

## Trust your gut: an edible exploration of Participatory Design language

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# Trust your gut

## An edible exploration of Participatory Design language

Josymar Rodríguez Alfonso\*

Faculty of Architecture and Arts, UHasselt, Diepenbeek, Belgium, josymar.rodriguez@uhasselt.be

Liesbeth Huybrechts

Faculty of Architecture and Arts, UHasselt, Diepenbeek, Belgium, liesbeth.huybrechts@uhasselt.be

*Trust your gut* delves into the embodied experience of feel-thinking with our guts. Grounded in Participatory Design's evolving embrace of relational and processual approaches, this situated action investigates how the acts of cooking, eating, and digesting together can inform and shape terms, concepts, and practices in the realm of Participatory Design (PD). Understanding the intersection of bodily experiences and language is crucial in 'thickening' our ways of doing PD. To this end, *Trust your gut* will engage participants' bodies in an interactive moment for collectively smashing, massaging, crushing, squishing, chewing, gulping and devouring materials and meanings. With the intention to develop a sensory-rich glossary, participants will explore the interplay between personal satisfaction, communal experiences, and materiality within their practices. Drawing on a digestion analogy, the situated action develops in three phases – indigestion, digestion, and excretions – with PD stages to facilitate collective exploration and reflection on bodily experiences and their integration into PD language. Ultimately, the situated action invites our guts to challenge the traditional conference scenario as we embrace the sensuous, dirty, messy and complex nature of lived experiences and interactions. Reaching out from within and connecting through what makes us all human.

### **Additional Keywords and Phrases**

eating, digesting, embodied knowledge, glossary, participatory design

## CCS CONCEPTS

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# 1 Introduction: Thinking and doing with our guts as an embodied experience in PD.

Designing for the complexities of socio-environmental challenges requires a shift from individual-centred approaches to more respectful and caring practices [4,13,18]. Participatory Design (PD) is undergoing an expansion of its repertoire to embrace more relational and processual approaches, driven by a curiosity to articulate a more caring and response-able attitude toward others, humans, and beyond [14,15]. This situated action, *Trust your gut: an edible exploration of Participatory Design language*, aims to contribute to this shift by examining the potential of thinking and doing with *eating* as an embodied experience in PD [9,10]. This research intends to connect beyond participation, *reaching out by reaching in*. Envisioning ways of doing Participatory Design based on explorations to bring ourselves and the people we work with closer to our bodies, closer to our guts, as a way to avoid distant perspectives, forefront socio-ecological relations, stimulate acting, and enable inhabiting among compromised worlds [2].

Since the 1990s, neuroscientists have declared our gut our second brain. "Every neurotransmitter in our brain also exists in the gut without exception. The brain in the gut is simply the brain gone south" [3]. Nevertheless, despite this similarity, traditional dualistic thinking assigns very different responsibilities to each, with the brain in charge of "the finer things in life" and the gut dealing with "the dirty, messy and disgusting process of digestion" [19]. However, life encompasses both extremes and everything in between. Life is messy, dirty, and sometimes disgusting. So how can we incorporate "sentipensar" - as described by Escobar [2016, 2018] - with our guts more into our PD processes? Exploring the connection between the gut and brain in participatory design could potentially lead to more embodied and holistic approaches, considering the messy and complex nature of human experiences and interactions. By acknowledging the role of our gut as a second brain and integrating this understanding into Participatory Design, we can cultivate more caring and embodied approaches that embrace the full range of human emotions, needs, and experiences.

