PhD Defence Manuscript

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For PhD defence, April 9, 2024, Design School Kolding

'Excuse me, have you seen the hammer?'
'Thank you, I've been looking all over for it'

CLANK-BANG-BAM! (I finish the welcome sign)

'I'm sorry about the wait. It's funny, no matter how many hammers we bring out here, it's just never enough. Like there's a Bermuda Triangle for hammers or something'

'Anyway, welcome to the junk playground!' (I show the welcome sign)

Let me bid you welcome with a short poem from the junk playground:

Hammers disappear
Materials dance and jump
Resisting our hands, our intentions
Surprising us with their dreams
Sending us off
On grand adventures
To the end of a world
Our bodies respond
Affected, affecting
A new world, a shared world,
Grows from the encounter
But where *is* the hammer?

When I begin like this, it is of course a way for me to warm up, land in this space and dampen my nerves, while also trying to prepare all of you for what might happen. I hope my words and actions have something to say about my project, where I have tried to conduct playful research to inspire a more lively, vibrant conception of democracy. I believe we will have to loosen our hold on things, accept that our agency is always shared, that we cannot always think our way through and that the path ahead may not be clear.

While we're here, I want to thank you all for coming today. Along the way, I hope you will get a better sense of the mess I have made over the past three years, what I have learned, and how it has changed me.

The only reason why I have dared to venture into this territory is because I have never been alone. Thank you to the committee, who have done an impressive job reading my many words and for accepting my invitation to play along. Thank you to my wonderful supervisors, Helle Marie and Eva, who have supervised, supported, encouraged and inspired me all the way. Thank you to all of you, who came to play with us. It truly brings me great joy to be here in this room with you at this very moment.

In the critical spirit of my project, I must start by questioning the very notion of the PhD *defence.* Let me be clear: this is *not* a defence. I will not be defending my thesis or my work more broadly – if only because I am not dressed in cardboard armor.

In my thesis, I aspire to create a world where the researcher, me, tell stories that can spark conversations and bring people together, and I seek to enact the same world with you here today.

A friend of mine, Elaine, from Cape Town gave me what may be the best advice for this situation: ''Have fun with it. You've done the work. Now just embody what it looks like''

In my thesis, I have returned to – and ended with – the image of a campfire, where we can gather to rest, eat and share our stories before we move on to new adventures.

Maybe that is what this looks like?

It is, at least, in that spirit I will share a handful of stories with you today.

To begin, let me share this overview of my thesis.

The first chapters – becoming, knowing, critiquing, theorising and doing – covers things like ontology, epistemology, critique, theory and methodology. Everything I needed to gather for my metaphorical backpack before I could move on and start my analysis.

The following batch of chapters make up my analysis, where I explore how people attuned themselves to the playgrounds; how the playgrounds where rife with rhythms and affective intensities; how conflicts and social friction unfolded; how most experiences were underpinned by a sense of care and collective joy. Finally, I analysed how people participated in the playgrounds, and how that points to a broader repertoire for democratic participation.

The last bit is my discussion chapters. In 'complementing participatory democracy' I ask what my thesis can do for the democracy we know, if it was put to use here and now. Drifting by friction explores how the project and I have drifted and changed over the three years. Finally, in 'Playful democratic frictions', I suggest that perhaps my work is more relevant if it is allowed to challenge and question what we think we know about democracy.

A PhD is expected to make some specific 'contributions', preferably to both theory and practice.

As a current that runs through my entire project, all my work, most of what I do, is the question of how we can develop better ways of living together. The hope that there *are* ways for us to live well together is what keeps me going.

From there, I hope that my project contributes to the development of a conception of democracy that invites more playful modes of participation. Rather than predominantly focusing on voting, rational deliberation and other familiar formats, what if democratic participation and civic agency could also grow from playful encounters? This may also allow

new democratic imaginaries to blossom, along with new conceptions of what democracy might become in the future.

Second, I hope that I contribute to discussions about how to become and be a researcher in a way that fits both the field of research and the researcher. Let me share a little secret: on several occasions during the PhD, I was looking for a way out, and I dreamt of becoming a woodworker instead. There were days, where I was simply unable to see how I could live a meaningful life as a researcher. That has all changed, and I hope by sharing my experience and my playful approach, I can also add some additional nuances to the images of research we carry with us.

