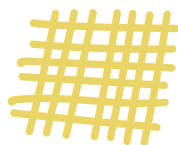


THE JOYS AND



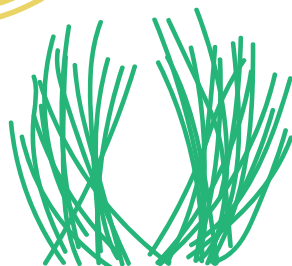
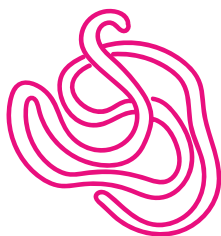
SHAPES OF



AUTISTIC

42

PLAY



MAX ALEXANDER

"YOU ARE THE CENTER OF YOUR LITTLE WORLD
AND I AM OF MINE.
NOW AND AGAIN WE MEET FOR TEA
WE'RE TWO OF A KIND.

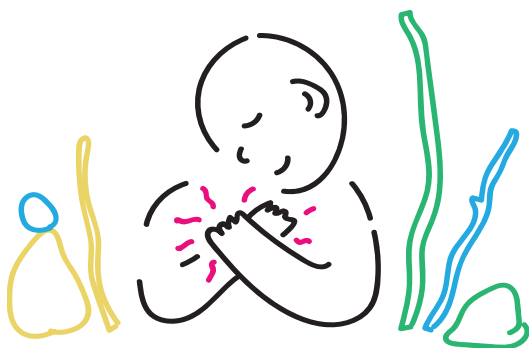
THIS IS OUR UNIVERSE...
CUPS OF TEA.
WE HAVE A BEAUTIFUL COSMOS,
YOU AND ME.
WE HAVE A BEAUTIFUL COSMOS.,,








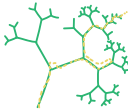

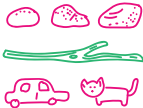

IVOR CUTLER,
BEAUTIFUL COSMOS





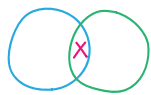



THANKYOU TO THE MANY
OTHER AUTISTIC PLAYERS,
RESEARCHERS, ARTISTS AND
THINKERS WHOSE PLAY AND
WORK HAS HELPED ME
GROW THESE IDEAS

THANKYOU STICK FRIENDS
AND ROCK FRIENDS



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INTRODUCTION TO THIS WORK

Welcome to “The Joys and Shapes of Autistic Play”. This is a piece of work that has come out of many years of playing and working with and alongside autistic children, young people and adults with a huge range of interests, experiences, needs and ways of being. All whilst being an autistic person whose most passionate interest and fascination is play. Whilst play is most often talked about in the context of childhood this work considers play as a lifelong pursuit and need (albeit one which will change in character and shape throughout our lifetimes) so I refer to ‘people’ or ‘beings’ or ‘body-minds’ to reflect this rather than “children” or “kids” or “young people.”

I start with introducing myself and then move onto providing some background and context for talking about autistic play before sharing my eight “Autistic Play Shapes”. Towards the end you will find resources, references and a glossary where I define any words I use that feel like jargon or in some cases clarify how I’m using them.

Thank you for being here and I hope this work is good company for you on your own playful autistic or autism-adjacent journeys.



INTRODUCTION TO THE AUTHOR

My name is Max Alexander and I work under the name Play Radical. I'm an artist, play worker and inclusive play advocate and thinker. My work centres play and connection with a particular focus on autistic, neurodivergent and disabled experiences. I have worked in arts, social care, play, health care, educational and community settings across over a decade of doing this kind of work.



I think all of that's pretty straightforward, except perhaps where I describe myself as a thinker. This usually feels a bit strange to do but I do it to try and name a part of who I am that drives me to create things like this work. I have a strong desire to find ways to translate or communicate abstract or intangible things in more widely graspable and solid ways. This is both a creative pursuit and an activist one when it comes to communicating about autistic and/or otherwise marginalised experiences.

I think it's a vital and beautiful act to keep trying to connect with each other by sharing how we understand and experience the world. It's not even necessarily about understanding each other, often it's more about trusting and enjoying each other. I carry a lot of frustration and sadness around the way I've had to move through the world as an autistic person but also a strong desire to respond to that through building alternatives.

I wiggle my fingers a lot and make friends with sticks.

I believe play, silliness and sincerity are delicious, vital and sacred.

A BIT OF CONTEXT

Why talk about autistic play at all? Why label or categorise or describe play in that way? These are questions I've been asked many times, seen asked of others and also asked of myself. In answering them I hope to provide some context for this piece of work.

Why label/categorise/describe play as autistic?

Often, I believe well-meaningly but ultimately unhelpfully, people will insist that the play of autistic people is 'no different' from the play of their non-autistic peers. They might express that viewing it this way is 'restricting' those autistic folks somehow or unnecessarily marking them out as different. As an autistic person this feels like mostly non-autistic people trying to defend me from their own restricted thinking.

Naming or labelling doesn't inherently mean putting someone in a box or devaluing them. If it is seen or felt that way then, from my experience, it is because the label being given is seen as something bad or unwanted or because it is being done in the pursuit of exerting power or taking away someone's autonomy.



Autistic isn't a bad word or something unwanted*. In the context of talking about autistic Play from the perspective of affirming and celebrating it is a useful and joyful word.

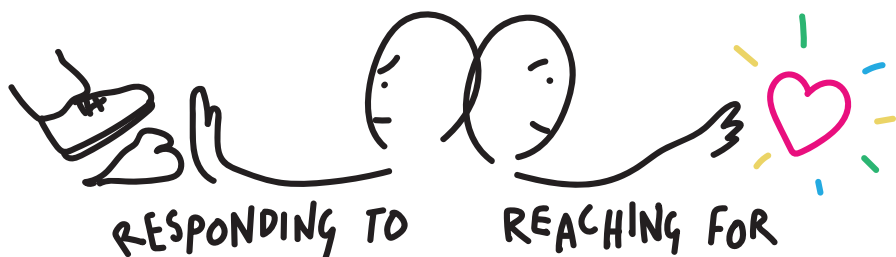
**In thinking this way about language and labels I am following on from a rich history of Disabled, Deaf, Autistic, Mad and Neurodivergent folks who have advocated for what is known as identity-first language.*

However it's important to acknowledge that this can be more complicated as 'autistic' certainly has, and continues to be a label used to take away rights and deny personhood to autistic people. Particularly for autistic people who are otherwise marginalised due to race, other disabilities and neurologies, gender, trans identities and sexuality.

Human beings are complex, messy and cannot be described neatly with words and intellectual ideas. In describing someone or something as 'autistic' I'm not attempting to describe the whole of that person or thing, or making a judgement about where 'autistic' sits in the vast array of accurate descriptors. Along with this sits the fact that in naming things it can allow us to see them and communicate them to others.

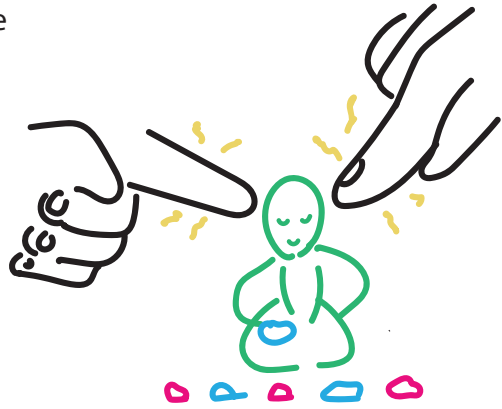
Why talk about Autistic play?

There are a lot of whys. Firstly I'm going to talk about what I call "The Urgent Responsive Whys". These are the hard things. They relate to the part of this work that is about responding and resisting things which are damaging to the wellbeing of Autistic people. Then I'm going to talk about the "Whys of Joy and Creativity". These are the things that are led by pleasure and connection, with ourselves, each other and our environments. They are also about creating alternatives to the conditions which create "The Urgent Responsive Whys".



The Urgent Responsive Whys:

1.The idea that autistic people 'don't play' or 'don't play properly' continues to be pervasive and damaging. Often adults around autistic children (and those in care roles of autistic adults) will intentionally stifle, attempt to stop or shape their play into something considered more acceptable. This acceptability is typically based on the play of their non-autistic peers. This can be subtle and well-meaning, it can be explicit and authoritarian and everything in between.*



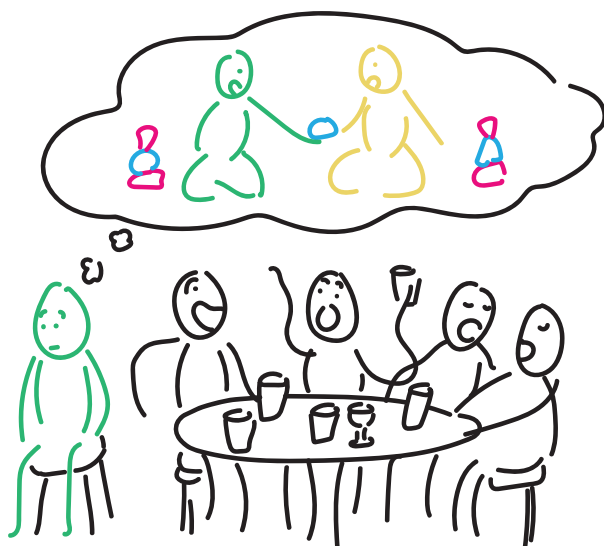
2.Often people in supporting and/or caring roles to autistic children and adults just don't seem to see or notice autistic play. Over a decade or so of working with autistic children in varying settings I've been repeatedly told by the adults surrounding those children that 'they won't do that', "they don't play", "they won't respond to you" and variations

on these statements. Given some time and space to tune in to those children and what sparks their interest or enjoyment I've always found these statements don't hold true. Which leads me to

** I'm not talking about intervening in play that puts children or those around them in danger here. But even when interventions are necessary for safety, these can be done in a way that isn't about the child's play instincts and needs being 'wrong'.*

question; How much play and opportunity for play is being lost due to it being unacknowledged, misunderstood or dismissed?

