

AND SO WE



PLAY



COUNTER  
PLAY '26



**A**FTER A LONG HIATUS  
LYING DORMANT  
ALL BUT FORGOTTEN

COUNTERPLAY IS RISING FROM ITS SLUMBER  
DANCING ITSELF AWAKE  
TO THE TUNE OF INVIGORATING LAUGHTER  
GATHERING PLAYFUL SOULS  
FROM NEAR AND FAR

TO EXPLORE THE TEMPTING PROMISES  
OF PLAYFUL FUTURES  
YET TO COME





# PRELUDE

As we were sitting around the campfire, slowly rekindling the spirit of CounterPlay, the theme for the next festival suddenly sprang from the crackling flames: *And so we play*. Four small words that tease us like a trickster, immediately beckoning us to explore their mischievous propositions. We can't tell you exactly what this phrase means, it remains slightly enigmatic to us, still, and maybe that opacity is exactly why we're drawn to it. Much has changed since our last playful encounter back in 2019, yet our ambition remains the same. We wish to cultivate spaces for playful inquiries that ask: *How might play help us live better lives together, nurturing both human and more-than-human flourishing?*

And so we play...



This call is an aspiration, a blurry vision and a dream of more playful worlds yet to come. It aims to be playful, poetic, political, critical, unruly, imaginative, it wants to see sparks of play flying all around us, and it longs for playful energies to surge. The call attempts to be ambiguous, full of puzzling questions and intriguing mysteries that can never be resolved. We are not seeking answers or solutions, but rather we hope to explore tensions, frictions, dilemmas, we want to swim in doubt, to lay bare our vulnerabilities and everything we don't know or can't know. While wordy-nerdy academics have been involved in writing this, you should read it with your own eyes and let your own body determine what you are drawn to. Some of us love geeking out over theory, but you can easily ignore that altogether. Not everything makes sense to everyone, and we encourage you to run with whatever might capture your attention, spark your imagination or send your thoughts flying. Though you may be looking at mere words on a screen, this call seeks to be more than that, sketching out a universe you can step into, to experiment and explore, to think and play.



Let's...

JUMP  
IN

... and go to Counterplay together, you and I



Welcome to...

# COUNTERPLAY!

Why don't we just jump right in and go to Counter-Play together, you and I? If you close your eyes for a moment, what are your images of this event? We say it's a 'play festival', but maybe you don't quite know what that means. If you saw any of our old programs, I bet they make you think of those conferences we both know so well. Phew, there's a lot of things going on, so many plans, so much structure. Rest assured, we will do our best that everything happens in a playful spirit, where we always encourage play above all else. I can't quite describe it, but play is in the air, somehow, always ready to erupt into all sorts of surprising, mischievous and beautiful experiences. Now, what should you bring? Your most-beloved plush animal? Soap bubbles? Dancing shoes? Goblin masks? Musical instruments? No? Well, I can promise you, none of that would be out of place. Quite the contrary.



Bring your favorite playthings, and you'll be off to a great start.





Are you ready to go? Good. We have invented this fancy teleportation device, and now we will beam you from wherever you are and straight into the festival. How fortunate, we're just about to start, but first, you'll have to make a kaleidoscope nametag. Don't know what that is? Well, neither did we, but it sounds funny, doesn't it? We love kaleidoscopes and, like Iona Opie, we always tried to 'call up the sensation of being surrounded by the kaleidoscopic vitality of the eager, laughing, shouting, devil-may-care people in the playground' (1).

Listen, now the band has started playing.

Listen, now the band has started playing. I'll share a secret with you: the first time we did this, asked a lovely band to play in the morning, it was a little trick to lure people into the great hall, so we could kick off the event. We should have known that playful people don't sit down and wait while the music is playing, they start dancing. And we love it, we're forever grateful for it and we promise there will always be bands in the mornings. If you find all this a bit bewildering, you're not alone. It sometimes takes time to settle in and find your footing, but we hope that the loving, caring play community will guide you and let you find your own way in. And then suddenly, as you're finally sitting somewhat comfortably in your seat, an inspired artist asks you to leave it again, to crawl all over, to make new friends and start drawing a 'blind portrait' of a person you've probably never met. And so, we play, never quite sure what will happen next.

Yes, we are indeed already playing, you and I...







# INTO DARKNES

## STARING

We may be playing, but if so, we need to outright reject any idea of play as escapism. We don't play to forget, but to remember, we don't play to run away and hide forever (though we might hide for a bit because hiding is delightful – sardines, anyone?), but to stay present with the trouble (2). What we need, and desperately so, is to learn how to better exist on this planet in more loving, caring ways.

