



Time Capsule

A Function Schmunction Zine By Max Alexander

This zine gathers snapshots from four years of Function Schmunction– a project all about celebrating and creating opportunities for authentic autistic play, joy and connection. It is a collage of photos, quotes from people involved in the project alongside extracts from my thousands of words worth of notes, observations (all names are pseudonyms aside from my own) and poems from the play sessions. The contents represents just a small fraction of what has happened over the project but I hope serves to give an insight into what took place.

Creating this wee time–capsule felt important to me coming to the end of a project that has given me so much joy, continuously lifted my spirit, challenged me and reminded me over and over again why I keep choosing to dedicate my energy and heart to play and creating spaces with and for my autistic kin. If you get to feel just a tiny bit of that energy whilst reading this then that will be a beautiful extra ripple of the project.



What is Function Schmunction?

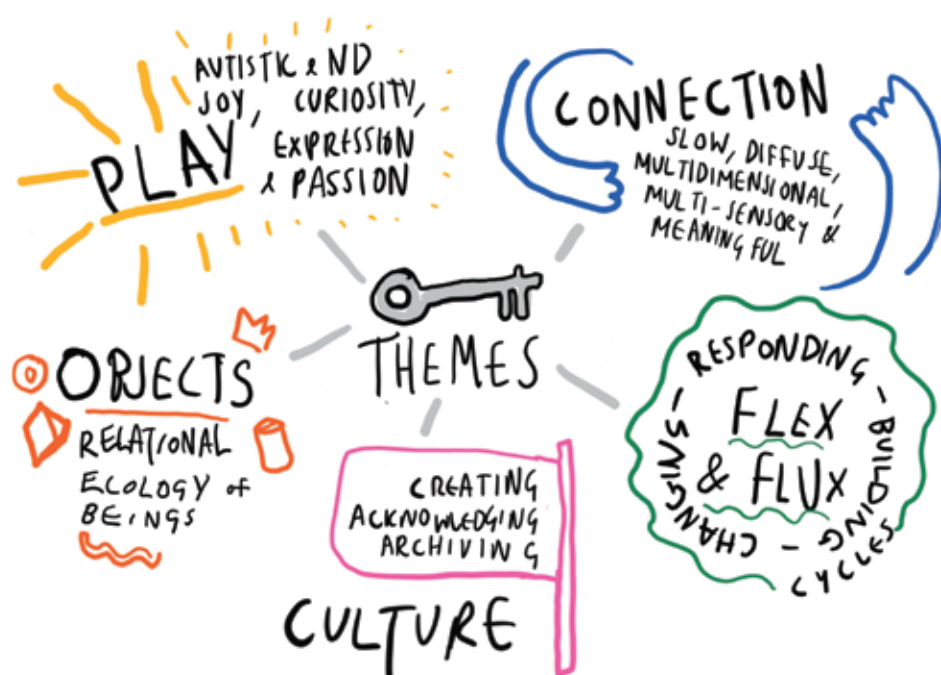
Function Schmunction was a project all about celebrating and creating opportunities for authentic autistic play, joy and connection. The project was devised and led by myself, Max Alexander, an artist, play worker and autistic being (also known as Play Radical) in collaboration with/produced by Independent Arts Projects (IAP).

The project started in early 2022 when I was part of IAP's Sensory Collective a project that brought together six artists and a producer to make work with and for Autistic folks, folks described as having Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities and folks with Dementia. All groups who face multiple and complex barriers to accessing cultural and artistic spaces. We were graced with a very open brief and I knew from the start I wanted to focus on a participatory project with autistic people and I wanted the focus to be play. I also wanted it to include autistic people and their communities of a wide range of ages, life experiences, interests and needs.



**A yoga ball or "Rubbery Belly"
(as one participant referred to it)
finding a new home in an outdoors
one-to-one play session**

At this point I had spent the last 8 years working primarily with disabled and/or neurodivergent children and young people and about 4 years developing a solo practice around creating inclusive and accessible opportunities for play with and for those children and young people. The opportunity to be part of the Sensory Collective with a group of artists with a huge range of practices and experiences and be given the time and space to devise my own project was extremely exciting and welcome. As a starting point I tried to distill my practice into key themes which I wanted to be embedded in that practice. Looking at this now these themes all feel just as relevant.