3. Autistic adults are consistently reported to have far higher incidences of poor mental health than their non-autistic peers. There are many complex and intersecting reasons for this, but living in a world often not built for us and a lack of opportunity for meaningful connection and community that comes with this is certainly a big factor. Our ways of connecting often go unnoticed, or unnurtured, or dehumanised, leading to deep loneliness and lack of a sense of self. Play is a space of reimagining our worlds and possibilities, learning about ourselves and what we want and need, and accessing feelings of freedom and connection. Many autistic adults will have had this compromised as children for the reasons discussed above. Play is important for everyone but it can take on a particular importance for adults with this experience. For many autistic adults then, accessing meaningful play can be a key part of this bigger picture of our wellbeing and capacity to experience a sense of safety and belonging as adults.



The Whys of Joy and Creativity:

1. A drive to create space for more authentic autistic play. This means opportunities for autistic people to experience and explore joy, pleasure, challenge, curiosity, risk, learning and creativity in their own unique dimension of existence at the pace of their specific body-mind.



2. A desire to explore meaningful connections as autistic individuals. Connections that can live within ourselves, between our bodies, minds and sensory systems, between ourselves and our environments, with each other and with our allistic friends and loved ones.

3. To build understanding of autistic lives and body-minds outside of pathologisation and dehumanisation. This paradigm heavily influences the lives autistic people live and its influence tends to increase the more complex or unmet needs an individual has. Understanding our autistic selves/your autistic loved ones isn't just about being able to problem solve and understand the tricky things, it's also about accessing and uncovering the beauty of autistic being.

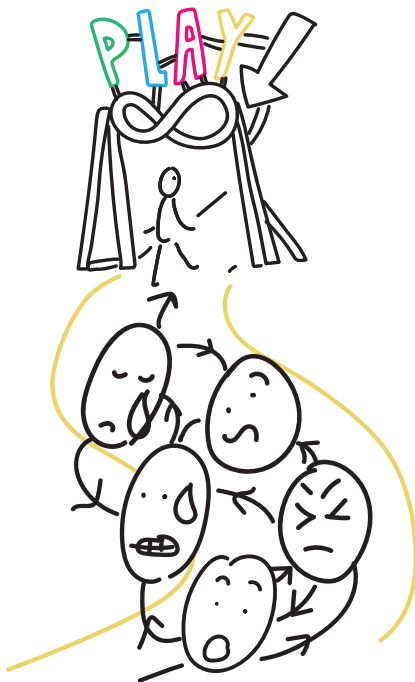




4. As a way of adding to the autistic cultural record. Autistic people have their own culture but the cultural record; books, film, fine art, theatre, architecture, music, civic spaces, historical archives etc. shows only a

fraction of this. Reasons for this I believe include, but are not limited to; historic and ongoing oppression of authentic autistic being, ableist assumptions that autistic people can only be consumers of culture and not creators of it and that much of autistic culture exists largely beyond spoken and written language. This piece of course exists in written language but seeks to communicate much which exists outside of language.

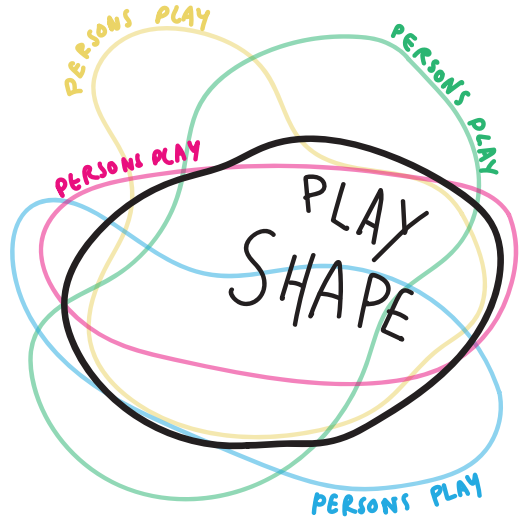
5. Because, to me, play is the point of everything else.



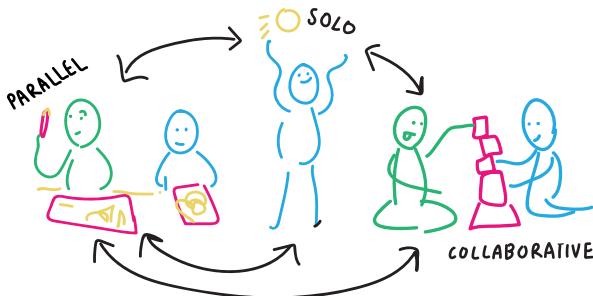
WHAT ARE 'AUTISTIC PLAY SHAPES'?

Like many autistic people I have a keen sense of pattern. What I'm calling 'Autistic Play Shapes' are familiarly structured and seemingly motivated, and repeating ways of playing (or patterns) that I see amongst autistic children, young people and adults. They are shapes which I don't see so often or as strongly in among non-autistic individuals or wider communities. That is, of

course, not to say they don't exist in those places; there are no fixed binaries here. They absolutely do, and especially so among differently neurodivergent folks. But they are certainly things which autistic bodies and brains seem to be more drawn to.



All of the Shapes can exist within and flow between solo play, parallel play and collaborative play. There is a general trend towards more solo and parallel play amongst autistic people but many of us also enjoy collaborative play. Some will have primary play modes and some will move between different modes. Often these play modes are viewed hierarchically, with collaborative play being seen



as the most valuable, and the ultimate aim, and solo and parallel play being viewed as stepping stones to reach this goal. I firmly reject this.

These modes of play are all valuable and different people have different needs and desires that will determine how they are playing at any given time. Although these Play Shapes may offer insight to people who are trying to support an individual to play collaboratively, that should not be an automatic aim. For some it will be desirable and welcomed, for others it may not be and may instead be an unhelpful intervention which can shut down their play rather than help expand it.

The Play Shapes emerge from autistic sensibilities and ways of being. Some of the things described under a Play Shape may therefore appear to describe autistic ways of coping with the world and regulating our bodies and minds rather than play. It is not always clear when someone is doing something out of a need for regulation, as a way of feeling safe, or purely as an act of play. Truthfully, for most people these things will cross over, sometimes it will be one or the other, often both will be present in some form. As Dinah Murray (2001) wrote “Play emerges from a sense of safety. Even the most playful animal won’t play when frightened or angry.”



SAME BEHAVIOUR DIFFERENT MOTIVATIONS

If you are someone whose sense of safety is consistently tested or compromised, as is the case for many autistic people, then naturally there may be blurrier edges between seeking safety and being in play. Unfortunately, when it comes to the way a behaviour is interpreted, that nuance is often lost: if something could be a coping mechanism then, to some, it can't also be understood as something playful. However, all of the things described under the Play Shapes that can be non-play driven behaviours can also be play

driven behaviours. It is not necessarily easy to spot the difference as an outsider but the feeling of the behaviour will likely be different when it's play driven. It will typically feel lighter, easier flowing and relaxed.

In the world of Play Theory, Play Work, Psychology, Education, Child Development and any other discipline concerned with what children want and need and why, there are many existing models



of play. There are play types, play cycles, play stages, play schemas and many more. I think many of these can be helpful lenses, particularly when you use them as tools to look at a play space and what's happening in it. I find for example, that using Bob Hughes Play Types (1996) to look at a space, and asking myself "okay, what's missing?" can help me identify play opportunities that may be valuable to add for those using the space.

The Play Cycle* (1998, 2018) is another theory that I find useful. It breaks up what is happening during play into six concepts. The

concept of the "Play Frame" is one which I find particularly helpful in my thinking. A Play Frame is the context which holds a moment of play together. It can be a physical part of an environment, such as a climbing frame, or something internal in the players, such as a

** This theory was initially developed by Gordon Sturrock and Perry Else and introduced in 1998 and later built upon by Dr Pete King and Dr Shelley Newstead in 2018 based upon their research.*

concept or emotion. It's this frame that holds the play together even if the action, materials, pace or external inputs change.

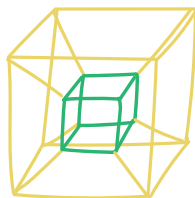
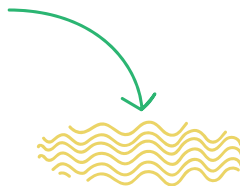
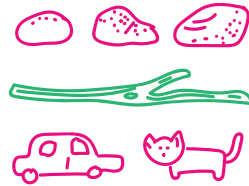
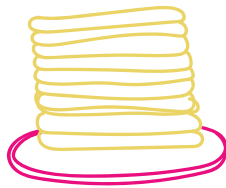
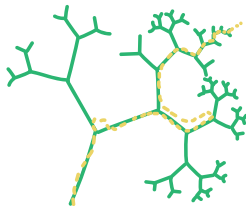
Whilst I feel some of these models and theories of play can be useful for all children, they are also largely based or rooted in an understanding of the 'typically developing child'. At best this means they simply exclude a lot of children's play and at worst means they act as a framework for pathologizing 'non-typical' children and their play (this is often a result of how people use them and not how they were necessarily intended to be used). When I first came across Bob Hughes' Play types early on in my Play work career, I was excited, as whilst I felt like there was a lot of neurodivergent play missing, it didn't feel like it was an exclusive model or that it was claiming to be a definitive guide to all play. At the time it prompted me to think about 'Autistic Play Types' and what that might look like.

I love to think about this stuff.
I love to geek out over play
and get into the analytical
nitty-gritty-ness, but I don't feel
particularly drawn to trying to
create any overarching theory
or taxonomy of any kind of play.
Partly because I'm not sure a
thing can truly exist, but mostly
because, to me, the magic and
sacredness of play lies in its
refusal to be neatly categorised
or even fully understood by any
individual. I think perhaps in a
more balanced and
harmonious world there would
be a felt collective understanding of play, but even then, I don't
think it could ever be reduced to an intellectual framing.



In this spirit, I drifted towards the idea of naming and describing 'Play Shapes' rather than 'Play Types'. When I think about a 'Play Shape,' I see it as a wiggling spongy outline, an organic creature who I'm simply naming and describing to the best of my ability right now. Not so much categorising as curiously acknowledging. There are also many places where the shapes overlap and engage with each other.

