingerslev, 2015, p. 126). As Kelty et al noted with what they call the 'educative dividend' of participation, for Nora this experience also allowed her to take a small step towards 'the opening of new possibilities and life chances for the individual' (Kelty et al., 2014, p. 7). What is expressed here by Nora also resonates with the understanding that play is about 'expressing ourselves—who we want to be' (Sicart, 2014, loc. 169). Here, players can 'step out of their determined positions, roles and functions and disrupt, revise and reverse social relations' (Hansen & Toft, 2020, p. 258). The playground thus becomes a space not merely for showing who we already are, but also for playing with who we might become.

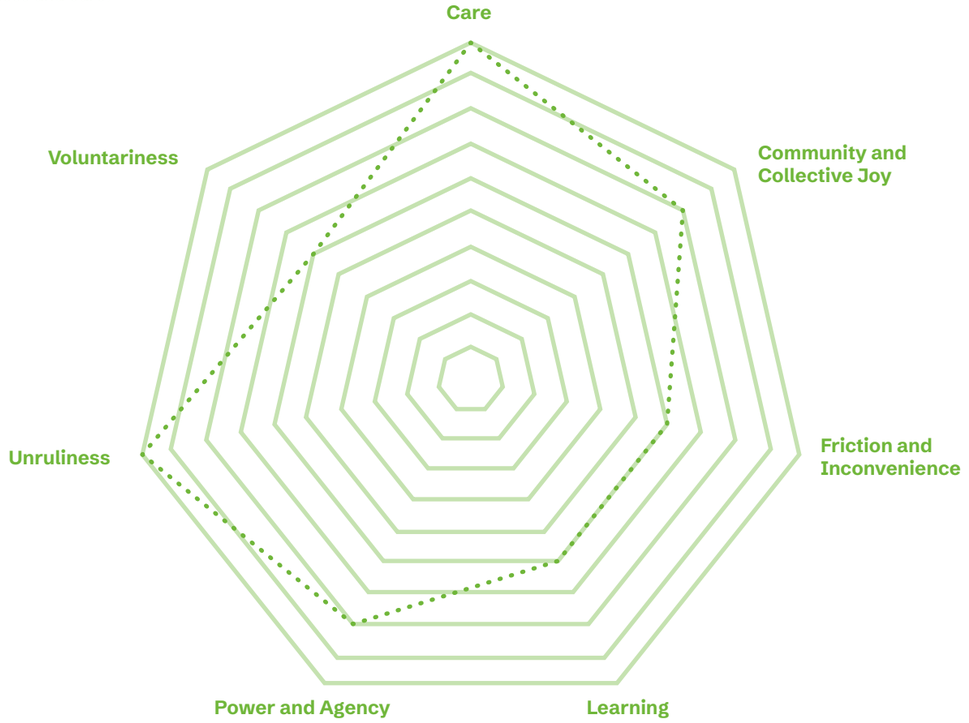


# 11.6 Carnivalesque *Participation*

We have already seen examples of the more unruly, subversive, and carnivalesque dimensions of participation, for instance with the children in the gravel pit and the teachers talking about their students. Let us visit EX8 for a better example of this. Here I will follow one person, Clara.

## EXPERIMENT 8

*Unruliness and care.*



At the beginning of the experiment, Clara noticed a catalogue on breastfeeding, and she started to cut out several breasts from the pages. Already in this act, separating the breasts from their two-dimensional bodies, she was venturing towards the grotesque and carnivalesque, which, according to Bahktin, is particularly fond of 'dismemberment' (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 317–318).

Dismembering bodies of paper..

After cutting out the breasts, dismembering paper bodies, she also created a contraption that she would later name the Nipple Catapult. The grotesque act of dismembering the human body can be understood, with Bakhtin, as simultaneously 'degrading' and an attempt to 'bring forth something more and better' (Bakhtin, 1994, p. 205). For Bakthin, as for Clara, 'the carnival-grotesque form' helps to 'consecrate inventive freedom':

**to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from cliches, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world. to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things.**

*(Bakhtin, 1984, p. 34).*

I would argue that this is exactly what the Nipple Catapult sought to achieve, to 'liberate from the prevailing point of view', and to carve out a space where disciplined affects, like anger and frustration, could be investigated and talked about.



Like all the other people in this experiment, Clara is an academic, and she talked about how certain aspects of her research had come under attack from some politicians:

**We drove past the immigration museum on our way out here, and I was just thinking about my own research in relation to that. I tend to research in immigration, nationalism, discrimination, harassment, anti-feminism, these kinds of things. On the one hand, it's something academia really want us to do. But on the other hand () that kind of research right now is extremely challenged () that's one of the reasons why play is so obvious for me. When we have these kinds of playful communities, that's also when we're finding places within academia when we fit () okay, so one of the things that we're really not allowed to see, at least on social media, is nipples. So, I was thinking of all these small playful communities within the university as nipples. We can kind of just have this Nipple Catapult to challenge the university structures. That's a metaphor for playful communities within universities, that's nipples.**

Clara also seems to embody Sicart's claim that playfulness is the 'carnivalesque domain of the appropriation' and that 'playfulness means taking over a world to see it through the lens of play, to make it shake and laugh and crack because we play with it' (Sicart, 2014, p. 24). Thus, I argue we can see the Nipple Catapult, ludicrous as it may seem, as a way to circumvent norms, using the grotesque, dismembered body in a carnivalesque fashion to challenge the university structures. When I have also emphasised the dimension of care, it is because I believe that Clara's carnivalesque inquiries were driven by a deep sense of care for the university as an arena for critical thinking. In a sense, Clara followed Anna Tsing's suggestion that 'anyone who cares about ideas is forced () to create scenes that exceed or escape () the surveillance techniques of privatization. This means designing research that requires playgroups and collaborative clusters' (Tsing, 2015, p. 285).

The Nipple Catapult in action.



## 11.7 Learning to *Participate*

If we take a closer look at the *learning* dimension of the framework, a few interesting themes emerge. Going over my research materials again and again, I started to see an interesting pattern relating to the skills required in the junk playgrounds. Stepping into the junk playground calls for a set of skills that seem to be different not only from other democratic contexts, but from most institutional contexts, including education. The junk playground asks people to engage with a selection of discarded materials, and there is an implicit expectation that they do something with those materials. In most cases, engaging with the materials also entails using certain tools, either power tools like drills, jigsaws and, in just a few cases, an angle grinder, or hand tools such as hammers and saws. If we look at the ability to use a saw, many people are not used to using hand saws or similar tools on a regular basis, and while there are examples of people being good at sawing, I will argue that in most cases, sawing is not something most participants do particularly well. Many people also explicitly questioned their own ability to use the tools provided. While Bloom's taxonomy has been criticised for suggesting that learning is a sequential process, the logic it perpetuates remains highly influential: before you can learn this, you have to learn that. A similar logic applies in many democratic contexts, especially perhaps in relation to deliberative democracy. In this case, if we apply a hierarchical taxonomy of progression, like Bloom's taxonomy, most participants would never move beyond sawing. They would simply not be able to acquire adequate sawing skills within the temporal horizon of the experiments, and we could disqualify most of the participants based on their lack of skills.

Creative sawing skills.

However, this would be a misunderstanding, because though people did not become master sawyers, they did acquire the confidence that they were skilled *enough* to make something, and to share their creative ideas through the process of making. What I see across the experiments is that 'being good at sawing' doesn't really matter. Participation became legitimate and meaningful long before people would fully develop the necessary skills, such as sawing. There is no shame in not being a particularly good sawyer, and it's relatively easy to be good enough to get the job done or to find someone who can. As we have seen, for instance, I understand skill-sharing as one of the many small practices of care in the playground.

Where other arenas for democratic participation have more regulated requirements and strictly defined modes of participation, the junk playground seems to be more inclusive, accommodating many forms of participation and many skill levels. If what really mattered was being involved, playing a part, feeling a sense of ownership, and doing something together, then these examples of mediocre sawing skills can instead be read as getting it just right. They stay in the game, so to speak, they keep it going, by sawing, and hammering and drilling away.

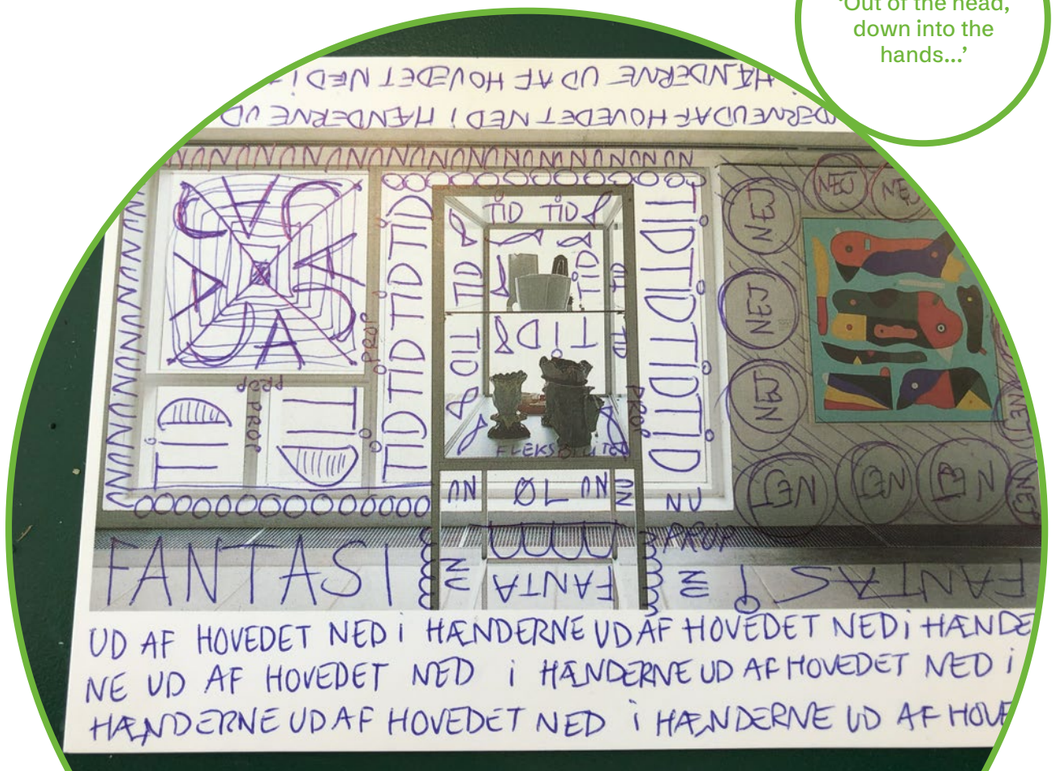
Dangerous sawing?



## 11.7.1 'Getting into the Body'

There were less concrete skills or capacities that played a big role as well, most notably perhaps the shift from 'head' to 'body', from 'thinking' to 'sensing'. One of the major struggles for many participants was the shift from rational thought and discourse towards the sensorial, affective experiences in the interaction between bodies and physical materials. Many expressed that they were simply not used to nor felt competent in 'listening to' their bodies in engaging with physical materials to make inquiries and express themselves; 'out of your head and into your hands' as one person in EX2 put it and further elaborated on the postcard shown below.

'Out of the head, down into the hands...'



On the other side, they wrote:

> **I have just been exposed to a situation – an assignment, which frustrated me a lot. I was challenged in my imagination, or perhaps rather my often very concrete way of thinking. It can be hard to move out of your head and into your hands. I will not claim that I succeeded. I fell in love with a big iron pipe, which constrained my creative and imaginative journey into an unknown future.**

Though they questioned their own success, the words nonetheless indicate that they took a step towards following their hands. The humorous comment about 'falling in love with a big iron pipe' certainly show a willingness and capacity to follow the materials rather than merely looking for something to manifest whatever predetermined ideas they may brought to the playground.

A similar issue was described by a woman, Amelia, at the end of the EX9, where I had invited people to explore the 'really big questions around the meaning of democracy, and the possible futures of democracy, probably not one future, but many possible futures of democracy'.


Playing with democracy.



With this matter of common concern, I encouraged people to follow their hands and bodies, as I had done in all the other experiments as well:

> **Maybe one of the main things of today is trying to shift a little bit from the rational and intellectual to our more sensorial ways of being, to our hands, our bodies, and try to explore what happens when we do that. Does it lead to different conversations, is it just too weird or annoying or far out? () all of these materials have some sort of voice, some sort of agency, some sort of desire, some sort of longing () Just walk around a little bit, have a look at what's going on there, is there something that attracts your attention for whatever reason, something that speaks to you.**

Trying to follow the hands and materials.

After playing for a while in pairs, they shared their stories about democracy, before we reflected on the experience together. Amelia emphasised how this had been quite difficult for her:

**You make an emphasis, you said we are all rational, we are trying to think things through, and I want you to stop thinking and just react to the objects you see on the table. I think, you are trying to shift the way we approach things. I found myself () okay, what's the future of democracy, as an academic and a thinker, I don't want to look at the objects, I want to think first, and then look for the objects that could represent my thinking. I think you want to reverse that, stop thinking and make the objects speak to you and get inspiration from there, but I find myself, right away, as soon as you asked the question 'give me a moment, I need to think', and then look for what is there to represent my thinking. It looks like it's an easy thing to do, but because our brains are conditioned and wired that way, it's difficult to break that habit. We can't start from a sort of blank page () the question for me was where is deliberative democracy on this table?**



**You don't just start from bottom up, like you would start with the kids, like four years old, okay find things, they don't have the theories, models, or abstract thinking. For adults, if they are rational and if they have thinking brains, it's about breaking the thinking habits. That might look easy but it's not easy.**

First, I think Amelia is showing an admirable degree of vulnerability here, admitting that she did not quite know how to approach the challenge. When she described how she found it difficult to move beyond her habit of thinking and of looking for rational answers, it resonates with what we have already seen several times. The process of attunement to the junk playgrounds remains a demanding task for many of us, as we have been taught that rational reflection is more valid than following our sensorial, affective impulses. When she contrasted her experience to that of a four-year-old, it resonates with Alison Gopnik's distinction between 'explore' and 'exploit' (Gopnik, 2020). Gopnik argued that, in general terms, children *explore* the world broadly to gain new knowledge, while adults *exploit* what they have already learned. Where exploitation of existing knowledge can 'quickly yield a "good enough" solution that will support immediate effective action', then exploration is more likely to lead to 'genuinely new ideas' (Gopnik, 2020, p. 3). In this light, we can say that Amelia was struggling with 'exploration' guided by her senses, while she would prefer to 'exploit' what she already knew about deliberative democracy in response to my challenge. Considering how difficult it has been for myself as a researcher to trust my own body and affective impulses, I agree with Amelia that this is far from easy. Quite the contrary, it will require quite a lot of practice from all of us who have spent our lives living mostly in our heads. Gopnik also argued that 'play is intrinsically on the explore side of the explore-exploit trade-off () it involves activities that are not designed to accomplish particular goals' (Gopnik, 2020, p. 5). This may suggest that we can indeed create training grounds for exploring and expanding our corporeal, affective registers through play.

# 11.8 Comparing *Participation*

So far, I have used the framework to examine single instances, and I maintain that it cannot be used to accurately compare one situation to another, as there are far too many variables and unknowns to hold 'all other things equal'. However, it might still help us see how the participatory assemblages can be configured in different ways and how it changes with the circumstances.

Getting ready to race!



If we pay another visit to the children in EX7, who were playing with their simple cart, we can make a comparison between two configurations of assemblages that emerged shortly after each other. We have already seen the euphoric energy when Victor and Theo were racing down the slope towards the iron fence. Perhaps the situation could be depicted like this:

## EXPERIMENT 7 - 1

*Unruliness, care and collective joy.*

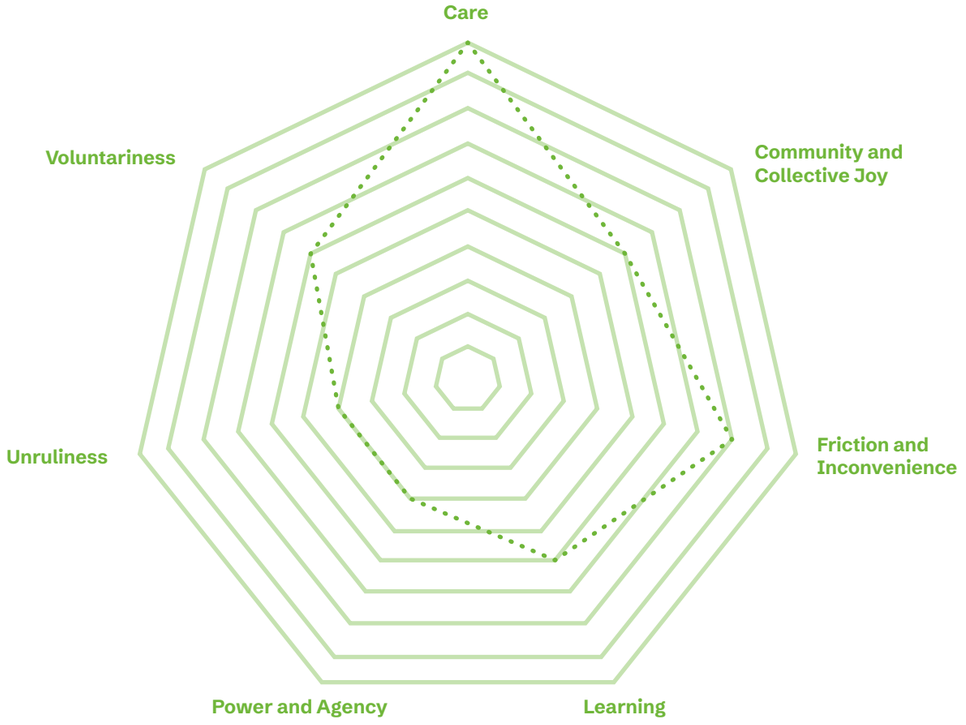
If we begin with the notions of power, agency, and unruliness, I believe they had a strong sense of agency, of being the ones who made the decisions. They may even have known that they were using the opportunity to stretch the possible, playing in ways that are often disciplined by adults (Ryall et al., 2013, p. 146). Even so, they were never in complete control, and the agency was still distributed across the assemblage, so, for instance, the wheels and the asphalt played their parts as well. While voluntariness, tied to the sense of agency, was high, they were nonetheless participating in an event their teachers had signed them up for and I had designed together with people from Nicolai. When I suggest that care was central, it should be understood as their collective care for each other and for the shared play experience, such as when Viktor repeatedly invited Theo to join him on the cart.




Then shortly after, when their teacher came to prevent them from getting hurt, the situation was perhaps more like this:

## EXPERIMENT 7 - 2

*Care and inconvenience.*



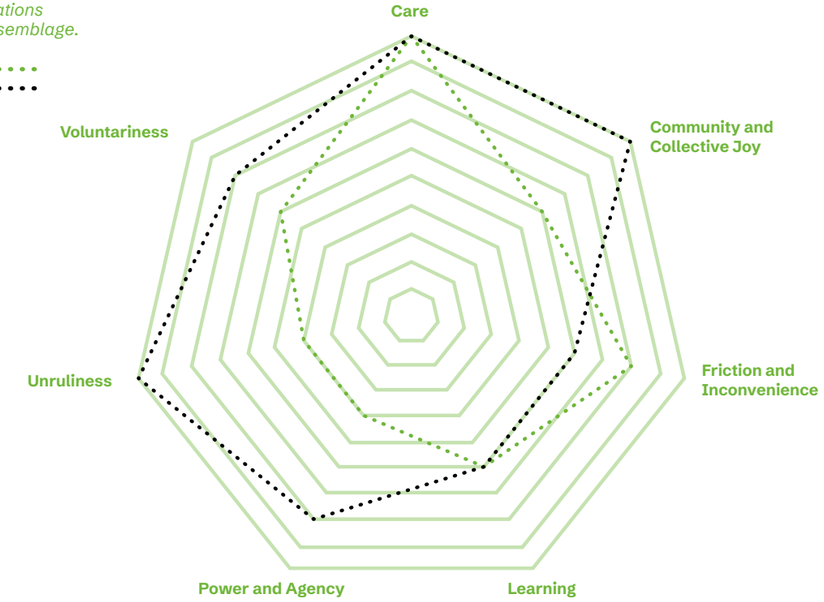
The nature of the situation changed was drastically by the intervention of the teacher. The children, who were euphoric, playing in unruly and carnivalesque ways just a moment ago, were now far calmer, almost obedient. As I indicate with the framework, care remains a central aspect of the participatory assemblage, but in a different way. Here it is less a care for the play experience, and more a care for the safety of the children. The teacher did not want the children to break their legs by getting them trapped underneath the cart or against the iron fence.