Key Themes Diagram:
 Play- autistic and neurodivergent joy, curiosity, expression and passion.
 Connection- slow, diffuse, multidimensional, multi-sensory and meaningful.
 Objects - relational and as part of an ecology of beings.
 Culture- creating, acknowledging and archiving.
 Flex and Flux- the cycles of responding, building and changing.

From this I came up with a structure that could hopefully allow these themes to be explored and flourish. I imagined meeting different autistic people and getting to know them individually through play; being able to make a space with deep attention and potential for experiences designed specifically for each person. I imagined all these individual experiences, each person's passions, interests and curiosities feeding into creating a play space that they would be represented in. I then imagined other autistic people and their wider communities coming to play in this play space and then... starting it all over again, not from scratch but building on what had come previously. So that each

iteration would contain something of all who had played before.

I imagined lines of playful connection between all these people who might never meet but would be part of each others lives through the play. For example; me connecting to someone I do a series of one-to-one sessions with which leads to an object being created, an object which then goes into a play space that many more visit who then interact with that object in their own infinite ways, to someone else I meet in a future play session who shows me something new which then influences what goes into the next play space and so on and so on. As an autistic person I have struggled with a lack of a kind of cultural heritage a feeling of connection with those who existed before me, a lineage of gorgeously weird, creative, disruptive autistic folk who are often missing from the cultural record or just misrepresented by it. So this idea of creating these lines of connection means a lot to me. Even when they can't necessarily be seen I think they can be felt.



One Line of Connection;

a visualisation of the concept of all the different play sessions and ideas connecting different people. A red line picks out a route through a constellations of dots.

Perhaps related to that lack of cultural heritage is a general lack of understanding of autistic play. Our play is still hugely misunderstood, misrepresented and pathologised. As a result of this many autistic children and young people have their play instincts and desires ignored, discouraged, or outright trained out of them. Sometimes this is with the best of intentions from their surrounding adults, sometimes not. Many autistic adults carry shame and trauma around their play experiences as a child. Many have simply been taught to ignore their playful instincts at such a young age that they find it difficult to connect with play at all. Function Schmunction was created to defiantly and proudly lay out a different pathway for autistic play.



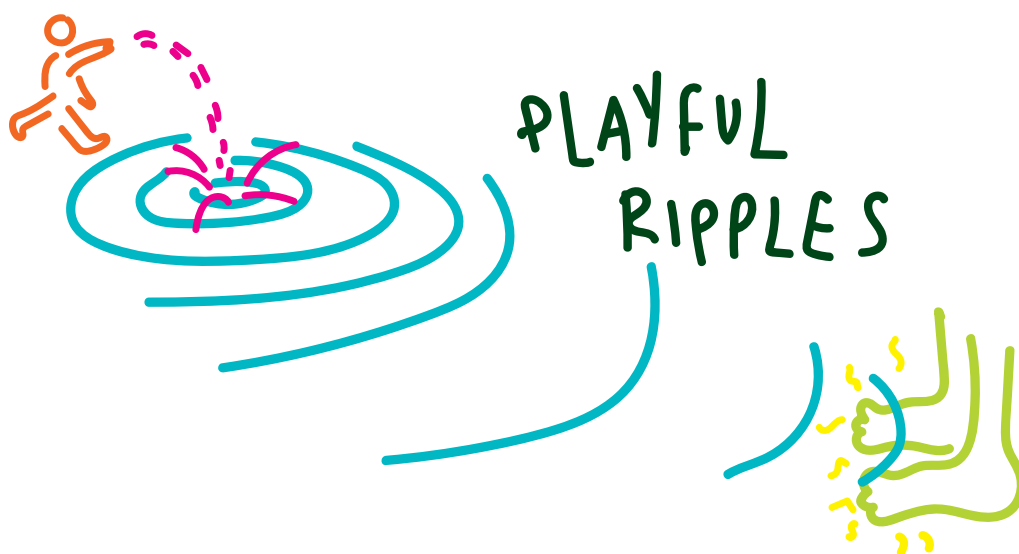
A young person seeks shelter with found treasures (ping pong balls) in a comfortable tangle of soft fleecy donuts in a makeshift den.