This work presents eight Autistic Play Shapes. There are many more than eight that could be named but these are the shapes that are most fully formed to me at the moment, through my experience of living, working and creating alongside and with other autistic people. I hope over time to be able to name more, and perhaps even have other people share with me shapes that they've named.



WHO IS THIS FOR?

The short answer is if you've gotten this far and are still interested then it is probably for you! The longer answer is I've created this work primarily with three groups in mind, and I expect many readers will belong to more than one group.

Firstly, my fellow autistics and adjacent neurodivergent kin. I would love you to take these Play Shapes and use them as portals for exploring, creating and playing. I would love for them to be used as launch pads for more thinking, pattern sensing, riffing on/off and adding to.

Secondly, anyone who shares their life with, cares for, and plays with and alongside autistic people. I hope this might provide new ways of understanding each other or ways of sharing space and experiences.

Finally, for allistic professionals working with autistic people; carers, teachers, playworkers, learning assistants etc. I hope these can provide a useful lens to enable more meaningful engagement with autistic people in play and to support in expanding opportunities for autistic play.



HOW THE SHAPES ARE PRESENTED

Each Play Shape is presented as text in the same format with drawings to help illustrate the ideas, as follows:

Name - What I call it

What is it? - A short description of what it means

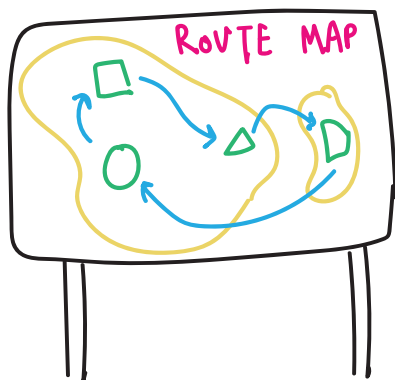
Background thinking - More details about the Play Shape. This might include concepts that help me understand or imagine it, other Autistic people's ideas or work, and ways it might link into ideas about Autism, Autistic lives and experiences.

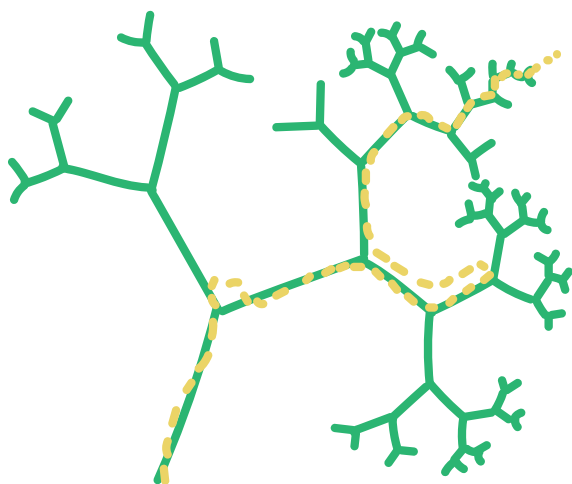
What might it look like? - Examples of how the Play Shape might show up in people's play.

Play Diary - Anecdotes and sharing's from experiences I've had with the Play Shape. All names used are pseudonyms.

How can you support it in others? - Ideas about how to enable this kind of play in others.

How can you nurture it in yourself? - Tasks or prompts intended to help you explore this kind of play yourself.





FRACTAL INVESTIGATION

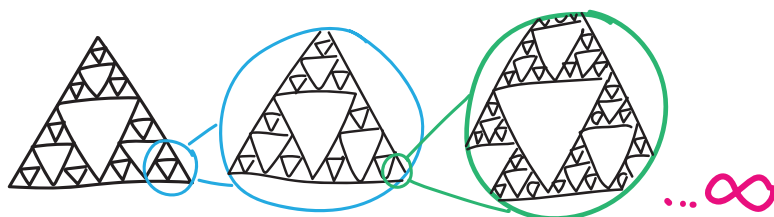
FRACTAL INVESTIGATION

WHAT IS IT?

Mapping and exploring the world through acts of deep and deepening investigation.

BACKGROUND THINKING

A fractal is a shape that is infinitely complex yet created through simplicity. Fractals are made of a pattern that repeats forever but on smaller and smaller scales. The closer you look at a fractal the more you see. Fractals are all around us within nature.



ZOOMING IN ON THE SIERPINSKI TRIANGLE
- A FAMOUS FRACTAL

I think much autistic thinking works fractally, with the ability to zoom in and in on things, and continue to find more and more to be captivated by, with seemingly no end . We can map and make sense of our world in this way and we can find pleasure, beauty and joy. To me, the world is full of fractals I haven't zoomed in on yet, and that is very exciting and means I'm rarely, if ever, truly bored. It provides a drive and ability to bring to light things that might be hidden or unseen by others.

This Play Shape* also aligns with the Theory of Monotropism, developed by Dinah Murray and Wenn Lawson. Monotropism

**And most of the other Play Shapes outlined here*

understands autistic brains as tending to focus intensely on a few things at once rather than less intensely on many things at once (Murray, 2018). This tends to look like very passionate and intrinsically motivated focus on a stimulus, activity or idea. Damian Milton (2017) draws comparisons between this “monotropic perceptual system” and “flow states” where someone loses themselves completely in what they are doing or thinking about. This is very commonly what happens in this form of play.



FEWER FOCUSES MORE INTENSITY



MORE FOCUSES LESS INTENSITY

Another concept that links into this is “Inscendence”. Which is kind of the opposite to transcendence. Rather than seeking to move beyond our physical, sensorial and emotional everyday lives as we might do when we try to ‘transcend’. Inscendence is about digging deeper and deeper into that around us, that we’re already feeling and experiencing. This means you can find creativity in anything.**

WHAT MIGHT IT LOOK LIKE?

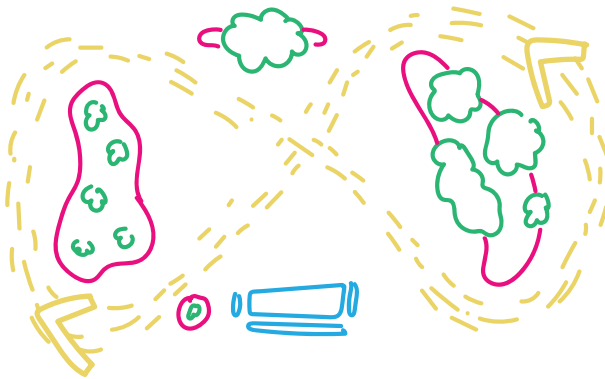
- Spending hours over weeks getting to know every inch of a patch of land.
- Learning everything you can about something then spending time walking outside and turning it over and over in your head.

***I read this term in the book “The Seabirds Cry” by Adam Nicholson and it clicked something in my brain immediately unfortunately I have been unable to find it used in the same way anywhere else since*

- Following a line of investigation further than anyone thought possible.
- Touching the same objects over and over again.

PLAY DIARY

I used to spend time with Alice, a young person who did a lot of Fractal Investigating. We would often spend our time together walking around and around a garden. Always the same route, at the same pace. Stopping to look at the same things, rarely using words and instead gesturing or sharing a glance of interest or excitement as we took it all in over and over again. Each turn around the garden may have looked the same to an observer but the feeling and shared energies ebbed and flowed with each iteration.



A FRACTAL WANDER

HOW CAN YOU SUPPORT IT IN OTHERS?

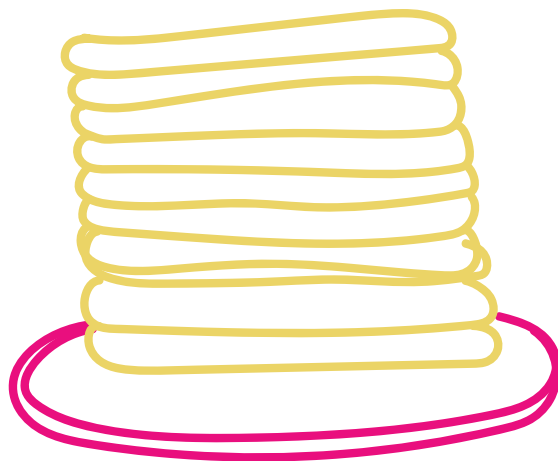
- If you're invited in as a play partner be curious, go in as if you don't know anything and see what happens
- Avoid rushing someone on from exploring an object in play.

- Don't assume someone walking around the edge of a playground alone is not playing.

HOW CAN YOU NURTURE IT IN YOURSELF?

- Notice a sensation that feels good in your body... try and create it again, try to find all the different flavours and colours of it, or simply repeat and repeat, being open to it changing and growing.
- Try and remember the first idea or subject that ever excited you. Return to it, pull up what you remember and explore it again, let that excitement lead your exploration.





PANCAKE STACK ROLE PLAY

PANCAKE STACK ROLE PLAY

WHAT IS IT?

Role play that doesn't take a linear narrative arc. Instead, it's made up of repetition and layering of short frames of an acted out script.

BACKGROUND THINKING

This is a really common way autistic children engage in role play. But it is often dismissed and invalidated as it differs from the more conventional understanding of role play as something made up of narratives and stories which keep moving and changing over time. The idea that autistic children don't engage in 'imaginative play' is persistent but untrue. It just tends to look different.

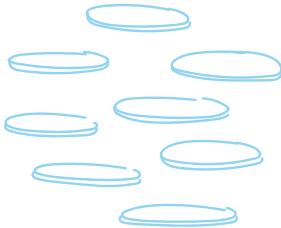
The script that is repeated might be based on a favourite cartoon or video game, it might be a scenario from everyday life like getting on a bus, or it might be completely absurdist, like meeting a giant frog in space. A particular flavour I've come across a lot is the 'everyday life' scenario with a surreal or slapstick twist; perhaps you get on the bus and have to buy a ticket from the space frog.



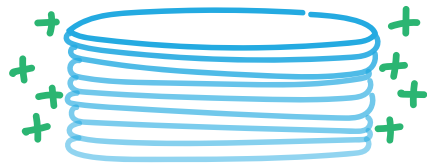
Stefania Donzelli (2021), a neurodivergent forest pedagogy trainer, has written about autistic pretend play through an autistic-affirming and Monotropism lens. Donzelli describes many common features of this play which resonate with this Play-shape including the heightened importance of seemingly small details, acting out ordinary and predictable role plays, the tendency to bring in rich

levels of detail from external sources and of course, a lot of repetition.