Overlaid, the two different configurations could look like this:

**EXPERIMENT 7**

*Two different configurations of the participatory assemblage.*

*Experiment 7 - 1*
*Experiment 7 -2*




Again, these are not accurate comparisons, but I argue they can help us see the changing configurations of the participatory assemblage in specific situations.

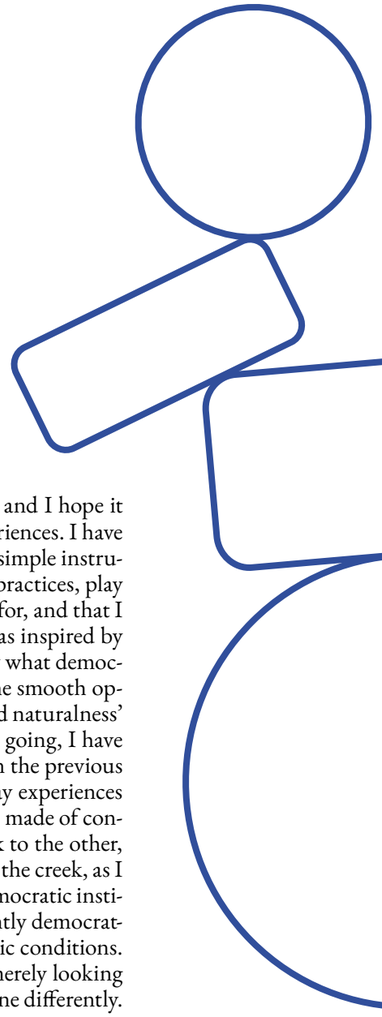


# 11.9 Participatory *Imaginaries*

As I have mentioned, I am particularly interested in openings and entry points, and in how the modes and repertoires of participation enabled by the junk playgrounds might lead to richer participatory imaginaries. Carole Pateman (Pateman, 1970), Donatella della Porta (Porta, 2013) and others have argued that we learn to participate by participating. Further, Pateman suggested that for citizens to even consider new and potentially more fruitful ways of participating, they would need to first realise that such options are available, so a kind of democratic 'training ground' would be needed (Pateman, 1970, p. 107). Kelty et al, drawing on Pateman, suggested that there is always a connection between 'the distribution of practices in participation' available to us as citizens and 'our collective social imaginary of what participation is and what it can achieve' (Kelty et al., 2014, p. 12). The distribution of practices is likely to orient people towards certain kinds of participation over others.

As I have argued, new imaginaries can be enabled through new bodily practices, and therefore, it seems that the junk playgrounds have the potential to evoke new participatory imaginaries. By widening the participatory spectrum, by inviting participants to continually renegotiate participatory strategies, by avoiding passing judgments, I believe that there is indeed potential to expand participatory imaginaries, also outside the playgrounds. The people in the playgrounds brought with them the felt knowledge that participation can take forms such as touching and browsing materials, hammering, sawing, drawing, dancing, singing, and playing self-made instruments, that they could be involved by giving gifts and caring for others, and that they could 'make place' by building a fort to hang out in. And so on. While none of these modes of participation are perfectly democratic, and undoubtedly situated and tied to the specific context, they have all been enacted in the junk playgrounds as ways of playing a part in shaping the shared experience of living together, if only for a few hours. Now, I cannot determine whether the participants brought an expanded participatory imaginary with them when they left the playground. That is for another research project; here, I merely want to stress that it is possible, maybe even likely, that the felt, bodily experiences of a wider participatory repertoire can plant seeds of expectations that they may also in other contexts be allowed a greater spectrum of involvement. When people have felt the possibility and legitimacy of a participatory pluralism, of participating in ways that were meaningful to them, it may generate an expectation that such options should be made more widely available.

# 12. Complementing Participatory Democracy

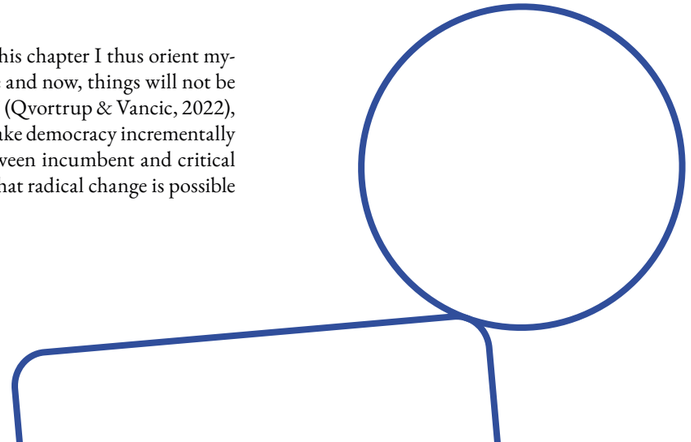


Until now, I have mainly explored the junk playgrounds as catalysts for play, and I hope it shows that they have indeed sparked a diverse repertoire of vibrant play experiences. I have followed this path because I insist that play should never be understood as a simple instrument, and I believe that even if we are looking for outcomes, such as new democratic practices, play must 'work' as play first. Along the way, I have regularly forgotten what I was looking for, and that I was supposed to eventually say something about democracy. As I have argued, this was inspired by the belief that too often, we know exactly what we're looking for, and we know exactly what democracy is. As Jack Halberstam argued, 'forgetfulness can be a useful tool for jamming the smooth operations of the normal and the ordinary' and for rupturing their 'air of inevitability and naturalness' (Halberstam, 2011, p. 70). By repeatedly forgetting what I was doing and where I was going, I have tried to jam 'the smooth operations of the normal', to look at democracy differently. In the previous chapter, I used the concept of participation to start building a bridge between the play experiences in the junk playgrounds and democratic participation. It is not a strong bridge, not one made of concrete and steel, more like a tree that fell in the woods, connecting one side of the creek to the other, allowing us to cautiously pass. In this chapter, I will try to balance on the log and cross the creek, as I explore possibilities for crosspollination between the junk playgrounds and existing democratic institutions and practices. At no point will I propose that the junk playgrounds are inherently democratic, nor that they offer a fully-fledged democratic alternative to contemporary democratic conditions. Potential contributions are much more modest and ambiguous than that, and I am merely looking for small, incomplete, flawed facets that may provide us with glimpses of democracy done differently.

In this chapter, I begin with the approach Matt Qvortrup and Daniela Vancic called 'complementary democracy' (Qvortrup & Vancic, 2022). They stated that democracy is suffering from 'a lack of legitimacy and a feeling that those in power no longer "represent" the people' (Qvortrup & Vancic, 2022, p. 2), an argument we have already touched upon. In their view there is no 'alternative to a system of government with elected representatives' (Qvortrup & Vancic, 2022, p. 197), and the task is to 'complement it with other institutions – and, indeed, other practices, and other forms of participation and protest' (Qvortrup & Vancic, 2022, p. 198). There is an obvious friction here, because I have spent considerable time questioning the 'tales of necessity', and I disagree with the notion that there is no alternative, a stance that constrains our imaginaries. Instead, I agree with Connolly when he claimed that we should not seek to assess probability, but rather 'probe the shape of positive possibility in relation to urgent needs of the day' (Connolly, 2005, p. 10). However, I *do* agree that it is hardly fruitful to deny the central role of governments and elected representatives in contemporary democratic societies.

To expand the notion of complementary democracy, I also draw on the idea of 'democratic mending', which Carolyn M. Hendriks, Selen A. Ercan and John Bosswell defined as 'the intentional, creative, everyday practices that seek to repair and renew connections in the fabric of democratic life' (Hendriks et al., 2020, p. 2). They further argued that these everyday practices of democratic repair 'relies on smallscale, mostly bottomup efforts to mend and make do with existing democratic resources and practices' (Hendriks et al., 2020, p. 3). I sense a connection to Carl DiSalvo's notion of 'design as democratic inquiry' (DiSalvo, 2022), especially when he suggested a kind of democratic tinkering as a 'matter of improving a situation a bit and perhaps only for the moment' (DiSalvo, 2022, p. 173). He added that tinkering 'is a humble practice of exercising our collective political imagination' (DiSalvo, 2022, pp. 174–175). I find that both mending and tinkering resonate quite well with the small-scale, playful practices in the junk playgrounds we have been exploring so far.

With the distinction made by Ricardo Blaug (Blaug, 2002), in this chapter I thus orient myself mainly towards 'incumbent democracy', assuming that here and now, things will not be radically different, and that the best we can do is to 'complement' (Qvortrup & Vancic, 2022), 'mend' (Hendriks et al., 2020), and 'tinker' (DiSalvo, 2022) to make democracy incrementally better. As I will also discuss later, I see no rigid separation between incumbent and critical democracy, between making things better now and suggesting that radical change is possible in the long term.





## 12.1 Democratic *Participation*

Drawing on my discussion of participation in the previous chapter, I will argue that the junk playgrounds can inspire more diverse forms of democratic participation and a richer participatory imaginary. As we have seen, people in the junk playgrounds demonstrated numerous ways of participating and I find this important because I believe that 'opportunities to participate stimulate trust and activism, thus reproducing the stimulus to participate and improving the effects of participation itself' (Porta, 2013, p. 41). Participation begets participation, and I contend that it remains a never-ending democratic challenge to develop modes of participation that are meaningful without repressing differences and reproducing sameness. I thus also follow those scholars who argue for more vibrant and diverse participatory democracies. I am inspired by Carole Pateman's vision of a participatory society (Pateman, 1970); I agree with Zizi Papacharissi when she argued that 'if we want lively citizens, we have to offer engaging opportunities of interaction' (Papacharissi, 2021, p. 111); I agree with Iris Marion Young when she insisted that we should expand 'the idea of communicative democracy from formal sites of deliberation' to 'the streets, squares, church basements and theatres of civil society', where communication is often 'messy, many-levelled, playful, emotional' (Young, 2000, p. 168); and I agree with Markus M. L. Crepaz, Karen Bodnaruk Jazayeri and Jonathan Polk when they claimed that 'a vibrant democracy depends on an active citizenry that is engaged in the political process not only via voting, but also via unconventional forms of political participation, such as demonstrations, boycotts, and petitions' (Crepaz et al., 2017).

I have followed these participatory traditions through the project, and I see indications that the junk playgrounds have cultivated a rich participatory repertoire. I suggest that different participatory dimensions form a dynamic assemblage alongside human and more-than-human bodies, including both physical and virtual entities, from the discarded materials and affective experiences to thoughts and ideas. This allows

for a broader, more nuanced, and dynamic view of participation that mirrors the participatory repertoire of the junk playgrounds, which was rather flexible, allowing new, unexpected practices to emerge, opening many pathways towards democratic participation.

I have focused on the junk playgrounds themselves to better grasp their possible contributions to more participatory democracies in the small. While I do believe that the playgrounds have been meaningful in their own right, I want to briefly consider how they might link with a larger democratic assemblage. Whereas I have been critical of the dominance of deliberative democratic innovations and the emphasis on disembodied, rational discourse, I nonetheless appreciate the potential and sustained relevance of deliberation. Just like representative democracy will undoubtedly be with us for a long time, then I believe the same is true for deliberative democracy. It has robust foundations now and makes important contributions by opening new avenues for participation and connection between different democratic spheres.

I do not believe the junk playgrounds are particularly relevant for their deliberative qualities, and they may indeed have something to offer exactly because they do not adhere to deliberative principles. However, I do believe that they can meaningfully exist within the expanded concept of 'deliberative systems'. In what John Parkinson and Jane J. Mansbridge labelled the 'third phase' of deliberative theory (Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2013, p. 26), there has been a shift from single deliberative events towards a 'deliberative systems approach'. Mansbridge et al have suggested talking about 'deliberative ecologies' where 'different contexts facilitate some forms of deliberation and avenues for information while others facilitate different forms and avenues' (Mansbridge et al., 2012, p. 6). In this systemic understanding of deliberation, 'what might be considered low quality or undemocratic deliberation in an individual instance might from a systems perspective contribute to an overall healthy deliberation' (Mansbridge et al., 2012, p. 12). As Toby Rollo has argued, this approach extends deliberation to 'incorporate the agency of citizens exercised in networks of informal sites of both speech and deed, which work together to produce both the formal decisions of government and the informal decisions enacted directly by the citizenry' (Rollo, 2017, p. 2). Following the systemic turn, Selen A. Ercan and Carolyn M. Hendriks argued that 'scholars of deliberative democracy have shifted their focus away from studying a single (perfect) site of deliberation to studying multiple (imperfect) sites of public deliberation' (Ercan & Hendriks, 2022, p. 175). In that light, I believe that the junk playgrounds could be one of 'multiple (imperfect) sites of public deliberation' (Ercan & Hendriks, 2022, p. 175). I agree with Hendriks et al when they argued that 'the democratic integrity of any given deliberative system lies more in continuity across and between different parts and less in the quality of any individual part' (Hendriks et al., 2020, p. 12), yet in this project, the junk playgrounds remain but one individual part of the larger democratic assemblage. While I cannot say much about how the junk playgrounds might fit within a larger deliberative system or democratic assemblage, in following sections I will suggest that the participatory practices of the junk playground may inspire democratic creativity and a stronger sense of community.



## 12.2 Democratic *Creativity*

I believe that the people in the junk playgrounds have demonstrated forms of creativity that might also inspire new creative approaches outside the playgrounds. When I talk about creativity here, I refer to the creativity that grows from play and is directed towards sustaining the play experience. As Lars Geer Hammershøj suggested, 'creativity in play results in a temporary combination that is novel and relevant in the situation and among those present' (Hammershøj, 2021, p. 4). Similarly, Patrick Bateson and Paul Martin have argued that play is 'about breaking away from established patterns and combining actions or thoughts in new ways' (P. Bateson & Martin, 2013, p. 45).

Further, and reiterating my orientation towards relational ontologies and new materialism, I understand creativity here not in the more traditional sense of a unique individual ability, but rather as the emergent capacities of the assemblage. I follow Nick J. Fox and Pam Alldred who argued that creativity should no longer be 'considered as an agentic attribute of a body, but rather as an affective flow between assembled bodies, things and ideas' (Fox & Alldred, 2017a, p. 7). Creativity grows from the capacities of relations in the assemblage that may include 'the physical properties of materials, the demands and needs of consumers, the physical and social infrastructure surrounding development, concepts and theories, and the skills, memories and experience of human bodies, drawn together by an affect economy within a creativity-assemblage' (Fox & Alldred, 2017a, p. 9). The creative practices in the playgrounds have often been sparked by these corporeal, affective encounters with both human and more-than-human bodies coming together. This resonates with Andeline Dos Santos' argument that affect can 'provoke us to look differently, interpret in new ways, relate differently, move our bodies, or extricate ourselves from habitual ways of thinking and behaving' (Dos Santos, 2022, p. 255). In their discussion of radical democracy and the 'nonhuman condition', Hans Asenbaum and Amanda Machin made a similar argument, contending that 'bodies possess agency, actively produce meaning, rupture established hierarchies and contribute creatively to political exchange' (Asenbaum et al., 2023, p. 5). In the junk playgrounds, human bodies have met more-than-human bodies, especially in the form of various discarded materials. However, the materials have often escaped this somewhat reductive label, becoming more than merely things people had thrown away, demonstrating Jane Bennett's point that agency 'is distributed across a swarm of various and variegated vibrant materialities' (Bennett, 2010, p. 96).

When Mitch Resnick argued that 'the greater the diversity of materials, the greater the opportunity for creative projects' (Resnick, 2017, p. 170), he echoed the 'theory of loose parts' (Nicholson, 1971), in which Nicholson argued that 'in any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it' (Nicholson, 1971, p. 30). Loose parts and a diversity of materials have been crucial components in the junk playgrounds assemblages, where the encounters between human and more-than-human bodies have sparked numerous creative constructions, stories, and experiences. Resnick also suggested to 'use familiar materials in unfamiliar ways. Use unfamiliar materials in familiar ways'(Resnick, 2017, p. 164). This mirrors the position of Vlad P. Glăveanu & Ronald A. Beghetto, who suggested that creative experiences entails 'a principled engagement with the unfamiliar and a willingness to approach the familiar in unfamiliar ways' (Glăveanu & Beghetto, 2021, p. 76). Again, I contend that we have seen several glimpses of people approaching 'the familiar in unfamiliar ways' as one example of a creative practices.

I believe that this kind of creativity is close to the notion of tinkering suggested by Carl DiSalvo as a form of democratic inquiry (DiSalvo, 2022). He argued that tinkering 'is a means to resist closure, to refuse to capitulate. Tinkering is a subtle but persistent refusal to simply let things be' (DiSalvo, 2022, p. 174). In their discussion of democratic playgrounds, Hans Asenbaum and Frederic Hanusch suggested shifting the focus from a 'democratic solutionism for expected change to a democratic serendipity of unexpected change' where our democratic practices can shift from 'decision-making and output production' to 'playful, creative, and open-ended exploration' (Asenbaum & Hanusch, 2021, p. 2).

For a small example, we can visit EX8, which took place in a meeting room at Monash University in Melbourne. By all accounts, it was not the most turbulent and chaotic of the experiments, but several interesting things happened there, and we have already seen Clara's carnivalesque Nipple Catapult. Another person, Felix, was initially more estranged by the experiment: 'I come from a very quantitative background, so very systematic, I work with software engineers, the opposite of this, totally the opposite, I never saw such a messy table in my life,' he said, laughing.

The 'messy table'.



Felix admitted to being slightly intimidated by the mess and he stressed repeatedly that he did not see himself as a creative person. Then we started playing, and he found a way to let things emerge from the assemblage. At the end, he told a deeply personal story about being stuck in a PhD project that made him unhappy:

**This is the IT thing, it is metallic, aluminium, magnetic that keeps you inside and doesn't let you out, right () This belt is tying me (he shows with his hand how it is holding him back), keeping me in that PhD, that I wasn't really enjoying, I was doing everything I was being told, I wasn't improvising, I wasn't being creative, I was just having a job, but not doing a PhD.**

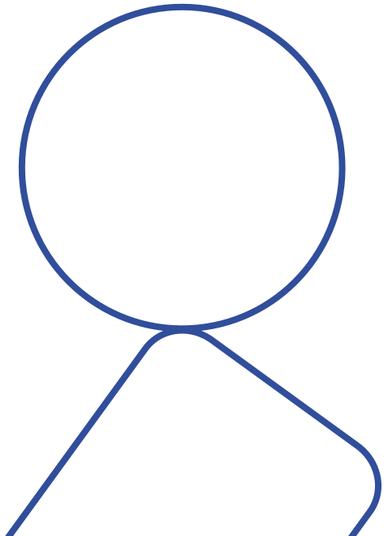
The story continued into a small performance that ended with him launching a rocket that released him from the situation he felt trapped in and sent him on a different trajectory. I cannot tell exactly where his agency ended and the materials took over, but he clearly engaged with the unfamiliar in a playful way in stark contrast to his initial assessment of himself.

A story of confinement and liberation.

Similar practices could potentially add a more creative and playful dimension to existing democratic formats. On a concrete level, I believe that there is great potential in even small reorientations from purely focusing on rational discourse towards other forms of participation, including bodily, affective flows, and forces. Rather than making people sit on chairs around tables or in lecture halls, we could invite them to engage with human and more-than-human bodies in new and unfamiliar ways, potentially cultivating a kind of creative, democratic serendipity.