Photo by Kat Gollock

That initial structure has pretty much stayed the same throughout three iterations of the project. During the first I worked with 12 individuals for a total of 42 one-to-one play sessions and through this the first Function Schmunction Play Space was created. It was installed for three days at a venue in Edinburgh where over 100 people visited and played in the space. Following this working with Mhari Robinson at IAP we came up with many versions of another Function Schmunction before eventually securing funding for two. One in collaboration with North Edinburgh Arts and one in collaboration with East Park School.

In each of these there was a series of one-to-one play sessions followed by a larger installation where the one-to-one participants could experience it alongside their wider community. For the East Park project I was joined by artist Amy Conway who also facilitated a series of one-to-one sessions and worked with me to create another version of the play space. Between those two versions of the project a further 17 children and young people took part in over 60 one-to-one sessions and around 60 individuals in those communities visited and played in the Play Spaces which were created.

Whilst Function Schmunction has come to an end it's ripples will still hopefully continue for those who have been involved. For myself these experiences have influenced my practice hugely and I feel I'm a better play worker and artist than when I started. It has also contributed to my understanding and ideas about autistic play and much of the experience fed into writing and publishing my book "The Joys and Shapes of Autistic Play" which is allowing the ideas to connect with folks I've never even met. There might not be more Function Schmunction but there will and can always be more authentic, connective, joyful, weird and stubbornly indescribably autistic play.



A colourful line drawing shows someone at the far end of a lake throwing something into the water and the feet of someone at the near end of a lake getting a pleasant wave bath. The words 'Playful Ripples' accompany the drawing

The following pages contain a mishmash of quotes from other people, excerpts from my notes, short poems written about play sessions by me and photos taken by a few different people. You can see who took the photo by looking at the text underneath it. If there is no text it means I took the photo.

Here's a guide to how things are presented:

"Quotes are in quotation marks and bold font"

Observations and stories from Max's notes are in regular font with no quotation marks

poems Max wrote about sessions are handwritten in glorious pink



Photo by Geraldine Heaney

Ailsa was briefly engaged with sword fighting before dozing off looking at tinsel.



photo by Kat Gollock



Ping Pong Post was a very popular part of the play space. A combination of wooden shapes, ridged pipes, buckets and ping pong balls which could be used in whatever way each player saw fit

We spent time investigating/looking deeply at monsters with the torches. Turning on and off the disco lamp and animating the monsters to turn the switches on and off. I got some paper and started drawing repetitive patterns. I stopped whenever Jai turned the disco lamp off. After a while Jai caught on to this cause and effect and started watching and experimenting with switching the lamp on and off at different paces and times. We continued like this for a while with Jai switching between her solo play with the monsters and torches and 'operating' my drawings.



Slinky noise amplifying device (tin can)
hangs in a tree.

butt shuffling into
mad scatter action-gleeful!
leave no trace? no chance

“that’s like art”
– one-to-one play session participant



A tiger trap



These movable cardboard partitions with various windows were a big part of the larger installation spaces. They allowed for the space to be changed quickly and for players to find a bit of privacy, shelter and a place to safely observe from.

Cian retreated to the den and made a game of shouting 'bye' and disappearing before reappearing again. I used a bike bell to make deliveries. These were received by Cian and then often thrown out of the den with a "BYE!".

Majority of play time taken up with physical play. Climbing on me, getting piggy backs, generally being a little goat. Enjoyed patterned bouncing and shaking. lots of giggling.

quiet smile spreading
treading air - vibrating - bathed
in shredded cosmos



Images of the second play space installed at North Edinburgh Arts influenced by a summer of one-to-one sessions with local children



photos by Geraldine Heaney

“Oh my god, that was amazing, we’ve never been to anything like this before, it’s so creative!”
– parent/carer

“My son had a fantastic time – he was taking time to focus on his favourite forms of play on our first visit with brief forays into exploring other areas. On our second visit he was excited to attend and completely relaxed in the environment. It was lovely for me to see him branching out and exploring play on his terms.”