So what's with the Pancake Stack metaphor? Imagine a role play that's being played out over and over again, for example; one player knocks on an imaginary door and presents the other with an imaginary cake, the cake receiver then starts to eat the cake and is disgusted to find out it's made of shampoo, fish and toothpaste. That script is the pancake in the metaphor. That script might get played out over and over again and look like roughly the same pancake. A key element to this kind of play however is that you don't just have a bunch of nearly identical pancakes. You have a stack, and that is different. As the stack grows it becomes a different creature. The pancakes that came before are important and remain present, influencing how each additional pancake feels and sits on the stack.



A BUNCH OF PANCAKES



A STACK OF PANCAKES

WHAT MIGHT IT LOOK LIKE?

- Playing out the same scenario or scene over and over again, from life, or the imagination, or somewhere in between.
- Humour driven with exaggerated facial expressions, gesture, and slapstick.
- Gleeful anticipation of the predictable events happening again and again.

- Role switching, with players taking it in turns to play the different parts (this is often directed by one player).
- Slowly morphing and changing shape over time.

PLAY DIARY

I have had the joy of being invited into so much of this kind of play. The Shampoo Cake example above in fact is very closely based on the kind of role play I would do with Ruairidh, a child I supported when he was around nine. Key to my part in the play would be my ability to provide highly exaggerated facial expressions of disgust. Ruairidh's anticipation of this part of the role play coming would have him bouncing on the balls of his feet and sometimes letting out high pitched squeals. But for this to have the full effect we needed to have the very dry build-up of knocking on the door and me being solemnly presented with the 'cake'. Me just doing the disgusted expressions alone without the build up didn't have anywhere near the same effect. This anticipation of something predictable, as opposed to anticipation of a surprise, I find is a very common autistic sensibility and source of joy, and is perhaps part of the reason this kind of play can be so enjoyable.

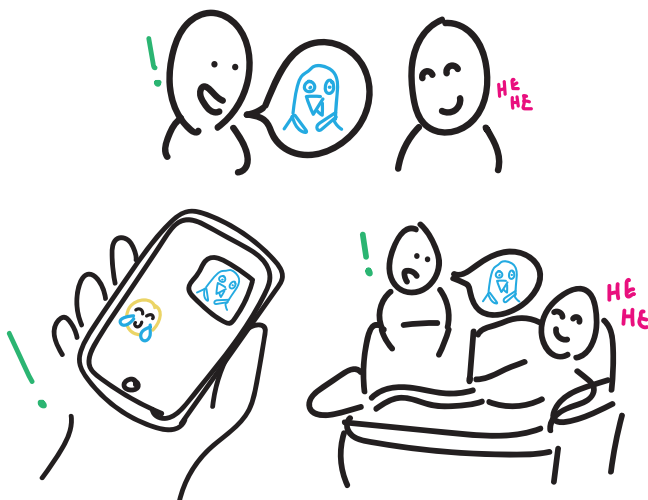


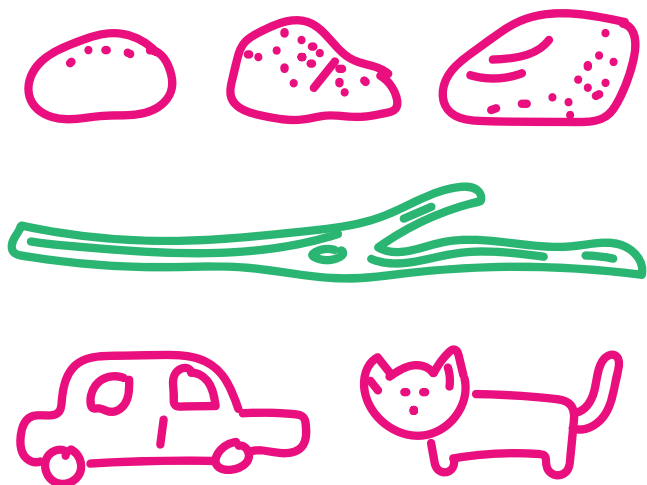
HOW CAN YOU SUPPORT IT IN OTHERS?

- Dig in and play along.
- Don't rush to introduce new ideas, stick with the script and after a while, when you're tuned in, you might start to notice subtle changes. When you've built trust with your play partner you might even be invited to improvise or add your own spins and twists.

HOW CAN YOU NURTURE IT IN YOURSELF?

- Let yourself lean into repetition, find peers who enjoy having the same conversation over and over, playing the same game over and over, or making the same jokes over and over (think inside jokes but even more dialled up!)
- If you are someone that doesn't enjoy surprises or finds anticipation leading up to the unknown generally stressful, try and explore what anticipation feels like when it's leading to something joyful and predictable.





OBJECT
HARMONISING

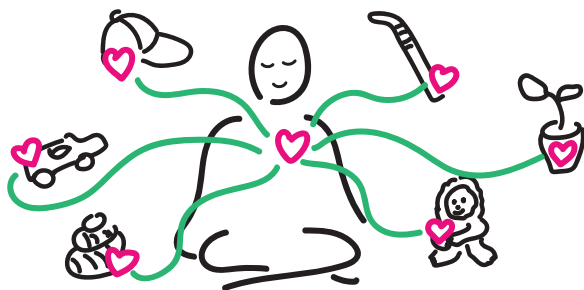
OBJECT HARMONISING

WHAT IS IT?

Interaction with objects that carries an emotional quality of care and attention. Seeking out ways to commune and share space with objects.

BACKGROUND THINKING

This shape is rooted in a common autistic affinity with objects and the non-human world, where relationships with objects can feel deeply emotional and reciprocal. It's pretty common for autistic people to talk about childhood friends who were trees, rocks, toys or objects that might generally be considered junk or rubbish. There is a way of interpreting this as being a substitute for human connection that autistics seek out because it's easier, or safer, or more accessible. This may be true for some people, for some of the time, but I don't believe this is always the motivation. My relationships with objects aren't substitutes for 'real relationships' with humans, they are their own kind of relationships which bring me joy and connection. Objects can be companions and play partners.



The common autistic play activity of lining up toys can fit into this shape. It also fits into Pattern Immersion (a play shape still to come) and is perhaps sometimes more one

than the other. It uncomfortably jolts me when I see or hear allistic adult interpretations of this play as being something non-emotional and anti-social, often with a subtext of it being seen as mechanical and cold. It jolts me because when I see this kind of play in action I

see great care and attention being given to objects which are not just 'things' but a part of the child's world and emotional experience.

Whilst collaborating on a sensory film project for Oily Cart Theatre Company, Coery, one of the young artists, shared a word he'd invented with us; "Cubbious". He defined it as meaning "something love," and wrote "My cat Rocco is cubbious. People can be cubbious too. Even objects like security blankets, books, my iPad etc. Things or people who are very special to me...Cubbious is the colour red and feels like love" (Something Love, 2021).

Terms that are often used to describe this way of relating to objects are "Anthropomorphism" and "Object Personification". The former refers to giving non-human beings or inanimate objects human characteristics and the latter more specifically refers to doing the same for objects. Whilst I don't think these are bad terms, I do think they are limited and are based on a very specific understanding of the world. They both really depend on a binary view of everything being either 'animate' or

'inanimate'. This is arguably a binary that comes from western scientific thinking and is not representative of many cultures, religions and human experiences around the world. Robin Wall Kimmerer explains how the English language



even enforces this; "English doesn't give us many tools for respecting animacy. In English you're either a human or a thing." (2012).

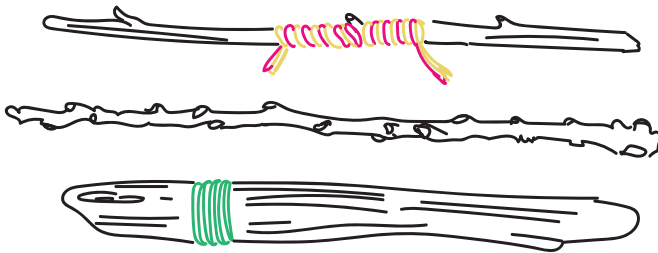
Stepping outside of the animate/inanimate binary and allowing for more possibility in how we can relate to objects and non-human beings is a joyful and useful way to understand and embrace this Play Shape.

WHAT MIGHT IT LOOK LIKE?

- Spending time talking to and relating to objects.
- Having non-human and object friends.
- Lining up, arranging and rearranging objects.
- Building collections of objects.

PLAY DIARY

This Play Shape is one that was a big part of my childhood and continues to be part of my adult life. The animate/inanimate binary doesn't really fit with my emotional experience of the world. I experience myself as being in reciprocal relationships with people, animals, trees, rocks, the clothes I wear, the mug I drink my tea from, the notebooks I carry in my pocket and so on. This is a core part of my experience of the world so it's also part of how I play. Sticks are a big part of my life. When I touch and wiggle and wrap sticks in yarn and string, when I search in the woods for new stick friends, when I line them up and watch them interact... I feel like we're in a conversation with the universe together. I am very attached to my sticks, and when, from time to time they inevitably break or get lost it can feel pretty heartbreaking. It's saying goodbye to a companion. To me this isn't about seeing 'Humanness' in a stick but about recognizing the sticks full 'Stickness' with my whole being.