I will return to my contributions again at the end, but for now, let's move on to my plan for today.

I have tried to avoid bullets of all kinds, and instead I bring a simple map of a landscape we can traverse together. In my project, I have cherished the idea of forgetting what I'm doing, getting lost in the wilderness to return and see with fresh eyes. I'm afraid we won't have too much time to lose our way today, but you never know. One can hope.

First, I will tell you a story about beginnings, and how it ever occurred to me to pursue this project.

Then I will ask the three research questions that have guided the project.

 I will discuss my theory development that underpin the project, before I turn to methodology and my design experiments.

After that, I will take you through a condensed version of my own process with a focus on the challenges of analysing my research materials.

Towards the end, I will present what I consider my most interesting contributions, and finally, I will share a few of the new adventures I am slowly embarking on.

Let's move on.

As some of you will know, I started this strange little play festival, CounterPlay, all the way back in 2014, simply because I wanted to create a space for exploring play *through* play. I myself hoped to learn more about play, and I crossed my fingers that a few people might join me on that journey. As time passed, a vibrant play community grew around the festival, and it slowly evolved into a space for exploring all kinds of questions and issues, not only through words, but also and not least through affective, bodily encounters.

I was so overwhelmed and moved by the dedication, courage and heart of the people who came from around the world to play with us in a library in Aarhus. People were engaging in sincere, sometimes vulnerable inquiries into what it means to be alive and how we might live together differently.

Over the years, I asked myself repeatedly what I was witnessing here. What emerged from all these playful encounters?

One perspective that really resonated was the argument made by Thomas S. Henricks, and others, that when we play together, we 'create models for living'. I asked myself: isn't that also what *democracy* is about? Exploring and creating models for living, ideally *better* models for living together?

This was the seed for my PhD, it is why we are here today, and the festival has weaved itself into the fabric of my thesis in more ways than I can count.

The questions that emerged from CounterPlay guided me towards the PhD, and they are entangled with the research questions that have followed me through the project.

First, I asked 'What happens when we understand play as a mode of democratic participation?'. I wanted to approach this issue not to prove whether or not play could be democratic, but to explore what might happen if we assume that it already is, that it already has something of value to offer democratic societies.

Following this question, I asked 'How can we study playful democratic participation?'. This points to matters of methodology, to the *how*, but along the way, I realised that it also touches upon epistemology and ontology, it asks about ways of knowing, being and becoming. In the end, this little question asked me what kind of researcher and human I had to become to even exist today.

Finally, I asked 'How might we design for playful democratic participation?'. This was intended as a more practical question, and in hindsight, it may also have been the question I paid the least attention to, which I believe the committee has also noticed. We can discuss that later.

I knew from the outset that my PhD would be practice-based. This called for a certain amount of 'methodological attunement', developing a methodology that could help me develop the experiments and generate 'research materials'.

I came to think of developing a custom methodology that suits the project 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 arrived first at design research, particularly the tradition of 'research-through-design' and constructive design research. With Ilpo Koskinen et al, I understand this as 'design research in which construction () takes center place and becomes the key means in constructing knowledge' (Koskinen et al., 2011). This has been particularly helpful in framing the project as practice-based, revolving around the construction *of* the junk playgrounds and the construction *in* the junk playgrounds through a series of design experiments, which I will return to.

While I am no artist and I always doubt and question my artistic skills, I have been drawn to artistic research, because I sense an inherent unruliness within this field. There is a dissident stance and an inherent insistence that there cannot be rigid standards for how research is conducted.

Tone Pernille Østern et al has argued that artistic research 'liberates the researcher and ensures that it is acceptable, desirable and required to be embodied and affected' (Østern et al, 2021)

It took me a while to grasp this, and even longer to trust my own intuition, judgment, and gut feeling. I'm not quite there yet, but the spirit of artistic research overflows with an energy that suited my project well.

Another important change unfolded as I came to embrace a*utoethnography*. I read Stacy's work while in Melbourne, and it resonated deeply when she argued that 'Autoethnography does not speak through an individual or isolated voice, saying 'My story, my experience, my self, the end.' Rather, autoethnography is interested and invested in assembling a we'.

If my research could aspire to 'assemble a we', it would bridge the gap to my previous practice of gathering people together.

This was one of those 'goosebumps-moments' I have slowly been learning to trust. If I get goosebumps while reading, talking, listening, observing, playing, then the affective impulse is probably something that warrants my attention.