While I consider these creative practices fruitful for democratic societies, that does not mean they are easy to control; quite the contrary. The kind of creativity I talk about here is closer to the notion of enchantment, the 'surprising encounter, a meeting with something that you did not expect and are not fully prepared to engage' (Bennett, 2001, p. 5). If creativity is not merely about creative outcomes, but processes, experiences, and environments, then perhaps that calls for what Kathleen Stewart described as 'the affective subject', one 'who waits in the company of others for things to arrive, one who learns to sense out what's coming and what forms it might take' (Stewart, 2017, p. 194).

I don't think the junk playgrounds are particularly well suited to deliver the kind of creativity we often seem to prioritise, that which is expected to generate useful results here and now. Therefore, I do not seek to demonstrate how the junk playgrounds can generate creative outcomes, but rather, how they contribute to environments for creative flourishing. Whereas Resnick talked about children, I agree with his point that the key creative challenge is 'how to create a fertile environment in which () creativity will take root, grow, and flourish' (Resnick, 2017, p. 168). Paraphrasing, I argue that the key challenge for a democratic society is how to create a fertile environment for democratic creativity to flourish. The kind of democratic creativity I am circling around here draws on Sheldon Wolin's claim that democratic renewal instead must rely on the fact that 'ordinary individuals are capable of creating new cultural patterns of commonality at any moment' (Wolin, 2016, p. 112). To follow the need for creative environments where new 'cultural patterns of commonality' can be created, I will end by suggesting that the junk playgrounds may help us cultivate such environments as democratic communities.





## 12.3 Democratic *Communities*

I believe that the creative participation in the junk playgrounds can also contribute to the cultivation and maintenance of democratic communities. While I cannot determine any long-term implications, I contend that in the here and now, the playgrounds created small openings for other ways of engaging with humans and more-than-humans, and other ways becoming together. I have been exploring social dimensions of the playgrounds throughout the thesis, and I have argued that we have seen different caring practices and traces of collective joy. Following Iris Marion Young, I argued that 'opening onto the other person is always a gift' (Young, 1997, p. 50) and by doing so, I also saw examples of people showing vulnerability, a prerequisite for a 'caring democracy' (Tronto, 2013, p. 146). I suggested early on that play can bring people closer together, rallying around the shared intention of making play happen. I have paraphrased Iris Marion Young's notion of 'listening across differences' to argue that people can 'play across differences'. Playing together may be one fruitful way of cultivating relationships and communities, but of course it is no panacea. For instance, I cannot say anything about situations where people have already developed a deeper animosity towards each other, which may be one of the bigger democratic issues we collectively face. However, in less tense situations, I do believe that playing across differences is a possibility that may bring about stronger mutual understanding. I also discussed this by drawing on Laurent Berlant's notion of inconveniences, which reminds us that we are 'inescapably in relation with other beings and the world and are continuously adjusting to them' (Berlant, 2022, p. 15). Adding to my previous discussion of joyful encounters, I also agree with Audre Lorde, who has argued that the 'sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference' (Lorde, 1984, p. 56). This sentiment was further stressed by Hendriks

et al, when they argued that democratic mending and democratic reforms are 'effective when the people involved enjoy it—when they gain opportunities to forge new social bonds and to release creative energies' (Hendriks et al., 2020, p. 155). All these perspectives point to the possibility of moving a little closer together and getting to know each other better. For philosopher Martha Nussbaum, such an understanding is a prerequisite for democracy to function:

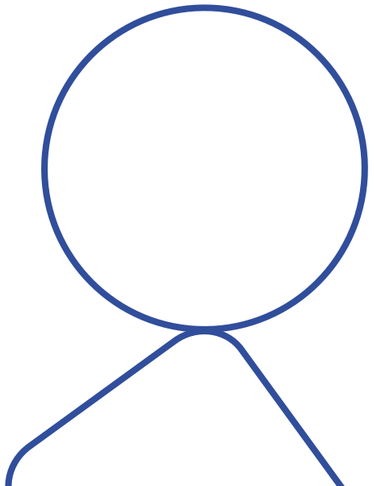
> **When we meet in society, if we have not learned to see both self and other in that way, imagining in one another inner faculties of thought and emotion, democracy is bound to fail, because democracy is built upon respect and concern, and these in turn are built upon the ability to see other people as human beings, not simply as objects.**
>
> *(Nussbaum, 2010, p. 6)*

While I would add that we should perhaps also develop the ability to see objects not simply as objects, I agree with Nussbaum that democracy requires us to see and respect each other. Joan Tronto made a similar point when she argued for a 'caring democracy', where to care for others requires knowledge about their lives and hence, there 'would need to be practices that allowed people to meet beyond their homes, workplaces (), and schools' (Tronto, 2013, p. 147). Returning to DiSalvo's notion of tinkering, he argued that 'experiences that spark our interest and imagination, that provide us with capacities and desires for diverse communal life, contribute to the constant renewal of our democracies, making them more vibrant' (DiSalvo, 2022, p. 186). I believe that, in modest ways, the junk playgrounds have provided people with such



experiences of diverse communal life in the small. As we have seen, several people have found in the junk playgrounds opportunities to show aspects of themselves that they otherwise hid from public view.

While democracy depends on a sense that we, as citizens, belong to democratic communities, that we are in this together, what I am discussing here is not merely a matter of instrumental value. As Martha Nussbaum argued, what 'play and the free expansion of the imaginative capacities contribute to a human life is not merely instrumental but partly constitutive of a worthwhile human life' (Nussbaum, 2013, loc. 413). The notion of collective joy that I have discussed earlier, for instance, cannot be reduced to a matter of utility, of generating certain results. In the junk playgrounds, people have often appeared to be drawn to the social dimension of the experience as much as the matters of common concern. While this approach risks getting in the way of efficient problem-solving and decision-making, that may precisely be the point. The junk playgrounds remind us that sometimes, creative, communal practices grow from not being too concerned with what comes after, from being absorbed and overwhelmed by the forces of the present moment. I find myself drawn to Hannah Arendt's famous argument that 'no one could be called happy without his share in public happiness, that no one could be called free without his experience in public freedom, and that no one could be called either happy or free without participating, and having a share, in public power' (Arendt, 1963/1990, p. 255). While I cannot unpack this here, I merely maintain that participating in the ongoing shaping of democratic societies is important to society and the individual, and it may be about more than providing legitimacy to institutions; it may be joyful and a source of happiness.



# 13. Drifting by Friction

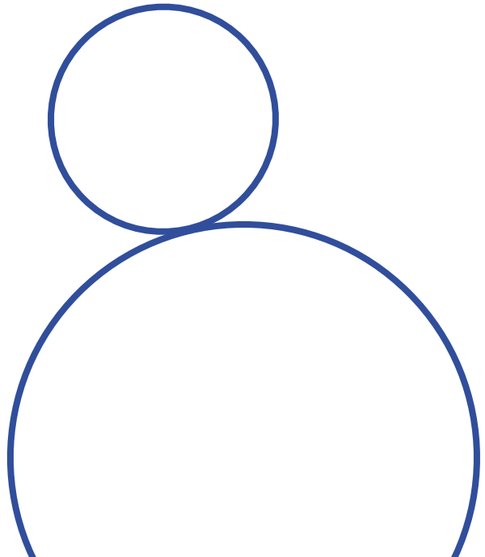


If you had asked me before I started this project, I would have considered the previous chapter a fitting place to end. I have said more than I imagined I would, probably more than I should, and I have, to some limited extent, addressed my initial questions. In short, I believe play can be understood as a mode of democratic participation. Furthermore, I argue that designing for playful participation may, in modest ways, help us alleviate some of the current flaws in the democratic assemblage by fostering a more vibrant participatory engagement, cultivating democratic creativity and a sense of community. I could elaborate on each of these dimensions, and I probably should, but the contours of a response are in place. So far, so good, but something rubs me the wrong way. There is friction, still. This short chapter could be seen as an intervention, where we will explore how those lingering frictions have caused the project to drift before we return to the question of democracy. As we have seen, Peter Gall Krogh and Ilpo Koskinen understand drift in design research as 'those actions that take design away from its original brief or question and lead to a result that was not anticipated in the beginning' (Krogh & Koskinen, 2020b, p. 6). When tracing friction, I also draw again on the concept of the research-assemblage 'to reveal the affect economies and micropolitics of social inquiry' (Fox & Alldred, 2017b, p. 159). I argue that the friction between the many heterogenous components in the research-assemblage is what has sparked a kind of drifting by friction. What happens when a design research project consistently augments friction rather than reducing and resolving it, leading to both processes and outcomes that are ambiguous, inconsistent, and confusing?

# 13.1 Friction *Tales*

Krogh and Koskinen stressed that it is important to show 'how the design project drifted and gained insights unintended by its original pursuit—and the knowledge one developed in doing so' (Krogh & Koskinen, 2020b, p. 130). This is what I will do in the following, when I trace how layers of friction have appeared in different guises throughout the project, folding in and out of each other. I also take inspiration from Charlotte Wegener and Ninna Meier, who insisted that we, as academics, need to share 'stories of the routes we did not plan, the messy things we did and the results of it all—which we may not fully understand' (Wegener et al., 2018, p. 15).

We can begin with the frictions we have already seen. They were accumulating long before the project started, as I observed the discrepancy between the tales of necessity and the people playing with models for living at CounterPlay. Another layer of friction emerged through the initial conversations with the people who were drawn to the project, but could not find a way in. If my proposition created friction with the structures of their work-life, then how could it ever be feasible for them to join? Then there were all the instances of material friction, of human bodies rubbing against both human and more-than-human bodies in the junk playgrounds, like the boy with the yellow cloth, the women with the wheels, and the person who fell in love with a big iron pipe. If the junk playgrounds ask people to move out of their head, then how do I reconcile that with prevalent ideals of rational discourse? And what if these materials have greater agency than stories of human exceptionalism have allowed us to see? Where the materials provided friction in abundance, sometimes friction grew from the *purpose* of the experiments. Or rather, the *lack* of a clearly defined purpose. I never told participants exactly what to do or why, I merely told stories, and hoped people would accept my invitation to play. Understandably, I was often faced with reasonable questions from participants, such as





'What is the purpose?' and 'What are we supposed to do?'

As these frictions were accumulating, I realised, step by step, that my findings in the junk playgrounds would not fit comfortably within prevalent conceptions of democracy, nor within my existing worldview. I developed a suspicion that if I were to take seriously the experiences of the people in the playgrounds, I would need to hold on to these frictions for as long as I could.

## 13.1.1 Australian Frictions

It was with my suitcase full of friction that I boarded the plane to go on a three-month research stay in Australia from August – November 2022. I had no elaborate plan, only a few loosely assembled ideas, and my intuitive strategy was to be like a sponge, to soak up as much as I could of everything while I was there. As soon as we arrived, we jumped at every opportunity to experience art. We went to small and big galleries, to openings of exhibitions, to niche theatre performances, everything we could find. Across all these experiences, what affected and moved me the most were all those artists who created friction with persistent colonial narratives. There was the powerful work, Austracism[21] , where artist Vernon Ah Kee entangled the familiar phrase 'I'm not racist but ...' with some of the many instances of racism suffered by Aboriginal people in Australia. Or the haunting artwork Can You Imagine (Mum's Story), that the artist, Peta Edwards, made in high school to tell the story of how her mother was abducted and became part of the 'stolen generation'. Or the harrowing video installation by Hoda Afshar, Remain[22] , following a group of stateless men who remained on Manus Island after the Australian government closed the facility.

[21] https://searchthecollection.nga.gov.au/object/129593
[22] https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/multimedia/hoda-afshar-remain/

If I am to take seriously my intention 'to reveal the affect economies and micropolitics of social inquiry' (Fox & Alldred, 2017b, p. 159), then I cannot omit these crucial encounters. If I was indeed a sponge, as I set out to be, then I was nearing the limits of my capacity for how much I could absorb. But I could not stop, I also tried to find contemporary poetry by young Aboriginal poets, like the following, an excerpt from Jazz Money's striking poem 'if I write a poem':

**if I write a poem**
**It's for the pen**
**Banned from my grandmother's hands**

**And if I write**
**It's for our language**
**Stolen from the mouths**
**Of babies in cribs**

**And if I write a poem**
**It's so that our children**
**will read some truth**
**Of their family**

**And if I write**
**It's because our story**
**Hasn't been written**

**By us**
**For us**

*(Jazz Money, 2021, 23)*



While this poem may have no immediate bearing on my research, and it could easily be disqualified for its lack of academic credentials, how could I read this and resist the friction? There is no way for me to fully understand where Jazz Money comes from or to 'adopt her worldview' (Young, 1997, p. 60), but if I try to 'listen across difference' (Young, 1997, p. 69) I hear a brave voice sharing uncomfortable insights about marginalised life, about living without the right to speak your own history.

It was against this background, enmeshed in friction and far away from home, that I found myself in a meeting room at the University of Canberra, where Professor Nicole Curato was about to give her inaugural lecture, asking 'Can there be a global deliberative democracy?'. Curato began by celebrating the accomplishments of deliberative democracy in recent years in both theory and practice, what she referred to as a 'deliberative wave'. 'Shouldn't I be celebrating the mainstreaming of deliberative democracy around the world?' she asked and then immediately revealed that 'something doesn't feel quite right'. She turned the tables, questioning her own work and that of her colleagues. 'Is deliberation, rooted as it is in Habermasian ideals from Eurocentric enlightenment and western modernity, enough?' she asked rhetorically. 'We include indigenous people in citizen assemblies but doesn't this just tiptoe around the issue - that we are standing on stolen land?'

This was not new to me as such, but my body was reacting affectively in a more profound manner than my cognitive capacities could possibly comprehend. It was overwhelming and moving. The friction from this situation, alongside all the other frictions in the research assemblage, pushed me towards deep, transformative shifts, probably because it resonated with a growing suspicion that we, in the West, are long past the point where we should start listening to voices other than our own.

# 13.2 Implications of *Friction*

As the incessant frictions and the unanswered, if not unanswerable, questions piled up, I arrived at the edge of what I thought could be known. It was as if the reality I knew was no longer enough, as if it rendered me unable to grasp all the mess and friction ensuing from this project. The frictions made it affectively tangible that there were ways of becoming and ways of knowing that were not (yet) available to me. It was as Judith Butler has argued:

> **[...] one does not drive to the limits for a thrill experience, or because limits are dangerous and sexy, or because it brings us into a titillating proximity with evil. One asks about the limits of ways of knowing because one has already run up against a crisis within the epistemological field in which one lives.**
>
> *(Butler, 2001, p. 3)*

I kept bumping up against those limits of ways of knowing and friction ensued. I have used Laurent Berlant's concept of inconvenience, which she understood as 'the affective sense of the familiar friction of being in relation'. For Berlant, every relation to anyone or anything comes with a certain degree of inconvenience, the world gets in the way, and such inconvenience is the 'force that makes one shift a little while processing the world' (Berlant, 2022, p. 14). While I was not aware what the frictions meant, I slowly came to realise that they pushed and dragged me to become something I was not yet, that I needed to be, see, think, and write differently. With the notion of inconvenience, Berlant also



talked about 'transformational infrastructures' and the possibility of becoming otherwise. She suggested that the crucial thing is to 'loosen up at the moment when everything in me would prefer not to' (Berlant, 2022, p. 223). I was not immediately compelled to follow the frictions, and in many cases I would have preferred not to, but I tried to loosen up, as Berlant suggested. Marisol de la Cadena used the notion of disconcertment to describe 'the feeling that assaults individuals—including their bodies—when the categories that pertain to their world-making practices and institutions are disrupted' (de la Cadena, 2015, p. 276). I believe this is what was happening: my familiar categories were being disrupted and I had to find a way to deal with that. Cadena also noted that 'not infrequently, disconcertment is explained away; what provoked it is denied, made banal, or tolerated as belief' (de la Cadena, 2015, p. 276). In the same manner, most of these frictions could have been explained away. I could have made them disappear, described them as anomalies and outliers, or I could have simply abstained from mentioning them altogether.

Only, I could not. Not this time.

At the beginning of this adventure, I imagined I would stay within the world I knew, which was largely a Eurocentric world with its Enlightenment ideals of the autonomous, rational individual. There is no escaping my own position and I am painfully aware that 'old epistemological habits tend to reinsert themselves behind our own backs' (MacLure, 2017, p. 56). I remain steeped in the legacy of Western Modernity, but I hope that I am also slowly becoming something else, that I am 'not only' (de la Cadena, 2017, 2021) that anymore. While most of my empirical research materials from the junk playgrounds remain bound to an intrinsically Western, Danish context, the frictions have compelled me to look at those materials through a different prism and ask what might democracy look like if it is no longer so tightly linked to Western Modernity and ideals of disembodied rationality? My decision to critically discuss both ontology and epistemology, to 'write as a hair in the flour' (Tsing, 2005, p. 207) and to question the 'one-world world' (Law, 2015), all these shifts have been a result of what I now call drifting by friction.

It is important for me to stress that while drifting by friction has been intense, demanding and sometimes deeply frustrating, it was largely driven by what I consider positive forces. I have been spurred on by a sense of curiosity understood as the 'certain determination to throw off familiar ways of thought and to look at the same things in a different way' (Foucault, 1997, p. 325). Even more so, I came to rely on love as a powerful 'mediating force' (hooks, 2015, p. 26) that compelled me to keep moving. If Jane Bennett is right that 'you have to love life before you can care about anything', then it is only because the project has allowed me to become (even more) 'enamored with existence' (Bennett, 2001, p. 4) that I made it this far.

I hope I have managed to convey how this friction has intensified into a sense that the world is trembling, or 'wobbling' as Berlant phrased it; that I have, gradually, slowly, and beyond my own direct control, drifted from a one-world world into a pluriversal borderlands. With the accumulating frictions, these perspectives have slowly evolved to become a central hypothesis of this entire project: that generating and holding on to friction can potentially challenge and dismantle the powerful narratives of necessities and inevitabilities that confine our collective imaginaries.

While the arrival at this destination marks an important step on my personal journey, here it also serves as an illustration, showing *one* possible outcome of following the frictions. We are all different, we will all drift in different ways, and Krogh and Koskinen argue that 'drifting is a function of epistemological beliefs' (Krogh & Koskinen, 2022, p. 33). In other words, the way we drift in our research projects depends on our beliefs about what constitutes knowledge in the first place. While I agree with this argument, I do not merely see drifting as a function of established epistemological beliefs, but also as a force with the potential to *change* those beliefs *and* the ontological ground on which they rest. In their understanding of 'drifting by intention', drifting happens 'not as driftwood, but as in car rally; intentionally and controlled' (Krogh & Koskinen, 2020b, p. 44). However, I find it increasingly difficult to think of myself and this project as a rally car drifting intentionally and controlled. As I have tried to show with my friction tales, 'unpredictable encounters transform us; we are not in control, even of ourselves () we are thrown into shifting assemblages, which remake us' (Tsing, 2015, p. 20). If the claims to human exceptionalism and our 'violent human will to dominate and control' (Bennett, 2010, p. xvii) pose a fundamental problem for our very survival, then how do we drift beyond those very conditions?