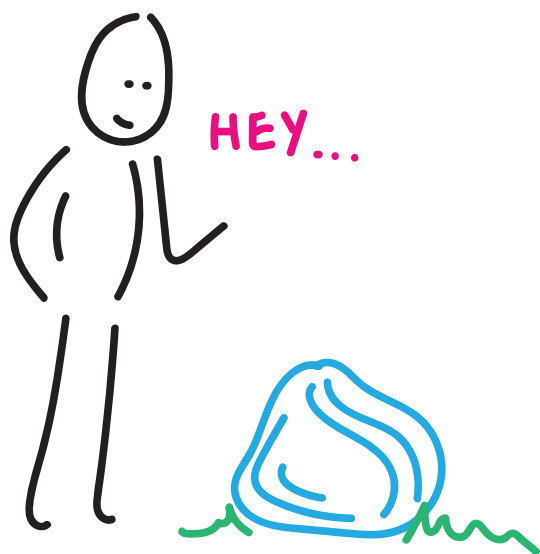
SOME STICK FRIENDS

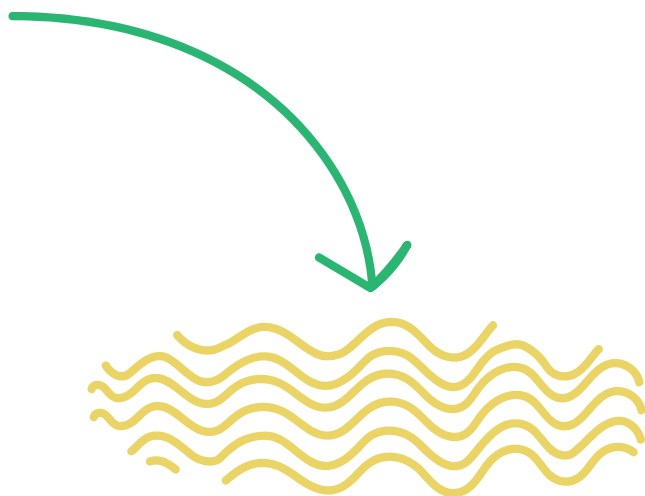
HOW CAN YOU SUPPORT IT IN OTHERS?

- Respect individuals' relationships with objects.
- Avoid trying to encourage individuals to 'play with things properly'.
- Be curious about these relationships.

HOW CAN YOU NURTURE IT IN YOURSELF?

- Go out for a walk (whatever that looks like for you) in a natural landscape. Pick up objects that draw your attention and take time to get to know them. If you want to take them with you, find a way to ask the object if that's okay. Listen to the response.
- Name the objects that you surround yourself with everyday, try to call them by their new name and see how it feels.





PATTERN
IMMERSION

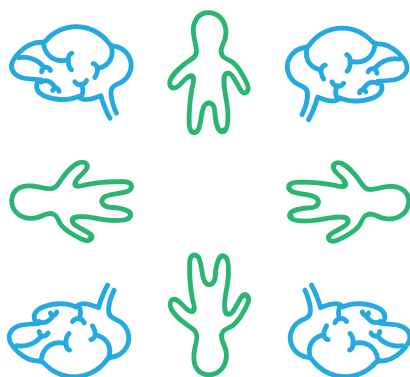
PATTERN IMMERSION

WHAT IS IT?

If we consider Pattern Perception as a sense; tuning into rhythm, repetition, order and space. Then this shape is playfully engaging with that sense.

BACKGROUND THINKING

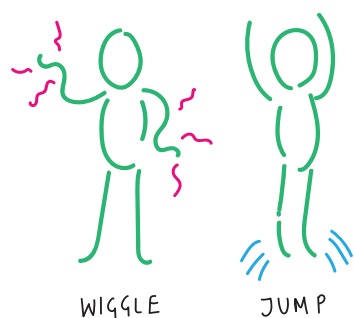
I think of recognising or perceiving patterns as a sense. In the same way I feel texture through touch, see colour through sight, smell through my olfactory system and so on. I feel pattern in a collaboration between my brain and body. Pattern broadly refers to a set of repeated, predictable and corresponding parts. These parts might exist in space, such as lines on a page or movements of a body, or might exist in time, such as the changing of the seasons or a series of social events. It is well documented and widely recognised that autistic people tend to have a highly-tuned sense of pattern. We tend to seek it out, spot it, create it and, of course, play with it.



A core way this Shape shows up is through Stimming. Stimming is a term that has been reclaimed by the autistic community, and is very much a staple of autistic culture. It comes from the term 'sensory self-stimulation' which is one of the ways medical texts describe it. We liberated it, shortened it to stimming, and use it to refer to any kind of repetitive sensory seeking behaviour. Stimming is a core part of autistic being and culture. Autistic bodies have a lot to say; they're not just in dialogue with other bodies and environments, but in

monologue with themselves.

Simon Yuill (2021) writes; “To stim is to flap, to rock, to jump, to rub, to hum, to sing, to click, to bang, to spin, to dance, to draw and catch rainbows sparkling through our fingers... Whether we are always mute, sometimes mute, or never mute, stimming is our voice, our language, our enunciation and conversation with the world.” There are endless ways of stimming. There are also a lot of different reasons why people stim. While many of them aren’t play motivated, I believe stimming can be, and when stimming is play motivated, it’s



often an expression of this Play Shape. As Yuill describes “the repetitive quality of stims creates patterns in the world”. When we stim in play, our sense of pattern is being expressed, explored and enjoyed through our bodies.

Chris Martin, a poet and educator*, works with often non-verbal autistic people in creating and playing in poetry. Martin writes and talks passionately about the “...remarkable reciprocity poetry shares with autism or autistic minds or autistic ways of moving through the world” (2022). The autistic relationship to pattern is woven into the way he talks about his practice; “I would say that in my experience autistic life is deeply patterned, it’s sensory rich and for me that’s the best kind of poems, like thoughtfully, creatively patterned, carefully patterned, then that sensory, you know, immense sensory detail” (2022). Language is full of patterns and poetry offers a place to dig deep into these patterns.

**The way Martin describes his relationship and approach to being an educator reads to me something more like “facilitator of mutual learning and exchange”. This is of course, less succinct but feels important to note.*

WHAT MIGHT IT LOOK LIKE?

- Stimming.
- Seeking out patterns of information.
- Lining up, arranging and rearranging objects.
- Investigating the environment; seeking out shapes, colours etc.
- Playing with words and the structure and pattern of conversation.

PLAY DIARY

Working on playgrounds this kind of play is often something you find evidence of. Sticks and stones you find arranged like an altar under a tree, deeply detailed and meticulously produced drawings left in a corner which read like maps of an unknown universe, a misfit crew of toys lined up in a way that makes them look like they were always meant to be together. Or, you see it from afar as someone bounces on their toes, flapping their hands or spinning peacefully and trancelike.



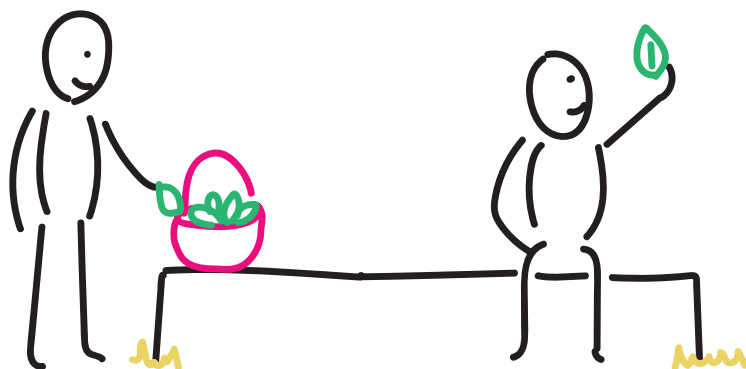
This kind of play is very often a solitary one. But occasionally I've been invited in. I once spent a few hours sitting next to Owen, a young

person, as I helped him in taking apart a toy vehicle with many, many parts. Each part was then arranged on a large piece of paper and drawn around one at a time. There was no sense of rush and as time went on, I felt patterns forming which felt zesty and

glimmering in my brain. I have no idea if he was seeing or feeling the same patterns, or having a completely different experience from me. I took a picture of what we created that I re-visit from time to time.

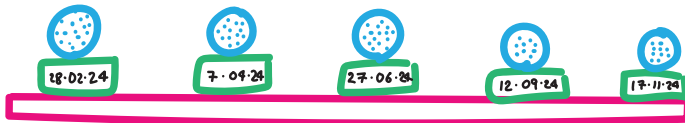
HOW CAN YOU SUPPORT IT IN OTHERS?

- Don't try and stop it or squash it.
- Pay attention to the movements and rhythms someone is engaging in, try and tune into those movements and rhythms for yourself. You may do this alongside or nearby the person as a way of exploring connection. Sometimes this will be welcome, but sometimes it won't, so approach this respectfully as an invitation to the other person for interaction. This often means going slow.
- Try to tune in to what appeals to someone who plays like this and then seek out objects or invitations you can make that might tie in with what they are drawn to. That might be certain shapes, textures, colours. It might be books or print outs of information. It might be ways to collect or gather, such as baskets, cameras or a mirror. It might take you a while to get this right, but that's just practice in fine tuning your own senses!

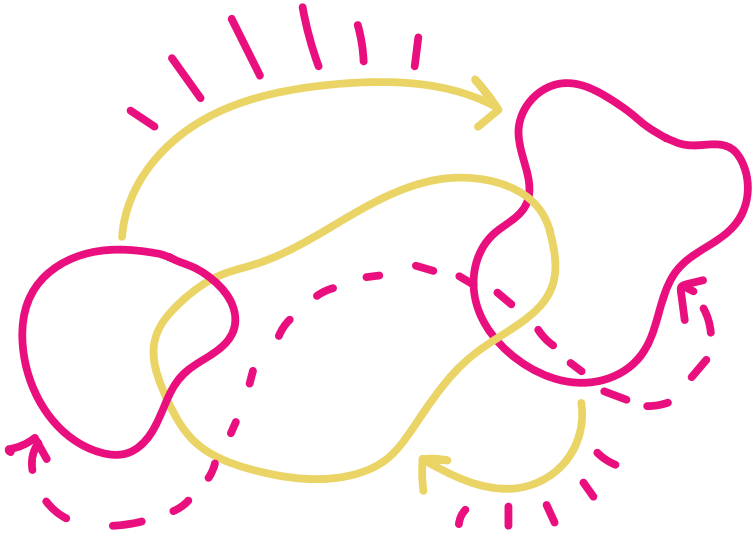


HOW CAN YOU NURTURE IT IN YOURSELF?

- Get yourself a pen or pencil and some paper (or any variation on something that makes marks and a surface to make them on!). Put a song that makes you feel good on repeat and then draw the rhythm.
- Start a collection. Ideally something small and low/no cost. It might be postcards, weird shaped pebbles, printouts of memes, golf balls you found in a stream... Spend time with your collection. You can arrange and rearrange it, categorise it in different ways, display it in your home, build it its own home or even create a portable version and take it with you on adventures.



