



Designing Unlikely Futures? A/symmetry & A-firmative Speculation in the European Borderscape

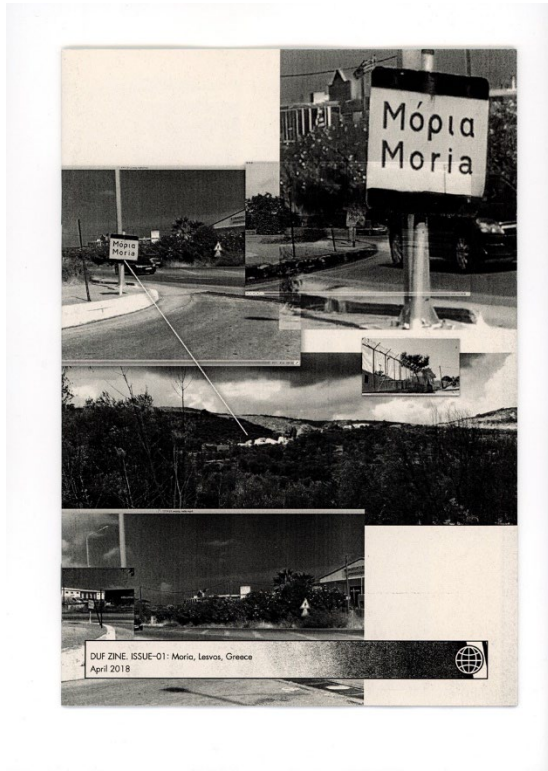
Research Through Design Case Study

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Abstract



DUF Zine 01: A publication documenting the Moria camp (Lesvos, Greece) made in collaboration with Mehdi Vafajoooye Diyanati via WhatsApp messenger.

Starting with the provocation to Design Unlikely Futures — a slogan encountered during the field work — this research introduces and problematises what I call situated ‘a-firmative’ speculative design practices to empirically engage with the European borderscape. Although design has previously sought to engage with migration and the borderscape, it often fails to take a critical view of the ways it is implicated, or of what else might be done beyond addressing immediate needs. By engaging empirically in the ‘Jungle’ camp in Calais, France, the island of Lesvos in Greece, as well as sites closer to usual design practices such as the workshop, studio and exhibition space, this practice research has involved designing, making and deploying devices so that they may enter into new compositions in order to invoke new possibilities, and problematise and record what happens to them in their various encounters. Devices have included a



tandem bicycle equipped with audio and video recording equipment, a 'broadcast trailer', and films, exhibitions, and publications produced as a result of various ongoing engagements.



Bringing the Police into Play'. Film still of Tandem Speculative Research Device in use in Calais.

To conduct and analyse these devices and practices the thesis draws on a wide range of scholarship and existing design practices. These include: speculative and process philosophy, that provides me with a framework to develop a specific kind of empirically engaged speculative practice. Speculative and critical design (SCD) as a precedent for critiquing problem-solving rhetoric in and around design discourse. Science and technology studies (STS), including the development of actor-network theory (ANT), and its uptake in Scandinavian participatory design (PD), which inspires the concept of a/symmetry that I develop to conduct various kinds of analysis in the thesis. The thesis provides a critical reflection on the above set of practices where I establish a set of key concepts that I use to both make the case for and analyse what I set out as a-firmative, situated empirical speculative practice. I argue that the concept of a/symmetry is key to examining the materialities, temporalities, and compositions of these practices, and the distributions of agency involved in them. Ultimately, I outline an extended manifesto where I draw from both the literature, and the practices I have been involved with to suggest ways for designers (and others) to engage speculatively with the borderscape.



Summary of research through design activity

My PhD research concerned how designers and speculative practitioners engage with European migration routes. From 2015 I collaborated with a number of people from both the Calais refugee camp known as the Jungle, and community centres on the island of Lesbos in Greece. These collaborations have materialised as films, exhibitions, work experience, funding campaigns, zines and publications, articles, websites and photographs.

The research through design activities have ranged from building and repairing temporary shelters, producing films, exhibitions, and zines (DIY publication).

In brief summary:

- Volunteering in the Calais camp to build and repair shelters instructed the research-through-design activities, whereby the activity prompted a critical reflection on the designer's role in such a space.
- Producing 'street-view' images and engaging with Google around the status of the camp on its digital platforms.
- A film produced documenting the Jungle camp in 2016.
- A series of films produced using a tandem bicycle 'interview machine' in Calais. These were shown in international exhibitions and conferences including Nordes in Oslo, Wounded Places in New York, Digital Humanitarianism in London; and as part of a broader public program, including: System of Systems in Athens, Contested Borderscapes in Lesbos.
- Production of videos and 'zines' made collaboratively via WhatsApp with displaced people in Lesbos. These zines are self-published and available publicly online, in independent bookshops and various book and zine fairs.
- The film Calais Then (2016), and Then (2019) produced in 2020, and shown at Refugov, AAG Shorts, and 4s conference. Also the subject of a papers authored by myself, and another Migrant Countermaps/Counternarratives: Calais Then (2016), and Then (2019)(2019) and Migranta con M de Mamá (Migrant Mother)(2020) by EJV Bolata.
- Working with the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford on a participatory curating project concerning migration in Calais culminating in an exhibition that opened in 2019 attracting several thousand visitors.



Underpinning research, context and summary of methodology

The research sought to explore the ways a speculative and critically informed approach to design research could be conducted in the European Borderscape. This initially took the form of a literature review to critique existing approaches, position the research, and to articulate an alternative approach to speculation to that which is typical in critical and speculative design practice.

The empirical aspects of the research took place in the European Borderscape, namely Calais in France, and Lesvos in Greece. Here I developed a situated method assemblage combining social research methods (such as ethnography, image and film-making, participant observation) alongside inventive methods, for example speculative research devices to conduct practice led research-through-design.

This method assemblage inevitably involved various forms of methodological a/symmetries and challenges, including issues of representation; conducting participant observation with those desperately in need of care; the challenges of practicing collaborative design research, and the situated ethical implications where asymmetric power relations are a latent aspect of researching borderscapes. Hence, I drew from STS scholarship's concept of asymmetry in order to problematise these relations, and to outline an empirically informed approach to speculation in design.

Throughout the research I presented the work at various conferences and in public exhibitions in order to gain valuable feedback from other scholars, research participants, collaborators and members of the public. The project was also presented as a written and visual thesis which concluded with a 'manifesto' to summarise and outline the key concepts developed in the thesis.

References produced by researcher from/during doctoral research

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