I suggest that as one way to get there, to get even a glimpse of other worlds, we could practice moving into the borderlands, a liminal space between worlds. Gloria Anzaldua argued that to 'explore the "cracks between the worlds () we must see through the holes in reality' (Anzaldua, 2015, p. 44). Doing this, moving in the cracks between worlds, is a practice, something to learn, that brings with it 'a new way of viewing the world, and you bring this "magical" knowledge and apply it to the everyday world' (Anzaldua, 2015, pp. 44–45). Walter Mignolo, drawing on Anzaldua, argued that 'the point is not to study the borders' while still dwelling comfortably in 'the imperial epistemology of modernity' (Mignolo in Reiter, 2018b, p. xi). If we are merely lingering within familiar territory, we may be, as Maria Lugones argued 'at ease', and if we are too much at ease, too reliant on the world we know, there is an inherent risk that we are not motivated to travel between worlds (Lugones, 1987, p. 12). Entering the kind of borderlands I am talking about here is difficult, because no-one can tell us where they are, and my borderlands are not your borderlands. I could not set up a host of fixed concepts or categories and expect them to take me by the hand into unfamiliar territory. The signpost does not accompany us on our journeys, after all, it only points in this or that direction. No, entering the borderlands calls for a different attitude and a kind of 'border sensing' that, according to Mignolo, is often affective, 'something that invades your emotions, and your body responds to it, dictating to the mind what the mind must start thinking, changing its direction, shifting the geography of reasoning' (Reiter, 2018b, p. xii). Here, we must, as Donna Haraway has famously argued, reject the 'god tricks' promising vision from everywhere and nowhere (Haraway, 1988, p. 584). There is no safe distance from which to observe these things, and only in the thick of it, flesh and all, will the cracks appear. This has implications for anyone who hopes to move into the cracks and obtain even a glance of other worlds, because we must become different, too. How could we see what we could not see if we did not change enough to see differently?
While there are many possible ways of engaging with the borderlands, I contend that play, because of its inherently affective nature, allows us to experience alterity in the flesh. I think Maria Lugones was right when she argued that playfulness might help us develop the sensitivity and loving attitude that would help us travel between worlds (Lugones, 1987, p. 15). From the outset, I have followed a familiar, simple idea, suggesting that when we play, we seek to spark and maintain an oscillating motion between order and disorder, between finding and losing our balance (Henricks, 2015, loc. 4139). When I look back over the project, I realize that I have tried, time and time again, to cultivate a space for thinking, writing, and playing where I *could not know,* where I would not be tempted to rest too comfortably with any one concept, where I continually destabilized myself, again and again. Similarly, Donna Haraway suggested that 'perhaps it is precisely in the realm of play, outside the dictates of teleology, settled categories, and function, that serious worldliness and recuperation become possible' (Haraway, 2016, pp. 23–24).



Drifting by friction does not provide us with solutions or answers, and I do not understand it as a research or design method. Drifting by friction means turning towards the friction, not away from it, enhancing it rather than resolving or ignoring it altogether. Drifting by friction means accepting the invitation to be shaken by the ruptures, to be loosened and transformed, to become otherwise and potentially unrecognisable to oneself. This is the somewhat opaque nature of friction, it challenges, questions, provokes, interrupts, disturbs, and destabilises even the most deeply rooted assumptions. Not all at once, not in one powerful stroke, but over time, step by step, it builds up like an accumulation of affective impulses and forces. Drifting by friction is not teleological, it comes with no predetermined trajectory or destination, it merely offers the possibility for divergence from what one currently can know and become.

Drifting by friction, then, may also have something to say about the notion of teleology. I have already briefly touched upon and questioned this concept, especially in relation to the Eurocentric description of history as an 'evolutionary continuum from the primitive to the civilized' (Quijano, 2007, p. 176), which frames 'the history of

human civilization as a trajectory that departed from a state of nature and culminated in Europe' (Quijano, 2000, p. 542). In contrast, Anna Tsing argued that we are living in a precarious world and that such a world is a 'world without teleology' (Tsing, 2015, p. 20). She conceded that such inherent 'indeterminacy, the unplanned nature of time, is frightening' but added that 'indeterminacy also makes life possible' by enabling other possible worlds. I thus also agree with Rosi Bradiotti when she argued that:

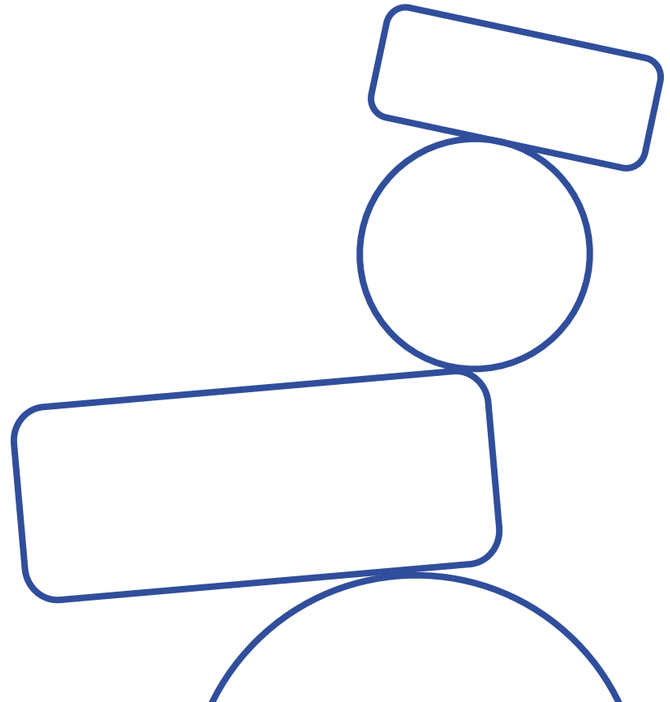
> **[...] our historical moment marks the decline of some of the fundamental premises of the Enlightenment, namely, the ideal of the progress of mankind through a self-regulatory and teleologically ordained use of scientific rationality aimed at the "perfectibility" of Man.**
>
> *(Braidotti, 2012, p. 28)*

For Braidotti, there can be no assurance of a 'teleologically ordained trajectory, just the humility to get on with the task, though the final destination may not be very clear. All that matter is the going, the movement' (Braidotti, 2012, p. 362). This, I believe, is close to what drifting by friction may offer – the possibility of 'getting on with the task' without knowing where we are going.

This has serious implications for how to think about democracy, as there can be no teleological development towards some projected end goal (e.g., certain Eurocentric conceptions of democracy). Sheldon Wolin argued that it is easy to 'assume that democracy is the sort of political phenomenon whose teleological or even ideological destination is a constitutional form' (Wolin, 2016, p. 102), that there is a certain form democracy will always evolve into. As we have already seen,

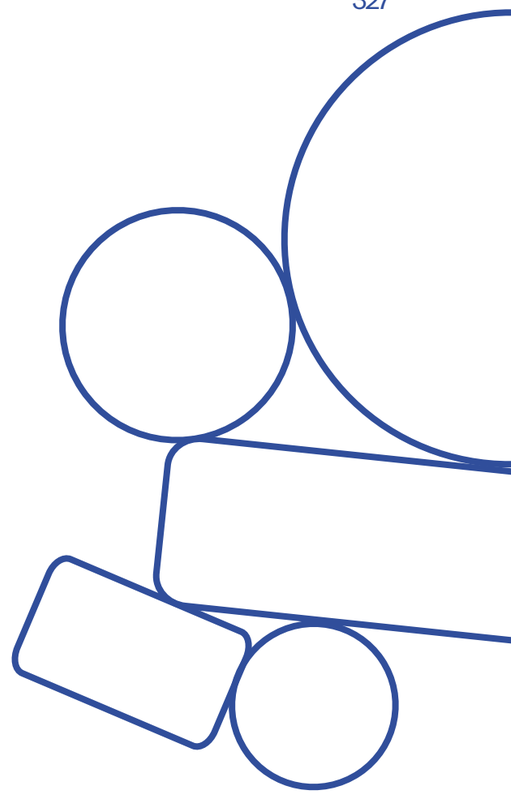


Wolin himself is highly sceptical of such an idea, as he understands democracy as 'a rebellious moment' (Wolin, 2016, p. 111), not as institutions, governments, or similar 'constitutional forms'. In discussing radical democracy and the 'nonhuman condition' through 'new materialist lenses', James Louis Smith suggested that the 'material dynamics of water also suggest flexible and materially apt modes of understanding political life and human agency as non-teleological and incomplete' (Asenbaum et al., 2023, p. 16). Smith argued that water mirrors and evokes 'the kind of flexible and endlessly renegotiated dynamics () that radical democracy requires' (Asenbaum et al., 2023, pp. 16–17), and it is exactly such 'flexible and endlessly renegotiated dynamics', sparked by a non-teleological drifting by friction, I will explore in the following chapter.



# 14. Playful Democratic Friction$_S$





With those frictions still dwelling in my body, I come back to democracy once more, and this time with a different gaze. As I have argued earlier, I see in the junk playgrounds numerous potential contributions to existing democratic practices. I sympathise with the proposal to complement democracy, and I do not think there is anything wrong with patching things up to make democracy work better for more people in the short term. I am intuitively drawn to patchiness, to the imperfect, and to the Brazilian notion of *'gambiarra'* that Ricardo F. Mendonça, Lucas Gelape, and Carlos Estevão C. described as 'improvised solutions to fix something with the usage of things at hand' (Mendonça et al., 2023, p. 160). I think this concept has much in common with the junk playground practices, and it would excite me to no end if the messy practices of the junk playground could travel, crosspollinate, and merge with existing democratic practices and institutions elsewhere.

However, there is risk involved in such an approach, where new knowledge is mainly brought to support existing structures: that the new is co-opted, tamed, robbed of its potential for friction and instead becomes aligned with the existing. The main challenge with complementing democracy may be that we are only treating symptoms, and we never get to the deeper dysfunctions, such as those stressed by, for instance, feminist and decolonial scholars alike. In other words, if democracy remains firmly rooted in Western Modernity and neoliberal capitalism, can we ever hope to move beyond the one-world world dictated by tales of necessity? If we invite participation without the willingness to address fundamental, ontological issues, are we not merely perpetuating what Wicks and Reason have called 'participative conformity', understood as 'an active contribution within the taken for granted norms of public service rather than participation that would disturb the status quo' (Wicks & Reason, 2009)? In such an approach, there is an inherent risk that participation merely becomes 'an instrument to patch up the widening social cracks produced by decades of neoliberal policies' (Holdo, 2023, p. 54).

It is critical to note that the distinction I make here, between patching and transforming democracy, is purely analytical, as the two are completely entangled, and I could not say where one ends and the other begins. Also, and even more importantly, it is possible to patch in the short term while working to transform in the long term. Returning to the notion of *gambiarra*, Mendonça et al argued that *gambiarras* 'show innovation might be possible in areas where nothing new seemed conceivable. Paradoxically, they may show that simple things may challenge very complex problems' (Mendonça et al., 2023, p. 162).

However, all too often it seems that even with the best of intentions, there is only patching, maintaining, and sustaining, detached from critical, experimental inquiries into what democracy might become if it were to become something else entirely. If we distinguish, for instance, between the ontological, epistemological, and methodological layers of democracy, then we can say that there is a great appetite for methodological innovation, for doing things differently, especially under the auspices of 'democratic innovations' (G. Smith, 2009, 2019). It seems that there is a greater reluctance towards epistemological change, towards reassessing what we believe constitutes relevant, acceptable knowledge and ways of knowing. As I have argued, it is even more rare to engage with the ontological dimension, which pertains to those assumptions we take as axiomatic, the robust, persistent, immutable, and all but *inevitable* foundation of democracy. However, I do sense a growing willingness to experiment, to try new things, and that is a great place to start. If we can go 'beyond institutions designed by experts to include the remaking of structures that govern our everyday lives' (Asenbaum, 2021, p. 3), then democratic innovations can potentially 'interrupt established modes of governance and create spaces for systemic transformation' (Asenbaum, 2021, p. 3)

For these reasons, I want to examine how the junk playgrounds may inspire us to move beyond existing conceptions of democracy. Where my earlier discussion of complementary democracy was closer to Blaug's notion of 'incumbent democracy' (Blaug, 2002, p. 105), here I am leaning into 'critical democracy' (Blaug, 2002, pp. 105–106). I reiterate Rosanvallon's definition of democracy as 'the regime that must ceaselessly interrogate its definition of itself' (Flügel-Martinsen et al., 2018, p. 37), as I hope to unfold 'experimental visions and methodologies aimed at re-generating democracy' (Schlosser et al., 2019, p. 28). In doing so, I will propose the concept of 'playful democratic friction' as a central contribution of this project that may allow us to expose and weaken the tales of necessity.



# 14.1 Prefiguring Other *Worlds*

If I bring the different facets of my analysis together, I see stories of numerous worlds that have emerged, prefigured through the actions of the players, for shorter or longer periods of time. The junk playgrounds seem to have afforded certain qualities that allow for less familiar worlds to take shape, reminding us that 'there are other ways of making worlds' (Tsing, 2015, p. 155). In the following, I will sketch out 10 different worlds that emerged in the junk playgrounds. Some of these worlds were sustained for longer periods of time, while some appeared only briefly. I tell the story of each world as if it was only constituted around one characteristic or *facet*; this is an artificial construct to make the chosen facet stand out. While each story is a composite with fictional elements, I stay close to my research materials and the encounters in the junk playgrounds.

## 14.1.1 Sensing Other Worlds

*We have arrived in the borderlands between worlds, where we are getting ready to leave familiar territory. People seem attracted to this liminal space, apparently drawn here by a growing friction with the world they know, and a hunch, a lingering sensation, that other worlds might be possible. We have become collectively attuned, somehow, to this idea that perhaps play can cultivate our courage and capacity to travel between worlds. If we are all here, maybe we should get going?*

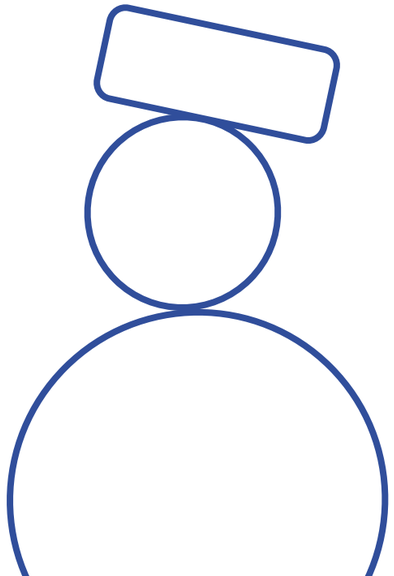
Here I draw again on the idea that moving into the borderlands and sensing the borders is an affective as much as a rational exercise. I talk about all the people who somehow *sensed* that things could be otherwise. I have previously discussed how some people were drawn to

the project through my initial, open invitations and videos. It seems that the idea of a 'junk playground as agora' etched out the promise of something different. Already in those very early meetings, where the whole project was only very vaguely defined, we started prefiguring other worlds together. Where I felt disappointed in my ability to turn more of those conversations into actual junk playground experiments, the encounters have stayed with me for several years now, beckoning me to acknowledge the importance of prefiguration at the very early stages of any collaboration, not least one with democratic aspirations. It might also serve as a reminder that new democratic worlds are not only prefigured in predefined spaces, and they do not wait for our signal, they are always already on their way, and often, they take us by surprise. It takes me back to the argument made by Wicks and Reason that 'the success or failure of an inquiry venture depends on the conditions that made it possible, which lie much further back in the originating discussions: in the way the topic was broached, and on the early engagement with participants and co-researchers' (Wicks & Reason, 2009, p. 244).

### 14.1.2 A World Where Play is Possible

*Our journey has begun, we have crossed the border, and it already seems like something has changed, ever so subtly. Am I wrong, or have people become a little more confident? It's as if some of us are starting to realise that in this world, we need not be embarrassed by our desire to play. No excuses or alibis are required. On the contrary, here it is both possible and perfectly legitimate to play, even for adults. I can sense that the spirits have been lifted, people seem to carry themselves differently, like they are a little lighter.*

As we have seen, most of us, especially as adults, typically live in worlds where play is often disregarded and marginalised, if not downright frowned upon. These are worlds where we must make excuses and find alibis (Deterding, 2017), and where even children are hardly





allowed to play without justification for fears they waste their precious time. It was such a world Maria Lugones had good reason to be 'seriously scared of getting stuck in', a world in which she could not be playful (Lugones, 1987, p. 15). As Richard Schechner noted, 'play is dangerous and, because it is, players need to feel secure in order to begin playing' (Schechner, 2004, p. 25). Making sure a situation feels safe enough is thus a central concern in designing spaces for play. We don't want anyone to get hurt, and we seek to create a space that encourages players to show 'who they are and explore what it means to be human' (Skovbjerg, 2016). Something seems to happen when play slips through the cracks of everyday life, when it allows us to be together differently. I have argued that whichever potential play might have for creating new democratic worlds hinges on the possibility that play happens in the first place. If the play experience is to have a more transformative character, the extent to which people are actually 'carried away' matters greatly. At no point was this expressed with greater clarity than the person from EX2 when she repeatedly noted that she had just 'been playing really well'.

### 14.1.3 In This Together

*Now that people have started playing, and in ever more inventive ways, it looks like there's a greater mutual trust growing. You can see that they are leaning towards each other and standing a little closer together, as if the need for personal space is shrinking, while the shared space grows bigger. If we embarked on this adventure as modern individuals, clearly distinguishable from one another, it seems that the sharp edges are fraying, as we are becoming ever more entangled.*

While I cannot determine which conception of self was brought to the playgrounds by people, it seems likely that they had much in common with the more general contemporary emphasis on the individual. Where Judith Butler has argued that it is 'as if under contemporary

conditions, there is a war on the idea of interdependency' (Butler, 2015, p. 67), then it seems some of the people in the junk playgrounds had a different experience. Foregoing the rationality of individuality is not a trivial thing, especially for adults who have been taught to care for oneself. It may be 'an act of defiance' (Segal, 2018, loc. 59) as Lynne Segal put it. In the best of moments, it seems like the junk playgrounds have sparked a feeling that 'we-are-in-this-together-but-we-are-not-one-and-the-same' (Braidotti, 2019, p. 157). This entails people allowing themselves to get lost together *because* they are together, but without automatically turning their differences into sameness. In those situations, we have seen glimpses of what Ann Light called a 'relational aesthetic', understood as 'a jolt' that 'one feels and benefits from in collaborating with other people, above and beyond the outcomes' (Light, 2023, p. 26).

### 14.1.4 Engaging with Materials

*Clank! The moment we enter this world, we immediately hear the familiar sound of the hammer, and as our gaze follows the noise, we see a group of people trying to nail a large sheet of wood to a couple of pallets. What are they building? A table? A shelter? I accept the mystery and we move on, only to see more people engaging with all sorts of materials. If they were at first a little cautious and timid as they tried to figure out what to make of these dirty, discarded things, by now, they don't seem to be holding back, emboldened by the solidarity of their fellow travellers.*

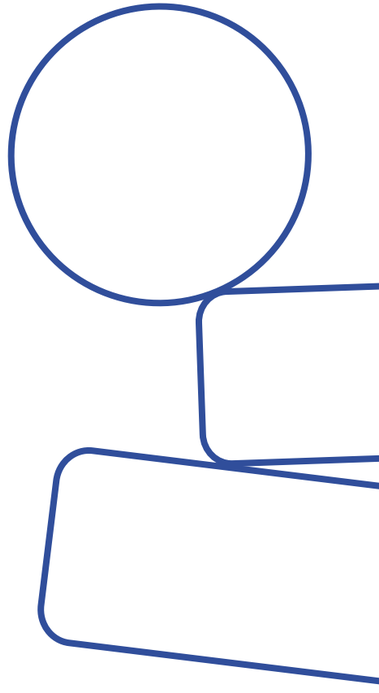
As we have seen, the junk playgrounds allowed us to take a few small steps towards a less human-centred conception of participation. Here, humans have not only been rational individuals in control of their environments, but the 'the myth of disembodied rationality' (Machin, 2022, p. 14) has been questioned repeatedly. As people have engaged actively with the lively collection of discarded materials, I believe we have sometimes seen examples of Tim Edensor's argument that the 'strong sensations experienced in the industrial ruin are repellent but also delightful, for they provoke unexpected pleasures, imaginings and desires' (Edensor, 2007, p. 230). The playgrounds have not exactly been industrial ruins, but they seem to evoke similar sensations and pleasures. It is almost as if the people in the playgrounds have been playing along with Jane Bennett's suggestion to emphasise 'the agentic contributions of nonhuman forces () in an attempt to counter the narcissistic reflex of human language and thought' (Bennett, 2010, p. xvi).