– parent/carer



co-created arrangement of shapes and pegs from a one-to-one play session

where are the lines asks
pattern wrangler - vivid grin
lights up kangaroo



photo by Kat Gollock

In the play space installation at East Park School we introduced 'Cafe Ice Del Citrus' with bowls of ice and trays of citrus fruit. This could be eaten, smushed, crushed, mixed with a selection of tools and goggles for safety



Shaun was very interested in my head, hat and beard. He led me to sit down on one side of the room and moved between drawing at the table and inspecting and touching my beard and patting my head. These interactions slowly developed into having more back and forth with high fives and high tens being incorporated. Whilst Shaun was drawing I would add something- balance an object on my head or put my arms in a different position and then Shaun would return, 'correct' my position and then do lots of high fives. These got more animated with more happy noises, smiles and laughs as it developed.



The climbing-in frame offered an island of focus and calm amongst each play space. Objects could be explored, re-arranged, kidnapped... it also featured a hidden cave underneath and became a part of imaginative play and shelter building and general mischief. Below you can see the remnants of a play session with a bunch of 13 year olds.



photos by Geraldine Heaney

Kick-starting questions
three headed cats and black holes
gobbling up air

I introduced multiple glass jars/containers with sea debris, rocks, cones, pottery etc. Ellis became quite emotional at this and I invited them to share more if they wanted. This led to chat about emotional autistic relationships with objects and the mutual care, memories and sensations they carry. The rest of the session was spent looking through these together, creating an arrangement on the floor of different shapes/colours etc. Ellis particularly enjoyed the pieces that fit to the hand.

Today was a big throwing day, everything getting thrown. Big smiles when doing so. Some interaction through hands and head touches. Big body energy of needing lots of input.



a moment of peak construction in a one-to-one play session where the play cycled between construction and destruction

**"I wasn't thinking, I was enjoying myself, having fun and being free."
- play space session participant**



ping pong ball contemplation?

photo by Geraldine Heaney

searching for searching
wandering doorbell gives pause
to taste test whirlwind

We oscillated between sword fights, making noises with Stylophones and looking through binoculars and kaliedoscopes for a while. High energy to gentle and quiet and back. We combined the stylophones and sword fighting together each awkwardly punctuating the sword play whilst playing the stylophones with one hand. Walking back through the woods Alistair said "that was a really fun session today".

a questioning pace?
when space given rest taken
hark! a fart unites

“The sessions felt generative, safe, gentle and so so much fun. Max has helped me reconnect with such an important part of my playful self, and gave me the license to be myself, without any feelings of judgement or shame.”

- one-to-one play session participant



photo by Geraldine Heaney

“Both, children and adults seemed mesmerised and engaged with the space as soon as they entered it. Some of the adults expressed that they’ve saw their child engaging with the surroundings differently than usual, such as seeming more calm or trying to do things they don’t usually get to. ”

– playworker who supported play space sessions



photos by Geraldine Heaney



Jack took to fan straight away. Jumping, getting up close, drumming on the outside- shiny disc in center particularly enjoyable- touching and watching ribbon and fabric being held in air stream.



Wobble city was a part of the final play installation at East Park School.

photo by Kat Gollock



hungry eyes eat light
seeking saturation-full!
twirling soft, content

Objects definitely of interest but the motivation much more about the social play around the object than the object itself... Main game became Aidan throwing ball into the woods and then us retrieving it together. Nice bit of risk navigation here with having to move through rough paths and over and around sticks and branches. This really seemed to motivate Aidan.

Thank you to all those who have played with and alongside us over the different Function Schmunction in it's many forms over the last four years. The spirit of this project comes from your curiosity, openness, creativity and humour. A play space isn't a play space until someone plays in it!

Thank you all our collaborators at Hampden Primary School, East Park School, North Edinburgh Arts, Cherry Road Resource Centre and those we met out in their homes and local communities, woodlands and parks.

Thank you to my colleagues and friends at Independent Arts Projects and in the wider participatory arts, play and disability activism community.

Thank you Nina Doherty and Mhari Robinson for being the Function Schmunction producers, logistical wizards and funding wranglers. Thank you Amy Conway who was a collaborating artist for Function Schmunction at East Park School.

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