I have tried to create a kind of methodological crosspollination that not only helped me design and conduct the experiments, but also to become a researcher in a way that I could live with – rather than becoming a woodworker, you know. I wanted to do good research, to become a good researcher, but not at all costs.

Inspired by 'constructive design research' and the tradition for doing 'programmatic design research', I developed a simple research program, 'the junk playground as agora', 'skrammellegepladsen som agora' in Danish. It was meant to evoke curiosity and to call forth images of a democratic space that was also a play space.

The programme helped me frame the project, as it cultivated a lively spirit and an unruly energy. It mattered that I was not organising workshops, but designing junk playgrounds. It also encouraged several people to contact me, as they wanted to know more and join the playgrounds, and I decided to openly invite people to join the project.

In total, I ended up making nine junk playground experiments across different contexts.

The first was a prototype with a group of 'our own' students. The second was with the entire staff of a public school. The third was part of a summer party with the local community in Hjortshøj. The fourth was with a group of students from the 'Administration Bachelor' education. The fifth was an event with a local recycling centre here in Kolding. The sixth was with a local community group and took place in a gravel pit outside Horsens. The seventh

was with groups of children at Nicolai here in Kolding. The last two took place in Melbourne and Canberra during my research stay in Australia.

Most of the experiments started with me telling a short fictional story to destabilise the situation. It went something like this:

'We have landed far into the future, and nothing is as we're used to. There is no one here 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. Let's 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 where we should end up – you are probably wrong. Hold on to the unpredictability, the unknown, and try following your bodies and hands, improvising in a dialogue with the materials.'

From there, we used the discarded materials to explore the 'matters of common concern' that we had defined together. For example, the public school wanted to explore how they could create better conditions for student participation and for a more experimental culture. In the gravel pit, the local council wanted to invite the community to develop a stronger sense of ownership over the space.

Let me dwell with a couple of situations from the playgrounds.

In experiment four with a group of students, I was a little unsure how meaningful the experience was to them. At one point, I thought I had lost them. However, at the end, one of them described how she felt brave as she had taken a step towards who she wanted to be and what she wanted to be a part of. This was deeply moving – and proves how difficult it is to assess a play experience while it is unfolding.

At the summer party in Hjortshøj, children and adults helped each other build these two towers.

In the image on the right, a young Syrian boy, a refugee from the war, spent the entire day at the playground, seven hours or so. He told me that he felt like he was getter better at building, and I think he also felt his social agency develop a little bit, as he found new ways deepen his relationships. Late in the afternoon, I found him drawing these hearts on the wall of their fort. It was a really touching moment.

The experiments sparked lots of considerations and concerns, including the question of representation. Who noticed my invitations to enter the playgrounds? Who responded? Who ended up participating? Who did not? Who felt included and who felt marginalised?

I wanted to explore how the junk playground experiments could be realised through an open-ended, collaborative process. This meant that many experiments were conducted with already existing organisations, groups and communities, which influenced who might participate.

If I were to analyse the demographics of the participants, I have a feeling it would be predominantly white people from the Danish middle class. While my project has many interesting stories to tell, I am left with some blind spots that I would like to examine in future research – and maybe we will return to this later today.
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Here I will briefly discuss my approach to developing a body of theory that suited the project.

First, I borrowed from Swedish design scholar Johan Redström the idea that theory is related to tourism, that theory is 'meant to take you places so as to witness a spectacle.' (Redström, 2017). How can theory help us see that which we could not see without it?

I then structured my theory chapter around four key concepts.

First, I developed my approach to democratic theory. I cited Pierre Rosanvallon's definition of democracy as the 'regime that must ceaselessly interrogate its definition of itself' (Flügel-Martinsen et al., 2018, p. 37) to insist that democracy always changes, and we can never know exactly what it means. In dialogue with democratic theory, I have proposed an understanding of democracy as movement, because I was interested in democracy as a dynamic, ever-mutating phenomenon, not a static one.

Then I discussed the concept of participation, and suggested that it could be understood as a multidimensional assemblage, where many different entities – human and more-than-human bodies, materials, terrain, the weather and so on – would be actively playing along. In this view, participation cannot be understood only as rational discourse and cleverly constructed arguments, it also includes bodily engagement and affective encounters.