### 14.1.5 Reconfiguring Control

*With people playing so well by now, as they move closer to each other and engage with the materials, they also seem to let go a little of their otherwise firm, strained grip on things. It's as if they are slowly coming to terms with a different notion of control, where they are less prone to determine in advance how things might play out. For most of us, this turn did not come easy, and many seem to be struggling still; it clearly takes a while to unlearn what we have been taught.*

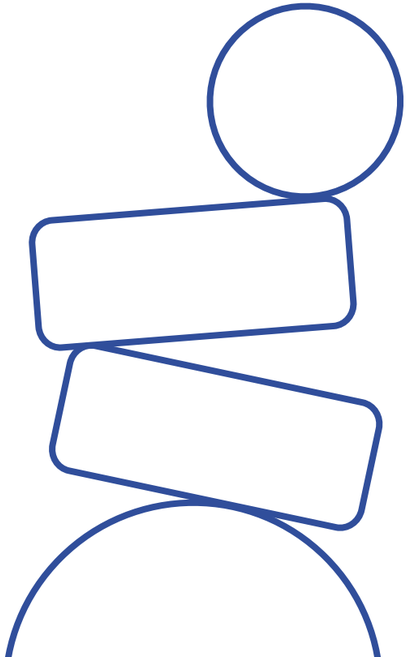
Stepping into a world of 'vibrant matter' (Bennett, 2010) almost inevitably leads to questions about who gets to make decisions and who is in control. In every junk playground experiment, control became a central theme to be explored. This was sometimes a stated goal, most notably in EX2 where the management wanted to loosen the control over the teaching situation. More often, it was something that emerged from the friction between the different components in the assemblage: people and their intentions, my stories, the discarded materials, the surroundings and so on. I always tried to gently push the balance a little towards a looser grip on the process, towards embracing not knowing exactly where the experiment would end. Many different notions of control were enacted, and multiple worlds were prefigured, where control took on meanings rather different to what most of us were used to. Across these worlds, it often became clear that 'unpredictable encounters transform us; we are not in control, even of ourselves' (Tsing, 2015, p. 20).



## 14.1.6 Renegotiating Purpose

*Loosening their initial desire for control in this rather turbulent world, people are now grappling with the purpose of what we're doing together. In the beginning, they asked me all the time 'What are we supposed to do?' and 'Why are we doing this?'", but those questions have all but disappeared. Maybe they have simply given up trying to make sense of things, or maybe they have become so absorbed by playing that it doesn't really matter what comes after.*

I do not mean to say this happened to everyone, and certainly not all the time. Many people probably never completely forgot about their motivations for joining in the first place, or what they would do after the experiment, and it is likely that even for those who did it only happened momentarily. However, it is in those instances we may come closer to Wolin's notion of democracy as a 'rebellious moment' (Wolin, 2016, p. 111), where things could be otherwise. It is in those moments where 'democratic engagement takes the form of a playful, creative, and open-ended exploration rather than decision-making and output production' (Asenbaum & Hanusch, 2021, p. 2). We can see one small example from EX2, when I tried to help people along without giving them very clear answers and they found a way to stay with the friction a little while longer. One person then suggested to the group that 'maybe the most important thing is not the result, or even that we have something finished to show, but rather the conversations we're having?'. I suspect that they simply got carried away by the play experience, and maybe they even came to agree with Eugen Fink that "play has only internal purposes, not ones that transcend it. (Fink, 2016, p. 20)





## 14.1.7 Joyful Encounters

*As we arrive in this world, we can hear the excited laughter of people playing, accompanied by a spirited drumming performance on a pair of old tin cans. They are cheerful, and it seems they have embraced a rather joyful stance towards the otherwise bewildering experience. At this point, there is apparently little concern with anything but the shared experience, they have shed their initial expectations that something useful must come of this. Now they are merely playing, seeking to continue for as long as they can and to garner as much shared enjoyment as possible. Sometimes, the laughter has nervous undertones, as if they suddenly realise that they don't quite know what is going on, but mostly, they seem at ease here.*

I have not made many comparisons across the experiments, because they have been so different, but I do believe that most of the experiments have been enriched by these moments of collective joy. In those situations, the spirits were lifted, energies flowed across the playgrounds, creating ruptures and surprises, keeping things moving. There was a time where I found it difficult to appreciate the importance of this sense of collective joy. It was not enough; I felt obliged to demonstrate the worth and value of joy, and I was concerned that collective joy would have little to do with democracy in the end. I see it differently now, and I believe that much more work on collective joy, including its inherently political dimensions, is required. Like Hendriks et al, it also seems to me that democratic renewal is more 'effective when the people involved enjoy it—when they gain opportunities to forge new social bonds and to release creative energies' (Hendriks et al., 2020, p. 155). I thus also agree with Lynne Segal when she stated that we should 'reclaim more of those moments and those spaces in public life where collective energy binds us together in ways that transcend our personal worries' (Segal, 2018, p. 25). Maybe collective joy is not merely a catalyst for democratic participation; could it be that it is vital in

its own right? While I cannot answer conclusively, I sense that there is indeed more to collective joy than a crude motivational instrument to instigate participation. For Segal, this is almost self-evident, as she also argued that 'our political dreams can end in disappointment, but are likely, nevertheless, to make us feel more alive, and hence happier, along the way, at least when they help to connect us to and express concern for those around us' (Segal, 2018, p. 216). In a similar vein, Stuart Lester suggested that 'playing's utility may simply be to increase the desire for more playful assemblages, and by doing so continue to reveal the world as a source of joy, to have greater satisfaction in being and becoming alive' (Lester, 2013a, p. 138).

### 14.1.8 Speaking Other Voices

*People seem even less restrained now, and they are eagerly experimenting with other possible voices and other ways of approaching the matters of common concern. They are still talking to each other, and words are being flung across the playground, sure, but the familiar dictum of rational discourse has been considerably diminished. Instead, people also use their bodies to express themselves, they build things to tell stories, they tease and provoke, they play the fool and the trickster, often taking them into more carnivalesque terrain.*

We may recall Clara cutting women's nipples from a magazine to tell a different story about the university, or the group of people exploring a way of talking about their students that seemed rather controversial and degrading, but who were more likely expressing a deep sense of care. In contrast to prevalent expectations of rational deliberation, these stories illustrate that broadening the scope of legitimate discourse allow for other ways of approaching difficult, sensitive issues. They remind us that 'alternative forms of speech, those that do not rely on the aural quality of voice but rely on the creative, playful, emotional, sometimes carnivalesque forms of claim-making, can deepen

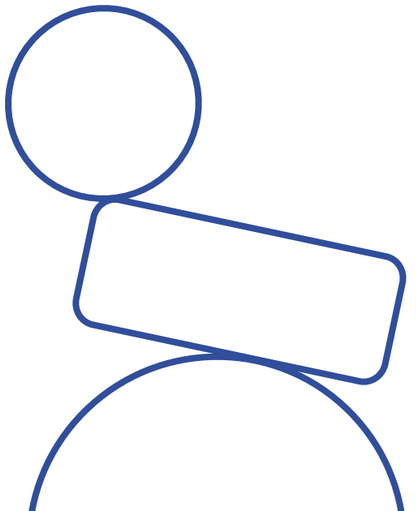


democratic discourse more than carefully constructed arguments' (Curato & Parry, 2018, p. 6). Humour, laughter and the carnivalesque can also cultivate relationships 'that allows recognition of democratic diversity, aesthetic sensibility and political dignity—essential for the reconstruction of a new space of resistance' (Tunali, 2020, p. 130).

### 14.1.9 Showing Vulnerability

*We step into this world with caution, carefully. Things have slowed down, but there's a palpable tension in the air, as if something fragile is being shared amongst the people playing. They rest more confidently in the confusion, facades are slowly falling away, and showing vulnerability seems less intimidating. It is not so much that they are sharing their deepest secrets, but merely that they no longer make much of an effort to hide their insecurities and doubts.*

As we have seen, Joan Tronto insisted that a caring democracy can only exist to the extent that its citizens are in a position where they can allow themselves to be publicly vulnerable, and to do so among people who are not among their most intimate relations. If a caring democracy requires citizens that dare to show vulnerability, then perhaps we can draw inspiration from the many people in the playgrounds who mustered the courage to show varying degrees of vulnerability. On many occasions, it was mostly small things, with people acknowledging that they did not quite know what was going on, what to do with the materials, or how to use a hammer. These small but significant admissions, understood as an active care for the experience, are what I believe made it possible for others to rest more calmly in the not-knowing and sometimes chaotic, confusing experiments. We have also seen fewer, more substantial signs of vulnerability, like the woman in EX8 who noted that 'I am very orderly, it's not because I like it, it's just how I am, and this frustrates me, sometimes'. This was essentially her questioning a fundamental aspect of how she is and how she sees herself, an



act that must have taken considerable courage. I can't say exactly why this happened, and everyone undoubtedly had their own reasons and motivations. It seems, however, that there were moments when people felt safe enough, where they came to trust not only the people around them, but the lively assemblage of human and more-than-human entities. When the junk playgrounds worked well as *play*grounds, they conjured up a world less dominated by competitive individuals, with a little less focus on performance, where skill and mastery took on different meanings, where control and outcomes gave way to presence, joy, and care. In those moments, perhaps we get a sense that 'care is so compelling because it attunes us to the world and to each other in ways that are in stark contrast with prevailing discourses that laud domineering forms of action' (DiSalvo, 2022, p. 162). In this environment, vulnerabilities were suddenly a little less vulnerable, if still not exactly trivial and completely comfortable to share. Maybe in those spaces, we can also practice, as Audre Lorde has suggested, 'being gentle with ourselves by being gentle with each other'? (Lorde, 1984, p. 175).

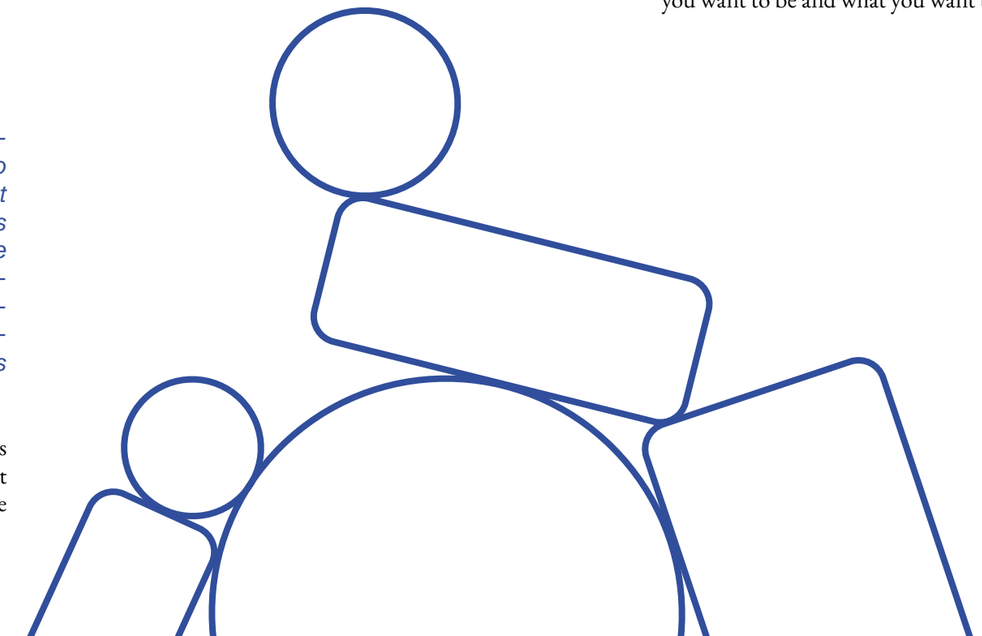
### 14.1.10 Becoming Otherwise

*Something profound has happened while we have traversed these worlds together. The playground appears to have become just safe enough for people to experiment with roles and identities, to make inquiries into other ways of being. It seems that people now more readily embrace the fluidity of their sense of self, allowing themselves to become otherwise while playing. I am not talking about radical or complete transformations, the changes and transitions are subtle, but more than profound enough to impress and move me.*

Through the prefigurative practice in the junk playgrounds, players have pushed what it is possible for them to say and do, but also what it is possible to be and become. As Dion Hansen and Herdis Toft have



argued, play is a 'mode of being and doing that allows the self to suspend enclosed categories such as age, gender, ethnicity, social status, etc.' (Hansen & Toft, 2020, p. 256). Similarly, Hans Asenbaum has argued that 'the politics of becoming affords new freedoms to the fugitive self, which is always on the run, trying to escape identity reifications through hegemonic identity interpellations' (Asenbaum, 2023b, p. 155). Some of the people in the playgrounds have relished in these opportunities to try on other ways of being, other identities. Rather than appearing as fully formed subjects, there are many people who have embraced their own capacity for change. I make no claims to grand transformations, but the junk playgrounds have provided us with numerous glimpses of people who showed different sides of themselves, such as the boy in EX3 when he moved beyond his normal ways of engaging with others. In some cases, we have also seen people sense and enact other possible identities that they were seemingly not fully aware of. We saw this, for instance, with the one person in EX4 who wrote that it had been an 'important development towards who you want to be and what you want to be a part of'.



# 14.2 Movement and *Friction*

The worlds we have visited are all small worlds, often with only a brief period of existence, but they are worlds that have somehow diverged from the world we often seem to take for granted. Remembering David Graeber's claim that it is 'one thing to say, "Another world is possible". It's another to experience it, however momentarily' (Graeber, 2002, p. 72), I believe that people in the playgrounds *have* experienced other worlds. These are not worlds that are necessarily radically different from the world we know, but they were different *enough* that they can generate a little bit of friction. Like Jane Bennett's use of 'onto-stories' (Bennett, 2001, 2010), these are stories that hint at slightly different ontological assumptions. In the context of this project, I have referred to ontology as ways of becoming, epistemology as ways of knowing, and methodology as ways of doing. I suggest that layers of friction may fold into three related dimensions of democracy: democratic ways of doing, democratic ways of knowing and democratic ways of becoming. In the following, I will mainly focus on the possible implications of generating friction with the ontological dimension of democracy.

With the smallness of these worlds, it may be easy to ignore or overlook them, to consider them entirely inconsequential, because, as Ruha Benjamin argued, 'we're still taught to only appreciate that which is big and grand, official, and codified' (Benjamin, 2022, p. 15). However, she went on to claim that a 'microvision of justice and generosity, love, and solidarity can have exponential effects' (Benjamin, 2022, p. 15). I thus also agree with Anna Tsing that 'world-making projects emerge from practical activities of making lives; in the process these projects alter our planet' (Tsing, 2015, pp. 21–22).



## 14.2.1 Democracy As Movement

Following the traditions of participatory and radical democracy, these are all worlds that emphasise participation, and a critical stance towards axiomatic assumptions about what democracy is or can be. If I return to my understanding of democracy as movement, then it is my hope that the junk playgrounds and these worlds create just that – movement. It is worth remembering that one of the most popular things to play with were these small yellow wheels on rails. Maybe you recall the women in EX5 who were drawn to the promise of movement, so much so that they pursued it for the entirety of the experiment?

I have already touched upon Katie Salen Tekinbas and Eric Zimmerman's suggestion that play is 'free movement within a more rigid structure'. They also argued that play 'never merely resides in a system of rules, but through an ongoing process of friction, affects change in the system. The friction of water flowing against rock and earth over time will alter the more rigid structure of a riverbed' (Tekinbas & Zimmerman, 2003, p. 558). The movement I have been interested in here is the movement that creates friction with the democracy we think we know, 'with the more rigid structure of a riverbed', and those moments and situations where we move outside the most common figurations of democracy. It is not that everything changes, but some things do, and those subtle alterations may provide the openings we need, when, for instance, the rational discourse gives way to carnivalesque forms of expression, or where the individual becomes entangled in an emerging assemblage that can no longer be reduced to individual desires. As Markus Holdo argued, 'participation may feel meaningful because the values it embodies are missing in society at large. To be part of a space where they are put to practice may give hope for change' (Holdo, 2023, p. 52).

I have found a particularly useful perspective in the ethnographic work of Marisol de la Cadena. She developed the deceptively simple phrase 'not only' to describe the 'excesses that modern practices could not recognize was [sic] important' (de la Cadena, 2015, p. 15). As she engaged with indigenous Andean Peruvians at the margins of modern traditions of knowledge, one of her conversation partners acknowledged that he did exist within the limits of such knowledge, but 'not only' that, he was also something else, something outside the limits. I believe that in all encounters, there is a similar excess, a 'not only', because, as Iris Marion Young has argued (Young, 1997, p. 52ff), we are never exactly alike, and we never carry the same ontological assumptions with us. Cadena went on to argue that the 'not only' can create 'onto-epistemic openings', because it halts 'knowing as usual' (de la Cadena, 2021, p. 253). She brought these threads together to argue that 'what you know (or might eventually know) might be exceeded by that which what you know (or might eventually know) cannot contain' (de la Cadena, 2021, p. 254). This delightful tongue-twister of a sentence tells me that what I know about democracy might be exceeded by that which I know about democracy cannot contain. If I claim that democracy is best understood as autonomous individuals participating by way of rational discourse, I risk perpetuating 'the ontological denial () of what exceeds' this conception (de la Cadena, 2021, p.

253). With Cadena's terms, I suggest that the worlds I have described in my stories are still connected to the modern world of individuals and disembodied rationality, but they are 'not only' that; there is an excess, however minuscule, something else, and it is in this space between the world we know and the world that exceeds it that friction can emerge. Finally, Cadena argued that 'ontological disagreement emerges from practices that make worlds diverge even as they continue to make themselves connected to one another' (de la Cadena, 2015, p. 280). For instance, a modern world where individuals are seen as autonomous entities and another world where nothing exists prior to their relation are building on diverging ontological assumptions, yet they can remain connected to each other. The democratic challenge, then is to listen across those differences, to develop conceptions of democracy that does not seek to suppress ontological difference into sameness.

I have previously drawn parallels between Cadena's work and that of John Law, and here I will return to the notion of a one-world world. As we have seen, Law argues that 'though the one-world metaphysics of the North are powerful, they are not as powerful as they imagine themselves to be' (Law, 2015, p. 135). He further argued that 'we need to find ways of puncturing the addiction of the North to selfsealing one-world metaphysics' (Law, 2015, p. 135). Rather than contributing to the permanence of the one-world world, we should find ways to question it, to demonstrate its inadequacy, to puncture it. What is required, argued Arturo Escobar, is a different understanding of political ontology that calls upon us to tell 'stories differently, in the hope that other spaces for the enactment of the multiple ontologies making up the pluriverse might open up' (Escobar, 2018, p. 328). I believe that the prefigured worlds and the stories I have told of them may offer such small, modest ways of puncturing the one-world narratives, by scratching some of the axiomatic assumptions we tend to take for granted as a firm ontological ground.