GOLF BALLS FOUND IN STREAMS
COLLECTION DISPLAY



CONCEPT
JAMMING

CONCEPT JAMMING

WHAT IS IT?

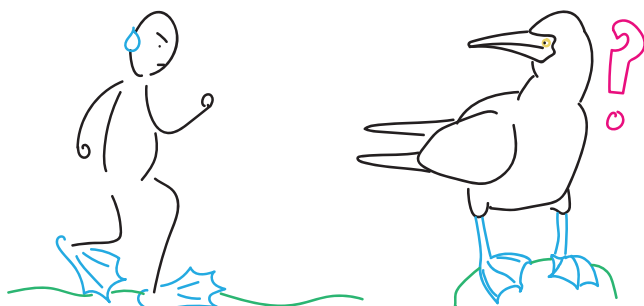
Improvising and playing in the medium of ideas, knowledge and imagination.

BACKGROUND THINKING

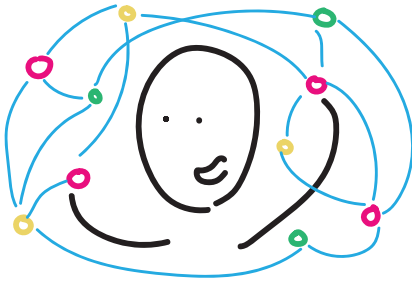
The term “Concept Jamming” riffs off the idea of musical jamming which generally refers to musicians gathering together to create soundscapes and songs in an improvised flow, usually for the sake of play or fun*. Concept jamming then, is playing and improvising in the medium of ideas, knowledge and imagination. To extend the metaphor; a note could be a snippet of information you hold, like the fact that it’s hard to run in flippers. A scale could be a list of facts about the blue footed booby birds of the Galapagos. Shifting

from a minor to major key could be a move from serious grappling to pure silliness. Changing your instrument could be swapping out your lens from a mathematical

one to a sociological one. The rhythm might change as you move away from solid fact to dabbling in nonsensical ideas... It’s inventing, layering and rearranging. Adding distortions, pushing one idea through the lens of another to explore the effects. Concept Jamming can be a collaborative or solo activity.



**This concept and practice has its roots in Jazz and Blues although extends to many other genres and practices today.*



Autistic brains often don't work in a linear way: we make connections in every direction and, sometimes, all at once. Neuroscience and Psychology based explorations of autistic thinking often refer to this as 'associative thinking' and consider it to be linked to creativity

(Neurolaunch, 2024). Essentially, autistic brains tend to take in more information and make more links or associations between those pieces of information than non-autistic brains. If we're having to think in a restricted one-idea-at-a-time linear way this can be incredibly overwhelming and creatively limiting. But if we can follow these connections and give the information and ideas space and time to roam and meet then it can be a creatively explosive form of play.

With other autistics, I will often have tangential spiralling conversations which as they gain momentum shift into free-flowing Concept Jams. We compose with ideas together. It usually involves laughter and stimming freely and the excitement of being in tune with someone in such a weirdly specific way that the fact that it has happened becomes an extra layer of pleasure in itself.

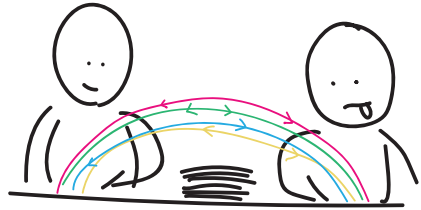
WHAT MIGHT IT LOOK LIKE?

- Tangential spiralling conversations, collaborative world building, creating vocabularies.
- Asking "What if... What if.... What if?"
- Inventing, layering and rearranging with existing ideas and worlds. Adding distortions, pushing one idea through the lens of another to explore the effects.

- Excitement and giddiness abound, buzzing brains and bodies.

PLAY DIARY

While this shape is often highly verbal, it doesn't have to be, it can use any language. For me, it often happens through drawing. I've worked with many young people who seem to feel stilted or stuck in a verbal conversation but when sat side by side with a stack of paper and a couple of pens we can disappear into a concept jam through our drawn-lines. Going back and forth, adding to each other's drawings, building worlds, playing with visual representations of words, switching between styles, speeds and levels of attention to detail. Making each other laugh and provoking more creativity. Time becomes marked by each blank sheet of paper introduced rather than the ticking of a clock.



My relationship with Shay, a young person, over a few years, was largely based on playing together in this way. Characters would emerge as we drew and they'd cross over into each other's drawing worlds. We'd interpret and reinterpret each other's creations through our own lenses. Different interests would come and go over time for



WOMBAT DAN

each of us, and become part of our drawing world. Looking back over some of the drawings we created together, there are adverts for imaginary crisp flavours, a series of vehicle/animal mash-ups, a survival guide, many elaborate diagrams of absurd roller coaster crashes, and a pastiche of The Beatles Sgt Pepper's album cover featuring characters we'd created over the years, including Sister Seal (a nun seal), the Jamitor (a jam jar wielding a mop) and Wombat Dan

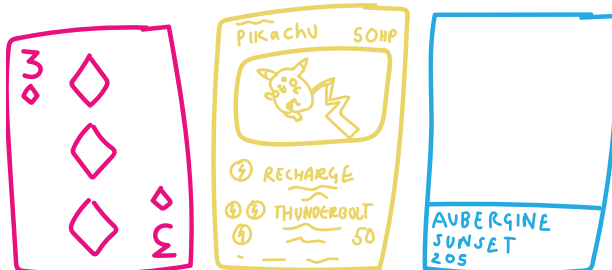
(a wombat called Dan). All by-products of treating ideas as play-things.

HOW CAN YOU SUPPORT IT IN OTHERS?

- Ask questions! Specific questions!
- Listen and go away and learn about the ideas or worlds that someone jams with.
- Reframe books, websites, podcasts etc as play things.

HOW CAN YOU NURTURE IT IN YOURSELF?

- Find out what you like to jam with, gather information, write lists of facts that interest you, quotes or ideas that excite you. Read through them when you have time to let your brain wander and see where it goes.
- Create a unique deck of cards. You can create your own cards and/or mix together playing cards, pokemon cards, paint sample cards, top trump cards, tarot cards. Shuffle your deck and draw three cards for yourself. Create a story that links the cards.
- Go to a library or bookshop, visit every section and make yourself linger at the ones you wouldn't usually visit.





VOICE AS
SENSORY TOY

VOICE AS SENSORY TOY

WHAT IS IT?

Using your voice as a sensory toy. Exploring the way it feels, sounds and interacts within your internal and external environment.

BACKGROUND THINKING

The voice can be an extremely pleasurable and fruitful avenue for sensory play. This can include both speaking and non-word based sounding. These things can sound very different but come from a similarly motivated place.

A lot of autistic people love language and use it as a play-thing as much as, or sometimes more than, a communication tool. Pulling out a set of words, phrases and voices can be analogous to pulling out a bunch of action figures, or running to a dress up cabinet and selecting things to wear. It can be like gathering your tools for play and then letting your creativity and imagination take over and losing yourself in a game. The words, phrases and voices may be repeated and remixed, some will become main characters whilst others fall to the wayside (with comebacks possible), words might be rolled around in the mouth, chewed on and tasted.



Speaking a word can be a complex sensory experience. These elements of play are all common autistic and non-conventional ways of using language and can be described with the terms

echolalia, palilalia, scripting and verbal stimming. They are all things that have multiple functional explanations but within this Play Shape the function is usually pure fun and enjoyment. Julia Bascom (2012) writes “As much as I can hate words, I delight in them, too. When I’m echoing, referencing, scripting, riffing and rifting, storing and combing and recombining, patterning, quoting, punning, swinging from hyperlexic memory to synesthetic connection, words are my tangible playground.”

Of course, the voice is not just for language. Non-word sounds can be echolalic, palilalic, scripted and stimmy in the same way that words can. Humming and squeaking, clicking, sighing and whistling offer endless combinations and experiences of tone, texture and feeling in the chest,



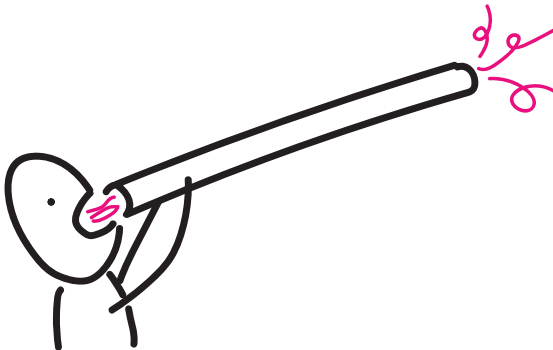
throat, mouth and then out and back into the ears. Volume, pitch and changes in breathing all add more richness and complexity making the voice a full body-mind experience. In “In My Language” (2007) Mel Baggs films herself moving, touching, sniffing, tasting in her home part of what they described as “being in constant conversation / with every aspect of my environment / Reacting physically to all parts of my surroundings”. Throughout the video her movements and actions are accompanied by a low occasionally shift pitching hum. The hum and actions harmonise and watching this video, for me, the hum feels incredibly tactile and all encompassing.

Talking about voice and being autistic feels inherently political. One of the binaries that gets applied to autistic People is that of “Verbal” and “Non-Verbal” or “Speaking” and “Non-Speaking”. The ability to speak is deeply linked to societal understandings of what makes

someone a person and therefore worth paying attention to. In my experience, what this often means is autistic people who are "Speaking" are considered to be close enough to allistic people to be considered properly human and autistic people who are "Non-speaking" are not. The assumption often seems to be that an autistic person who talks will have more in common with an allistic person than an autistic person who doesn't talk. One of the things I love about this Play Shape is when it flourishes between different autistic folks it can feel like a powerful rejection of this idea. Our voices, whatever kind of sounds they create, are equally, wildly and playfully human.