Maybe you feel, as so many of us do, that these are dark times indeed. Are we not all grappling with a looming sense of despair in the face of the polycrisis (3) that invades every aspect of our lives? It feels like staring into the abyss on a daily basis, and while we may want to look away, we can't. Some might say this is no time to play, but we believe it is *exactly* the time to play, and we hope you will read this call as a 'a deliberate choice to "gamble on humanity" in full awareness of the mess we are in' (4).

While play is not going to save us from our predicament, not now, not ever, it might be what keeps us going in the face of otherwise insurmountable challenges. We find ourselves in the ruins of our own destructive practices (5), and we're not so blindly optimistic that we think everything can be magically saved. We are, however, cautiously hopeful that, in the very least, play will allow us to change our trajectory. This is not a matter of winning or losing, but persevering, together, towards more liveable worlds and mutual flourishing (6). We may not know where to go, but 'all that matter is the going, the movement' (7). What matters is that we generate the



collective energy and courage to keep ‘wobbling through the discomfort with curiosity and a willingness to try again.’ (8). To spark that movement, we will, once more, invite you to ‘surrender to the movement of play and to place faith in the future, without knowing where play will take you’ (9). If you were confused upon arrival, stumbling right into a lively play community in full swing, kaleidoscopes and dancing and all, then maybe this only makes matters worse. Claiming that play can somehow help us overcome such deeply perilous conditions, where humanity at large seems stuck in a downward spiral? It sounds a bit presumptuous, we know, and we may need to recalibrate our collective expectations. We believe the big crises must be addressed through small actions, small steps to big change, and we have witnessed, time and time again, how even the smallest moments of play can open new paths for us to follow.

If you’re up for it, we could dress up, venture into the streets and alter, briefly, the way we encounter people in public? It’s hilarious and a little intimidating, but you will see how malleable the world is. We could also slow down, sit down over here with our good friends, and help them build a beautiful hanging castle, all made from paper and dreams? Or, if neither appeals to you right now, how about we crawl into this little secret space and hide for a bit? No words required.

I am talking about these brief, concrete experiences of play that our bodies remember, experiences that we bring with us, because they keep us going.





It's all a question of...

**TELLING  
NEW**

**STORIES**



It's all a question of story. We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The Old Story - the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it - is not functioning properly, and we have not learned the New Story' (10). 'If we are to survive into a liveable future, we must take into our own hands the power to create, restore and explore different stories, with new main characters, better plots, and at least the possibility of some happy endings' (11).

Without new stories, better stories, more critical, hopeful, imaginative and affirmative stories, we seem bound to remain stuck in the doldrums. Without a wealth of such stories, we risk merely perpetuating the stories we know, and too many of those stories are deeply destructive. And play might be the catalyst we need, the engine of radically different stories to live by. Play reminds us that 'the future is not given, but always contains the potential for novelty and the unexpected' (12). It is a potential troublemaker, and a source of friction (13), where we constantly find and lose our footing, over and over. The stories we talk of here are not only those we tell, but those we live. Play is a kind of prefigurative practice (14), where we enact new ways of living together in the flesh, here and now. Play manifests the inherent malleability of the world, where a bite is not a bite (15), a stick never just a stick, and where everything could always be otherwise. We wish to nurture exactly this kind of play as a 'creative and critical force capable of reshaping the worlds we live in' (16).

The stories from past gatherings linger with us, and give us hope, still. Like that one time where we played 'human PowerPoint' and nobody knew exactly what was going on. People were the slides, somehow. It was glorious and delightfully silly. We may cherish play, yet in no way should our dream of a more playful world cloud our perception of the injustices carried out in the name of play (17-19). We are painfully aware that play has routinely been deployed as a tool of the powerful to maintain certain ways of being in the world. Play needs and deserves a critical gaze, too.





# EMBRACING RELATIONALITY

*'Outside of the actual events, just knowing that other people exist out there that I can sometimes connect with on social media or in these video chats it made me realise that my mind switches into a different mode of interaction when I know it's a CounterPlay person so I'm like oh, it's actually safe to be silly, it's not going to derail the conversation, they will actually reflect that and it will still continue into a maybe even deeper place'*  
(Zack Wood)

CounterPlay exists only because of the community that has so lovingly sustained it, and we are committed to the radical relationality that binds us together. We understand relationality not merely as connections between autonomous individuals, but as that which constitutes our very existence (4,20). We exist through and because of our relations. Further, if we change how we relate, we change what we might become. Relating otherwise is living and becoming otherwise. We believe that play is fundamentally a matter of relating differently, a space where we can step out of 'determined positions, roles and functions and disrupt, revise and reverse social relations' (21).