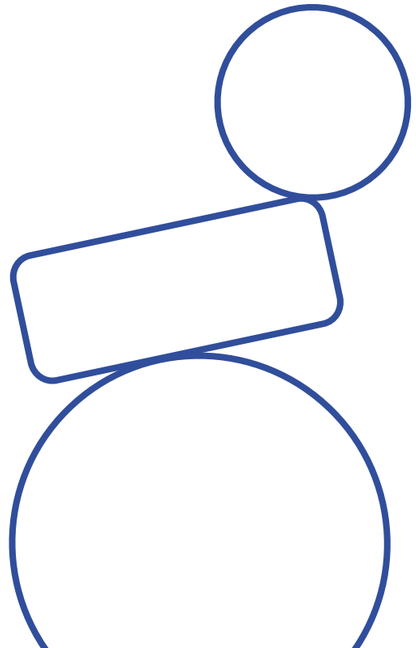


## 14.2.2 Unpredictable Transformation

Throughout this project, I have not made any claims to the lasting effects of the junk playgrounds or the worlds they have prefigured. However, I maintain that affective experiences and encounters always have the potential to change us, even though I can't say exactly *how* the people in the playgrounds have been transformed. As Anna Tsing argued, 'encounters are, by their nature, indeterminate; we are unpredictably transformed' (Tsing, 2015, p. 46). Hans Asenbaum made a similar point when he argued that even though it may appear as if 'things go back to normal' after a democratic intervention, that is not the case. Instead, he argued that 'traces of the democratic experience persist' and they 'change how political issues are perceived, they challenge established attitudes, and induce critical reflection' (Asenbaum, 2023b, p. 5). It may even be possible, as Markus Holdo argued, that

**[...] something has already changed when people get together and form bonds of mutual trust and solidarity and experience the power of collective action. Where would significant social change begin if not in spaces that make such hope, such bonds and such action possible?**

*(Holdo, 2023, p. 52)*



## 14.3 Wrapping *Up*

In this chapter, I have argued that the junk playgrounds make a democratic contribution by allowing participants to prefigure other worlds, to enact them in the here and now, and get a feeling of what living in that world would be like. My point is not that any of these small, prefigured worlds are inherently democratic, or necessarily better than the world(s) we know, but merely that they were made *possible*, and by their being possible, they open up alternative futures as *possible* futures. The primary democratic quality of the junk playgrounds is thus that they have provided us with a friction to destabilise axiomatic assumptions, allowing people to experiment with other ways of living and becoming. We can explore, through play, not only what it means to be human and to be alive, but also, and more importantly in this context, what it *might* mean to be human, what life *might* be like, if lived otherwise. We play with potentiality and alterity when we see and sense, in the flesh, other worlds where other ways of being human, other ways of living, are not only possible but real in the here and now.

Friction runs as an undercurrent through those experiences, sometimes surfacing, but almost always present, if imperceptibly so. As I have tried to show, the people in the playgrounds have found ways of lingering with that friction, following it to see where it would take them and what would happen. In almost every respect, the junk playgrounds work against the widespread ideals of efficiency and smooth interactions. In that light, if they are to make any contribution, it is clearly not by granting us clarity, but rather, by inviting us to linger in opacity. They serve as a reminder that we can design for friction, and that such friction can be sustained for longer than is typically assumed or preferred. If we stay with the friction, hold it in our bodies and in the connections between us, new perspectives and imaginaries can emerge from that tension. Maybe, more than anything, the junk playgrounds have been training grounds for embracing dilemmas, harnessing friction, and exploring the possibilities that emerge, when we, if only momentarily, suspend our otherwise dominant concern with answers, solutions, and the rational discourse of individuals.

Building on these reflections, in the following I will round off my discussion of playful democratic frictions by suggesting a democratic ethos that might generate additional friction.



## 14.4 An Ethos of Playful Democratic *Frictions*

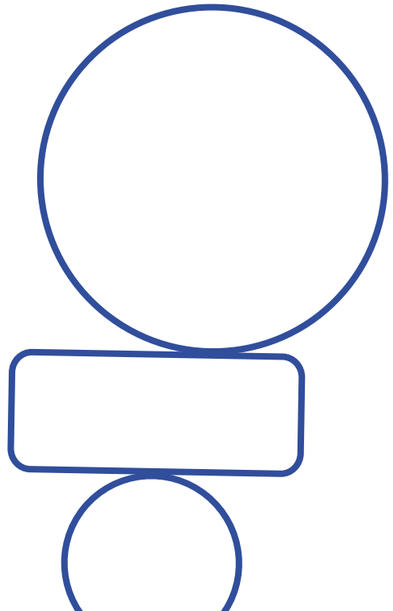
Across the different worlds prefigured in the junk playgrounds, I have seen people act in so many ways, often surprising me with their inventiveness, their willingness to try out things, with the shifts and ruptures in rhythms, with their courage to embrace the unknown and the vibrant frictions, and even to allow themselves to be transformed by the experience. While they have all approached the playgrounds in different ways, there are some recurring patterns in the stances they have taken. I have a sense that if I draw these different stances and attitudes a little closer together, perhaps we can see the contours of a certain orientation that might inspire a fruitful democratic ethos.

### 14.4.1 Moving with Democracy

I take the first cautious step by reiterating that in a democracy, just like in the junk playgrounds, things are never really finished but in perpetual motion. It may seem like some iterations of democracy have been refined into a slightly higher fidelity prototype than the ramshackle creations we have seen through this project, but it remains a prototype, a work-in-progress, nonetheless. In our daily lives, we often seem to forget that democracy is not 'a given, it is not guaranteed, and it is not stable' (Papacharissi, 2021, p. 7). Democracy is volatile and we must reject the idea that 'democracy is the permanent achievement of the West and therefore cannot be lost' (W. Brown, 2015). Our democracies are always only in various states of becoming, just like we as citizens are always only ever *becoming* democratic citizens. This is why I have described democracy as *movement*. If democracy is movement, if it is forever restless, searching, probing what it might become, then a democratic ethos should be on the move, too, and it should seek to make movement *happen*. This is exactly the aim of the ethos I unfold here, to

move and to create small, subtle movements and shifts. As we will see, the ethos thus also shares many qualities with the concept of drifting by friction.

Remembering Rosanvallon's definition of democracy as 'the regime that must ceaselessly interrogate its definition of itself', an ethos to support this interrogation requires us to acknowledge that 'in the workshop of democracy, we are all apprentices' (Rosanvallon, 2018a, p. 37). This also means that we must be unfinished, too. It calls for democratic citizens that are 'experimenting with the plasticity of identity, and exploring the transformative potential of the self' (Asenbaum, 2023b, p. 3). As we have seen William Connolly argue, 'pluralists adopt a bicameral orientation to political life' (Connolly, 2005, p. 4) and so do the people in the playground. They may have had their own ideas and beliefs, but they were also willing to move with the assemblage and the flows and rhythms that animated it. Just like the people in the junk playgrounds, who often did not know what would happen or how to react, we must find ways of responding to the unfamiliar, to move and grow with it. It requires a willingness to be open to change, to embrace the fact that 'encounters are, by their nature, indeterminate' (Tsing, 2015, p. 46). While this was not always an easy or comfortable process for the people playing, they found ways to navigate the unknown, but only because they were not alone. As Haraway argued, 'becoming-with, not becoming, is the name of the game' (Haraway, 2016, p. 12). Democracy is not becoming anything on its own, and neither are we; we are only ever becoming together. In this perpetual flow of things, it is impossible to exactly determine beginnings and ends. However, even though becoming, transformation, and growth are constants, and we are never static, there may be preparation or 'ready-ing', as Nora Bateson called it: 'Ready-ing is slow and sometimes fast; soft and also harsh at times; it is seen and unseen. To give it room is a kind of humble preparation preparing towards undefined multiple pathways' (Bateson, 2022, p. 991). We may need more and better opportunities for ready-ing, for continually becoming response-able, as Haraway suggested, to the change that is constant. It seems inadequate, in a democratic society, to expect citizens to prepare at home,





and then show up in public with their minds made up. This is never only an intellectual, cognitive, or mental readiness, it is also a ready-ing with and of the body, an affective capacity. Here we can draw on Kathleen Stewart's notion of the 'affective subject' who must be 'both nimble and patient, jumping with the unexpected event but also waiting for something to throw together' (Stewart, 2017, p. 197). As a citizen in this conception of democracy, fewer things are given in advance. Things are more volatile, changing, becoming, and we must practice our ability to move with democracy-as-movement. Sometimes, that means jumping at opportunities that surprise us, sensing that something is going on, whereas other times, patience is called for, and we may linger at the edge of what is about to happen. This is what players do: they probe, and they pry, they linger in uncertainty, cultivating an 'openness to surprise' (Lugones, 1987, p. 16) and as we have seen, at least sometimes they become different because of it.

### 14.4.2 Caring-With Democracy

We have seen people in the playgrounds care for each other, for place, and for the shared play experience, and I have argued that these caring practices contributed to a strong connective tissue and a sense of collective joy. One consequence of a democracy on the move is that it calls for the same kind of careful attention. As Joan Tronto has argued, for democracy to function, a range of vibrant, caring practices are required: 'what it means to be a citizen in a democracy is to care for each other and to care for democracy itself' (Tronto, 2013, p. x). Like Haraway's 'becoming-with', Tronto talks about 'caring-with' as the web of caring practices that we engage with as citizens. To admit the need for care is also to admit vulnerability and that something is out of our control. We have seen small glimpses of this in the playgrounds, where people sometimes reached the conclusion that they were not in control and that they needed help. Here I agree with human geographer Sophie Bond when she insisted that 'there is a need for a radical

shift in political subjectivity away from individualised responsibility, blame, and liability to a more collective ethos of care and responsibility' (Bond, 2019, p. 16). To assume a caring stance puts requirements on the individual citizens, but even more so on the relations in which we are always-already entangled. Caring also means caring for the social world, and caring for what democracy might become. As Carl DiSalvo argued, in ongoing, situated democratic practices, 'care of the possible entails a commitment to tending to diverse potentials, to conditions and consequences that have yet to be realized' (DiSalvo, 2022, p. 161). This, for DiSalvo, can take the form of tinkering as a 'means to resist closure, to refuse to capitulate' and a 'subtle but persistent refusal to simply let things be' (DiSalvo, 2022, p. 174). Tinkering also closely resembles the experimental inquiries and playful construction activities in the junk playgrounds.

### 14.4.3 Embracing Friction

Caring-with democracy is not just a matter of repairing and maintaining what is, but also about getting in the way of necessity by generating friction. As Michael Connolly has argued, a 'viable democratic ethos embodies a productive ambiguity at its very core' where democratic citizens develop the capacity to instigate a 'periodic disturbance and denaturalization of settled identities and sedimented conventions'. The purpose of these disturbances, for Connolly, should be to 'open up the play of possibility by subtracting the sense of necessity, completeness, and smugness from established organizations of life' (Connolly, 1993, p. 379). These intentions share strong similarities with my earlier discussion of drifting by friction as a means to challenge the tales of necessity, and to 'emerge from under the shadow of inevitability' (Tsing, 2005, p. 269). The friction reminds us that 'political rationalities are always historically contingent' (W. Brown, 2015, loc. 1714). As things can change and societies and democracies could be different, what is required is a collective effort to bring forth



'another political rationality' (W. Brown, 2015, loc. 1714). A playful attitude may be helpful here, as it allows 'taking over a world to see it through the lens of play, to make it shake and laugh and crack because we play with it' (Sicart, 2014, p. 24). Creating friction and making the world 'shake and laugh and crack' has the potential to eventually lead us, through the cracks, to the borders between worlds, to the pluriversal borderlands.

### 14.4.4 Into the Borderlands

While an ethos is never complete, I will end the discussion here by suggesting that the goal is not merely to generate friction and make the world crack, but to go spelunking in those cracks and crevices as they appear. Drawing on the concept of drifting by friction, I suggest that a fruitful ethos would similarly inspire the confidence to move into the pluriversal borderlands. If we can learn to generate friction, to make the world crack, then maybe we can also drift into those cracks between the worlds. Dwelling and maybe even living in the cracks means not completely belonging to this or that world, that 'we're not quite at home here but also not quite at home over there' (Anzaldua, 2015, p. 81). Anzaldua further argued that the future 'belongs to those who cultivate cultural sensitivities to differences and who use these abilities to forge a hybrid consciousness that transcends the "us" versus "them" mentality' (Anzaldua, 2015, p. 81). Finally, Maria Lugones argued that we can live in multiple worlds, where we, in each of these worlds, are able to show different sides of who we are. To visit each other's different worlds, to overcome the risk of arrogance, Lugones suggested cultivating playfulness as a 'loving attitude to have while travelling' (Lugones, 1987, p. 15).

While this ethos is not born out of any one person's actions or attitudes, neither mine nor that of the people in the playgrounds, I do believe that we can trace it back to the playgrounds through the glimpses

we have already seen. All these bold people have been playing in ways that convinced me that I had to move away from familiar, comfortable explanations. It was their actions and their courage that convinced me to pursue the friction through the cracks.

### 14.4.5 Friction-ing the Ethos

These four dimensions of a democratic ethos come together to suggest that we, as citizens, approach both democracy and ourselves as unfolding in eternal states of becoming; that we engage in caring practices, for humans and more-than-humans alike, as well as for democracy itself; that we resist tales of necessity and inevitability to pursue instead possibilities for democratic friction and that we, through the friction, can cause the world(s) we inhabit to crack, so we can see, however dimly, other possible realities through those cracks.

Despite my belief in the potential merits of this ethos, I am painfully aware of the irony. How can I argue for a heterogenous pluriverse 'where many worlds fit' while also suggesting *one* democratic ethos, almost implying that if everyone would only subscribe to this ethos, then things would be okay? I have no good answer, and I willingly acknowledge that the ethos was a flawed idea to begin with. I insist that, for this ethos to have any value, it should be sensitive towards the pluriversal, while also acknowledging that multiple ethe can and must exist simultaneously, alongside multiple epistemologies and ontologies. It builds on the core idea of an increased capacity for friction, ambiguity, and dwelling in the cracks between worlds. As we have seen people in the playgrounds do repeatedly, the ethos should inspire the courage to linger a little while longer with that which we don't quite understand yet, can't put into words, and to perhaps even 'engage the limit of thought -where thought stops, what it cannot bear to know' (Britzman, 1995, p. 156).



I readily admit that, while grounded in the junk playgrounds, this ethos is also a politically charged proposal. I can only reiterate the argument I have made repeatedly, that we are always already making worlds with our actions, as researchers and humans. Hence, we are always already political and, as Haraway put it, we should dare to be 'for some worlds rather than others and helping to compose those worlds with others' (Haraway, 2016, p. 178). I agree with Ruha Benjamin, that we can't only 'critique the world as it is. We have to build the world as it should be to make justice irresistible' (Benjamin, 2022, p. 11). Neither this ethos nor the project have any universal value; both are merely modest attempts to generate some friction with prevalent assumptions, and, most importantly, to invite others to join me, hoping to 'assemble a we' (Holman Jones, 2017), to sit together and share stories around the campfire.

# 15. Co-Labouring Other World$_s$



In the following, I will reflect critically on my research approaches in this project while speculating on possible paths for future work. I will primarily focus on possibilities for deeper collaborations by drawing on Marisol de la Cadena's concept of 'co-laboring' (de la Cadena, 2015, 2021)

## 15.1 Collaborative Research as *Co-Labour*

While I have been striving to conduct collaborative research, especially through processes of co-design, some of the promises I initially made to myself remain unfulfilled, and in future projects I hope to venture further into this territory. I wish to deepen the collaborative nature of the research, from start to finish, as I dream of research projects with a greater degree of shared ownership beyond the intentions of researcher(s). There are many possible ways to go about this, as I could hold on to co-design, and I could look to other research traditions such as 'participatory action research' where 'researchers and participants actively co-create the research process' (Cole, 2022, p. 13). I will keep exploring these and related fields, but I have also found myself drawn to the concept of 'co-labouring' that Marisol de la Cadena developed through her anthropological studies in Peru. Cadena described co-labouring as the 'practices among us () that composed a complex togetherness: a contact zone () in which we understood each other and did not understand each other' (de la Cadena, 2021, p. 248). Rather than seeking an 'economy of sameness' (Irigaray, 1983), rather than trying to turn divergence into convergence, with co-labouring Cadena insisted on maintaining the divergences. The divergence is not only a matter of difference and being different, but also indicates that we are becoming differ*ent/y*, that we are following different paths, our very movement through life is diverging. As Cadena further contended, such divergence is 'not infrequent as ethnographic experience', but it is routinely 'ignored because acknowledging it would require slowing down habitual knowledge, thereby creating an ethnographic contact zone for "not knowing" that can be perplexing' (de la Cadena, 2021, p. 250). However, it is exactly this perplexing contact zone of not knowing that I am interested in. It is neither a matter of imposing a certain epistemological regime on someone, like we have traditionally done in the West, nor about completely discarding familiar ways of knowing. The challenge is to develop a gentler sensitivity that does not rule out any form of knowledge a priori. Co-labouring thus presupposes 'an ecology of knowledges', 'the recognition of the copresence of different ways of knowing' (Santos, 2018, loc. 347) and an embrace of the pluriverse, where 'heterogeneous worldings' come

together in perpetual negotiation (Cadena & Blaser, 2018, p. 4). The heart of co-labouring, as I understand it, is the willingness to risk one's own position, to risk becoming otherwise because of the encounters with both human and more-than-humans.

With these considerations, I will use the concept of co-labouring to discuss methodological issues I hope to address in future research.

## 15.2 My own *Role*

Throughout the junk playground experiments, I faced a series of dilemmas pertaining to my own role as a researcher, and a great deal of (mostly productive) friction ensued. None of these questions and dilemmas have been fully resolved. As I have described, I found it impossibly difficult to be a distanced observer during the experiments, during which I almost always ended up as a deeply entangled participant, a host, a storyteller, and a caretaker. Regardless of my obligations as a researcher, I must admit that it is my practice of gathering together, of assembling a we, that matters most to me. When I am in the field, when we are experimenting together, I veer towards the practices that I believe can sustain the we. In the beginning, this was mostly an intuitive reaction, as I relied on my practice to navigate the often chaotic and turbulent situations. Autoethnography have helped me calibrate my orientation, shifting from regretting and excusing my own active role to embracing it, acknowledging that *that* is how I can be a researcher. Another transformative shift happened as I slowly learned to trust my own affective responses, what I have talked about as goosebumps-based research. None of this resolves the dilemmas, it merely affords me strategies for writing from that position. I believe that co-labouring can help me move further along this path. I have already discussed Cadena's phrase 'not only' that she used to describe entities that may fit in one category, like the category of 'human' or 'mountain', but which can 'not only' be contained by that category (de la Cadena, 2015, p. 14). She talked, for instance, about Ausangate, a mountain that is *not only* a mountain, but also an 'earth being', a very active participant in political events. Co-labouring always entails making space for the 'not only', that which can be captured in words, but *not only* that. That which can be accepted as knowledge according to established knowledge regimes, but *not only* that. To the extent that my practices of assembling a we can allow us to engage the 'not only', all that exceeds our own limits, I believe it can also sustain co-labouring by cultivating spaces for divergence.



## 15.3 Invitations

In crafting invitations, I was inspired by design researchers Åsa Ståhl and Kristina Lindström (Lindström & Ståhl, 2016), as well as by my late friend Bernie DeKoven, who always insisted that all we could ever do was to 'invite playfulness'. I believe that the invitational approach has been helpful in opening the project, making it possible for more people to think, talk, and play along with me through conversations and the junk playground experiments. However, in the context of co-labouring, they also provide a dilemma because every invitation is an invitation to *something*, to a world that has already been sketched out. Inviting people to a research project around the notion of 'junk playground as agora', I had implicitly made numerous decisions about what would be feasible, possible, likely, or legitimate in this world – and what would be less so. At the same time, research projects *do* have to start somewhere, and in most cases someone, an individual or a group, takes the initiative. Indeed, Cadena herself made 'An Invitation to Live Together' (de la Cadena, 2019), where she stressed the importance of challenging 'the destructive imposition of sameness' and to be less afraid of the unknown (de la Cadena, 2019, p. 483). So perhaps invitations and an invitational approach remain meaningful, as long as they are sensitive to everything that exceeds the invitation itself.