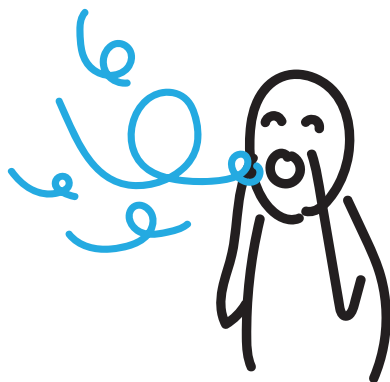
WHAT MIGHT IT LOOK LIKE?

- Reading and talking aloud, doing 'voices', having humorous conversations with yourself.
- Humming, clicking, squeaking.
- Echolalia and Palilalia/ repeating words and phrases.
- Holding or tapping the chest or throat whilst sounding with the voice.
- Shouting, talking, singing into resonant objects such as pipes, bowls, or big empty rooms.

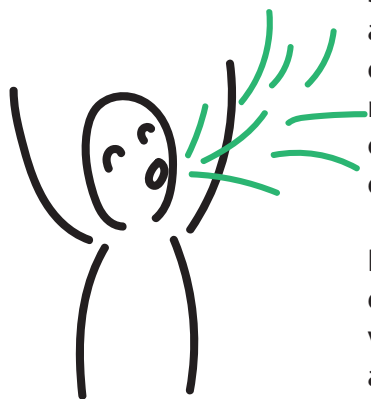


PLAY DIARY

This is a kind of play that I have endless memories of witnessing and joining in with. But one stands out in particular because of the impact it had on me. Whilst working on an adventure playground I met Jack, a young person whose voice was loud, unpredictable and free. It seemed to erupt from his entire body, not just his mouth. He would scream, squeak, laugh and shout. Despite this, Jack was someone who would usually be described as non-verbal or non-speaking. We would see each other every week and our relationship grew as I learnt his language.



For as long as I can remember I've been scared of my own voice. I can't pinpoint exactly why, but I know there is a whole swirly mess of things which feed into that fear. A big part of it is about sensitivity to sound, my voice often comes out in a way I don't expect and it literally gives me a fright. I expect a lot of it is also about growing up as an autistic kid who was often made to feel "too much". I am able to get into a space where I use it functionally, usually with a lot of



scripting. This is particularly necessary as I fairly regularly talks to large rooms of people as part of my work. But using my voice for expression and enjoyment can feel extremely difficult, especially if other people are around to hear it.

Being with Jack however, let me effortlessly set my joyful and expressive voice free. I could scream, squeak, laugh and shout with him. Following his lead

to begin with, but then finding my own noises. On one level this was about an ongoing conversation between us, but on another it felt like it was about shared joy in the sensory exploration. Experiencing each other's, and our own individual, voices together.

HOW CAN YOU SUPPORT IT IN OTHERS?

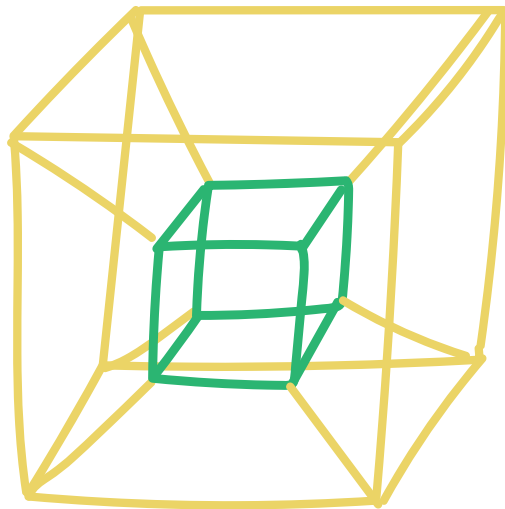
- If someone starts a conversation with you in non-word noises respond with non-word noises.
- Provide objects such as pipes or cones to extend possibilities for playing with vocal resonance.
- Introduce or explore possibilities of using voice recording and playback to expand the ways someone can play with their own voice.

HOW CAN YOU NURTURE IT IN YOURSELF?

- Read aloud to yourself. This could be from a book, but it could be a menu, street signs, or a set of instructions. Try to feel your voice as much as the words. Doing this in a space where your voice sounds different such as in the bath or under a blanket can help, as can doing your best to read something in a language that you don't speak.



- With a play partner, explore laying with your heads on each other's chests and/or bellies whilst the other sings or hums or makes nonsense sounds.



NESTING

NESTING

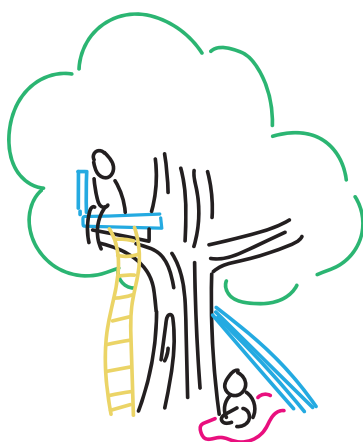
WHAT IS IT?

The creation of micro-environments such as dens and nests within a larger space. This space then acts as a place to listen, think, feel and observe from.

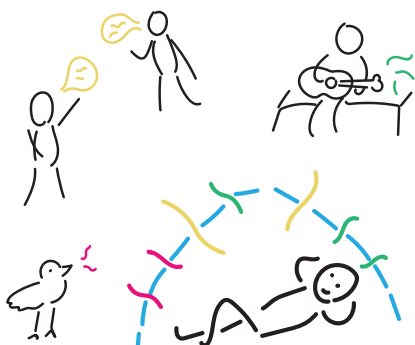
BACKGROUND THINKING

Versions of this are common in pretty much all play spaces with all kinds of people. Den building seems to be a deep seated play instinct. Hughes (2001) describes den or shelter building as typically being concerned with three play types; "Mastery" which is gaining skill and control in mastering the elements, "Deep" which is that involving risk and "Social" which is about relating to others.

Hughes also notes that it links to a drive for recapitulation or engaging in complex behaviours linked to our ancestral past. A lot of the den building behaviour I've witnessed certainly fits into these descriptions, however there is a specific version that I see show up particularly amongst autistic players that doesn't. It also doesn't exclusively show up as den building, but has other similar but different linked behaviours, which is why I settled on referring to it as 'Nesting'.



Within Nesting the drive is to create a smaller space within the larger space to be alone in. Both the act of creating or discovering a space or nest and then how time is spent in it are core to this Shape. It often becomes the place where imagining, thinking and sensing



THE POROUS NEST

happen. The external space is created to allow the internal play to happen. It also often acts as a porous wall between the nesting person and the world outside the nest, be that one populated with other people and/or non-human beings. The player can then both be in the outside space in a way, taking in the sounds and sights, whilst experiencing the protection of the nest. That outside world

might then influence their internal play. The nest may also become an anchor point to come back to when the person leaves the nest.

Annie Murphy Paul (2021) writes about the value of constructing or having some level of control over the spaces we occupy and how it enables people to feel more confident and be more capable. When you combine this with the experience of many autistic people of finding the outside world overwhelming and unsafe the potential power of the nest becomes apparent. Paul writes “The place itself helps us think”. When thinking is a big part of someone’s play, constructing or seeking out a space to do this also becomes part of the play. The nest-creation and the nesting feed into each other.

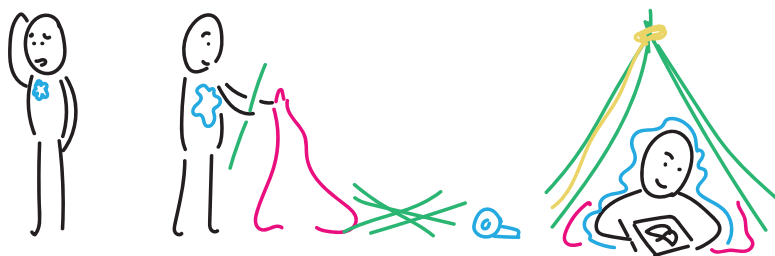
WHAT MIGHT IT LOOK LIKE?

- Building dens or structures, from the simple to the elaborate.
- Finding existing nooks and crannies in the physical environment and fitting into them.
- Hiding under and within clothing, blankets, boxes etc.
- Climbing up.

PLAY DIARY

A common clash of needs I've observed between autistic and allistic children is around the creation and occupation of dens. Often this comes out in the language of "ownership" and "sharing" and ideas about what is or isn't the right way to go about these things. But it can perhaps better be understood in terms of play motivation. For the allistic child it might be that dens are a thing to be enjoyed together, a hub of social activity and play, and for the autistic child it might be that they are actually engaging in Nesting rather than social den building. Usually, this clash can be supported by scaffolding* communication, not being afraid for it to take time and patience, and ultimately supporting both children in following their play separately (this can of course be made more challenging when resources and space are scarce but can usually be figured out creatively).

Autistic adults often carry trauma or complex experiences around play and when working with autistic adults in play I've found that the act of giving permission for them to occupy and build a space to nest can be the bridge needed for them to be able to access their playful selves.



**I use the term scaffolding to describe the process of providing structure around children's communication to aid them in understanding each other. Often when children have very different communication needs and abilities you can support by bridging the gaps to enable them to communicate whilst minimally influencing what they communicate. For example if one child is frustrated at another because they aren't "playing the game properly" you can ask questions to help the child explain the rules they have in their head to provide that information to the other child.*

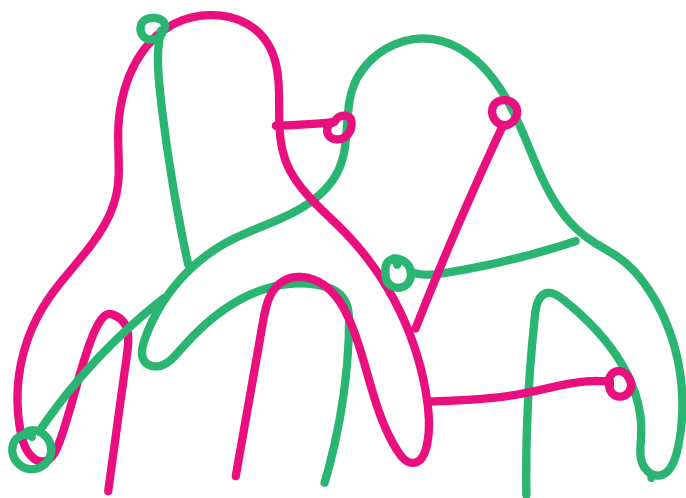
HOW CAN YOU SUPPORT IT IN OTHERS?