When people started dancing in the morning, they were relating to each other, the festival and the space in new and surprising ways. So were the two brave knights who stepped out of the scheduled activities to create and dress up in cardboard armour before they fought it out in the middle of the library. If we dare to 'play the fool' (22), then maybe we can even expand 'multispecies relatedness' (23) and attune to the more-than-human worlds. Maybe, just maybe, play can help us explore what it might mean to live in a world of 'mutuality, of connectedness, of becoming-together, diversely, respectfully, carefully in the world' (24).



For the...

# LOVE of PLAY

*'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' (Sarah Huxley)*

CounterPlay was and is committed to play, always driven by a deep love of play, and we still aspire to cultivate moments, spaces, communities, societies, worlds where play can flourish. In dark times, in the face of multiple crises, we believe that every small step we might take, together, should be underpinned by care and love for life itself as we pursue the ever-elusive idea of a 'loving playfulness' (25). Perhaps the most compelling and urgently needed stories we can tell together, are of those moments where play taught us how to love life. We play exactly 'to call forth love, and to be called into the depths' (26).

There is a defiant energy to playing like this, insisting that there is indeed something to play *for*, mounting a wilful challenge to the creeping cynicism that threatens to swallow us all. This is not a cold defiance, not one of turning our backs on the world, but more like rising up to a loving embrace. It is an insistence that there is hope to be found in the cracks of any one dominant structure, hope resides exactly in the fact that 'we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act' (27). Some will call us naïve, but we believe, with a passion, that a 'certain amount of naïveté is necessary for engaging in the world' (28) and for playing on, even in the face of failure and destruction. Taken together, we are looking for anything that might spark our collective imaginaries to help us draw out living, vibrant visions of possible lives, worlds and futures. We want to know what living in those worlds might feel like, and we hope to play our way there.

And so we play...

And so... we play, on and on, towards lives and worlds we don't know yet.





We would...

LOVE



TO  
PLAY  
WITH  
YOU





...so do consider sharing your play proposal with us.

With this call, we invite everyone interested in play as a way of life to help us explore those possible lives that play may nurture. Whether you think of yourself as a practitioner, a researcher, a writer, an artist, a public servant, a teacher, a consultant, a librarian, an architect or designer, or just a human being with a gut feeling that play is important, we would love to hear from you.

We have traditionally maintained a very wide interpretation of 'play', fuelled by a rampant curiosity. We can't or won't tell you what a proposal must contain, because it will vary wildly if you, for instance, want to share theoretical work on play, host an artistic workshop on print-making, convene a goblin summit, facilitate a drawing session for 200 people, or if you simply want to invite people to blow bubbles or dance in the morning (all things that happened at previous festivals).

You might think of your proposal as a play session, a workshop, a conversation, a talk, a tour, an installation, or something else entirely. We want to avoid too rigid categories, because they risk overdetermining in advance what kinds of activities are possible. The more we can be surprised, the better. As long as you bring something that might help us better fulfil the promise of more playful lives, we will be grateful for your submission. Regardless of your specific contribution, we ask you to consider how it might be conducted in a playful spirit. We are aware that with the festival being physically located in Denmark, it is more likely for people from Northern Europe to attend due to the costs and related logistical challenges. We readily acknowledge that this historically been a challenge we haven't fully lived up to, and we have undoubtedly favoured and reproduced certain Western perspectives. We hope to further address that issue this time around. If you want to join us, but don't have an organization or a rich aunt to cover the costs, do get in touch and let's see how we might be able to help.







CALL FOR

PLAY

### Practical info

**When:**

May 7 10.00 - May 9 17.00,  
2026

**Where:**

Kolding School of Design, Ågade  
10, 6000 Kolding, Denmark.

**Deadline for submissions:**

December 5, 2025

**Read more:**

[www.counterplay.org](http://www.counterplay.org)

If you have questions regarding this call  
or the festival in general, get in touch with  
Mathias Poulsen:  
[mp@dskd.dk](mailto:mp@dskd.dk).



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for some of us wordy-nerdy academics...

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# A BIG THANKS TO THE COMMUNITY

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COUNTER  
PLAY '26