## 15.4 Making *Accounts*

As I have pursued a more diverse participatory repertoire, I also became aware that such efforts call for more diverse ways of making accounts and telling stories. If I look at the junk playground experiments, I believe that, in small ways, the plurality of participation resonates with the divergence stressed by Cadena. For instance, we may recall the two children, Lucas and Luna, working on the car in EX7. Whereas Lucas insisted that the task entailed building a car out of wood and other materials, Luna came to believe that her contribution would be making a sketch of the car. Both were working on the car, but they diverged in their values and priorities. In a research context, for an encounter like that to be meaningful, we also need ways of holding on to it for long enough to conduct our analysis. I have tried different approaches, like the GoPro recordings and the 'postcards from the future', alongside my own observations and reflections. Co-labouring, I believe, would benefit from an even more creative, flexible, and pluralistic conception of these accounts, if all the many voices and knowledges are to be heard and respected. Maybe the making of accounts should itself become a collaborative process of co-labour, where everyone involved has a role to play. That might also allow us to better grasp the performative nature of such accounts, to explore how they always 'bring forth the life which they name' (Jackson & Mazzei, 2022, p. viii), and how accounts are forces that 'transform our relation to thought and to how we consider what might be said about life' (Jackson & Mazzei, 2022, p. 2).

## 15.5 Colaborative *Analysis*

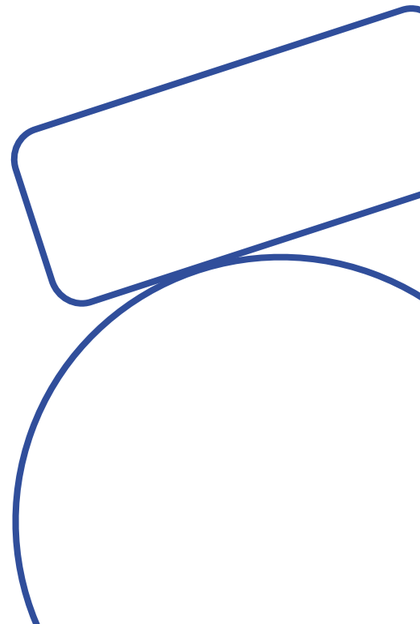
Although I worked with many people to plan and run the junk playground experiments, the collaboration did not extend to the ensuing analytical work, which remained largely in my head and hands. Those



who had been playing in the playgrounds were only with me by proxy, through the traces they had left and the accounts they had given. The defining work of analysing their contributions rested with me, and while I stand by my analyses, I see a need for experimenting with collaborative approaches, as so many important interpretations, arguments, and decisions are made in the analytical space. If 'collaborative approaches' are also a matter of reminding us that 'legitimate knowledge is not only located with the privileged experts and their dominant knowledge' (Hovde et al., 2021, p. 64), then I believe analysis should also be included in the collaboration. In Cadena's words, co-labouring required holding on to the diverging categories and stories 'even if they clashed () for this would not stop the conversation. It would continue and yield unexpected possibilities and the unexpected as possibility!' (de la Cadena, 2021, p. 247). I have tried my best to respect the people who have played along, to be sensitive towards what they said and did, even when I didn't understand or appreciate it at first. However, in the end I came to assign their heterogenous, vibrant contributions to certain categories and concepts chosen by me. I have decided what is included and what is not, I have made interpretations and suggestions, and I have told the stories in the ways I could tell them. There is room for change and improvement here.

## 15.6 Writing

When I discussed my approach to writing, it was an attempt to set me on a course, to create a space for writing in which both the project and I could thrive. I also wanted to plant a seed, because in future research I wish to further explore the possibilities of playful, creative, evocative, and *collaborative* writing. I wish to further develop my research practice as an autoethnographic 'way of life, of thinking, feeling, acting, and being with others, that highlights compassion and concern for ourselves, for those who are the focus of our inquiries, and for all who make up our community of scholars and researchers' (Adams et al.,



2021, p. 8), as Carolyn Ellis described it. In the spirit of co-labour, such an approach should extend writing beyond *my* writing, as I hope to nurture more social and communal forms of writing. There are many examples of what I talk about here, but for now, I will mention two.

The first is the book *Frit Flet* (Aidt et al., 2014) (loosely translates to 'Free Braiding') by Danish artists, poets, and authors Naja Marie Aidt, Line Knutzon, and Mette Moestrup. It is a work of art, not an academic text, but I believe this is exactly why it has much to say to us, why it feels so reinvigorating and vibrant. In the foreword, they describe the project as one of longing for more vibrant and communal ways of writing: 'We did *not* want each of us credited for the individual texts, we wanted to write anonymously. We wanted as much community/solidarity/fellowship and freedom as possible during the writing process' (Aidt et al., 2014, p. 26). And further:

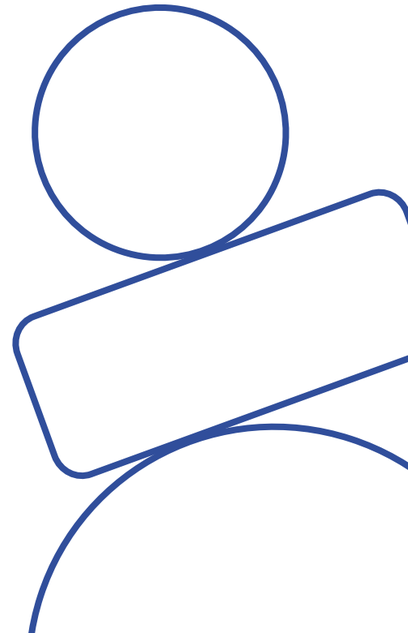
> **The form itself would have to express freedom and inclusiveness. That is why we wanted to make a big collage with all kinds of texts. Community and generosity were key words for us – we wanted to invite others to join us in creating the book, we wanted to be courageous and experimental, while we were writing. Vanity and control would have to cede in favour of openness, laughter, chaos and the occasional euphoric joy of working together. We wanted to make literature a less lonely place to be; we wanted to create dialogue rather than monologue.**
>
> *(Aidt et al., 2014, p. 26)*



These words may seem almost outlandish in an academic text, but for me and for the work I have tried to create, they resonate deeply. As I re-read their words towards the end of my project, I realised that their aspirations and longings are quite familiar, close to my own, even if I am working in a somewhat different genre.

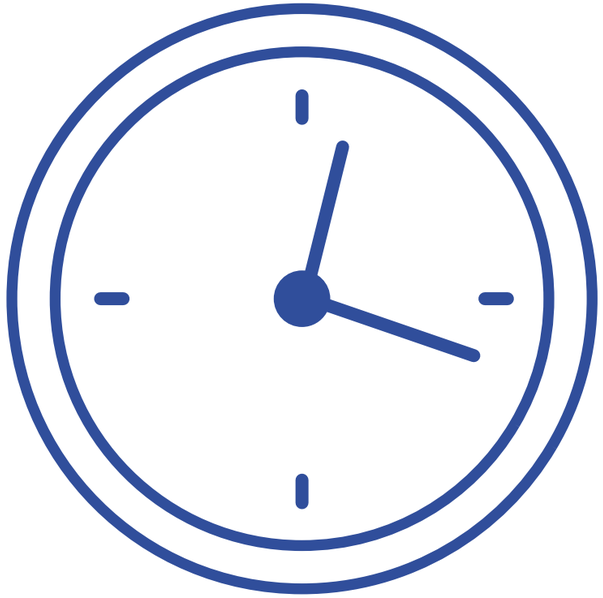
My second example comes from more familiar territory, that of design research. One of the many important experiences I had during my research stay in Australia was to attend the book launch for Lisa Grocott's most recent book, *Design for Transformative Learning* (Grocott, 2022). Striving to make 'the participatory orientation of the practice visible', her colleagues 'gathered in the footnotes, offering plural perspectives and further reading' (Grocott, 2022, p. xx). In the book, the footnotes became a lively place, where a kind of affirmative critique unfolded, mirroring Latour's idea of the critic as 'the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather' (Latour, 2004, p. 247). I wanted to follow this example, to invite people to comment and critique my text from the position of the footnote. Like the junk playgrounds, why not make the text itself a kind of agora, a place for gathering together? For a while, I held on to this dream, but as the days, weeks, and months were flying by, I realised that there would simply not be time, that I would not have any sufficiently coherent text for people to critique. Next time.

While I did not manage to invite people to join me in the footnotes, nor did I enact the kind of communal writing performed by Aidt, Knutzon and Moestrup, theirs are practices I wish to continue and grow in my future work. Finally, coming back to Cadena's notion of co-labour, I believe that autoethnography and other forms of performative, artistic, and collaborative writing would be good travelling companions. To the extent that autoethnographic writing aspires to 'assemble a we', a heterogenous, plural, vibrant we, a we that celebrates difference, to that extent, the resonances and affinities with co-labouring only seem to deepen further. Maybe such an approach to writing could invite what Cadena called a 'cosmolife', a 'proposal for a politics that, rather than requiring sameness, would be underpinned by divergence' (de la Cadena, 2015, p. 286).



## VIGNETTE:

# Playing with time





Our long and arduous journey is almost over, and I just want to tell one last story before the end. It is a story about time and the deep worries that can spring from not having enough of it. Two years into the project, one of my biggest concerns was related to the duration of the junk playground experiments. I was afraid that they were simply too short to say anything meaningful about anything. As I have shown, they lasted 2-7 hours, and only in the case of the gravel pit did an experiment stretch across multiple days. It ended up like this for several reasons, partly by design, partly by coincidence, and because of my open-ended attempts at attunement. The 'art of the possible'. For a long time, I considered this a fundamental flaw in the research design, as if I had failed some crucial test. By now, I have accepted this circumstance as merely one of so many limitations to consider in any research project. However, it does mean that I have not been able to say much about how the junk playgrounds might evolve over time, or how a community might grow around them.

This is what I want to speculatively explore in the following by drawing another parallel to CounterPlay. While the junk playgrounds and CounterPlay are different in many ways, I do believe that the qualities I have previously analysed – the bodily and material dimensions, the rhythms, and the affective intensities, the carnivalesque voices, the open-ended nature and the surprises, the caring practices, the sense of collective joy, and the many ways of playing along – are similar to what inspired and invigorated people at CounterPlay.

# *Coming back to CunterPlay*

For this story to unfold properly, we must embark on yet another detour. This trip takes us back to Melbourne, where I had just arrived, trying to find my bearings on the other side of the planet. My friend, Troy, an artist and urban play scholar, had invited me to visit their RMIT Future Play Lab[23] . I hadn't seen him off the screen for three years, but right away, we started thinking out loud, laughing, plotting, and planning new play events.

He revealed that they had been talking about hosting a version of CounterPlay in Melbourne, and I was as surprised as I was thrilled. More than three years after the last time we gathered all these playful souls from around the world, the festival was still alive, somehow. Across vast distances in time and space, and despite the COVID-19 pandemic that hadn't exactly been conducive for the bodily proximity that play thrives on. All that and yet there was still a sense of community and belonging, a feeling that something special had unfolded between us because of that one time he and I met and played together in a library in Aarhus. The festival was clearly not dead yet, and it made me consider contrasts between the different temporal dimensions of the junk playground experiments and CounterPlay. On the one hand, we have the short junk playground experiments that I have been writing about in this thesis. CounterPlay, on the other hand, has existed since 2014, and the community has evolved organically, growing stronger roots, and sustaining a sense of continuity and consistency over time. Not consistency as in staying the same, but in that we have all been changing together by repeatedly revisiting and renegotiating our shared values, hopes, and dreams. We stick together, still.


Playful plotting in the Future Play Lab

[23]http://futureplaylab.io/

**As I was speculating what might happen if the junk playgrounds could be sustained over time in a similar manner, I started a conversation with the CounterPlay community. I asked them:**

**'Is there something about CounterPlay that has been particularly important to you? Do you still feel some kind of connection to the community? Is there something from CounterPlay that has a place in your life today, in any small way? [24] '**

[24]https://www.facebook.com/groups/counterplay/posts/2592199314252849/

People immediately started responding:

CP 2017 was a huge turning point in my life and deeply affected my practice since. Fundamentally to recognize and identify as being part of a play community was huge. Seeing the intersectionality that play could sit within/support/hold? has driven everything I've done since I think!

To this day I continue to share what I discovered at counterplay, and most valuable for me I've embraced my playfulness as the biggest gift I can share with the world. () It is a wonderful thing indeed you seeded in this world, which ripples through our relational body and everybody we play with. Thank YOU!

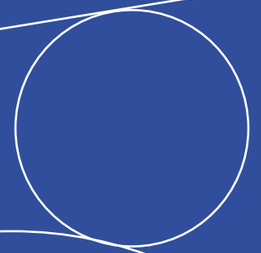
CounterPlay is immensely meaningful to and for me!! It always stays with me, I mention things I experienced and learned there in my teaching regularly, I share the festival page and the ideas from the conference/festival as a model for others. I've watched and remained connected to folks from the festivals over time and would love to do so more. I don't think I feel the same way about any other conference or festival. It's absolutely unique, very long term. In the bonds and loyalty formed, remains in my heart regularly and consistently, and I think is one of the most special and meaningful things I've experienced in my life - very honestly. I always long for more CounterPlay! (...) oh yea, I think CounterPlay will be alive as long as any of us are alive.

I was moved by these stories, and it literally brought tears to my eyes to realise how the festival had affected and stayed with them all for so long. As so many times before, Lynne Segal's claim that 'even more special are those moments of collective joy that we have helped to generate ourselves' (Segal, 2018, p. 264) reverberated through me. The conversation turned into a playground, full of mischief and laughter, when one person suggested that we should gather stories in 'an online playful dialogue way'. The sheer excitement and energy said a lot about their commitment, as the community seemed to awaken from a long slumber. Later, when we met online, one person started by sharing their story about how CounterPlay had given her the confidence to let play seep into more 'compartments' of her life:

> I've always been playing as a girl scout, but it's been in that compartment of my life, then I joined CounterPlay () since then I dared to take the play into my work life as well () I work in a hospital, with processes and problems () facilitating has now become a lot more playful me () I bring LEGO, I bring a doll house, I bring all sorts of things () it gave me the courage to take play out of just one compartment of my life and put it into others. Work was one, but actually I think also just in life in general.

Another person reflected on the feeling of staying connected to like-minded, playful spirits:

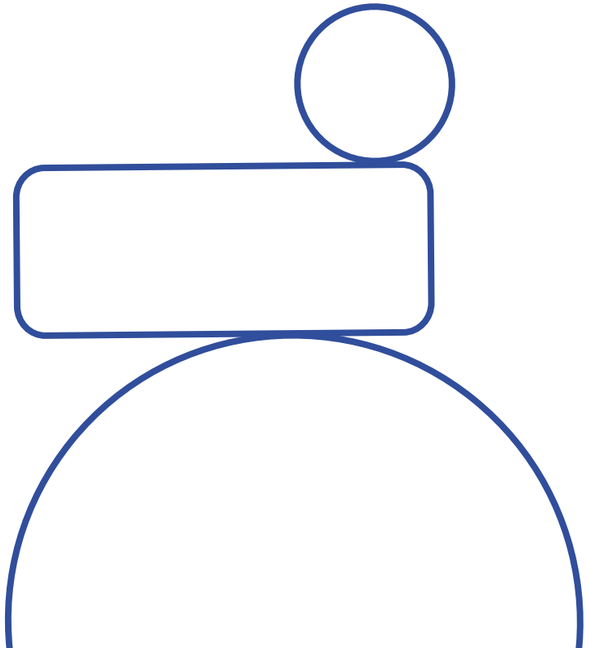
> Outside of the actual events, just knowing that other people exist out there that I can sometimes connect with on social media or in these video chats () it made me realise that my mind switches into a different mode of interaction when I know it's a CounterPlay person () so I'm like oh, it's actually safe to be silly, it's not going to derail the conversation, they will actually reflect that and it will still continue into a maybe even deeper place.



Finally, there was this one person, who described how the festival had evoked ‘a deep understanding of love’:

> The first CounterPlay I went to really changed my perspective, what I want to do, the sort of person I want to be, it fundamentally impacted my life () it was the cacophony of different people coming together, a sense of openness, a sense of energy, so much of what is contained and restrained in the world that we all operate in. Actually, there was a sense of, I would say more than connectedness, I would say a deep understanding of love, and I’m not talking about Hollywood romantic relationships, I’m talking about a sense of care, connection, generosity, appreciation, that kind of love.

I could go on sharing these stories, but we are almost out of time. In all these responses, reflections, and fond memories, I see a sense of community and belonging that even now, almost five years after the most recent festival, remains alive and vibrant. We are connected and together, still. I don’t want to stretch these speculations too far, but in the very least, they suggest to me that play events can cultivate a sense of community that remain meaningful and vibrant long after the event itself ended. I dare to speculate that the junk playgrounds, and open-ended play events more broadly, could generate similarly thriving communities locally, to the extent that they were allowed to develop over longer periods of time. And who knows what might happen from there?



# 16. Conclusion

**We don't have a word for non-linear in our languages because nobody would consider travelling, thinking or talking in a straight line in the first place. The winding path is just how the path is, and therefore it needs no name.**

*(Yunkaporta, 2020, p. 21)*

A PhD project is an unruly beast, always twisting and turning, sometimes kicking and screaming, often taking the novice scholar in many surprising directions. Especially if said scholar prefers all the twisting and turning over the linear path in the first place. Throughout this project, I have consciously and repeatedly tried to avoid closure in favour of new openings. It has become a mantra of sorts – make openings, not closure. When I follow Rosi Braidotti, 'all that matter is the going, the movement () though the final destination may not be very clear' (Braidotti, 2012, p. 362). In that light, the word 'conclusion' sounds a little too *conclusive*, it has a ring of finality that I'm not comfortable with, and it holds a promise of something I cannot deliver. As if, after all my doubts, insecurities, failures, inquiries, experiments, and detours, I could somehow tie a nice bow on things and hand it over to you. I cannot. Hence, the 'conclusion' that we have here can only be understood as 'the last part of something ', and the last part, it is.

[25]https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conclusion

Along the way, I sometimes felt that I have been working on several different PhDs at the same time, without being sufficiently competent to write any one of them. I guess this is what Anzaldua meant when she talked about living in the borderlands, not feeling 'quite at home here but also not quite at home over there' (Anzaldua, 2015, p. 81). For the sake of plurality, and for generating movement and friction, I have spent most of my time traversing disciplinary borderlands where different fields rub up against each other. I have been walking along what felt like an edge of democracy, where I was at the same time both connected to and disconnected from existing democratic theories, institutions, and practices. This has been a source of profound frustration and recurring despair, but I see now that it was exactly where I needed to be. I did not set out to study democratic participation that would live up to already established values and principles in the world we know, but rather, I wanted to probe what democratic participation *might* look like in worlds we don't *know* yet.

Those worlds have grown from the junk playgrounds, and they have generated a wealth of small stories that I have told as well as I could. In the smallness of my stories, I see allusions to something bigger, something that reaches just a little bit further and a little bit deeper than the situation itself. I refer to those precious moments where everything outside the present disappeared, where those people in the playground were just there, playing together, forming a caring, joyful, assemblage. Those moments, I believe, conveyed a small experience of what all these human and more-than-human bodies could become together. Sometimes, they created a democratic argument that could not have been made with words only, it required the corporeal, affective encounters between human and more-than-human bodies. It was not a fully formed, rationally reflected argument, not one that would stand up to deliberative, analytical scrutiny, but an argument in the flesh, a lived argument of contingency, insisting that there are other ways of making worlds. For some, the argument may simply have been that they desired more opportunities to just be, that the joyful moment with no expected outcomes and no teleological direction was enough. It was sometimes expressed through opportunities for hanging out in a more flexible, malleable space with no clearly defined destination, regardless of what some impatient researcher would like to see. We may remember the boy, William, from EX3, who, by sharing with the community a tower made of pallets, scrap wood, drainage tubes and old tarps also shared a version of himself that allowed him to grow beyond what he used to be. Or Nora from EX4 who got a slightly better grasp of what she could become, what she *wanted* to become, and with whom. Or Olivia from EX2, who would not play, until she could not stop, because she was playing so well. Or...



A carnivalesque argument for solidarity and sharing our concerns in precarious academic worlds?