- Provide basic materials to enable building; fabric, pegs, cardboard, tape etc.
- Don't fill every corner of a play space with things, make sure there are empty and blank spaces to be nested within.
- Help scaffold interactions with children around 'ownership' and control of spaces.

HOW CAN YOU NURTURE IT IN YOURSELF?

- Create a space in your home and designate it the 'do nothing nook'. This doesn't have to be big, it could be a cushion and a blanket in a corner. Spend time there, bring objects you enjoy to the space with you, try to adapt to make it a space attuned to your sensory needs and desires.
- Find ways to spend time taking in your environment from different perspectives; lay down where you wouldn't usually lay down, sit in a cupboard for a while and see how it feels, sit on top of a table.





RELATIONAL MAPPING

RELATIONAL MAPPING

WHAT IS IT?

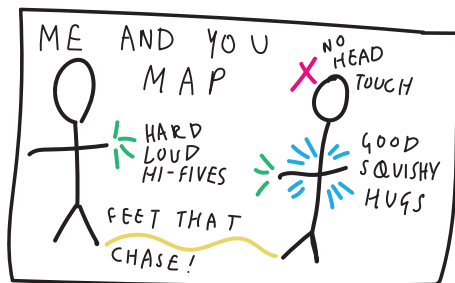
Exploring the sensory and social properties of 'I am me and you are you' to ask the question; who are we and how can/do we meet?

BACKGROUND THINKING

This shape is about playing with the sensations, sociality and emotions that make up how we can relate to other people and our environments. It spans many different behaviours but those behaviours are based on asking and answering questions about how one body-mind can interact with another body-mind or with their surrounding environment. Questions like 'If I take your hand and pull you towards me what happens?', 'If I push my forehead against yours how does it feel and how do you react', 'If I move you over to this corner of the room how does that change how I experience you; do you look different from over here than from over there?' These questions will largely be non-verbal and asked through action rather words. These might be things that most people feel they intuitively know, but for a lot of autistic body-minds these things might not be intuitive and finding them out and exploring them can be a source of pleasure and fun. Some will also play this way verbally asking questions and gathering information from someone, this can then form into verbal scripts that get played out over and over again.



Through this kind of play the players will form an interpersonal map of sorts. A lived experience of different ways they can interact and relate with each other and the space around them. The more fully formed that map is the more fun will often be had in filling in more details and testing what is already known through repetition. Patterns will be discovered, explored and added to.



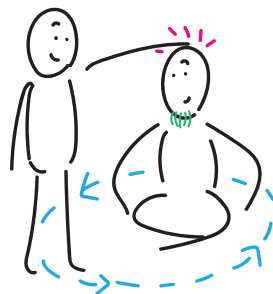
This shape often involves a lot of touch. Touch can be complicated for autistic people. For some, touch is hard to access due to sensory and social barriers. For others, touch is hard to access outside of the touch of personal care given by support workers and carers. For some, it is difficult to access because the majority of people surrounding them are paid workers with varying complex policies and guidelines to follow around what touch is okay and what isn't. Regardless of the many barriers, touch is still something deeply needed by most, and that includes autistic people. This Play Shape can be a way of exploring and experiencing accessible touch and finding ways to navigate this with others.

WHAT MIGHT IT LOOK LIKE?

- Touching and exploring proximity with another person.
- Positioning/moving someone's body.
- Running social scripts on repeat.
- Tactile, social and emotional cause and effect i.e. actions motivated by "what happens if I do this..?"

PLAY DIARY

Asha was around seven when I met her and we spent a series of thirty minute sessions together over six weeks. Upon meeting her for the first time she was immediately taken with my beard and bald head. I sat down on the floor to allow her to investigate. Over the weeks the majority of the sessions would be based upon this fascination, but the play



developed more as we got to know each other. Asha would initially guide me to sit down on the floor and then proceed to walk around me in circles with her hand on my head, when she got to the front she would touch my beard before going back on her way. Over time we started adding high fives, changing direction of the walking and me hiding my head and



beard in various hats that Asha could remove to reveal my head and scarves that Asha could pull down to reveal my beard. At a couple of points I had to assert a boundary around how hard I was happy with Asha tapping me on the head. Having built up our communicative play language from the start it felt fairly easy to negotiate this with her.

As the weeks went on more and more laughter crept into the sessions and more ways of relating to each other including touching heads, spinning, tapping my head, double high fives and upside down high fives, became part of the play. On our very last session together Asha sat down next to me for the first time, our back against a wall and the sides of our bodies leaning against each other. We turned our attention out to the room together for the first time. We rocked against each other with the occasional head and beard touch from Asha. It was much lower energy than our previous sessions with lots of soft giggling instead of loud bursts of laughter.

HOW CAN YOU SUPPORT IT IN OTHERS?

- Be curious, if someone instigates this kind of play with you pay attention to the patterns that are being explored and what kind of questions are being non-verbally or verbally asked. Try to answer them genuinely.
- Offer up your own non-verbal questions, e.g. offer a fist bump or head touch where you might usually offer a high five. You might be 'corrected' into offering up your usual high five or this divergence might be a point of excitement or curiosity.
- Get to know what your own boundaries and comfort levels are around touch so when engaging in this kind of play with others you can do so in a way that is safe and comfortable for you.

HOW CAN YOU NURTURE IT IN YOURSELF?

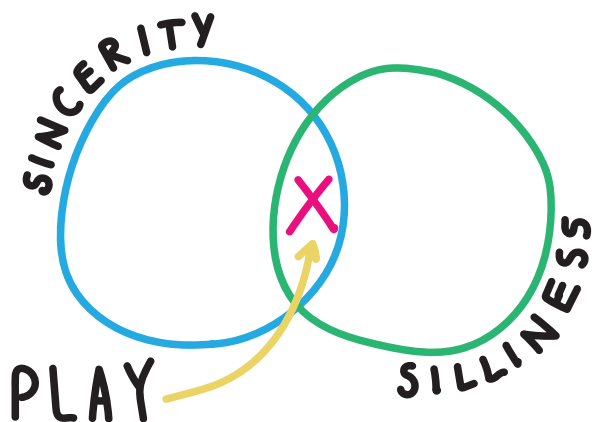
- Explore playful wrestling with someone you trust. How does it feel to play this way within your relationship? Does the relationship change? What new or different ways of interacting arise?
- Touch/smell/bite/listen to/taste everything you safely can in a familiar space. See if you can learn anything you don't already know about the way you can relate to the environment. If there are other people or animals in your space make sure to engage consensually.



CONCLUSION

Fractal Investigation, Pancake Stack Role Play, Object Harmonising, Pattern Immersion, Concept Jamming, Voice as Sensory Toy, Nesting and Relational Mapping. I'm pretty fond of them all, especially after taking the time to really dig into what they mean and translate them into this work. There are so many more to discover and map and play with, some of them I have inklings of, they have blurry edges, many of them I haven't discovered yet and maybe I'm not the person who will. But for now, I'm very happy to be able to have shared these with you.

I want to finish with a sensibility. Unlike the shapes this isn't a pattern of playing but more a flavour, a way of being that is often present when these Play Shapes are being formed out in the wild. When autistic people are playing freely and authentically alone, alongside and together. That sensibility is the ability and instinct to hold both sincere sensing and feeling along with profound silliness and light in the same moment. These two things can exist in tandem with no clash or contradiction. Sincerity and silliness are excellent play partners and autistic play can be a beautiful, weird, wild and sublimely engineered vehicle to carry them. We need more sincerity and silliness in the world. We need more play and we need more autistic play. I hope this work can be a part of helping it flourish.



GLOSSARY

Allistic

Someone who isn't Autistic.

Autism-Adjacent

Someone who has a close relationship to Autistic ways of beings, whether that's through their own neurodivergence or through their relationships to Autistic people.

Autistic Echolalia

A kind of speech where a person communicates and/or expresses themselves by repeating phrases, words or sounds they've heard from someone or somewhere else.

Autistic Palilalia

A kind of speech where a person communicates and/or expresses themselves through repeating their own phrases, words or sounds.

Binaries

Categorising things into two options. When this refers to social binaries it often means categorising people into two categories with no room for nuance or existing outside of those two options.

Body-Mind

A term use to describe human beings which understand the body and mind as being inseparable and deeply interconnected. Rather than being a body with a mind attached we are bodies that think, experience and perceive the world. The term has its roots in the

work of feminist and disability justice scholars.

Collaborative Play

Play that happens between two or more people.

Marginalised

To have your power taken away, to be oppressed or treated as unimportant. In this context I am referring to this being an experience ingrained in our social and cultural systems as a result of an individual's having characteristics that are discriminated against such as being disabled, being trans or queer, being black and/or a person of colour, being working class and so on.

Neurodivergent

To have a mind that differs from the societal and cultural expectations of what is 'normal'. The language of Neurodivergence is used within the Neurodiversity Paradigm which is a way of thinking where the differences in the ways our minds work are seen as natural parts of human variation and not things to be fixed.

Parallel Play

Playing that happens alongside others and not directly with them.

Pathologising

To view a person or groups traits, characteristics or ways of being as being abnormal. This is often through a medical or psychological lens. For example considering autistic play as being wrong and something that needs to be fixed because it goes against what is seen as normal.

Scripting

A way of using language where a person will plan ahead for what they are going to say rather than making it up as they go along. This is often closely linked to echolalia and palilalia where the script may be constructed of previously heard or create phrases that are used repeatedly.

Solo Play

Playing alone.

Stimming

Behaviour involving engaging in repetitive sensory stimulation such as movements, sounds or manipulation of objects.

Stimmy

Something which creates the desire to stim or has potential to be stimmed with.

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RESOURCES

Sources of autistic led and affirming writings and ideas which make valuable further reading and exploring around the themes in this work.

www.autisticrealms.com

www.neuroqueer.com

www.oolong.co.uk/on-autism/

<https://www.unrestrictedinterest.com/>

<https://stimpunks.org/>

<https://monotropism.org/>

www.playradical.com