While I knew from the outset that democracy and participation would be important concepts, I had not quite anticipated the role of friction. Drawing on Kathleen Stewart, I described affective friction as a ''surging, a rubbing, a connection of some 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). This 'surging' and 'rubbing' and the ensuing friction allows and encourages us to question things we typically take for granted, like the autonomous individual, rational discourse and the idea of human exceptionalism.

Finally, I discussed how friction in the junk playgrounds can spark 'prefiguration' and the possibility of enacting worlds and realities through our actions. Prefiguration expresses something I have been contemplating and observing for a long time: when we play together, we enact different worlds, not as carefully planned strategies, but through improvisation and emergence.

Let us return to the experiments. I conducted all these experiments together with people, some big and lively, some smaller and more introspective, some outdoors, some indoors, some with adults, some with children and some with a more intergenerational vibe, adults and children playing together.

What then? How do you move on from that? What is the secret magic trick that allows you as a researcher to say anything meaningful based on your 'data' – or 'research materials' as I prefer to say?

The key word is 'analysis', of course, but to me, this has been a rather enigmatic, elusive concept, and the steps I had to take from experimenting and creating empirical research materials towards conducting a meaningful analysis probably amounted to the most confusing time in the entire project.

For a while, I was deferring my shift into analytical territory. I was a little afraid that my research materials would be disappointing and inadequate, that they would amount to nothing of interest or relevance.

I started, cautiously, by gathering everything together: my own written reflections and affective remembering, scattered across handwritten notes and digital text, my photos, all the video recordings from phones and GoPro cameras, the verbal and written reflections from participants.

I transcribed the video recordings and brought most of my research materials into the same format – digital text.

I loaded those transcripts into a piece of software called 'Dedoose', where I started coding everything. I did 'initial coding' 'line-by-line', where I was trying to assign 'codes' – key words – to every line of text. I continued this for a while, producing very long lists of codes that I condensed down to a more manageable 'code tree' as it is often called.

What I really appreciate about the process of coding was the time it took, because it forced me to linger with the materials, getting to know them really well. This helped me to see important aspects of the material that I would probably have otherwise missed. I saw, for instance, a great diversity in the ways people were participating in the playgrounds, where participation became less about getting things right and more about making stuff work, staying in the game, so to speak.

I hoped that this process of coding would allow me to analyse my experiments step-by-step, one-by-one, but despite my best efforts, something about the coding approach just rubbed me the wrong way. It felt like the research materials lost their connection to the experiments, they felt 'dead' and flat.

I don't think an analysis just starts and stops, analysing something is not a linear process you take step by step, in some teleological manner, as if heading towards a predefined goal. It is also an affective experience, one that flows and pulsates, it generates friction and often resists our attempts at creating a semblance of order and coherence.

This process has led me to believe that maybe it takes six years to bake a half-decent analysis.

Take the idea of 'collective joy' that I have used several times throughout my thesis.

I don't know where the story begins, but I certainly had a sense of something like this at every CounterPlay festival. People from all over the world, coming together in play, moving close to each other, and with so many people expressing delight in the sense of community and 'finding their tribe'.

One person even said that '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'

Later, in the dawn of 2018, still before starting the PhD, I read Lynne Segal's book 'Radical Happiness: Moments of Collective Joy', and it left a lasting impression on me. Maybe especially her argument that 'As the world becomes an ever lonelier place, it is sustaining relationships, in whatever form they take, which must become ever more important. An act of defiance, even'

Three years later, I read Zizi Papacharissi's 'After Democracy: Imagining our political future'. A few times throughout the book, she asked asking: 'but is it a joyful mode of engagement?', as she was discussing available modes of democratic participation. It seemed like a rhetorical question and her answer was most likely no, no, it was not joyful.

Around the same time, I had started conducting my junk playground experiments, and I realized that the people playing often exuded a decidedly joyful energy. Quite often, when I came back home after one of my experiments, I was charged, as if an electric current was running through me.

The same year, 2021, I was writing a paper for the Design Research Society conference, where I did an early analysis of my first experiments. I set out using "self-determination theory" and the pieces seemed to fit together nicely. A little too nicely. While it made sense to look at my experiments through the concepts of 'autonomy', 'competence' and 'relatedness', it didn't feel adequate, especially because it was too rooted in the individual experience.