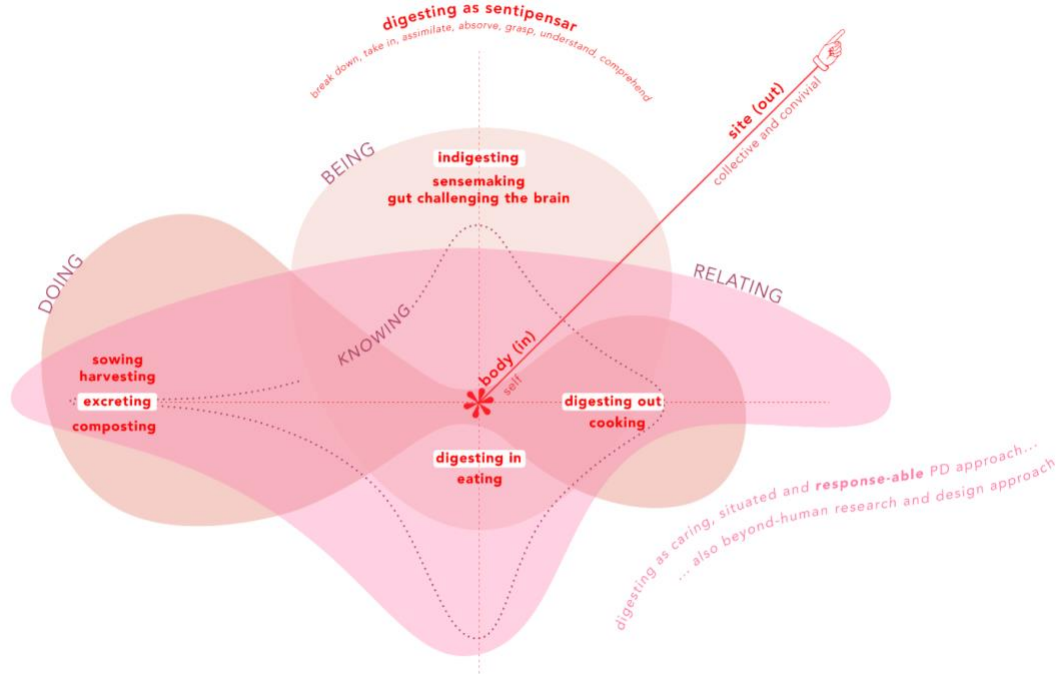
A gut-driven PD intentionally translocates the knowledge-making process from the brain to the gut, taking cues from our everyday metabolic engagement [17] and the socio-material relations they create [1]. It aims to disrupt dominant and anthropocentric ways of knowing by embracing the embodied knowledge that emerges from our everyday metabolic engagements, mainly through eating. This approach challenges traditional notions of knowledge production and highlights the interconnectedness of human and non-human actors in the design process. In our situated action, we will explore "thinking with" [4] our gut with the "explicit purpose to make things' thicker" [11,21]. Specifically, make PD 'thicker' by adding layers of engagement, sensuous and dirtier layers, reaching out from within, connecting through what makes us all human.

## 2 Digestion analogies for other ways of knowledge-making in PD.

The specificity, situatedness, materiality, relationality, and transformation capacity already embedded in eating make it a rich and provocative field for PD researchers and designers to engage with. In this Situated Action and based on my PhD research, we will work with three analogies between participatory design stages and the process of digestion, allowing ways of *thinking and doing with our guts* rather than our minds [Figure 1]:

1. The first phase, **indigestion**, allows the researcher to recognise her position as an outsider and gain awareness of herself as the body slowly senses and makes sense of the socio-material conditions she is working with. Embracing bodily discomfort becomes a means to process something not yet metabolised. This phase sets the stage for response-able and situated research and a deeper engagement with the site and its actors.
2. During the **digestion** phase, the researcher engages with the site and its actors through a process of breaking down to aid assimilation. This involves collectively crushing, squishing, cutting, and chewing parts of the site, food, people, stories and ways of being, dissolving boundaries between in and out, land and self, human and beyond. I am digesting by slowly becoming with from the inside. As I eat, materials and meanings transform inside me; the gut becomes the locus of knowing, facilitating shared understanding and action.
3. The final phase, **excretions**, involves the results of making and coming to be with expanded and deepened relationalities with other beings. This phase encompasses socio-material practices, meanings, projects, and products that emerge from an "enlarged sense of interconnection between self and others" (Braidotti et al., 2018, P. 49), shared concerns and collective commitments.

In this situated action, we will explore digestion analogies to bring to our attention other ways to navigate the different stages of PD in a more embodied and transformative manner.



**Figure 1.** Analogies between participatory design stages and the process of *digestion*. Three stages of digestion – indigesting, digesting in and out and excreting – and its relation with a transformational capacity going from the self (inside of our bodies) to the collective (outside, land and others). This graphic

understands Annemarie Mol's way of engaging with the concepts of being, doing, knowing, and relating as fields traversing, with different intensities, between in and out in the different *digestion* stages.