An argument for sharing and evolving as a community?


A provocative argument for taking care of our students?

An argument for taking one's time making place without following the decrees of adults?

We can continue to disregard those arguments as unacceptable because they fall below our standards or outside our field of vision, but we can also try to listen to them, let them affect us, we can try to develop a different way of paying attention, an orientation, and a sensitivity that allows those arguments to shape us. It requires method, but a softer, more generous method that does not seek to reduce difference into familiar categories. It demands a willingness to engage with epistemological and ontological assumptions about what we value and how other worldly configurations can come about, also when those engagements question and fracture what we may consider the bedrock of knowledge and the foundations of our very existence.

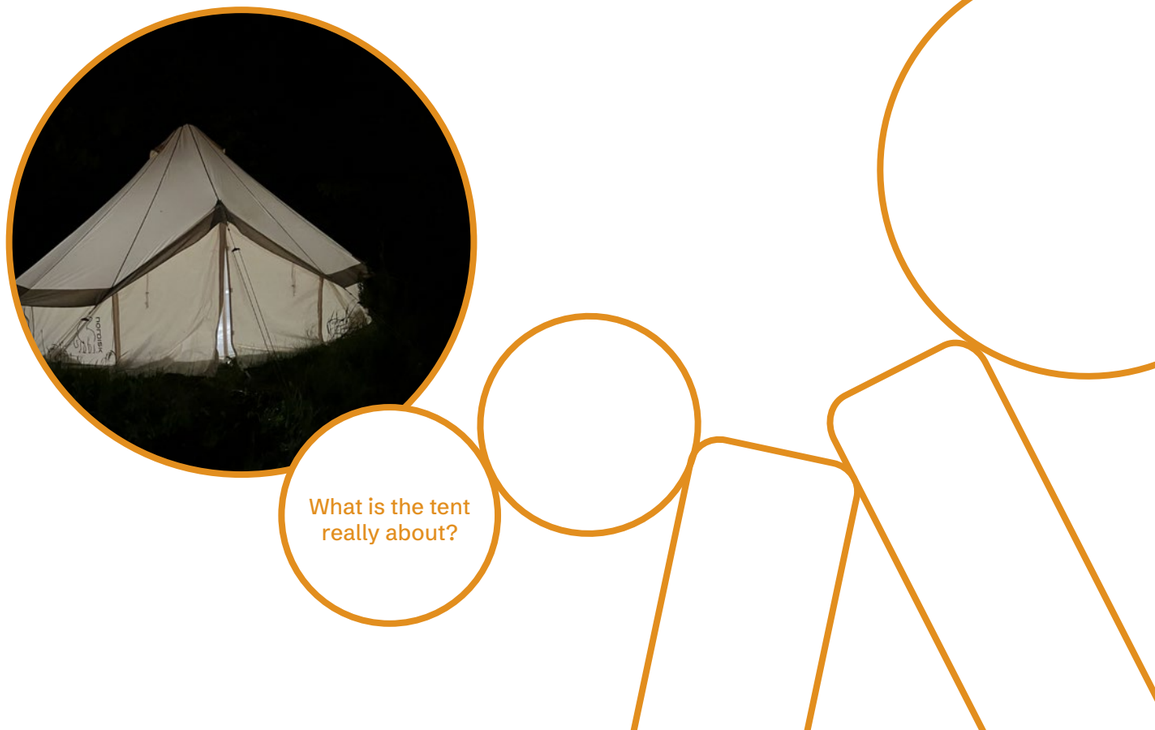
That is what I have tried to achieve through this project, which has essentially been one long-winded attempt at becoming sensitive to ways of making arguments, telling stories, and creating worlds that I could not see before I myself became otherwise. I would like to say, triumphantly, that I have succeeded, but I have not, I could not. At least not in any big or conclusive manner. I want to embrace that sentiment and suggest there is ample rewards to be found in between those two poles, between not-quite-succeeding and not-quite-failing. Like Jack Halberstam, I believe that 'under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world' (Halberstam, 2011, pp. 2–3). Therefore, I have tried to act and write in ways that are less wound up with competition, dichotomies, and binaries, less concerned with winning and losing, in the hope of fostering approaches more in tune with life and the worlds we inhabit.





# 16.1 Contributions

Whereas this work has been stretched out between democracy, design and play as crucial tent poles, it was never primarily *about* any of that, per se, just like the tent is not *about* the poles, pegs, and fabric, but the ways of living enabled by a temporary shelter. And it is exactly matters of life and the difficulties of living together I remain most concerned with. Here, however, I will discuss my contributions in relation to the fields of democracy, design, and play, before rounding off with contributions that address the challenges of being a researcher in turbulent worlds.



### 16.1.1 Democracy

In this section, I primarily respond to my first research question, "what happens when we understand play as a mode of democratic participation?" and the subsidiary questions regarding the look and feel of playful participation, the participatory repertoire, and democratic imaginaries.

Through my discussions, I have suggested engaging with matters of democracy in two different, but related ways.

First, I argued that designing for playful participation can contribute by "complementing" (Qvortrup & Vancic, 2022) and "mending" (Hendriks et al., 2020) contemporary democratic formations. With my framework for understanding participation as a multidimensional assemblage it became possible for me to better grasp a broader participatory repertoire beyond the exclusive focus on rational discourse. I suggest that this expanded repertoire may invite a more diverse choir of voices to join the conversations, which in turn might possibly nurture a richer democratic creativity and foster a sense of community and collective joy.

These contributions engage with familiar conceptions of democracy, assuming that we know what democracy is and how to improve it. However, as a kind of "gambiarra", the junk playground also indicates that "innovation might be possible in areas where nothing new seemed conceivable" and that "simple things may challenge very complex problems" (Mendonça et al., 2023, p. 165). As such, I believe that the playgrounds contain seeds for democracy done differently, which opens a path to my second and primary contribution, the notion of *playful democratic friction*. This brings us closer to the traditions of participatory and radical democracy, as the friction encourages us to question ontological assumptions about what constitutes democracy. In this perspective, we cannot know exactly what democracy is and even less what it might become, but by prefiguring other possible worlds the junk playgrounds have allowed people to experience alterity in the flesh. Finally, I suggested *an ethos of playful democratic frictions* by drawing on the attitudes and orientations of the people in the playgrounds. The ethos is an experiment, a performative attempt to generate friction and to further explore what it might demand from us if we hope to enact new democratic worlds.

### 16.1.2 Design

In the following, I primarily refer to research question 3, as I discuss my contributions to design research. I suggest that my contributions can best be summarized with the concept of "drifting by friction". It is not a concept that can easily be implemented in existing design practices, but that is exactly the point. The kind of design research I have pursued in this project is fragile, flawed, situated, and often disoriented. It is not without a sense of agency, but it is radically different from the classical Western ideals of the 'heroic designer' (DiSalvo, 2022; Torretta et al., 2021). It is design



research that cannot be depicted, like the popular design squiggle[26] , as a linear movement from chaos and uncertainty converging towards order and certainty.

Drifting by friction can be understood as a 'sensitizing concept' (Blumer, 1954; Bowen, 2006), that may suggest 'directions along which to look' (Blumer, 1954, p. 7), but only if we become capable of sensing and following the friction. Drifting by friction is a response to the many voices insisting that 'we have to envision design differently' (Disalvo, 2022, p. 242), and it may help us as design researchers to 'continually produce slippage and difference to resist conformity' (Akama & Yee, 2016, p. 4). Finally, with drifting by friction, I follow Tony Fry and Adam Nocek when they claim that the 'challenge for design, insofar as it is part and parcel of the fabrication of the Anglo-Eurocentric subject of Reason, is to undermine its own ontological ground' (Fry & Nocek, 2020, p. 3). I have argued that friction has the capacity to challenge ontological assumptions about democracy, and I extend that argument to design. For instance, the drift in this project has led me to question Western conceptions of autonomous, rational individuals and the human-centred ontologies on which they build. These matters carry important implications for the imaginaries of design available to us.

While I consider "drifting by friction" to be my most important contribution to design research, I hope there are also smaller, potentially more practical ideas to draw from this project. Here I will mention three:

**First**, my attempts at attunement and the invitational approach may add nuances to the practices of co-design, especially in the initiation phase. With the open-ended invitations, we can engage people in the early framing of the possible and the making of worlds, actions which greatly influences and shapes the conditions for the entire collaborative process.

**Second**, the use of messy, discarded materials in a playful, new materialist perspective may add vitality to the ways representations, prototypes and material dialogues are used in co-design processes. Rather than framing materials as props under human control, I believe there is much to learn by allowing them a slightly bigger and more active role in our encounters.

**Finally**, I hope that my work contributes to writing practices in design research. By combining affirmative critique and autoethnography, I have tried to develop forms of writing that are occasionally evocative, personal, and close to the body. This may be helpful for design researchers who are concerned with the artistic, experimental, and affective dimensions of design and who wish to continue those experimental inquiries through the process of writing.

[26] https://thedesignsquiggle.com/

## 16.1.3 Play

Here I refer especially to my research question 2, subsequently 1, as I discuss my contributions to the field of play research. I consider myself to be first and foremost a play practitioner, or a play activist as I have often said, yet I have been concerned about the role of play in this project. I have sometimes imagined that play is an invisible friend of mine, and when I was in doubt, I asked this dear friend if I have done play the justice it deserves? If so, I would like to think that my most important contribution is to be found in my repeated insistence that play must be play first. While I do believe play can inspire new conceptions of democracy, possibly reinvigorating democratic practices in the process, any such rewards depend on play happening in the first place. There is nothing radically new in this position, yet it remains under pressure and a sustained, collective effort is needed to continuously invigorate the spirit of contemporary play scholarship.

I have tried to heed Thomas S. Henrick's call 'to invoke the spirit of play in its scholarly formulations' and his proposal that play scholars should 'play themselves into the future' (Patte & Sutterby, 2016, p. 169). Further, I have been emboldened by the argument that a 'creative research practice springs from a curious, sensitive and playful life as a human being' (Wegener et al., 2018, p. 14). I agree and suggest that play research benefits from being conducted in a playful spirit, from living a playful life. For inspiration, I have followed the people in the playgrounds, who were often moving and shifting, trying to destabilise themselves, to create surprises, to see what might happen when they combined this with that. Encouraged by their engagement, I have been playing with everything I encountered along the way, always on the lookout for materials that might 'work to create play situations with' (Skovbjerg, 2021, p. 47). I have a feeling that the most interesting ideas from this project has grown exactly from my desire to keep playing, from start to finish, and beyond.

However, I hope that the project can also inspire new play practices in smaller, more concrete ways.
I have implied that there are numerous exciting opportunities for play scholarship to be found in the many attempts to challenge and destabilise the Western ideas of human exceptionalism, individuality, and rationality, including new materialism, affect theory, feminism and decoloniality studies. As Jane Bennett argued, if we hope to grasp the more-than-human flows and forces we are entangled with, it helps to 'admit a "playful element" into one's thinking and to be willing to play the fool' (Bennett, 2010, p. 15). We can start by *playing* that everything has agency, that materials are conscious and alive, driven by inherent desires and with their own stories to tell.




By reinterpreting the tradition of "skrammellegepladser" through the prism of these perspectives, I have indicated that seemingly simple play designs hold great potential for rich and surprising play experiences. The basic premise of playing with discarded materials to enact and explore other possible worlds have sparked a wide range of vibrant encounters, where both children and adults have been absorbed and engaged.

Building on this, I also believe that the project serves as a reminder that play cannot be relegated to the lives of children or even humans, but rather should be considered a vital force of life for humans and more-than-humans alike. That calls for more play research that moves beyond simple binaries like child–adult and human–more-than-human.

Where I have primarily linked my participatory framework to *democratic* participation, I contend that it also emphasises the diversity of play. It offers no complete mapping of the forms of play found in the junk playgrounds, but it does suggest that play thrives on variety and flexibility, offering players numerous opportunities to make play happen.

## 16.1.4 Doing Research

Finally, I suggest that I have made a few modest contributions to the lively discussions about how to do research and how to be a researcher. Here, I thus mainly address my second research question.

With questions 2a and 2b I sought to grasp the methodological, epistemological, and ontological requirements and implications of conducting research into fleeting encounters and affective experiences. I believe that my most important contributions here is to be found in the playful, experimental approach, in resisting closure and in the sustained striving for increased sensitivity and flexibility. I have followed this path, because I agree with Tim Ingold that for 'life on earth to carry on, and to flourish, we need to learn to attend to the world around us, and to respond with sensitivity and judgement' (Ingold, 2021, p. 3).

As has typically been the case in the junk playgrounds, I find that it is the combination of disparate things that is most likely to generate meaningful contributions. For instance, with the combination of constructive design research, artistic research and autoethnography, I began to trust my own intuition and affective responses, to suggest a kind of "goosebumps-based-research". Similarly, by bringing together notions of affirmative critique, affirmative ethics of care, democratic pluralism, and performative research, I have found ways to reconcile my previous practice of 'gathering together' with my emerging research practice.

These dimensions also point to my question 2c, where I ask how we might talk about that which we are not ready to talk yet. This unassuming question has been a major catalyst for my inquiries. As I kept drifting by friction, I bumped up against the edges and limits of my own capacity to understand and describe what I encountered. The notion of a generous affirmative critique, alongside autoethnography, convinced me that I could discuss important theoretical concepts, such as ontology, as well as my findings in the junk playgrounds before feeling properly equipped to do so. It means that the thesis remains in flux, and I like to think of it more like an assemblage of energies, flows, tones, moods, and affects, only loosely held together with duct tape and string, volatile and alive, still.

Combining this with that to see what happens.



## 16.2 On To New *Adventures*

> **What kind of book is this that refuses to end? (...) In this kind of storytelling, stories should never end, but rather lead to further stories. In the intellectual woodlands I have been trying to encourage, adventures lead to more adventures, and treasures lead to further treasures**
>
> *(Tsing, 2015, pp. 287–288)*

Like Anna Tsing, I don't know how or where to stop. While academia is marred by precarity, and I cannot predict what happens next, I can say for certain that this project is embedded in something much larger; my life project, if you will. It started way before the PhD, and it goes on for as long as I can muster the energy. I recall Brian Sutton-Smith's reflections on his illustrious career:

> **I thought time and again I had at last discovered the meaning of play. But, somehow, it always turned out otherwise, somehow there always seemed other questions to ask, other lines of inquiry to follow, all auguring answers more promising than those I thought I had in hand. () And so this account () turns out to be more a preliminary inquiry than a final resolution of my thinking, a setting sail again rather than a coming to port.**
>
> *(Sutton-Smith, 2008, p. 80)*

From the little bit of sailing I have done, I know the pleasures of coming to port, to enjoy firm ground under your feet, to gather provisions, fill the cupboards and such, but boats are not made for the harbour, and after a few days, the open waters start calling again.

This is not an ending, and it is the sustained movement that matters. The research I try to call forth is work that generates frictions, repeatedly and in perpetuity. If this seems like an insurmountable task, intimidating and stultifying, then we may do well to remember that friction also offers a connective tissue, bringing us together to endure and possibly even enjoy the friction together. Perhaps friction can even inspire hope in these difficult times. Not because it allows us to solve our problems more efficiently, but because it rejects such simple solutionism. The hope I talk about here has nothing to do with unbounded optimism, the belief that everything will be ok. Instead, I understand hope as that which "locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act" (Solnit, 2016, p. xiv). In other words: as long as there is movement and friction, there is hope.

If I return to Tsing's notion of the woodland, then my contributions with this project may amount to planting a tree or two. Those trees are but vulnerable seedlings, and left to their own devices, in the middle of this windy field, chances are they will wither and die. It is only in the case that more trees appear, along with a host of other plants and critters, that a woodland can emerge. If I were to plant additional trees in this field in the future, I would start with some of the many unanswered questions left behind by this project.




**First**, what might happen if the junk playgrounds took place closer to established democratic institutions and practices? On the one hand, I believe that the junk playground experiments I have conducted for this project drew much of their vitality exactly from not being constrained by formal procedures and regulations. On the other hand, I acknowledge that the institutions remain a vital component of democratic societies, at least for the foreseeable future. If we aspire to instigate greater democratic transformations, the institutions must be involved.

**Second**, what would happen if we could play with different temporal horizons? If we, to stay with the metaphor, could approximate the temporality and longevity of trees? If our scholarly experiments could be sustained for longer, be granted sufficient time to grow roots in the woodland? While the junk playground experiments were short-lived, and I have only alluded to the long-term implications of CounterPlay, I am eager to explore other durations in future research.

**Third**, how might we continue to question and destabilise the ontological assumptions we tend to take for granted as axiomatic? Following critical research traditions such as feminism and decoloniality further into new territory, I aspire to do research that generates and perpetuates friction with still-dominant ideas. As that one artist said to me, 'the world is trembling', and I only hope to make it even wobblier.

These questions are like trees I would love to plant, not on straight lines as in a plantation, but wherever the topography of the terrain encourages it. They may grow slowly, like an oak that will outlive us all, or rapidly, like an intrusive willow that spreads uncontrollably, we cannot know. What we can know is that to 'encourage the unknown potential of scholarly advances—like the unexpected bounty of a nest of mushrooms—requires sustaining the common work of the intellectual woodland' (Tsing, 2015, p. 286).

And that, I have come to believe, requires *love*.

Love is the only place where I feel this project can end. Like the person from CounterPlay, 'I'm not talking about Hollywood romantic relationships, I'm talking about a sense of care, connection, generosity, appreciation, that kind of love'. However, among all the many things I have found it difficult to talk about, love makes my words disappear.

**I've looked at love from both sides now**
**From give and take and still somehow**
**It's love's illusions that I recall**
**I really don't know love**
**Really don't know love at all**

*(Joni Mitchell - 'Both Sides Now',)*

Why is that? Because love disagrees with the Western ideals of disembodied rationality and dispassionate demeanours? Am I afraid that love is always beyond my control? Or is it because I have occasionally been accused of being a 'romantic', and 'once bitten, twice shy'?

It is probably a bit of everything, and I also believe that love is difficult to talk about because it allows for no distance. Love demands presence and proximity; it requires us to lower our defences and lay bare our vulnerabilities.

While I am not accustomed to talking about love, I have tried, in small ways, to let love in. I stated early on that I embarked on this journey 'for the love of it, motivated by a sense of care, personal involvement and responsibility' (Ingold, 2021, p. 11). I hinted that perhaps critique could be a 'loving gesture', before I turned to Paulo Freire and suggested that 'dialogue cannot exist () in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people' (Freire, 2000, pp. 89–90). With bell hooks, I described love as a 'mediating force' (hooks, 2015, p. 26) in our broader ethical commitments as researchers. Following Jane Bennett, I argued that a sense of enchantment can generate sparks of feeling 'enamored with existence' (Bennett, 2001, p. 4) and I agreed with Hannah Arendt that we must all 'decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it' (Arendt, 1961, p. 196). Finally, in my ethos of playful frictions, I



drew on Maria Lugones' idea of cultivating a 'loving attitude' (Lugones, 1987, p. 15) for travelling between worlds.

So, it was there all along, and as I'm writing these final words, I realize that love has been the ultimate catalyst, if I am only now ready to call it by its proper name. I want to end by pulling these threads together and point towards the contours of a more loving research practice. What better way to do that than to repeat bell hook's bold encouragement for us to draw upon 'love to heighten our awareness, deepen our compassion, intensify our courage, and strengthen our commitment' (hooks, 2015, p. 27). If all I take from this whole endeavour is a slightly lower threshold for talking about love, then I could wish for no more.

Rooted in a loving, affirmative ethics of care, all the questions I have asked are subordinated to my aspirations of 'assembling a we', as I seek to gather human and more-than-human bodies together in encounters where we can become what we-are-not-yet.

And with those words, we find ourselves staring into the mesmerising flames of the campfire, where we can rest our aching feet, grab a bite to eat, and share our stories before we move on to new adventures.

Gathering around the campfire.

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