Then Lynne Segal and 'collective joy' made its way back to me, and I vividly recall rereading parts of the book with a smile on my face and tears in my eyes because it resonated even more deeply now.

Later, as I was coding my research materials, the idea of a shared joy kept surfacing. As one person wrote in their written reflections:

'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'.

It took me a while to acknowledge analysis as an affective process, of affecting and not least being affected by encounters, including encounters with my research materials. As Tone Pernille Østern and co-writers argued, 'The researcher is also in the hands of the research material, often in very affected ways (). The researcher goes through pain, joy, despair, moments of flow, relief, grief and pride as the research material plays tricks with her.'

Maybe it boils down to this, a kind of 'junk playground analysis', where I have combined things, sometimes quite different things, to see what happens, what comes alive, what shimmers, what emerges and grows.

I hope these stories give you some impression of how my analyses have unfolded and emerged over time, sometimes long periods of time, in uncertain and unpredictable ways.

Now it is time to return to my contributions.

First, I will refer to what I described as 'playful democracy' earlier.

Here I will mention the concept I have called 'Playful Democratic Frictions'. For a long time, my project was called 'Designing for Playful Democratic Participation', because I wanted to propose a more flexible and inclusive participatory repertoire. I still have that goal, yet in the end, I changed the title to 'Designing for Playful Democratic Frictions', because I was drawn to all the friction that emerged from the playgrounds.

I have argued that the junk playgrounds created a friction with many assumptions about what constitutes democracy. They did this, for instance, by prefiguring other worlds where people were not expected to be autonomous, rational individuals making coherent arguments, but where they could also be vulnerable, entangled critters making bodily, affective inquiries and experiments. This friction, then, allows us to see and sense other possible worlds, rooted in other ideas, principles and values.

I hope this contributes to conversations within democratic theory, but also to design research and our attempts at designing for democracy.

Second, I will mention the concept 'drifting by friction', which I developed to trace and describe how both the project and I have drifted quite significantly from where we started. The concept is inspired by design scholars Peter Gall Krogh and Ilpo Koskinen, who suggested the idea of 'drifting by intention' to describe '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). For them, drifting is what a rally driver does, something that happens 'intentionally and controlled'.

This is not exactly what it felt like for me. It was much closer to Anna Tsing's argument that '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).

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. 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 and takes us places we could not have imagined or predicted.

This concept has grown out of design research, where I hope it finds resonance, but maybe it can also lend itself to conversations in other fields.

Finally, I hope that I can contribute to discussions about the transformations we undergo as researchers. As a result of my 'drifting by friction', I am not the same person I was three years ago. For one, I have embraced the decentering of the human amidst a vibrant landscape of more-than-humans, where we are all deeply entangled with and dependent each other. I have tried to develop a much greater sensitivity and a willingness to pursue decisions also based on affective impulses and bodily encounters.

Finishing the thesis and preparing for this event has been a welcome occasion to pause, reflect on my journey, and to ponder which new adventures to embark on. Much remains uncertain, but I know this: The rational, autonomous human being, reigning supreme over everything else, is dead to me. I only see a wealth of entangled humans and more-than-humans, and I hope to further develop my sensitivity towards this web of life, to better blend the rational and the emotional, to dismantle the dichotomies between mind and body, nature and culture and so on.

To me, this calls for further traversing and developing the fields of artistic research and autoethnography in close dialogue with design research. It calls for experiments and interventions, where we as researchers enter unknown territory and probably come out transformed.

If it seems like I don't quite know how to stop, then that's because there is so much more to say. This is not the end, neither of my project nor of our conversations, we are already somewhere in the thick of it. In a way, I started working on this project more than 10 years ago, and I will go on for as long as I can muster the energy.

However, in respect of you all, I must stop talking soon, and I want to end where my thesis ended – with love. As I was trying to find a fitting place to land my imaginary aircraft, I looked back over my many pages, and while it points in many directions, the one pattern that stood out was the loving nature of it all.

In the end, maybe it was the person from CounterPlay who made the decision for me, her voice echoing through the back of my head, still, insisting that 'I'm not talking about Hollywood romantic relationships, I'm talking about a sense of care, connection, generosity, appreciation, that kind of love.'

I cannot escape 'love', though I found it terribly difficult to say the word out loud, even in writing. However, I have come to believe that the only way for me to do the work that I dream of, to enact the worlds I believe in, is to acknowledge the foundational importance of love.