### 3 A gut-driven exploration of PD language

Exploring bodily experiences and their intersection with language is critical to "thicken" our understanding and approach to Participatory Design. Therefore, this session will explore how the acts of cooking, eating, and digesting together can inform and shape terms and concepts—and, by extension, practices—within the realm of PD. We aim to develop a sensory-rich glossary, a collection of word meanings that captures the nuances and subtleties of our experiences as gut *sentipensantes* [5]. Sensitivities are born through the act of naming; we cannot perceive that which has no name [22]. By incorporating the insights from philosopher Boris Groys [2022] and anthropologist Annemarie Mol [2008, 2021], we aim to craft a glossary that reflects the interplay between personal satisfaction, communal experiences, and the materiality of our actions within PD.

#### 3.1 Trust your gut

The session facilitates a deep exploration of our bodily experiences and digestion processes at different intensity levels. Through a progressive engagement of over one hour, we, the facilitators, will host an open *soil table*, inviting others to digest with us.

##### 3.1.1 Setting the soil table

[75 min] We will lay out the material guests before the situated action. Soil, dirt, water, cushions, low stools, buckets, camping stoves, bowls, plates, graters, knives, cutting tables, hand towels, fruits and vegetables. The action is set for us, conference participants and organisers, to question how life-affirming practices (digesting, eating, cooking, cleaning) shape our institutions and academic settings. Creating a setting to challenge what a "conference lunch" is. And its hygienic, formal, ready-to-eat format.

##### 3.1.2 Collective indigestion

[15 min] We will welcome participants to a space for *indigestion* as the moment to gain awareness of the diversity of bodies, positions and biases participating, connecting through labour and creating a shared understanding (what are we washing? How and why? What tools are we using? Is it only our hands?), bending ourselves and PD notions to allow the gut—instead of our brain—to step in. The session will briefly introduce the gut, eating practices, and digestion processes to core participatory design principles.

##### 3.1.3 Outside digestion

[20 min] Cooking with participants. We will be using our bodies to engage with materials and meanings, breaking them down to aid assimilation. It will be a very interactive and talkative moment for collectively smashing, massaging, crushing, peeling, cutting and squishing foodstuff and PD language.

##### 3.1.4 Digesting inside

[10 min] Eating together, transforming materials and meaning inside our bodies. A reflective moment where we will give space to the gut to be an active participant. A time-out for the brain. When eating, participants will be encouraged to reflect on how, during the session, their senses are expanding their understanding of PD.

##### 3.1.5 La sobremesa

[15 min] We will try to put into words what and if the gut was able to feel and how actively listening to it helps us shape our *collective excretion*: our sensory-rich collection of meaning for gut-centred PD, coining new expressions and redefining existing ones based on the many forms of digestion explored during the session.

## 3.2 Outcomes and outputs

We aim to bring a visceral dimension to Participatory Design and seek connections rather than confirmation. Outcomes of this session may include a new understanding of the role of *life-affirming* practices in PD, crafting a sensory-rich vocabulary, and exploring the potential of digestion-based experiences as a catalyst for building new forms of thinking, feeling and doing PD. We aim to draw insight from one another's embodied encounters and enhance our research and methods collaboratively while contributing to the expansion of relational and processual PD.

## 4 Conclusion: towards a gut-driven PD

The proposed situated action will be critical in developing our group's work towards a gut-centred PD. Our preliminary findings suggest at least two reasons for PD researchers and designers as to why we need "to pay attention to how matter and discourse combine in the visceral body" [12]. First, it provides an embodied way of overcoming dualistic thinking: body and mind, self and others, emotion and cognition, as it "alerts us to the viscosity of being embodied and entangled in human and non-human nets of materiality and meaning" [20]. Second, it helps us adopt an experimental and transformative rather than a descriptive orientation, as it enhances our willingness to 'take in'—quite literally—the world in the act of knowledge-making [7]. We have found these are critical capacities for PD researchers and practitioners to develop more inclusive, caring and response-able trajectories, *reaching out by reaching in*.

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